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 **MAGIC**

CHILDREN

OF THE

NAMELESS

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By Brandon Sanderson

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PART ONE

PROLOGUE

There were two kinds of darkness, and Tacenda feared the second far more than the first.

The first darkness was a common darkness. The darkness of shadows, where light strained to reach. The darkness of a closet door, cracked open, or of the old shed near the forest. This first darkness was the darkness of dusk, which seeped into homes as night arrived like an unwelcome visitor you had no choice but to let in.

The first darkness had its dangers, particularly in this land where shadows breathed and dark things howled at night. But it was the second darkness—the one that came upon Tacenda each morning—that she truly feared. Her blindness was tied directly to the rising of the sun; as its first light appeared, her sight would fade away. The second darkness would then claim her: a pure, inescapable blackness. Despite the reassurances of parents and priests alike, she knew that something terrible watched her from that darkness.

Her twin sister, Willia, understood. Willia's curse was the inverse of Tacenda's—Willia had sight during the day but was claimed by the second darkness each night. There was never a time when both of them could see. And so, though twins, the girls were never able to look one another in the eyes.

As she grew, Tacenda tried to banish her fear of this second darkness by learning to play music. She told herself that at least she could still hear. Indeed, while blind, she felt that she could better hear the natural music of the land. The crunch of pebbles beneath a footstep. The vibrant trembles of laughter when a child passed by her seat at the center of town. At times, Tacenda even felt she could hear the stretching of ancient trees as they grew—a sound like the twisting of a rope—accompanied by the gentle sigh of their settling leaves.

She did wish she could see the sun, even once. A giant, blazing, burning ball of fire in the sky, brighter even than the moon? She could feel its intense heat on her skin, so knew it was real, but what must it be like for everyone else to go about their lives, seeing that incredible bonfire in the sky bearing down on them?

The people of the village learned of the girls' inverse curses and noted them as marked. It was the Bog's touch upon them, the people whispered. A good thing: it meant the twin girls had been claimed, blessed.

Tacenda had trouble feeling it was a blessing until that first day when she found her true song. While still a child, the people of the village bought her drums from a traveling merchant, so she could sing to them while they worked the dustwillow fields. They said the darkness among the trees seemed to retreat when she sang, and they claimed the sun shone brighter. On one of those days, Tacenda discovered a power within her—and began to sing a beautiful, warming song of joy. Somehow, she knew it had come from the Bog. A gift along with her curse of blindness.

Willia whispered that she too felt a power inside her. A strange, awesome strength. When she fought with the sword—though only twelve years old—she could match even Barl, the smith.

Willia was always the fierce one. At least during the daylight hours. At night, when the second darkness took her, she trembled with a fear that Tacenda knew intimately. During those long nights, Tacenda sang to her sister, a girl who was terrified—against reason—that this time, the light would not return to her.

It was one such night, soon after their thirteenth birthdays, that Tacenda discovered another song. It came to her as a thing from the forest clawed at the door, howling and raving. Beasts sometimes came from the forest at night, breaking into homes, taking those who dwelled inside. It was the price of living out in the Approaches; the land demanded a tax upon one's blood. There was little to do but bar your door and pray to either the Bog or the Angel—depending upon your preference—for deliverance.

But on that night—listening to her sister panic and her parents weep—Tacenda had stepped *toward* the beast as it broke in. She'd heard music in the cracking and splintering door, in the breeze rattling the trees, in her own heartbeat as it thundered in her ears. She opened her mouth and sang something new. A song that made the beast scream in pain, and withdraw. A song of defiance, a song of warding, a song of *protection*.

The next night, the village asked her to sing her song into the darkness. Her music seemed to still the woods. From that day forward, nothing came from the forest. The village, once the smallest of the three in the Approaches, began to swell as people heard of its twin protectors: the fierce warrior who trained during the day, and the quiet songstress who calmed the night.

For two years, the village knew a remarkable peace. No people taken during the night. No beasts howling to the moon. The Bog had sent guardians to shelter its people. Nobody even took much notice when a new lord, who called himself the Man of the Manor, arrived to displace the old one. The squabbles among lords were not for the common people to question. Indeed, this new Man of the Manor seemed to keep to himself—an improvement upon the old lord. So they'd thought.

But then, just after the twins turned fifteen, everything went wrong.

The Whisperers arrived just before dusk, and Tacenda's song was not enough to stop them.

She screamed the refrain of the Warding Song, sliding her hands across the strings of her viol—a gift from her parents at her fourteenth birthday.

Her parents were both gone now, killed ten days earlier by the strange creatures that now assaulted the village. Tacenda had barely recovered from that grief when they'd taken Willia too. Now, they'd come for the entire village.

Since the sun had not yet set, she couldn't see them, but she could hear their quiet overlapping voices as they flowed around her seat. They spoke in raspy tones—soft, the words indistinguishable—like an underchant to her song.

She redoubled her efforts, plucking her viol with raw fingers, sitting in her usual spot at the center of the village, by the gurgling cistern. The song *should* have been enough. For two years, it had stopped every terror and horror. The Whisperers, however, sounded indifferent as they flowed around Tacenda. And soon, human screams of terror rose as a horrible chorus around her.

Tacenda tried to sing louder, but her voice was growing hoarse. She coughed at her next breath. She gasped, trembling, struggling to—

Something cold brushed her. The pain in her fingers grew numb, and she gasped, leaping back, clutching her viol to her breast. All was black around her, but she *could* hear the thing nearby, a thousand whispers overlapping, like riffling pages, each as hush as a dying breath.

Then it moved off, ignoring her. The rest of the villagers were not so lucky. They had locked themselves in their homes—where now they shouted, prayed, and pled...until one by one, they started to go silent.

“Tacenda!” a voice shouted nearby. “Tacenda! Help!”

“Mirian?” Tacenda's voice came out as a ragged croak. Which direction had that sound come from? Tacenda spun in the darkness, kicking over her stool with a clatter.

“*Tacenda!*”

There! Tacenda carefully ran her foot along the side of the cistern to feel its carved stones and orient herself, then struck out into the darkness. She knew this area well, and it had been years since she'd stumbled when crossing the village square. But still, she could not avoid that spike of fear she felt in stepping forward. Out, into that darkness that still terrified her.

This time, would she walk into the void, and never return? Would she continue to stumble in a vast, unknowable blackness, lost to all natural feeling and touch?

Instead, she reached the wall of a home, right where she'd anticipated. She felt with raw fingers, touching the windowsill, feeling Mirian's potted herbs in a row, one of which—in her haste—she accidentally knocked off. It shattered on the cobbles.

“Mirian!” Tacenda yelled, feeling her way across the wall. Other screams still sounded in the village—some people crying for help, others shouting in a panic. Together the sounds were a tempest, but each seemed so alone.

“Mirian?” Tacenda said. “Why is your door open? Mirian!”

Tacenda felt her way into the small home, then stumbled over a body. Tears wetting her cheeks, Tacenda knelt, still holding her viol in one hand. With the other, she felt at the lace skirt—embroidered by Mirian's own hand, during the evenings when she sometimes stayed up to keep Tacenda company. She moved her hand to the woman's face.

Mirian had brought Tacenda tea not an hour ago. And now...her skin had already gone cold somehow, her body rigid.

Tacenda dropped her viol and pushed away, slamming back against the wall, knocking something over. The fallen item cracked as it hit the ground, an almost musical sound.

Outside, the last screams were giving out.

“Take me!” Tacenda shouted, feeling her way around the door. She scraped her arm on a sharp corner, tearing her skirt, bleeding her forearm. “Take me, like you did my family!” She stumbled out into the main square again, and as more of the shouting and panic trailed off, she picked out a quieter voice. A child's voice.

“Ahren?” She shouted. “Is that you?”

No. Bog, hear my prayer. Please...

“Ahren!” Tacenda followed the small, panicked screaming to another building. The door was locked, but that didn't seem to stop the Whisperers. They were spirits or geists of some sort.

Tacenda felt her way to the window, where she heard a small hand pounding on the glass. “Ahren...” Tacenda said, resting her own palm against the glass. A coldness brushed past her.

“Tacenda!” the little boy screamed, voice muffled. “Please! It's coming!”

She drew in breath, and tried—through her sobs—to force out a song. But the Warding Song wasn't working. Maybe...maybe something else?

“Simple...simple days of warming sun...” she began, trying her old song. The joyful one she'd sung to her sister, and the people of the village, when she'd been a child. “And light that calms and will not run...”

She found the words dying on her lips. How could she sing about a warm sun she could no longer see? How could she try to calm, to bring joy, when people were dying all around her?

That song...she no longer remembered that song.

Ahren's crying stopped as a muted thump sounded inside the building. Outside, the final screams died off. And the village grew silent.

Tacenda shrank back from the window, and then behind her, she heard footsteps.

Footsteps. The Whisperers made no such sound.

She spun toward the footsteps, and heard the rustling cloth of someone nearby, watching her.

"I hear you!" Tacenda screamed at the unseen figure. "Man of the Manor! I hear your footsteps!"

She heard breathing. The sounds, even, of the Whisperers faded away. But whoever was there, watching, remained still.

"Take me!" Tacenda screamed at the second darkness. "Be done with it!"

The footsteps, instead, retreated. A cold, lonely breeze blew through the village. Tacenda felt the last rays of sunlight give out, the air chilling. As night fell, Tacenda's vision returned. She blinked as the blackness retreated to mere shadows, the sky still faintly warm from the sun's recent passing. Like the embers that clung—briefly—to a wick after the fire went out.

Tacenda found herself standing near the cistern, her face a mess of tears and tangled brown hair. Her precious viol lay, wood finish scratched, just inside the door to Mirian's house.

The village was silent. Empty save for Tacenda and corpses.

Tacenda spent about half an hour breaking into homes, searching in vain for survivors. Even those families who had fled to the church had fallen. She confronted corpse after corpse, the light gone from their eyes and the warmth stolen from their blood.

Her parents had suffered the same fate, ten days before. They, along with Willia, had been on their way to deliver offerings to the Bog. The Man of the Manor had intercepted them and attacked, his reasons unfathomable. He'd overpowered Willia, who—despite her uncommon strength—had been no match for his terrible magic.

Willia had escaped and run to the priory for help. When she'd returned with church soldiers, they'd found only two corpses. Her parents, their bodies already cold. That night also, the Whisperers had first appeared—strange, twisted geists who killed those who strayed from the villages. Witnesses swore they worked under the direction of the Man of the Manor.

Even then, Tacenda had hoped for deliverance. Hoped the Bog would protect them. Until the Man of the Manor had finally come for Willia, killing her. And now...

And now...

Tacenda slumped on the Weamer family's doorstep, head in her hands, lit by aloof moonlight. The priests and Willia had wanted to give her parents a church burial, but Tacenda had insisted that their bodies be returned to the Bog. Priests could teach of the angels all they wanted, but most Approachers knew that they belonged—ultimately—to the Bog.

But...who would return all these corpses to the Bog? The *entire village*?

Suddenly, it seemed the eyes of all those corpses were watching her. With an aching hand, Tacenda felt at her sister's pendant, which she wore around her wrist. The simple leather cord bore an iron icon of the Nameless Angel. It, and her viol, were the only important things left in her life. So there was no reason to remain here beneath those watchful, dead eyes.

Feeling numb, Tacenda took up her viol and just started walking. She wandered out of the town, past the dustwillow field where Willia's corpse had been found. On that day...well, a piece of Tacenda had gone cold. Perhaps that was why, now that it was done, she found herself too tired for tears.

She walked out into the dark forest, a place where no sane person went. To travel the forest at night was to *demand* mishap, to invite getting lost, or open yourself to the fangs of some lurking beast. But why would that matter to her now? Her life was meaningless, and she couldn't get lost if she wasn't planning to ever return.

Still...when she closed her eyes, she could sense where the darkness was more pure. Almost it had the

feeling of that second darkness that she feared. A few years ago, she'd met a blind girl from the township, visiting with merchants. Willia had been so excited to speak to someone else who might understand the Second Darkness—but this girl had reacted with confusion to their descriptions. She didn't fear the darkness, and couldn't understand why they would.

It was then that Tacenda had truly begun to understand. The thing they saw when the curse took them was something deeper, stranger. Something more than just blindness.

She went toward the darkness, her skirt catching on underbrush, passing trees so ancient she'd have surely lost track counting the rings. On many a night, these trees had been Tacenda's only audience, the wind in their leaves her applause. The rest of the village had slept the fitful, uncertain sleep of a lamp with too little oil. If you woke up gasping for breath, at least you had woken up alive.

The endless canopy—pierced here and there by steel moonlight—seemed to be the sky itself. Held up by the dark columns of trees, extending into infinity, like reflections of reflections. She walked a good half hour, but nothing came for her. Perhaps the monsters of the forest were simply too stunned see a lone girl of fifteen wandering at night.

Soon, she could smell the Bog: rot, moss, and stagnant things. It had no name, but the villagers all knew that it claimed them. The Bog was their protection, because even the things that terrorized in the dark reaches of the forest—even nightmares made incarnate—even *they* feared the Bog.

And yet, it failed us tonight.

Tacenda emerged into a small clearing. She knew the Bog's sound as she knew her own heartbeat—a low rumbling, like that of a boiling pot, punctuated by the occasional *snap*, reminiscent of a breaking bone. She'd come many times with her parents, bringing offerings—but for all that, she'd never been to it during the night.

It was...smaller than she had imagined. A perfectly circular pool, filled with dark water. Though the ground in this region of the forest was pitted with mires and treacherous swamps, this specific pool had always been known as “the Bog” to her people.

Tacenda stepped right up to the edge, remembering the soft sound—not quite a splash, more a sigh—her parents' bodies had made when they'd been slid into the water. You didn't need to weigh bodies down when feeding them to the Bog. Corpses sank in and did not return.

She teetered on the edge of the pool. She'd been born to protect her people, possessing a warding power unseen in generations. But she had failed in that duty tonight, and even the Whisperers hadn't wanted her. All that remained was to join her parents. Slip down under those too-still waters. It was her fate.

No, a voice seemed to whisper from deep within her. No, this was not why I created you...

She hesitated. Was she mad now too?

“Hey!” a voice said from behind her. “Hey, what's this?”

A garish intruding light flared up and bathed the area around the Bog. Tacenda turned to find an old man standing in the door of the caretaker's shack. He held up a lantern, and bore a scruffy beard, mostly grey—though his arms still had some tone to them and his stance was strong. Rom had been a werewolf hunter once, before he'd come to the Approaches to live at the priory.

"Miss Tacenda?" he said, then practically fell over himself scrambling to reach her. "Here now! Away from there, child! What is wrong? Why aren't you at Verlasen, singing?"

"I..." Seeing someone alive stunned her. Wasn't...wasn't the entire world dead? "They came for us, Rom. The Whisperers..."

He pulled her away from the Bog toward the shack. It was a safe place—protected by the wards of a priest. Of course, those same wards hadn't protected the villagers tonight. She didn't know what was safe and what wasn't any longer.

Priests from the priory took turns here, in this shack, watching. Recently, they'd been trying to forbid the people from bringing the Bog offerings. The priests didn't trust the Bog and thought that the people of the Approaches needed to be disabused of their ancient religion. But an outsider, even a kindly one like Rom, could never understand. The Bog wasn't merely their religion. It was their nature.

"What's this, child?" Rom asked, settling her on a stool inside the small caretaker's shack. "What happened?"

"They're gone, Rom. All of them. The geists that took my parents, my sister...they came in force. They took everyone."

"*Everyone?*" he asked. "What about Sister Gurdenvala, at the church?"

Tacenda shook her head, feeling numb. "The Whisperers got in past the wards." She looked up at him. "The Man of the Manor. He was there, Rom. I heard his footsteps, his breathing. He led the Whisperers and took everyone, leaving nothing but dead eyes and cold skin..."

Rom fell silent. Then he hurriedly took a sword from beside the shack's small cot and strapped it on. "I need to get to the prioress. If the Man of the Manor is really...well, she'll know what to do. Let's go."

She shook her head. She felt exhausted. No.

Rom tugged her, but she remained seated.

"Hellfire, child," he said. He looked out the door, toward the Bog—then narrowed his eyes. "The prayers on this shack should protect you from the worst things of the forest. But...if those geists could get into the church..."

"The Whisperers don't want me anyway."

"Stay away from the Bog," he said. "You promise me that, at least."

She nodded, feeling numb.

The aging warrior-priest took a deep breath, then lit her a candle before seizing his lantern and heading out into the night. He'd follow the road, which would take him past Verlasen. He'd see for himself then.

Everyone was gone. *Everyone.*

Tacenda sat, looking out at the Bog. And slowly, she started to feel something again. A warmth rising within her. *A fury.*

There would be no repercussions for the Man of the Manor. Rom could complain to the prioress all he wanted, but the Man—the new lord of this region—was beyond condemnation. The priests had no real power to stand up to him. They might shout a little, but they wouldn't dare do more, for fear of being exterminated. The people of Verlasen's two sister villages would turn their heads and continue with life, hoping that the Man would be sated with those he'd already killed.

Dangers from the forest were one thing, but the true monsters of this land had always been the lords. Flush with anger, Tacenda began rummaging in the small shack. Rom had taken the only real weapon, but she did find a rusty ice pick in the old icebox. It would do. She snuffed the candle, then stepped back out into the moonlight.

The Bog rumbled approvingly as she started along the roadway that led to the manor. This was a foolish kind of defiance, she knew. The Man would undoubtedly murder her. He would torture her, use her corpse in some terrible experiment, feed her soul to his demons.

She went anyway. She wasn't going to throw herself into the Bog. That was not her fate.

She was at least going to *try* to kill the Man of the Manor.

The Man of the Manor had arrived two years ago, just after Tacenda discovered the Warding Song. He had immediately removed the previous ruler of the Approaches—a creature known as Lord Vaast. Nobody had shed tears at Vaast's apparent death. He'd often taken too much blood from the young women he visited at night.

At least he'd never claimed the lives of an entire village in one day.

Tacenda crouched at the perimeter of the manor grounds, looking in at the stately building. A too-red light shone from the windows. The Man of the Manor was known to consort with demons; indeed, the front roadway was lined with winged statues that—as she watched their shadowed forms—occasionally twitched.

She clutched the ice pick close, her viol strapped to her back. The rear of the building would have a servants' entrance; her father had spoken of delivering shirts there.

Feeling exposed, Tacenda left the forest and crossed the lawn. The moonlight seemed garish and bright. Could the sun really be brighter than it was? She reached the side of the manor, her heart thundering in her chest, ice pick held like a dagger. She leaned against the wooden wall, then inched along it to the south. A glow came from that direction. And were those...voices?

She reached the back corner of the building, then glanced around to see an open doorway. The servants' entrance, spilling light across the lawn in a rectangle. Her breath caught—a group of small red-skinned creatures chattered here, just outside the door. As tall as her waist, the misshapen devils had long tails and wore no clothing. They dug in a barrel of rotten apples, throwing the fruit at one another.

Those apples...they'd be from last month's orchard harvest, sent to the Man of the Manor as required. The villagers had given him the best picks, but—judging by how full the barrel was—the fruit had been left to mold.

Tacenda ducked back around the corner, breathing quickly, her hand trembling. She squeezed her eyes shut and listened to the creatures jabber in their guttural, twisted language. She'd often heard terrible sounds from the forest, but to see such creatures directly was a different matter.

She forced herself to move, trying to open a few windows along the wall. Unfortunately, each was latched tight, and breaking one would draw attention. That left the front gates, or the door with the creatures at the back.

She crept back to the corner and forced herself to glance at the things again. The four of them squabbled over a somewhat-whole apple. Tacenda took a deep breath.

And sang.

The Warding Song. She kept it soft, just a quiet, low chant—though her viol responded to the music,

vibrating as it often did if she didn't start playing it when she sang.

The song made warmth rise within her, passion and pain together. The music came *through* her more than *out of* her. Tonight, it seemed particularly vibrant. Alive. More so than she was.

The devils froze, and their black eyes widened as if dazed. They leaned back, lips parting, exposing too-sharp teeth. Then, blessedly, they scrambled away, screeching softly and seeking the forest.

The song wanted to grow, wanted to burst from her more loudly. Tacenda cut it off instead, then breathed out, gasping softly. The music made her feel. It pulled her from the waters, soggy and cold, and somehow breathed life into her. But how could she feel anything save anger and sorrow?

Focus on the task at hand. Ice pick held before her, she slipped through the back doors of the manor and stepped into a corridor that felt too welcoming, with its thick rug and ornate wooden trim. This was the home of a monster. She did not trust its friendly facade any more than she'd trust a little girl found deep in the forest, smiling and promising treasure.

Footsteps creaked the wooden floor in a room nearby. Certain that some horror would burst out and grab her, Tacenda took the nearby steps up to the second floor. Indeed, a moment after she stilled herself, something with dark grey skin stepped into the hallway. The enormous creature's horns brushed the ceiling, and it stepped with heavy footfalls.

Anxious, Tacenda watched it inspect the area outside the back door. It had heard—or perhaps just felt—her song. She needed to get out of sight. She slipped into the first room she found on the second floor: a bedchamber, judging by the moonlit canopy beside the window.

She crossed the chamber to a door at the side, then slipped into a lavish washroom, with a tub that could have bathed an entire family. She shut the door, enclosing herself in a common sort of darkness. One she almost found welcoming. Familiar, at the very least.

Here, the tension of the moment finally overwhelmed her. She sat down on a stool in the darkness, ice pick held against her breast, her hand trembling. Her viol started to thrum softly on her back—and she realized she'd begun humming to try to calm herself, and stopped abruptly.

She instead felt for her sister's pendant, which she'd taken before surrendering Willia's body to the priests.

Willia had trusted in the angels. She'd always been the stronger one, the warrior. She should have lived, while Tacenda died. Willia would have had a chance at actually killing the Man of the Manor.

They'd always relied on one another. During the days, Willia had encouraged Tacenda, led her out to the fields to sing for the workers. And at night, Tacenda had sung while Willia shivered. Together, they'd been one soul. And now, Tacenda had to try to live alone?

Voices.

Tacenda bolted upright in the darkness. She could hear voices approaching—one of them sharp, authoritarian. She *knew* that voice. She had heard it when the Man of the Manor had come—shrouded in his

cloak and mask—to complain about her father’s shirt delivery two months ago.

Footsteps sounded on the boards outside, the creaking of old and tired wood. Tacenda scrambled to her feet and placed herself right inside the door. A jolt of panic ran through her as that door opened, spilling light into the washroom. And then...

Then peace. It was time.

Vengeance.

She leaped out of the shadows and raised her makeshift weapon at the Man: a domineering figure with a pencil mustache, dark slicked-back hair, and a black suit. The ice pick made a satisfying *thunk* as she slammed it directly into his left breast, just to the side of his violet cravat. The pick ground bone as it sank in deeply.

The Man froze. She seemed to have genuinely surprised him, judging by the look of shock on his face. His lips parted, but he didn’t move.

Could she...could she have pierced his heart? Could she have actually managed to—

“Miss Highwater!” the Man called over his shoulder. “There is a *peasant girl* in my *washroom!*”

“What does she want?” a feminine voice called from the other room.

“She has stabbed me with what appears to be an ice pick!” The man shoved Tacenda back into the washroom, then yanked the pick out. The length glistened with his blood. “A *rusty* ice pick!”

“Nice!” the voice called. “Ask her how much I owe her!”

Tacenda gathered her courage—her *fury*—and stood up straight. “I’ve come for vengeance!” she shouted. “You must have known that I would, after you—”

“Oh, hush, you,” he said, sounding more annoyed than angry. His eyes clouded briefly, as if filling with blue smoke.

Tacenda tried to lunge for him, but found herself magically frozen in place. She strained, but couldn’t so much as blink an eye. Quick as that, her confidence evaporated. She’d known all along that coming here would be suicide. She’d hoped to exact some kind of vengeance, but he didn’t even seem to be in pain from the wound. He tossed his jacket onto a chair in the bedroom, then prodded the small bloodied section of his ruffled white shirt.

The woman who’d spoken earlier finally stepped into the room...and *woman* might have been a misnomer. The creature wore human clothing—a fitted grey jacket over a simple knee-length skirt—and wore her black hair in a bun. But she had ashen grey skin and dark red eyes, with small horns peeking up through her hair. Another of the Man’s demonic minions.

The demon tucked a ledger under her arm and walked over to peek in on Tacenda. Again, Tacenda tried to struggle, but couldn’t budge from her former posture—standing up straight to challenge the Man.

“Curious,” the demon woman said. “She can’t be older than sixteen. Younger than most of your would-be assassins.”

The Man poked at his wound again. “It strikes me, Miss Highwater, that you are not treating this situation with the gravity it deserves. My shirt is *ruined*.”

“We’ll get you another.”

“This one was my favorite.”

“You have thirty-seven exactly like it. You wouldn’t be able to tell the difference if your life depended on it.”

“That’s not the point.” He hesitated. “...*Thirty-seven*? That’s a tad excessive, even for me.”

“You asked me to see you properly stocked in case the tailor got eaten.” The demon woman gestured toward Tacenda. “What should I do with the child?”

Tacenda’s breath caught. She *could* still breathe, though her eyes were frozen open, staring straight ahead. She could barely make out the Man through the washroom doorway as he slumped down in a chair in the bedroom.

“Have her burned or something,” he said, picking up a book. “Maybe feed her to the devils. They’ve been begging me for live flesh.”

Eaten alive?

Don’t imagine it. Don’t think. Tacenda tried to focus on her breathing.

The demon woman—Miss Highwater—leaned against the washroom doorway, arms folded. “She looks like she’s been through hell. And not the nice parts, either.”

“There are nice parts of hell?” the Man asked.

“Depends on how hot you like your magma. Look at that bloodied dress, ripped and covered in dirt. Doesn’t something about her strike you as odd?”

“Dirty and bloody,” he said. “Isn’t that how peasants normally look?”

Miss Highwater glanced over her shoulder.

“I don’t keep up on local fashions,” said the Man from his seat. “I know they’re very fond of buckles. And collars. I swear, I saw a fellow the other day with a collar so high, his hat rested on it, rather than touching his head...”

“Davriel,” Miss Highwater said. “I’m being serious.”

“I am too. He had buckles on his arms.” The Man held up his left arm, gesturing incredulously. “Like, just wrapping around his upper arm. No purpose at all. I think the people are worried that their clothing will run off if it’s not strapped in place.”

Tacenda bore the exchange in silence. Their conversation was odd, but also so dismissive. She really *wasn't* anything more than an inconvenience to them, was she?

Still, the longer they spent arguing, the longer it would take for them to feed Tacenda to the devils. She couldn't help imagining the experience, lying immobile as the creatures fought over her as they had the apples. Until finally, they started to feast upon her flesh—the pain sharp and real, though she would be unable to scream...

Breathe. Just focus on breathing.

Deep breath in, deep breath out. Even her lips were frozen—her tongue and throat as if stone—but perhaps...with effort...

She drew in a deep breath, then pushed out a soft—but pure—humming note. Her viol responded, strings vibrating in harmony.

The Man of the Manor stood up in a sharp motion.

Warding Song. Sing the Warding Song! She tried, but all her effort amounted to nothing more than a quiet hum, and it didn't seem to bother the demon or her master.

“Send for Crunchgnar,” the Man finally said. “We'll have him bind the assassin, then make her explain who sent her.”

Davriel Cane—the Man of the Manor—was growing *very* tired of people trying to murder him.

What was the point of moving to a far-off backwater if people were just going to bother you anyway? Davriel had made reaching him extremely difficult, but these self-righteous, questing types seemed to consider it an extra challenge.

You will not have these worries once you use me, the Entity said from the back of Davriel’s mind. It had a silky, inviting voice. *Once we are confident in our power, no simple adventurer will ever think to challenge us.*

Davriel ignored the voice. Chatting with the Entity was rarely productive. So long as it healed him from his wounds, Davriel didn’t care what promises it whispered.

He settled back in his seat as Crunchgnar arrived. The tall, horned creature would—to any normal person—have simply been “a demon.” That, of course, was far too pedestrian a term. Diabolist connoisseurs knew that demons came in hundreds of strains—and one never properly used the term “breed” or “bloodline” for demons, as they were normally created fully formed from magic, rather than being born.

Crunchgnar, for example, was a Hartmurt Demon: a strain of tall, muscular demon with no hair, inhuman features, and horns that swept back along the head almost like a mane. A rare wingless strain, Hartmurts were hardy, quick to heal, and tended to be skilled combatants. Indeed, Crunchgnar wore warrior’s leathers and bore a pair of wicked swords strapped to his waist.

The demon was dumb as a stump. Fortunately, he was as sturdy as one too. At some instructions from Miss Highwater, Crunchgnar squeezed into the washroom and picked up the little assassin girl, then carried her out into the bedroom. He took the viol off her back, then placed her in a chair opposite Davriel. The demon frowned as the girl’s stiff, frozen shape didn’t conform to the seat.

Miss Highwater was correct. This girl *was* different from the other would-be heroes who came to kill Davriel. She was so young. Fourteen, fifteen at most. Had the church run out of able-bodied adults to send to their deaths?

Instead of the usual gear of spiky weapons and too many buckles, the child wore peasant clothing—tattered, bloodied, ashen. She looked half-starved, with deep dark circles under her eyes.

Miss Highwater stepped up beside him, cocking an eyebrow as Crunchgnar tried to force the girl to sit down—which Davriel’s binding spell still prevented. The demon then grumbled to himself, doing his best to tie her into the seat.

Davriel clapped, summoning a small, red-skinned devil from the serving room. It trotted in, carrying a tray that was too big for it, set precariously with a bottle of fine Glurzer, a local vintage. The sweetly aromatic

wine tickled Davriel's nose as he poured himself a cup.

The creature jabbered at him in the clipped local devil tongue.

"No," Davriel said in reply, sipping the wine. "Not yet.

The creature snarled in annoyance, then held up a much smaller cup, which Davriel filled with wine. The devil wobbled off, carrying the tray while trying to drink its wine. It had better not drop that Glurzer. Devils made terrible servants, but one worked with what one had. At least they were cheap and easy to fool.

You will have so much more, the Entity whispered in the back of his mind. *Once you seize it.*

Crunchgnar finally stepped back, folding oversized arms. "There. Done." He'd tied the girl by her waist, feet, and neck to the chair—though she was still stiff as a board, and so rested against the seat at an angle.

"Good enough," Davriel said. "Though you should probably stay here when I release the binding, just in case."

"You fear such a tiny thing?" Crunchgnar snarled.

"Tiny things can still be very dangerous, Crunchgnar," Davriel said. "A knife, for example."

"Or your brain, Crunchgnar," Miss Highwater noted.

Crunchgnar folded his arms, glaring at her. "You think to insult me. But I know that deep inside, you truly fear me."

"Oh, trust me, Crunchgnar," she said. "You'll find there's nothing I fear more than stupidity."

He stalked forward, feet *thumping* on the floor. He drew up close to Miss Highwater, looming over her. "I will destroy you once I have claimed his soul. You grow weak and lazy, like him. Ledgers and figures? Bah! When was the last time you claimed the soul of a man?"

"I tried to claim yours the other night," she snapped, "but I found only the soul of a mouse, which I should have anticipated, considering—"

"Enough," Davriel said. "Both of you."

They shared glares, but stilled. Davriel laced his fingers before himself, studying the peasant girl. She had stopped singing, but that tune... It had an odd strength to it, a power he hadn't expected. Was that the Bog's touch on her? She was undoubtedly from the Approaches, likely Verlasen.

He canceled the binding. The young woman immediately relaxed in her seat, gasping. Then she wrapped her arms around herself and shivered, as if cold—binding wards often had that effect. Her long brown hair covered much of her face as she glared at him. Crunchgnar's ropes, now slack, didn't do much. They tied her feet to the chair, but didn't prevent her from moving her arms or head.

"Be on with it, monster," the girl hissed at him. "Do not play with me. Kill me."

"Do you have a preference?" Davriel said. "Axe to the neck? Cooked in the ovens? Devils have been

suggested, but I'm worried you're too lean to provide proper nutrition."

"You mock me."

"I'm merely frustrated," he said, pushing up out of his chair to begin pacing. "What is wrong with you villagers? Isn't your life terrible enough already, with those spirits and beasts and whatnot out in the forests? Do you *have* to come up here and incite my wrath as well?"

The girl huddled down in her chair.

"All I want," Davriel said, "is to be left alone. All *you* need to do is your job! See that I'm provided with tea."

"And shirts," Miss Highwater said, going down her ledger, "and food. And occasional taxes. And furniture. And rugs."

"And, well, yes," Davriel said. "Some *few* offerings, befitting my station. But it's not that bad. A relationship equally beneficial to everyone involved. I get a quiet, secluded place to go about my life. *You* get a lord who doesn't drink your blood or feast on the flesh of virgins at every full moon. I would think that on Innistrad, having a lord who mostly ignores you would be quite the novelty!"

"So what did Verlasen Village do to offend you?" the girl whispered. "Were your socks made too tight? Did one of the apples have a worm? What insignificant offense caused you to finally notice us?"

"Bah," Davriel said, still pacing. "I don't care about you. Yet you keep sending these hunters to come attack me! How many in the last two weeks, Miss Highwater? Four?"

"Four groups," she said, flipping a page in the ledger. "With an average of three cathars or hunters in each one."

"Popping out of my cellar," Davriel said, waving in annoyance, "or breaking down my front door. Those twins with the tridents smashed my dining room window—the one made of *antique stained glass*. Someone keeps telling them of me, and so they keep coming to slay me. It's growing *severely* inconvenient. What can I do to get you villagers to shut up?"

"That should not be a problem," the girl whispered, "now that you have murdered us all."

"Yes, well, that's not..." He trailed off, stopping in place. "Wait. '*Murdered us all*'?"

"Why feign ignorance?" the girl said. "We all know what you've done. You were spotted when you took my parents from their wagon ten days ago. Then your geists took those merchants, and others who strayed too close to the edge of the village. My sister two days ago. And then, today..."

She closed her eyes.

"They're all gone," she whispered. "All but me. Dead and cold, with marble eyes. I held my sister after they found her, and she was...limp. Like a sack of grain from the cellar. She was apprenticing to be a priest, but she died like the rest. The Bog will have the bodies of my people, but it will not feast, for their souls are gone. Taken, like the heat stolen straight from the fire, leaving only ash."

Davriel looked toward Miss Highwater, who cocked her head.

“*All* of them,” Miss Highwater said. “As in, *everyone* in Verlasen Village?”

The girl nodded.

“Verlasen?” Davriel asked. “Is that the one where...”

“You get your dustwillow tea?” Miss Highwater asked. “Yes.”

Blast. The tea, a mild sedative, was his favorite. He needed it to sleep on days when memories grew too weighty for him.

“It’s also where the shirt tailors live,” Miss Highwater said. “Lived. I guess we anticipated that problem, then.”

“Every villager?” Davriel said, spinning on the girl. “Every one of them?”

She nodded.

“Hellfire!” he said. “Do you know how long it takes to replace those things? Sixteen years at least before they’re productive!”

“You do have two more villages,” Miss Highwater noted. “So I suppose it could be worse.”

“Verlasen was my favorite.”

“You wouldn’t be able to tell the difference if your life depended on it. But this *is* going to have a serious impact on your income, and the next season’s profit and loss ledgers.” She made a note. “Also, we’re out of tea.”

“Disaster,” Davriel said, slumping back into his chair. “Girl. It has been ten days since the first of these deaths?”

She nodded slowly. “My parents. You knew them; they made your shirts. But...you already know of their deaths. You *killed* them.”

“Of course I didn’t,” he said. “Murdering villagers? *Myself*? That sounds like an awful lot of work. I have people—well, beings that are vaguely shaped like people—to do that sort of thing for me.”

Davriel rubbed his forehead. No *wonder* the hunters had been bothering him so much lately. Nothing hooked would-be heroes more than news of a mysterious lord abusing his peasants.

Hellfire! He was supposed to have been able to fade away into obscurity [here]. He’d moved [here] years ago, then finally settled on the Approaches as the most remote location on an already remote plane. [Here], consorting with demons was seen as only a minor oddity.

So he’d thought. What...what if news of this spread to the wrong ears? The ones listening for stories about a man with his description, a man who could steal spells from the minds of others?

Time grows short, the Entity said in the back of his mind. *They will find you. And they will destroy you. We*

must gather our power and prepare.

I will be fine, Davriel countered, thinking directly to the Entity. I don't need you.

A lie, it replied. I can read your thoughts. You know that someday, you will need me again.

For a moment, Davriel smelled smoke. Heard screams. For a moment, he stood before cowering masses, and was *worshipped*.

These memories were somehow more real than they should be. The Entity could play with his senses, but he asserted his will and forced away its touch, banishing the sensations.

“Miss Highwater,” he said.

“Yes?”

“Do we still have the soul of that knight who attacked me a few days ago? The one from whom I stole that binding I used on the girl?”

“You promised to give the knight’s soul to the devils,” she said, flipping a few pages in her ledger. “If they were good.”

“Have they been good?”

“They’re devils. Of course they haven’t been good.”

“Right then. Fetch the soul for me. Oh, and a head, if we’ve got one lying around.”

Tacenda tested her bonds. They were slack, and she thought she could even get out of the ones wrapping her feet. But dared she run? What would that accomplish?

Once Miss Highwater returned from giving orders outside the room, the Man asked her if Verlasen Village was, “The one with that angry man who smelled of dishwater.” That might have meant Mayor Gurtlen of Hremeg’s Bridge? In any case, this Davriel pretended to be completely unaware of what had happened to her people, her family, her entire world.

What was the purpose of the subterfuge? *Who knows what strange machinations inhabit the brain of such a creature?* she thought. *Perhaps he just wants to torture me with uncertainty.*

She wiggled one foot, slipping it free of her ropes. Should she try attacking again? Foolishness. She obviously couldn’t harm Davriel with something as simple as an ice pick. Maybe she should try the Warding Song?

She decided to wait. Soon, another demon entered the bedroom. About her height, it was twisted and hunched over, and had features that vaguely reminded her of a hairless dog’s snout. Unlike the other two, it had black wings jutting out of its back, though they were gnarled and withered.

The demon slunk over to Davriel, carrying a bag in one hand, a cloth-wrapped object in the other.

“Finally,” Davriel said, rising and pulling over a small end table. “Right here, Brerig.”

The hunched-over demon set the object on the table, and the cloth slipped off it, revealing a large, squat mason jar with a glowing light pulsing inside.

“Excellent,” Davriel said.

“Riddle, master?” the demon—Brerig—asked, smiling a wide mouth full of too many teeth.

“Fine.”

“Was it a farmer?”

“Nope. Afraid not.”

“Ah. Oh well.” Brerig sighed and pulled something from the sack. A human man’s head, held by the hair. Tacenda immediately felt sick. The head was preserved with some kind of metal plate on the bottom. The skin was pale and bloodless, but not rotting.

She tasted bile, but forced herself to swallow and breathe deeply. Just another corpse. She’d seen...seen too many of those already today.

Davriel took the head and screwed it onto the glowing glass jar, affixing the two. Brerig shuffled over to

the wall, where he shooed away a few of the red-skinned devils. Miss Highwater inspected the jar, her ledger under her arm, while Crunchgnar stood near the doorway and slid a knife from his belt, eyeing Tacenda.

Davriel fiddled with the jar, flipping something on the top while muttering something that sounded like an incantation. Then, when he set it down, the light from the jar faded—and the head on top *quivered*. The lips began moving, eyes lethargically opening and looking one way, then the next.

“You’re a stitcher?” Tacenda asked.

“Do not insult me, young woman,” Davriel said.

“A ghoullcaller, then? A...a necromancer?”

Davriel stood up and spun, pointing toward her. “I’ve been patient with you so far. Do not *test me*.”

Tacenda shrank back into the chair. Stabbing him had only seemed to annoy him, but this...this he actually found insulting.

“I am a diabolist,” Davriel said. “A demonologist—a scholar. My study takes skill, effort, and acumen. Necromancy is a fool’s art, practiced by failed butchers who think they’re being clever just because they—brilliantly—notice that sometimes corpses don’t stay dead.” He snapped his fingers in front of the head’s eyes, drawing its attention. He moved his finger back and forth, and the eyes tracked it.

“Have you ever taken note of the types of people who end up practicing necromancy?” Davriel continued. “The art attracts the unhinged, the unintelligent, and the unkempt. Far too many of them have overinflated opinions of their own ‘wicked schemes,’ believing that they’re rebellious and self-empowered simply because they’ve trained themselves to look at a dead body without getting sick. Never mind that corpses make for *terrible* servants. The up-front work is a nightmare, and then the maintenance! The *stench*! All for a servant who is even dumber than Crunchgnar!”

Crunchgnar growled softly at that. Tacenda slipped her other foot free. Davriel wasn’t watching; he was using a syringe from the bag to inject the head with some kind of green liquid.

“But...” Tacenda couldn’t help saying, “you are working with a corpse *right now*.”

“This?” Davriel said. “This is barely even magic. This is merely a means to an end.” He finished the injection, and the head focused on him more deliberately, then parted its lips.

“Do you remember your name?” Davriel asked the head.

“Jagreth,” the head said, its lips moving, though the sound seemed to come from the metal plate that connected it to the jar.

“Jagreth of Thraben,” Miss Highwater said, reading from her ledger. “Cathar, official church warrior, and self-styled ‘hunter of evil.’ He had quite the reputation for honor, by my sources.”

I met him, Tacenda realized. It wasn’t his head, but this man—this soul—had come through Verlasen a few days ago, after hearing of her parents’ deaths. His voice had been deep and confident; she’d imagined him as a tall, broad-chested man. Willia had been quite taken with him. That had been before...before she’d...

“I came to kill you,” the head said, fixing its gaze on Davriel. “Man of the Manor. What have you done to me?”

“Just a few improvements,” Davriel said. “How does it feel?”

“Cold,” the corpse whispered, “as if my soul had been frozen in the highest mountain ice, then locked in a darkness so deep, even the sun would be swallowed there.”

“Perfect,” Davriel said. “That’s the preservation liquid doing its work.” He tapped the head lightly on the cheek. “Thank you for the binding spell you let me leech from your brain. It proved helpful not half an hour ago.”

“You monster,” the head whispered. “What you have done to me is an abomination. A moral injustice.”

“Technically,” Davriel said, “I’m the legal authority in this region, and you *did* try to murder me in my sleep. So I’d say that what I’ve done to you is both moral and just. But let’s make a deal. Answer a few questions for me, and I’ll promise to let your spirit go.”

“I am not going to help you bring terror and pain to any others, fiend.”

“Ah, but look at the poor girl in that chair,” Davriel said, gesturing toward Tacenda. “Her entire village has been killed! Their souls stolen from their bodies in the night by some mysterious terror.”

“It was during the day,” Tacenda whispered. “And it’s not mysterious—you know what happened. *You* did it.”

The head fixated on her, and the features softened to sympathetic. “Ah, child,” the head with the voice of Jagreth, the Cathar, said to her. “I tried, and I failed. It is as I feared, then? A monster like this one is rarely sated with a few murders. Once he has the thirst for blood, he returns again and again...”

Tacenda shivered.

“I do get quite thirsty,” Davriel said. “Usually, I opt for a nice red wine—but after an extremely hard day, nothing hits the spot like a cup filled with the warm blood of an innocent.”

The head’s eyes turned, looking up at him.

“I bathe in it, you know,” Davriel said. “Just like the stories say. Never mind how impractical that sounds—the clotting, the staining—really, just go with it. But blast, you all keep *finding out* about my nefarious nocturnal necations. What I need to know is how. How did you find me out?”

“Those at the priory told me what you had been doing,” Jagreth said. “They explained about the souls you’d taken.”

“Who at the priory?” Davriel said.

“The prioress herself.”

This made Davriel harden for some reason, his lips drawing to a line.

“Everyone knows what you’ve been up to,” Jagreth said. “You left the bodies, the souls removed.”

“But how did you know it was me?” Davriel asked. “I’m not native to the locale, but even my few years here have taught me that you don’t lack for threats upon human lives. Why assume *I* was behind it?”

“I have already told you—”

“My sister saw you,” Tacenda said, drawing both of their attention. “She *watched* as you took my parents ten days ago. After that—when you took the souls of those merchants traveling between villages—a priest saw you. Then you claimed Willia in the fields, likely angry she’d escaped you before.”

“You cannot pretend innocence here, monster,” Jagreth said. “You are distinctive in your cloak and mask.”

“My...cloak and mask,” Davriel said.

“The ones you wear when visiting the village,” Tacenda said. “My sister saw you clearly.”

“She saw someone in my cloak and mask,” Davriel said. “The cloak and mask I *specifically* wear to obfuscate my features so that my real self is unrecognizable. Nobody saw my face. Correct?”

Well, technically, the mask and cloak were what Willia had said she’d seen. But everyone knew the Man of the Manor was a malevolent figure who consorted with demons. Everyone knew that...

She looked again at Davriel, with his fluffy shirt, thin mustache, and violet cravat—with his strange mix of arcane knowledge and remarkable obliviousness.

“Hellfire,” he muttered. “Someone’s been imitating me.”

“A difficult task,” Miss Highwater said. “Think of the sheer number of naps they’d have to take.”

Davriel eyed her.

“Admit it, Dav,” she said. “It would require a true master of imitation to impersonate you. Most people would accidentally do something relevant or useful, and that would destroy the entire illusion.”

“Go check for my cloak and mask,” he said.

“Release me,” the head said. “I have answered your questions.”

“I did not specify a date or time,” Davriel said. “I only said that I would release you. And I will. Eventually.”

“Technicalities!”

“As far as I’m concerned, technicalities are all that matter.”

“But—”

Davriel twisted something on the jar’s top, and the head went slack, jaw drooping, eyes rolling to the side. The jar underneath filled again with glowing light.

Miss Highwater ruffled through a wardrobe on the side of the room. She pulled out a deep black cloak,

with a distinctive ghostly tattered bottom—like the frayed spirit of a haunting geist. The golden mask was in a demonic shape with large dark eyes, sinuous lines, and a gruesome mouth reminiscent of a jaw with the skin removed. It was what the Man wore when he went in public.

“Well,” she said, “your outfit is still here. So the imitator fashioned their own copy.”

“But why?” Tacenda asked. “What reason would someone have to imitate you?”

“Miss Highwater,” Davriel said, “how many times did you say I’ve been assaulted in the last few weeks?”

“Four,” she said. “Five if you count the girl, I suppose.”

Davriel threw himself into his chair, rubbing his forehead. “What a pain. Someone is having fun out there, then pinning the blame on *me*. How am I supposed to get any work done?”

“Work?” Miss Highwater asked. “What work?”

“Mostly reminding you to do things,” he said. “I don’t want you slacking. I wrote myself a note about it the other day...” He patted his pocket, then reached over to his suit coat and removed a piece of paper—which was bloodied from his stab wound. He gave Tacenda a flat stare.

“You...really didn’t do it, did you?” Tacenda asked. “You *didn’t* kill my village.”

“Hellfire, no. Why would I ruin the village that provides my tea? Even if your harvest has been late this year.” He glared at Tacenda.

“We’ve been busy,” she said. “Being *murdered*.”

“What a mess,” Davriel said. “I can’t have someone imitating me. Miss Highwater, send Crunchgnar and, say, Verminal to look into who might have done this. And see if we can get more peasants. Maybe promise no whippings for the first two years, see if that attracts any settlers?”

“You’re going to send the *demons*?” Tacenda asked. “You’re not even going to go yourself?”

“Too busy,” he said.

“He has to take his evening nap,” Miss Highwater said. “Then a nightcap. Then sleep. Then his morning nap.”

Tacenda gaped at Davriel, who leaned back in his chair. Perhaps he hadn’t killed the people of her village, but *someone* had been leading the Whisperers when they attacked. She’d heard their footsteps, and someone had been seen wearing Davriel’s cloak and mask.

The murderer, and the geists that served them, was still at large. Verlasen wasn’t the only village in the region; there were two more, along with the people of the priory. Hundreds more souls were in danger. And Davriel wasn’t even going to leave his manor?

Tacenda felt her anger rising again. Maybe this man hadn’t killed her friends and family himself, but his incompetent and selfish rule shared equal blame for the deaths. Tacenda stood up, pulling herself from her ropes.

Crunchgnar—who had been watching for this—stepped in front of the doorway to cut off her escape. But Tacenda didn't try to flee. She leaped forward and snatched the glowing jar off the table near Davriel, then—without a second thought—smashed it against the floor, breaking it and causing the head to roll away.

The brilliant light of the soul inside seeped free, and she heard a distinct *sigh* as the imprisoned cathar escaped his torment. The light floated up, forming vaguely into the shape of the man—just as she'd imagined him, with that square jaw and that noble air, swathed in the rugged coat of a hunter.

Admittedly, the collar was a little much.

Thank... Thank you... A voice—as if blown by the wind—moved through the room.

Davriel watched with an expression she couldn't read. Surprise? Horror at what she'd done to his prize?

“Technicalities or not,” she said. “You should make good on your word. I'm sure a *true* necromancer would know to...”

Thank...thankgagnsk Thaaaaaaahhhhh...

Tacenda hesitated, then turned toward the spirit, which—instead of dissipating as she'd assumed—was growing brighter. Its eyes grew larger as they darkened to pits, distorting the face. Its fingers stretched longer, and it adopted a wicked, lopsided grin...

“Cathar Jagreth?” she asked.

The thing struck, slashing razor-sharp fingers through her forearm, causing her not to bleed, but to feel an intense frozen pain. She gasped and stumbled back. The thing—gone mad—lunged for Davriel.

Crunchgnar arrived first. The oversized demon blocked the spirit, touching it as if it were physical, and slammed it backward. The spirit let out an angry wail that made Tacenda's ears hurt, and she clamped her hands on them, crying out.

The spirit seemed to be able to decide whether it was physical or not, for though Crunchgnar could touch it at first, the spirit faded and flowed away like fluttering curtains. It kept repeating a bastardized version of “thank you” over and over again, each somehow more *wrong* than the one before.

The spirit flowed toward Davriel, darkening and becoming less transparent. Crunchgnar whipped a sword from its sheath, and the weapon's faint glow of power made the spirit hesitate.

Then Davriel—red smoke filling his eyes and turning them crimson—stood and released a jet of *flame* from his hands, the heat so intense that Tacenda screamed. The spirit screeched in kind from the center of the immolation, then pulled in on itself, shriveling before burning away.

It left a singed and blackened scar on the rug and the bookcase behind. Tacenda gawked, cradling her arm, which still felt icy where she'd been slashed.

The red smoke faded from Davriel's eyes. He winced, as if using the magic had caused him pain. He rubbed his temples, then shook his head. “Well, that was exciting. Thank you, Crunchgnar, for the timely intervention.”

“I will have your soul, diabolist,” Crunchgnar snapped. “I have not forgotten our terms.”

Davriel stepped over and kicked at the burned rug. “Did the rug makers live in your village?”

“Master Gritich and her family,” Tacenda said. “Yes.”

“Damn,” Davriel said. “I’ll have you know, girl, that I leeches that fire spell from the mind of a *particularly* dangerous pyromancer. I’d been saving it for an emergency.”

“The cathar...” Tacenda blinked. “He attacked me...”

“Loose spirits—geists, as you call them—can be dangerous and unpredictable. Most forget themselves when separated from their bodies, retaining only the faintest hints of memory. What you did was both foolish and reckless.”

“I’m sorry.” She looked away from the scarred rug, tucking her arm against her chest.

“Great. Glad to hear it.” Davriel nodded his head toward her. “Miss Highwater, see what the girl can tell you about this impostor, then toss her out into the forest. Tell the devils they can have her if she tries to sneak in again.”

“You’re not going to check her mind for talents you can leech?” Miss Highwater said.

“The Bog’s stench is all over her,” Davriel said. “No thank you. I have enough headaches at the moment.”

One of the demons—the hunched-over one they’d called Brerig—took Tacenda by the arm and began to lead her from the room. His skin was surprisingly soft.

Tacenda resisted, trying to pull out of the demon’s grip. “Wait,” she said. “My viol!”

Behind them, a devil was plucking at the instrument. Davriel waved with an offhand gesture, so the devil scrambled over and delivered him the viol.

“I...” Tacenda said. “Please. It is all I have left.”

“It’s a fine instrument,” Davriel said. “Might sell for enough to buy a new rug. But cooperate with Miss Highwater—tell her everything you know of this impostor—and I’ll let you keep it. Did you see this cloak and mask yourself?”

“No,” Tacenda said, deflating. “I am...blind during the days. The Bog’s blessing has also left me cursed, payment for the songs it gives...”

Davriel sighed, then made a shooing motion.

Brerig towed Tacenda by the arm toward the doorway. “Come,” the demon said. “Come. Come, and I will tell you a riddle. They are fun. Come.”

She resisted a moment longer, then—as Miss Highwater joined them—finally relented to Brerig’s surprisingly gentle prodding. What...what was her fate now? She had escaped death three times over tonight. The Whisperers. The Bog. The Man of the Manor.

“You didn’t see the impostor,” Miss Highwater said, a dark pen poised above her ledger as she walked. “What *did* you see?”

“Just bodies,” Tacenda said. “So many bodies. I should live among them. I belong in a grave...”

“Did they lose the color from their skin?” Davriel asked from his seat, still toying with her viol. “After they were taken, did they go pale, or ashen?”

Tacenda paused beside the doorway, and the demons didn’t force her to continue.

“They looked just like they did in life,” Tacenda said back to him. “Only blue around the lips. Their limbs went rigid, and they stayed stiff for a few hours—strangely stiff—before finally going limp.”

“Suspended animation following a direct soul siphon,” Davriel said absently. “Probably the result of some aspiring necromancer harvesting souls. Well, it could be worse. If Miss Highwater can find the souls, I suppose we could restore them before the bodies rot. Then I wouldn’t have to mail-order a new village.”

Tacenda felt a *jolt* go through her. Had he just said...

“*Restore them?*” Tacenda asked. “As in *bring them back to life?*”

“Possibly,” he said. “I’d have to see the bodies to be certain. But from the description, this state might be reversible—and that would certainly be easier than growing new peasants the traditional way.”

“Though admittedly not as much fun,” Miss Highwater noted. “Come, let’s stop bothering Lord Cane.”

The demon Brerig pulled Tacenda’s arm, but something deep within her—something that she had assumed shriveled and lifeless—stirred.

Bring them back. She could *bring them back?*

“How long?” she said. “How long do we have?”

“Are you still here?” Davriel asked.

“*How long?*”

Crunchgnar stepped forward, pushing aside Miss Highwater, sword out and leveled toward Tacenda.

So Tacenda began singing.

Though she intended to start small, that hope—that *warmth*—exploded from her in a pure, solitary, forceful note. Like the peal of a morning bell, it was the first note of the Warding Song.

The demons and devils in the room cried out in pain, a sharp and garish harmony. Brerig whimpered, and Miss Highwater backed away, hands to her ears. Even Crunchgnar—seven feet tall with terrible horns—stumbled and wavered. The devils scattered with collective screams of agony.

Her viol, still in Davriel’s hands, played the same note: a demanding, relentless tone. Davriel let go of the instrument, then cocked his head as it hovered in front of him. That happened sometimes. Her drums had done the same.

She continued the song, each note louder than the one before. The three demons cowered down, groaning in agony, holding their heads. Davriel, however, just pushed the floating instrument aside with one finger, then stood up with a deliberate motion.

The song didn't affect Davriel. He...he really was human. As with many protection magics, people were immune.

Davriel strode up to Tacenda, who let her song die off. Her viol floated down to the ground before Davriel's chair, and the three demons slumped to the floor. The cries of the devils still echoed in the other rooms.

"The Bog's ward," Davriel said. "A nice demonstration. Whatever took the people of your village was obviously frightened of you, which is why you're still alive."

"How long?" she asked. "How long will my people last? If I could find their souls..."

"Depends," Davriel said. "Most violent soul harvesting leaves the subject dead immediately, often with physical wounds. Exploding chests and all that drama. But what you described sounds more like the aftermath of involuntary projection, where the soul is coaxed away from the body. That often sends the body into a brief catatonic hibernation."

"How—"

"Two days, perhaps three," Davriel said. "After that, the soul won't recognize the body as its own—and the body will have begun to decompose regardless."

So her parents...her parents were truly gone. Dead ten days ago and reclaimed by the Bog. But her sister, Willia, lay on a slab at the priory. She hadn't been returned to the Bog, because she worshiped the Angel. Could she be saved? And Joan, the woodcutter. Little Ahren and Victre...

"You have to help them," she said. "You are their lord."

Davriel shrugged.

"If you don't," Tacenda said. "I will...I..."

"I'm amused to hear this threat."

"I will see that you *never* get to take another nap."

"You'll find that I..." He trailed off. "What?"

"I'll travel to Thraben," Tacenda said. "I'll go into every church and I'll sing to them of the 'necromancer of the Approaches.' I can sing more than the Warding Song. I have other songs, with other emotions. I'll *make* them hate you. Terrible Lord Davriel Cane, the man who took the souls of an entire village."

"You wouldn't dare."

"I'll break down in tears," she threatened, "before every would-be knight, questing hero, and hunter wanting to make a name for themselves. I'll send an *endless* stream of self-righteous champions to the

Approaches, until they clog the bridges in their eagerness to come and bother you.”

“I could just kill you, you realize.”

“And my soul will continue!” Tacenda said. “As a mournful ghost. The girl of the forests, whose entire family was taken by Davriel of the Approaches! I’ll sing ballads! Dead or alive, I’ll send them to annoy you! And...and I’ll draw them maps. And pictures of your face. And—”

“Enough, girl,” Davriel said. “I doubt you would have the willpower to continue this silly endeavor as a geist.”

Tacenda bit her lip. In defiance of his words, Davriel looked worried. Annoyed, really, but it seemed—with this man—that was basically the best she could hope for.

“You know they’ll come for you,” Tacenda said. “Even if you kill me. An entire village? Rumors will spread. Decades from now, people will still be trying to slay you. You’re probably right that I couldn’t do much to inspire more—but I doubt I’d need to. Think about the *inconvenience* this will cause. Yet, one evening of mild work could prevent all of that. Not much effort. Just come look at the bodies of the fallen, and try to figure out what might have taken their souls.”

“You make a strangely persuasive argument, child.” He sighed. “Miss Highwater? Are you well?”

The female demon had pulled herself up off the ground and was shaking her head, still seeming stunned by the effects of the Warding Curse. “Well enough, I guess,” she said.

“Then...prepare my carriage. Let us visit this village. Perhaps we can find some tea they neglected to deliver.”

PART TWO

Davriel felt he could hear the Bog, despite the distance, as his carriage bumped down the overgrown forest road.

He'd come to this plane specifically because so many others avoided it. The land had a...chill to it. A sense of dread that ran deeper than the unyielding autumn and the watchful trees. It disturbed even the most callous to visit a place where human beings—with loves, lives, families—were often just...food.

What other lands whispered, this one screamed: feelings and aspirations were immaterial. In the grand scheme, your dreams were less important than your duty to reproduce, then become a meal.

The carriage jostled as it hit one of the many ruts in the road. Miss Highwater cursed softly, then scratched a line through something she'd been writing in her ledger. The girl, Tacenda, sat next to her, clutching her viol. Davriel had pretended to be reluctant in returning it; in truth, he had no idea what he'd do with such a thing. He preferred silence.

The road crested a rise, and outside moonlight frosted the tops of the trees. A flock of birds—too distant to distinguish the species—broke up into the air as something startled them. They almost seemed to trail wakes through the moonlight, like fish in a current. As if the light were somehow too thick.

It's out there, Davriel thought. That direction. The cursed Bog. He claimed to be the lord of the Approaches, but the villagers only gave lip service to fealty, and even to religion. The sole thing they really seemed to respect was that watery pit. And whatever lived deep within it.

The Entity stirred inside him.

No words for me? Davriel thought. *Usually, it upsets you when I think of the Bog.*

The Entity didn't speak, not even offering its usual assurance that he would someday wield its power. Something was off about this night. The disappearing villagers. The Bog's ward. That cold moonlight...

"So," Miss Highwater said, continuing her interrogation of the girl. Only the three of them rode in the carriage; he'd put Crunchgnar and Brerig in the coachmen's seat outside. "The first victims were your parents, ten days ago. Your sister escaped and ran to the priory."

"Yes," the girl said. "She was...she was training to be a cathar, for the church. When she returned with soldiers and they found my parents, some thought they might have been subject to dustwillow poisoning. That happens sometimes to the farmers, you know. But we couldn't think why the Man would attack, then *poison* someone. Then the merchants were taken, three days later, on their way to the priory."

"Witnesses?" Miss Highwater asked.

"A priest saw the attack from the distance," Tacenda said. "He spoke of seeing the Man of the Manor and terrible green spirits, pulling the souls out of the merchants. After that, we started to stay close to the village,

and the prioress promised to send to Thraben for instructions or aid.

“Others died though—taken by apparitions, which we started to call the Whisperers. Two days ago, my sister fell dead near the farms. Oddly, she didn’t seem...frightened, as the others had been. Her face wasn’t frozen in a grimace of fear, at least. Perhaps she was taken by surprise?”

“Anyway, the worst of it happened earlier today. Workers in the fields came running to the village, saying that geists were flowing out of the forest surrounding Verlasen. Mirian—my neighbor—woke me, since I usually sleep until near duskfall. Everyone hid in their homes while I took my spot near the cistern and started singing.”

“Outside?” Davriel cut in. “They leave you out by yourself, as an offering, all night?”

“I’m no offering,” the girl said, lifting her chin. “My sister and I were born with the Bog’s blessing—stronger than anyone has ever known it before. My songs protected the village at night.”

“Isn’t that hard?” Miss Highwater asked. “Singing all night?”

“I don’t have to go straight through the night, usually,” the girl said. “A song here and there, some humming in between. But...today...” She looked away. “It didn’t work. The Whisperers entered the village, ignoring my song. I didn’t see whatever it was, but I heard them. Whispering...”

Davriel leaned forward, curious. “Why didn’t anyone flee? Why just hide in their homes? Why not run away?”

“Run?” The girl laughed an empty laugh. “Where would we *go*? Starve out in the woods somewhere? Travel at night, trying to get to Thraben, where they’d turn us away? Their merchants and priests might come to the Approaches, but they wouldn’t accept a village full of refugees.”

“Still, the priory,” Davriel said. “It’s close.”

“Some of the villagers went to the church in our village. Those who worship the Angel. When she heard of our plight, the prioress had sent priests to protect us with their prayers. But faith didn’t help the ones who hid in the church. Just like it didn’t help my sister.”

It seemed Tacenda didn’t follow the Angel herself, despite the symbol she wore wrapped around her wrist. Curious. From his first arrival in the Approaches, he’d found it unusual how staunchly the people here resisted the church. The priests of the priory—misguided fools that they were—had a trinket that stilled the souls of any who died there. No geists, no rising corpses, no terrors.

That should have been enough to earn them converts, but few of the villagers accepted the Angel’s blessed sleep. Instead, they left instructions for their bodies to be returned to the Bog. The cursed thing had its vines wrapped around their hearts.

“I knew the priests who came to help,” Tacenda said. “The younger one, Ashwin, did a sketch of my sister once. They barricaded themselves with the faithful inside the church. I looked in on them at the end, and found only corpses.”

Davriel sat back, thoughtful. In the manor, he'd postulated this was the work of some rogue necromancer. But an entire village? Defended by multiple priests with protection wards and banishing talents?

"Maybe we *should* have left," Tacenda said, looking out the window. "Maybe we *should* have run. But you don't know how it is, safe up in your rich manor. You don't know what it's like to sleep each night with a fervent prayer and an axe set by the door, just in case.

"This is how we live. There is always a shadow in the forest, with eyes that burn too darkly and teeth that shine too brightly. We've lived here for generations, trusting in the Bog's ward. This is our fate. Hunker in at night and pray for the clouds to pass us by..."

The carriage bumped again, then the wheels clattered on wood as they crossed an old bridge. The carriage lanterns soon revealed a collection of squat homes. Though the buildings huddled in groups, the reinforced doors and thick window shutters made each one look solitary.

He spotted the first body in the street. A woman lying on her back, arms frozen in a gesture of panic, trying to protect her head. The face was locked in a mask of terror.

Crunchgnar slowed the carriage. Davriel stepped out into the silent town full of hollow buildings, like broken eggshells. This place, he decided with a shiver, was worse than the forest, where you knew you were being watched. Here...well, there was a question.

Crunchgnar thumped down from the carriage, wearing his full battle gear. Brerig perched on the top of the carriage like a gargoyle, his stunted wings fluttering behind him. Gutmorn and Yledris rounded out his retinue—a brother and sister pair of lightly armored Nightreach demons who landed on a nearby rooftop, their enormous wings settling around them. They were far less human-looking than Crunchgnar or Miss Highwater, with skeletal features and long, goatlike legs.

If anyone *had* been alive in the village, they likely would have died of fright from the sudden arrival of his procession. Miss Highwater helped Tacenda from the carriage, then pulled out Davriel's cloak and mask. She held these toward him, expectantly. He normally wore them in public. Fewer people from off-plane knew the costume than they did his face—and Davriel Cane was, of course, a newer name he'd adopted.

He threw on the cloak, which had an old shadow charm from his days living among the demons of Vex. When the edges fluttered down, they left faint smudges in the air, like the streaks made by a paintbrush. It was a tad dramatic—but few would ever accuse demons of understatement.

He left the mask off for now as he knelt beside the body of the frightened woman. He felt at the skin of her face—which had gone cold and stiff—then slipped his hand under her back. The sun had set almost three hours ago, and the attack had occurred just before that, but there wasn't a hint of warmth. The body heat wouldn't have faded so quickly on its own, even in a chill environment such as this. That also ruled out something like dustwillow poisoning—it might provoke a catatonic state, but wouldn't cause the body temperature to plunge so quickly.

He nodded to himself, working the muscles of her face, then moving one of her arms down. "Definitely not a mere immobilization ward, like I used on you earlier," he said as Tacenda stepped up beside him. He

looked deep into the fallen woman's eyes, then used a mirror to check for breath. "No sign of life, but also very little pooling of the blood at the back... Unnatural chill... No sign of puncture wounds from being fed upon... Blue around the lips, as you noticed... Muscles are taut, but can be posed..."

"So?" Tacenda asked.

"So, this has been a waste of a trip," Davriel said, standing up and accepting a washcloth from Miss Highwater for his hands. "It is exactly as I surmised at the manor. Their souls have been evacuated, and the trauma induced their bodies into a form of paralytic suspension."

"But what can we do?"

Davriel handed the towel back to Miss Highwater, who tucked it away, then handed him his walking cane. It had, of course, a sword hidden inside. He turned around, inspecting an entire village full of mausoleums.

"That depends on who or what is behind this," he said, gesturing with his cane. "Your average necromancer would want the bodies; that they were left here tells us this wasn't the work of some common corpsemonger. However, there are varieties of necromancer who build devices using souls as a form of power. And there are many creatures in this land who feed upon souls. Some attack aggressively. Others—like demons—engage in such feasting only as a delicacy, once the soul is won through contract."

"I doubt it was demons," Miss Highwater said, flipping back a few pages in her notebook. "The girl said that many of the doors were still locked. She had to break in and check for survivors. She heard these Whisperers, but couldn't distinguish the language they spoke."

"The Whisperers could pass through walls," Tacenda said. "But...someone was controlling them. Right?"

"Yes," Davriel said. "Even if you hadn't heard footsteps earlier, we could surmise that. The subterfuge using my likeness, the precision strike to excise your sister, then the collected assault... Someone *is* controlling these geists. On their own, they wouldn't have the presence of mind to act in any coordinated way." He pointed with his cane. "Take me to one of the locked buildings you opened."

Crunchgnar and Brerig joined them—the littler demon holding a lantern for light—while Gutmorn and Yledris took to the air, watching for danger. They all had various claims upon his soul, per the contracts he'd made with them. The terms of each were different, but each shared one important element: their reward was predicated upon him surviving long enough for the deal to be fulfilled. If he died early, they got nothing.

That was the first rule of demonology: make certain the demon's incentives align with your own. Though the concept was simple economics, it was so easy to forget.

They reached a nondescript home with a broken window. The shutters to this one had apparently been unlocked for some reason during the attack, so Tacenda had been able to get in easily by breaking the glass.

They went in through the door, and there found the bodies of a young family—with two small children—huddled in a variety of states of terrified panic. Davriel handed Miss Highwater his cane, then did a perfunctory check of the bodies, which had the same signs as the first woman. As he worked, Brerig heaved his stumpy body up onto a counter near the stove and began rummaging through the cupboards. He tossed out

a few empty jars after sniffing them, then kept rummaging.

“If it’s here, master,” Brerig said, “I’ll find it.”

He’s...looking for tea, Davriel realized. *For me*. The little demon had a habit of fixating on one thing Davriel said, then trying his hardest to fulfill it. He came out with a jar of what appeared to be dried-up garlic cloves, and obviously couldn’t decide if it was tea or not. Miss Highwater gave him a covert shake of her head, so he tossed it aside.

Davriel turned back to the investigation. “These were followers of the Bog?”

“Yes,” Tacenda said, her voice sounding hollow. She carefully tucked a blanket around the smallest of the children, a boy who couldn’t be older than four. His terrified face was frozen mid-scream, eyes open wide, and he was clutching a straw toy for comfort.

Davriel had been inclined to trust Tacenda’s description that these Whisperers were a form of apparition, but she’d been blind, so it was best to check for himself. The bodies in this home—which had otherwise been locked tightly—seemed proof enough. Whatever had done this *could* pass through walls.

Brerig limped over, carrying a pouch that looked promising. Indeed, it had once held tea, judging by the scent.

“Sorry, Master,” Brerig said, upending the pouch and proving nothing was inside.

“It’s all right,” Davriel said, standing up and wiping his hands on the cloth Miss Highwater provided.

“Riddle?” Brerig asked.

“Go ahead.”

The little demon scrunched up his face. “Is it air?”

“That’s actually a good guess,” Davriel said. “But no, it’s not the answer.”

Brerig smiled, then tucked the pouch into his pocket as he exited. Crunchgnar—who had waited outside during the investigation—thumbed over his shoulder, sending the smaller demon to go watch the horses, which he did without complaint.

“Honestly,” Miss Highwater said, “I don’t think he ever wants to figure out that riddle.”

Perhaps she was right; it was criminal how loyal Brerig could be. Davriel stepped back out onto the street, Tacenda following.

“Well?” she asked. “What now?”

He pointed with his cane toward the shadow of the small church at the center of town. Crunchgnar led them that direction with his lantern.

“How much do you know about the Bog’s ward upon you?” Davriel asked Tacenda.

“All of the Approachers are marked. The Bog’s protection. It’s said that because of it, we don’t suffer

nearly as many attacks as we should, living this far away from the rest of society. I don't know about that. When I was younger, attacks seemed frequent enough. Until I learned to sing." She looked down. "Before my failure today, I thought it would always be enough. My sight, in exchange for the song..."

"A curious curse," Davriel said.

"It's a reminder," Tacenda said. "Of what I owe the Bog. Of the debt we all owe to the Bog, for protection." She seemed to waver as she said it, looking toward an open doorway with bodies inside.

Well, Davriel supposed he couldn't blame these people for a little superstition. There *was* something different about the Approachers. That was the most intriguing part of all this.

"Something is very odd about these spirits who invaded your town," Davriel said, gesturing with his cane. "Miss Highwater, would any discerning demon make a deal with an Approacher?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Of course not."

"And why not?"

"Because they're claimed already. Everyone knows that. You can *smell* it on them."

Crunchgnar grunted, then nodded. "Like we can tell when a soul is already under contract to another demon. It takes a powerful prize to be worth entering such a bargain."

"Thank you for the compliment," Davriel said. "Miss Verlasen, the mark upon your souls is less a protection, and more a sign of ownership. A claim. Your song functions the same way. It scares off beasts and spirits because they recognize the danger in provoking the Bog. Killing you would be like killing a powerful lord's hounds. But your song did not help earlier. Ergo..."

Tacenda stopped in the street, her instrument strapped to her back. Though Miss Highwater had given her a handkerchief earlier to clean her face and hands, her peasant's dress was still ragged and bloodied from where she'd scraped her arm. She gaped at him.

"Surely," she said, "you aren't implying the *Bog* took them?"

"It is my leading theory," Davriel said. "There is another possibility—perhaps these geists were sent by someone powerful enough to ignore the Bog's claim. Still, I can't help wondering why your warding did not work. Perhaps the thing that took these souls was made of the same power. While a mouse might fear the cat's scent, the cat itself won't even notice it."

"The Bog *protects* us," Tacenda said. "It demands our souls when we die, but otherwise it wards us and keeps us safe. It couldn't have been involved."

"Possibly," Davriel said. "I've always found it difficult to separate your little cult from the Bog's actual interventions."

"It's not a cult. This is just...the way things are."

Davriel glanced through an open doorway into another home, noting a body lying on the floor near the

opening. He found himself increasingly annoyed. Not by the deaths—lives began and lives ended. There was no use fretting about every little loss. But these were *his* peasants. The Bog, or something similar, had taken them in flagrant disregard for Davriel’s authority.

We will become so much more, the Entity said—ever lurking in the back of his mind.

There you are, Davriel thought. *Have you been napping?*

You continue in petty struggles for power and authority, the Entity whispered. *You must realize these are meaningless wastes of your potential. Once you use my strength—infuse your spells with my power—you will outgrow all of this.*

That was precisely what Davriel feared. Ever since stealing the Entity—pulling it from the mind of a dying man—he had been able to sense its vast potential.

Soon, the Entity said, *we will escape this mundanity. Soon...*

They reached the church, a simple wooden structure with a peaked roof. No grand stained-glass windows, not out here in the Approaches. Just a wide single-story structure filled with pews. Inside, the darkness was complete, as the few windows didn’t allow in much light from the moon.

The large front doors stood open, and the bar on the inside had been set aside. *Curious*, Davriel thought, resting his fingers on the engraved wood, noting distinctive scrapes. Those were fresh. Also of note, the door had once borne the symbol of the collar, the sign of the Church of Avacyn the Archangel. That had been sanded off some months ago. In addition, the identical stonework mark once set into the arch had been covered over with plaster.

“What’s this?” he asked, pointing. “Why did your people remove the symbol?”

“Well,” Tacenda said, “after that business last year, the prioress decided...”

“Business last year?” Davriel said with a frown. “What business is this?”

“With the angels?” Tacenda said.

He shook his head, then glanced at Miss Highwater, who seemed amused. Even Crunchgnar raised an eyebrow.

“You’re not serious, are you?” Miss Highwater said. “The archangel Avacyn went crazy? As did most of the flights?”

“What?” he said. “Really?”

“The angels tried to kill us,” Tacenda said. “They wanted to exterminate humankind for our own good. Even here, away from the main body of the church, we heard about it.”

“Huh,” Davriel said. “That sounds like a rather large hassle.”

“Oh, Dav,” Miss Highwater said. “I gave you three briefings on the matter.”

“Was I listening?”

“Obviously not.”

Tacenda, incredulous, waved toward the sky. “The moon? Didn’t you notice the *moon*?”

“Oh? Did it try to kill you too?”

“The symbol?” Tacenda said. “The enormous rune *etched into its surface*?”

He stepped back, looking up at it, then cocked his head. “Has that always been there?”

Tacenda looked at him, incredulous. “How can he be so shrewd, yet so *oblivious* at the same time?”

“You ask a question that has tormented me for years, child,” Crunchgnar muttered. “Someday, I will discover his secrets as he screams for mercy, his soul burning in my hearth deep within hell. Then, I will devour his soul.”

“And I shall endeavor to give you indigestion, Crunchgnar,” Davriel said, squinting at the moon. “You know, I like it. It has style. It’s different.” He held up his hand, making a fist in the air to summon Gutmorn and Yledris.

They flapped over, landing on the ground nearby with quiet thumps. The two claimed to be brother and sister—created upon the same day—though their faces were so twisted with horns, they *also* could have been siblings to a particularly aspirational fork, and Davriel wouldn’t have known the difference.

“Watch the perimeter of the town,” Davriel told them. “I don’t trust this night. The rest of you going to be all right if we step into a church?”

“I fear not the angels,” Crunchgnar snapped.

“And I don’t care,” Miss Highwater said. “As long as there aren’t any priests or banishing spells around.”

Good enough. Davriel strode in.

Tacenda stopped in the doorway of the church as Davriel and the demons spread out to investigate.

She intimately knew the sounds of this place. The way voices echoed in the eaves. The way the small fountain tinkled with the sound of spring water. The prioress had installed that symbol of purity just before Tacenda's birth—an attempt to represent clean waters to contrast the impurity of the Bog.

Tacenda had come here with Willia for services, though she'd never herself taken the oath of the Blessed Sleep. The church cared about this true sign of devotion above all others: the promise to have one's body taken to the priory for burial, rather than accepting entombment in the Bog.

Tacenda trailed to the front dais and the altar, which had holes for candles and twin poles at the sides. Once those had borne Avacyn's symbol, the general symbol of the church. Tacenda remembered kneeling here as a child, one hand on each of the poles. Feeling at the cold metal, the cast bronze symbols, while the priests prayed over her in an attempt to heal her from her affliction.

The symbols of Avacyn had been removed at the prioress's command. Apparently, everyone in Thraben worshipped a new angel now. But could you really just change your faith? Swap it out like changing shirts? What made this new worship any better? And how long had the old one been flawed?

Willia wasn't the only one here who had taken to wearing the symbol of the Nameless Angel instead. A mysterious figure who had granted the Approaches the boon of the Seelenstone, the relic of the priory.

Crunchgnar poked around inside the building, his motions exaggerated, as if he was trying hard to *prove* just how unbothered he was to be inside a church. Miss Highwater stayed close to Davriel, who inspected the beam that used to bar the door. Then he turned his attention to the windows, which he opened in turn, looking at the frames.

Tacenda walked to the bodies, which lay in shadow. Crunchgnar's solitary lantern left the wide chamber feeling gloomy. Around a dozen people had fallen here, two families' worth. The faithful among the village, a handful compared to those who had stayed in their homes to instead trust the Bog's Warding Song.

With them were the bodies of the priests. There were three: old Gurdenvala was their village priestess, a woman Willia had always called stern. She'd fallen at the altar, holding aloft a symbol of Avacyn—a now-forbidden icon. When danger had come, she'd turned back to her original faith.

The other two priests had come from the priory to try to help the people in this emergency. Tacenda didn't know them as well, though the younger one was Ashwin—the priest who had once done a sketch of Willia. His body huddled against the wall, eyes open wide. Tacenda knelt and slipped a sketchpad from the ground beside him, and inside found sketches of people. Priests, villagers, several of the prioress herself.

The last sketch was a quick drawing of the church from this perspective near the wall: the pews in a

line, the front doors wide open and the moon beyond. Standing in the doorway—drawn as quick unfinished outlines—were transparent figures with twisted faces. Ghastly images that reminded her distinctly of what she'd seen earlier at Davriel's mansion, when the cathar's spirit had twisted into a fearful geist.

She shivered at the haunting sketch—rough, but somehow compelling. She could imagine the priest there, huddled in the corner, drawing furiously as the church's wards and prayers failed. She took the sketchpad to the front of the room, where Davriel and Miss Highwater were again inspecting the front door.

“What's this?” Davriel said, stepping over and taking the sketchpad from her. “Too dark. Crunchgnar, would you get on with lighting the lamps in here? I can barely see how ugly you are.”

Crunchgnar grumbled, but started to do so. Davriel turned the sketchpad toward the light, then nodded. “Makes sense.”

“What makes sense?” Tacenda said.

“Miss Highwater,” Davriel said, handing the sketchbook back to Tacenda, “what would you make of this situation?”

“The church's wards held for a short time at least,” Miss Highwater said, pointing. “Scratches on the doors and windows, which look distinctly like the marks made by geists trying to claw their way in. They wouldn't have needed to do so if they could simply pass through these walls, as they did the other homes.”

“Excellent,” Davriel said. “Miss Verlasen, this is compelling evidence.”

“Evidence?” Tacenda asked. “Of what?”

“These Whisperers could not enter the church, at least not at first. The powers of the priests *were* sufficient to hold them back.”

Tacenda looked back at the picture of the spirits at the doorway to the church. “You said before that it was possible the geists weren't affected by my song because they were too powerful. But if the Church's wards held them back...”

“I doubt something powerful enough to completely ignore the Bog would, in turn, be stopped by the wards of these priests,” Davriel said. “That said, we have proof that the priory's authority can ward away the Bog's influence. The claim it can make upon the souls of those buried there, for example.

“As the Whisperers were unaffected by your song, but were stopped by the priests, I find it increasingly likely that they *are* from the Bog. In fact, the spirits you heard whispering were likely people from your own village.”

He strode across the room, cane clicking on the church's tile floor.

Tacenda hurried after him. “*What?*” she demanded. “What do you mean?”

“The attacks started slowly,” Davriel said. “At first, just two people—your parents—on a trip to the Bog. Then a few more, rising in frequency, until the final attack on the village. Why so many days between the first attacks, then a growing, overwhelming attack at the end?”

“I suspect it was because these ‘Whisperers’ are the very spirits we’re searching for, the disembodied souls of your villagers. The spirits can perpetuate the theft—once a few geists were made, they could be sent to gather others. The multiplicative effect would compound their numbers quite quickly, growing their ranks for larger and more daring attacks.”

Tacenda froze in place, horrified by the idea—but it made a twisted kind of sense. Her sister’s face...it hadn’t been frightened when she was taken. Could it be that she’d somehow *recognized* the geists coming for her? Could it have been...her parents?

“Miss Highwater,” Davriel said. “Several questions remain. Someone seems to be helping the Bog, as evidenced by the footsteps she heard. This leads us to the answer to how the church was breached. The wards were, after all, holding.”

“Vampires?” Miss Highwater guessed.

“An excellent guess.”

“But wrong?” she asked.

Davriel smiled.

“Wait,” Tacenda said. “What is this about vampires?”

“The door was opened from the inside,” Miss Highwater said, pointing. “The bar was removed willingly, with no signs of a forced entry. Your sketch proves that the spirits entered through the doorway. So someone let them in—that’s why I guessed vampires. A creature who could control the mind of someone inside and get them to open the doors.”

“And would open doors alone allow spirits to enter a warded church?” Davriel asked.

“I’m not sure.” Miss Highwater frowned.

“Beyond that, could an Approacher even *be* mind-controlled?” Davriel asked. “Have you ever tried to reach into one of their brains? I’ll tell you, it is *not* a pleasant experience. The Bog’s touch is quite powerful.”

“So...” Tacenda asked. “What happened then?”

“Check the bodies of the priests,” Davriel said, waving toward the corpses.

“I just did that,” Tacenda said.

“Then do a better job this time, Miss Verlasen.”

She frowned, but walked over and knelt beside the corpse of the young priest. She looked him over, then—timid at first—turned his body. *He’s not really dead*, she told herself. *He’s just sleeping. I’ll save him, like I’ll save Willia.*

His body didn’t seem different from any of the others. She moved to the older priest from the priory, who lay on his front, with his head turned to the side. He had the same frozen, glassy expression as everyone else. Tacenda rolled him to the side.

And found a stab wound in his chest.

She yelped, letting go, but Miss Highwater took the body and rolled it all the way over. He had been killed with a blade. How had Tacenda not noticed that?

There's barely any blood on the floor, she thought. It stained the front of his robes, but hadn't pooled underneath him.

"His body froze like the others, once his soul was taken," Miss Highwater said. "Damn it, Dav, how did you know?"

The Man of the Manor walked past, looking self-satisfied as he began to rummage at the altar.

"What does it mean?" Tacenda asked.

"Someone stabbed him, which interrupted his prayer," Miss Highwater said. "Then that someone opened the doors and let in the Whisperers. There was a traitor in the village."

"Yes," Davriel said. "Do you know exactly who was in this room when they first barred those doors?"

"No," Tacenda said. "It was a confusing time, and I was still blind. My eyesight didn't return until just after dusk."

"Might be worth having someone audit the town anyway," he said. "So we can see if anyone is missing. A task we could perhaps assign the priests of the priory, come morning. Unless...Miss Tacenda, your sister is dead, so we can't interview her. But you said a *priest* was among those who identified me. Do you know which priest?"

"Edwin," Tacenda said. "A younger man. He happened upon you...or someone dressed as you, I suppose...attacking some local merchants. That was the first time anyone reported seeing geists involved..."

She trailed off. Those were the first attacks after her parents had fallen, and Edwin had reported seeing two geists. It seemed obvious, now that Davriel had pointed it out. Those two had been...had been her parents.

The horror of it suddenly threatened to overwhelm her. She slumped down on the ground beside the stabbed priest, surrounded by corpses. Her parents, her sister, the people of the village—they'd been taken, corrupted, forced to come back and rip out the souls of those they loved. And Davriel said the Bog was involved? That it *wanted* this for some reason?

Tacenda had been using a kind of focus to keep herself moving—first, a narrow focus on attacking the Man. Then a focus on trying to save her sister. But if she really stopped to think about how terrible it all was...

She was the village's last protector. But in the end, she was barely an adolescent, and she had *no idea* what she was doing. What would she do if the Bog itself was against her? If its gift was useless, what was she?

She hugged herself, and wished—for once—she had someone to sing to her, as she'd sung to Willia in the night. She wished she could hear that Song of Joy, the one that—moment by moment—she seemed to be forgetting...

“The priest, child,” Davriel said, his voice uncharacteristically soft. “What do you know of him?”

“Not...not much,” Tacenda said, shaking herself. “He’s Approacher born, but trained in Thraben. Surely you don’t think he was involved in this?”

“They might have opened the church doors here for a priest,” Davriel said.

“It would explain a lot,” Miss Highwater said. “Someone seems to have gotten through those doors, then stabbed the priest saying the prayers—letting the geists flood in.”

“I’m making no absolute judgments yet,” Davriel said, still poking around behind the altar. “I have no concrete theories on why a priest would work *with* the Bog. I can’t even say why the Bog would go about murdering its own worshipers, if indeed that happened.”

“Then...what do we do next?” Tacenda asked, blinking, trying to recapture her focus. She couldn’t think about it all too much, or it would overwhelm her.

They *weren’t* dead. Willia *wasn’t* dead. Focus on that.

“We need magic that can deal with geists,” Davriel said. “I’d best want a spell to track them. Sometimes if you can isolate a geist, then confront it with something very familiar to it when it was alive—a tool of its trade, perhaps—it will recover enough to answer a few questions. We might also want some magic to stabilize and anchor their forms, forcing them to remain corporeal so they can be resisted physically.”

“Do you have that kind of magic?” she asked.

“No,” Davriel said. “Technically, I have few talents of my own.”

“But—”

“I can but borrow from others, Miss Verlasen,” Davriel said. “I am an unassuming beggar, a servant of all people.”

Crunchgnar snorted as he lit another lamp. It still wasn’t very bright in the room.

“Many people,” Davriel continued, “have some kind of minor talent—a magical knack, an aura of faith, or even some practiced wizardry. They’re truly uninspired in the use of these blessings. I give them a little help.”

“He does that,” Miss Highwater noted, “by reaching inside their brains and forcibly ripping out their magical abilities, which he then uses as he needs them.”

“That’s horrible!” Tacenda said.

“Now now,” Davriel said. “It hurts me almost as much as it does them, especially if the magic I steal is from someone particularly self-righteous. And they recover the talents soon after my intervention, so what is the harm? Aha!”

He stood up suddenly, holding something aloft.

“What?” Tacenda asked. “A clue?”

“Better,” he said, turning around the small jar. “The priestess was hoarding some dustwillow tea.” He unscrewed the lid, then his face fell.

“Empty?” Tacenda asked.

“You peasants have been exceptionally lazy these last few weeks,” he said. “Yes, yes. Being murdered by geists and all that. But really...”

A thump sounded outside, and a shadow darkened the front of the church. One of the two flying demons—Tacenda couldn’t tell them apart—ducked into the chamber, holding a spear and speaking with a gravelly voice. “Master. Riders on horseback bearing lanterns have approached the town.”

“What?” Davriel said. “At this time of night?”

“They shot at us when they saw us,” the demon said, holding up a wicked crossbow quarrel. “Gutmorn got hit in the leg. He landed on top of a nearby home to recover, but the riders are coming straight this direction. They look like demon hunters.”

Davriel sighed a loud, deliberate sigh, and shot Tacenda a glare.

“You can’t *possibly* blame me for this,” she said.

“I’ll blame whomever I want,” he snapped. “Yledris, go fetch Brerig and the wagon. See if he can get here before—”

A crossbow bolt *snapped* against the wooden door next to Yledris, and shouts rose in the near distance.

“Or,” Davriel said, “perhaps just bar the door.”

Tacenda stumbled back as Crunchgnar roared and slammed the door shut. The tall, thick oak portal rattled as Crunchgnar—with Yledris’s help—rammed the bar into place. Crunchgnar then unhooked a small round shield from his back and slipped a wicked sword from its sheath. Yledris fell in beside him, spear held before her, wings stretching and then settling in a relaxed posture.

Miss Highwater peeked through a small window beside the doorway—the glass was thick, the opening narrow. “This is novel,” she said. “I’ve never been on *this* side of a church assault before.”

Davriel joined her, and Tacenda stepped up, but the window was too narrow for her to get a good view.

“Lord Greystone!” a woman’s voice shouted from just outside. “Do not pretend to hide! Our scout saw you inspecting your foul handiwork in this poor town. Your hour of reckoning has arrived! No longer will you terrorize the Approaches! Come out and submit to judgment in the name of the Archangel Sigarda and the host of cleansing!”

“Greystone,” Miss Highwater said. “That’s the alias you give when...”

“...I visit the prioress,” Davriel said, his expression darkening. “It grows increasingly obvious that she and I will need to have words. Can you get a count of how many are out there?”

“There are at least a dozen,” Miss Highwater said. “We shouldn’t have trouble fighting them unless they’ve brought some heavy magics.”

“Fighting them?” Tacenda said, stretching on her toes, trying to look over Miss Highwater’s shoulder to see out. “There’s no need to fight—just let me talk to them. Once I explain that you didn’t attack my village, they’ll probably want to help us save the people.”

Davriel and Miss Highwater shared a look.

“She’s sweet,” Miss Highwater said. “It will be fun watching her get disillusioned.”

Tacenda blushed. “I’m not naive. But those are good people out there. Heroes. *Surely* we can talk to them.”

“There’s no such thing as good people,” Davriel said. “Just incentives and responses.” A bright red light flashed through the window. “Ah! They brought a pyromancer. That might prove convenient. Also, *take cover*.”

He turned and ran for the nearby pews, leaping over them with shocking spryness. Miss Highwater followed, and Tacenda gaped for a moment, then ran.

The door exploded.

The shock wave slammed Tacenda against a wooden pew. A spray of burning splinters fluttered through the room, trailing smoke. Crunchgnar bore it without flinching, his shield blocking some of the debris.

Soldiers bearing the new church symbol—in the shape of a heron’s head—flooded the room. They wore stark white tabards, bound at the waist with thick buckles. Crunchgnar and Yledris engaged them immediately, and though outnumbered, the demons loomed over the smaller humans.

Davriel dusted some splinters from his clothing, then settled into a chair beside the fountain—one with a view of the fight—and *put his feet up*.

Tacenda scrambled over to him, her ears ringing from the explosion. “Aren’t you going to do something? Can’t you freeze them, like you did me?”

“That spell has faded,” he said. “I’ll need to steal something new before I can intervene in this.”

A thump sounded outside as the other flying demon—Gutmorn—landed and attacked the soldiers from behind, causing those nearest the door to turn around, shouting. Most of the soldiers were outfitted in similar uniforms, though their leader was obviously that woman with the long black hair and the silver lining to her coat. She edged to the side of the demons, holding a longsword, watching for an opening.

Beside her, a man in leathers carried a large canister on his back, glowing with a deep red light. Tacenda had never seen anything like it before, but tubes extended from it along his arms, down to his hands. The pyromancer?

I have to do something to stop this, Tacenda thought as Crunchgnar swept a soldier aside with his shield, then hacked at another one—killing the poor woman. The demon took a spear to the side however, and cried out in agony.

“Stop!” Tacenda shouted, though her voice was lost in the ruckus. “Stop! Let me explain!”

The woman with the long hair glanced at her, then pointed. “Deal with his thrall.”

A soldier dashed toward Tacenda. She backed up a few steps, anxious. “Listen to me,” she said. “Lord Davriel didn’t do this. We’re trying to find out what happened. Just listen—”

The soldier swiped his sword at Tacenda, who scrambled away, climbing back over a pew. “Please,” she said. “Just *listen*.”

The man rounded the pews. Nearby, a body went rolling past, thrown by one of the demons. The entire church building was a cacophony of grunting demons, shouting men, and ringing metal. They fought without taking note of the bodies of the villagers on the floor, other than to stumble over them occasionally. It was madness!

The soldier lunged for Tacenda again, but she stayed among the pews, quicker than he was. He stopped in the aisle, then held his hand to the side, light gathering there. Tacenda froze, worried. Magic?

The man suddenly screamed, the light in his hand vanishing. He fell to his knees, holding his head in agony.

“Ah!” Davriel said. “Curious.”

Tacenda glanced at him, noting the red smoke fading from his eyes. She glanced back at the soldier. Davriel had...stolen a spell or talent? From the man’s mind?

She backed away, stopping near Davriel’s seat.

“What did you get?” Miss Highwater was asking.

“A summoning charm,” he said. “Not terribly powerful, but flexible. It brings the most recently touched weapon to hand. I suspect that soldier was summoning a crossbow to deal with Miss Verlasen.”

Another round of shouts came from the soldiers, who backed away as Yledris took to the air, sweeping about with her spear. Three men with crossbows, however, launched a row of bolts with strange chains on them, meant to damage wings. That dropped Yledris back to the ground, where men came at her long goatlike legs with axes.

Davriel narrowed his eyes, then pointed at one of the men, who stumbled and screamed, holding his head. Gutmorn pushed into the room and speared the man through the neck.

Tacenda turned aside, wincing. “We shouldn’t have to do this,” she said. “They’re on *our side*.”

“They’ve seen demons, child,” Davriel said. “They won’t talk or listen now.”

“They’re *good people*.” As he started to respond, she cut him off. “There *is* such a thing. I’ve known many a good and humble person.”

“Products of social conditioning and moral incentives,” Davriel said absently. He pointed again, and another man screamed.

“Anything good?” Miss Highwater asked.

“No,” Davriel said. “The minds of these are about as useful as bent spoons.” Davriel eyed the man with the fire machinery, then pointed directly at him. Nothing seemed to happen though, and Davriel grunted.

“What?” Miss Highwater asked.

“He’s got wards upon his mind,” Davriel said, frowning. “Ones that seem specifically intended to block me.”

Crunchgnar roared as he took a hit to the back, and dark blood poured down his leather armor. Most of the soldiers still fought in this open space at the rear of the room, between the doors and the pews, where the three demons fought with increasing desperation as they were surrounded.

“They’re being hurt,” Tacenda said. “The soldiers are killing them!”

“Yes, that’s *literally* why I keep them around,” Davriel said. He stood up and pointed once more at the man with the pyromancy gear, but again nothing seemed to happen.

“Can you even steal anything from him?” Tacenda asked. “He’s using machinery.”

“He’s augmenting with geistflame, but he’ll have innate power to control and maybe ignite the fire,” Davriel said. “My best chance will be right at the moment of ignition...”

“Dav,” Miss Highwater said. “There at the back, near the doors. Do you see that bearded man?”

Tacenda squinted, picking out a man who had entered the church behind the fighting, then set an enormous tome on the floor before him. “That one is called Gutmorn,” the old man shouted, his voice carrying over the fray. “The winged one with the wounded leg. He is a demon of the Devrik Depths! Feaster upon souls, tormentor of the seven princes!”

“They brought a church diabolist,” Davriel said. “How cute.”

“Hell,” Miss Highwater said. “Somebody kill him. Crunchgnar! Stab that bearded guy!”

But Crunchgnar was flagging. Fully half of the soldiers were down, but he’d been cut up badly. The other two demons put their backs to one another, lashing out with spears, but they too were slowing. Bleeding dark blood on the floor.

“That is Yledris Bloodslave!” the old man shouted. “The other winged demon, also from the Devrik Depths. They are not immune to fire, Grart! The tome is certain!”

So much death. So much pain. Again, it threatened to overwhelm her. Uncertain what else to do, Tacenda stepped forward, and found herself humming. Maybe...maybe it would help? To sing?

“You’ll just see them dead if you do that,” Davriel said. “Your ward will stun the demons and let the soldiers finish them off. A demon has no soul; destroy it, and it is gone forever.”

Tacenda hesitated. Surely there was a way to stop this. Surely there was a way to make them—

Hands seized her from the side and shoved her to the ground. She gasped—she’d been so focused on the demons, she hadn’t seen the woman with the long hair, who had snuck up along the pews. Dazed, Tacenda rolled over as the woman thrust her hands toward Davriel, her eyes glowing, a powerful blue and white light forming in front of her.

Davriel shoved Miss Highwater aside. A blast of light exploded from the demon hunter and washed over him, like a column of purity, tinged faintly blue.

“And now you shall finally rest, immortal monster!” the woman shouted.

The light faded, leaving Davriel standing there in his puffy shirt, purple cravat, and long cloak. He blinked several times, his eyes watering. “Well, that was unpleasant.”

The woman gaped, lowering her hands.

“Unfortunately for you,” he said, “I’m quite human.”

“There!” said the old man with the book, pointing toward Miss Highwater, who’d stumbled and fallen as Davriel had shoved her out of the way. “Do not ignore the demon that has the form of a comely woman! That is Voluptara, Feaster of Men! Known as one of the most dangerous and wily of demons of the Nexrix Flame

Expanse!”

Tacenda blinked, sitting up. “Vol...*Voluptara?*”

“Oh, hell,” Miss Highwater said. “He found it.”

A roaring heat came from behind Tacenda, and she turned, scrambling to her feet. The man in red—finally in the right position to not hit any of his friends—had come alight with fire. He cackled, launching a blaze from his tubed hands.

It engulfed Yledris completely. A terrible, raging inferno jet that—when it finally faded—left only bones and some buckles. Gutmorn screamed in agony, a shockingly human sound, while the remaining soldiers cheered.

Their leader turned back to face Davriel again and raised her hands to summon her light, as if to try to prove to herself that it *would* work this time.

“I believe,” Davriel said, “that is enough.”

He pointed, stabbing his fingers toward the lead woman. Her light went out and she screamed, falling to her knees. Again, Tacenda noted that Davriel himself winced in pain as he stole the woman’s power—as if he shared in her agony.

Davriel dealt with the pain far better than the woman. He kicked her aside, and Miss Highwater leaped forward, producing a knife from her belt. She dealt with the unfortunate woman, and Davriel picked his way toward the demons.

Another soldier came for Davriel, but he snapped his fingers—red smoke clouding his eyes—and his cane appeared in his hand.

The summoning spell, Tacenda thought, backing away. *The one that brings him a weapon*. He’d summoned the cane from where he’d left it beside the altar. With a smooth motion, Davriel whipped the sheath off, revealing a long slender blade inside.

The soldier stabbed at Davriel, who didn’t dodge, but instead lunged forward in a dueling stance, driving his sword straight through the soldier’s neck. The man scored a hit on Davriel, stabbing him through the side—but Davriel didn’t seem to mind. He slid his sword from the man’s neck as he stumbled and died.

The pyromancer roared, turning his weapon on Davriel. But the lord seemed to have been waiting for this—for as the pyromancer focused on charging up his flames, Davriel stabbed his fingers at the man.

The fire went out, and the man stumbled as if he’d been punched. Then he looked befuddled as he inspected his tubes. A second later, a blast of flame from Davriel’s hand vaporized him, along with a large swath of pews behind.

The remaining three soldiers had seen enough. They scrambled away out the door, leaving a bleeding Crunchgnar and Gutmorn among the corpses. The demons sagged under the weight of their wounds, sighing. That left only the old man with his tome, who was still kneeling on the floor, frantically flipping pages. He

slowed as he looked up and found Davriel standing above him.

The church had again become quiet. Silent, save for the crackling of flames from burning pews. Davriel loomed over the old man, then rubbed his fingers together, causing a small flame to rise between them.

Tacenda gasped, then dashed across the room and grabbed Davriel by the arm. “No,” she said. “Just let him go.”

Davriel didn’t respond. His eyes clouded red, with no pupils, and he seemed a demon himself standing there.

“What do you gain by killing him?” Tacenda asked.

“His words cost me a valuable servant,” Davriel said. “I’m simply...responding to incentives. Let’s see if you have any useful talents, old man.”

He stabbed his fingers forward, and the old man screamed, holding his head. This time, Davriel didn’t so much as flinch. But he also *held* the moment, as if continuing to invade the man’s mind, driving the pain deeper and deeper. The old man writhed in agony.

“Please,” Tacenda said. “*Please.*”

Davriel glanced at her, held for a moment, his eyes clouding a deep grey-black. Then he snapped his fingers.

The old man collapsed, groaning, but his immediate pain seemed to have ended.

Davriel picked up the old tome and handed it to Miss Highwater, who was tucking away her knife. The old man managed to climb to his feet, and Davriel didn’t do anything to prevent him from fleeing out the door.

Tacenda forced herself to keep moving, to try not to think too hard about what had happened. She instead decided to check on the bodies of the villagers and the priests, while the demons nursed their wounds at the front of the old church.

Still, she couldn't keep herself from glancing at the bodies of the fallen soldiers, and each time she did, she felt sick. She was accustomed to the hardships of life in the Approaches, but there was something disturbingly brutal about these corpses. Men and women slain in battle.

How many horrors could she witness in one night before she collapsed beneath it all?

Just keep going. Help those you can, she thought, rolling over Ulric the cobbler and settling him beside his family. *Don't think about how, under any other circumstances, you'd have hailed the demon hunters as heroes...*

She squeezed her eyes shut, and took a few long, deep breaths. She would keep going. She had to. She was the village's protector. She'd been *chosen* for this.

She opened her eyes and sat back on the hardwood floor. So far as she could tell, none of the comatose villagers had been harmed during the skirmish. The closest any had come to danger was when Davriel had unleashed his stolen pyromancy. She'd used Ulric's cloak to beat out the flames nearby.

Nearby, Gutmorn limped through the ashes, his leg wrapped in a bandage. The lanky demon knelt down, tenderly lifting something from the black char—a horned demonic skull. Ash flaked from it as Gutmorn lifted it to his face, and a low groan escaped his throat. An anguished, raw sound. His terrible eyes closed, his head rested lightly against the skull, and his posture crumpled into a stoop.

Tacenda could almost see humanity in the poor thing.

"Gutmorn," Davriel said from the front of the church, "your leg wound is bleeding through that bandage. The cut is deeper than you indicated."

The demon didn't stir.

"Return to the manor," Davriel said. "Get that wound sewn up and warn Grindelin that some of the hunters escaped us. They could decide to look for easy pickings at the manor."

Gutmorn stood up. Wordlessly—still cradling the skull—he limped from the broken church. Miss Highwater reached up and rested a hand on his shoulder as he passed, and though the taller demon didn't look at her, he did hesitate beside her.

Tacenda felt as if she were intruding on a personal moment where she didn't belong.

Gutmorn finally vanished out into the night, and the sound of beating wings announced his withdrawal.

Davriel strode through the room and inspected Crunchgnar. The burly, flightless demon was carefully wrapping his forearm in a bandage. He'd taken far more punishment than Gutmorn, but seemed indifferent to his wounds.

"Don't even think about sending me away," he growled at Davriel. "I'll heal this up within the hour, and I won't leave you alone. You'll end up getting killed early and breaking our contract."

"Alas, you've caught me in my design," Davriel said. "It has forever been my intent to seek suicide merely as a means of inconveniencing you."

Crunchgnar growled, as if believing it to be true.

"So far," Davriel added, "the noxious air of your presence has not been enough to do me in, but I am nothing if not determined, so I shall find another method." He turned toward Tacenda. "Do you require more time for recovery, Miss Verlasen?"

"I'm fine," she lied, standing up.

"You wouldn't be with us if that were true," Davriel said, then pointed into the night with his cane. "But let us be off. There is no more to learn from the dead. At least, not the kind who cannot speak."

They struck out into the night, Miss Highwater carrying the lanterns. Davriel's former reluctance appeared to have vanished. Indeed, as he led the way through the village back toward their carriage, his gentleman's sword-cane rapped the ground with a vigor that Tacenda might have considered *eager* in someone else.

"Where now?" she asked him.

"Those men obviously came through the priory on their way here," Davriel said. "Some had wards on their minds to protect against my talents. I was already intent upon visiting the priory—both to ask after this priest who claims to have seen me, and to see the prioress. She has magical talents that help in interacting with spirits. The arrival of these hunters reinforces my decision. The prioress has several questions she must answer."

"You...aren't going to kill her, are you?"

"I think it shall depend greatly upon her responses."

He slowed in the night, and Tacenda drew up beside him, confused—until she saw the carriage ahead. Or, more accurately, the gruesome figure beside it. Poor Brerig—the small, simple-minded demon—had been discovered by the hunters, likely before their assault upon the church. His deformed corpse had been nailed to a nearby door, his head removed and placed beside the flickering lantern on the ground. The mouth had been stuffed with what appeared to be garlic.

Davriel didn't make a noise, though his hand upon the knob of his cane tightened until it trembled, the knuckles white.

"These," he said softly, "are your 'good people,' Miss Verlasen. Would that both gods above and demons below could protect me from *good people*. A man dubbed evil will take your purse, but a so-called 'good

man' will not be content until he has ripped out your very heart.”

She stepped back. There was no threat to his voice—indeed, he spoke with the same lighthearted tone as ever. And yet...

And *yet*.

Since their strange meeting, she had lost most of her fear of him—until that moment. Standing on the roadway, the light of the lanterns somehow failing to reach his face. In that moment, he seemed to become shadow itself, so cold as to smother all warmth. Then he spun, strange cloak fluttering around him, and stalked to the carriage, its horses—fortunately—neither accosted nor stolen.

Tacenda followed, hesitant, shooting one last glance at Brerig's corpse. She would bury it, she decided, once her village had been rescued. The small demon had been kind to her. Certainly, he hadn't deserved such a fate.

Hadn't he, though? she thought, climbing into the carriage. *He was a demon. Who knows what horrors he committed over the course of his life?*

She didn't know, and neither had the hunters. Perhaps that was what left her so uncomfortable. But what were they supposed to do? Ask a demon to list his crimes before destroying him? In this land, you didn't have time for such niceties. If you didn't strike quickly, the things that moved in the forest would claim your life before you had a chance to speak.

And thus, the night made monsters of them all.

Crunchgnar was already looking better. He took the driver's seat, causing the carriage to groan beneath his weight as he settled in. Miss Highwater again sat inside the carriage, a small lantern hanging beside her head giving light as she opened her notebook ledger and started writing.

Tacenda climbed in last, checking on her viol, which she'd left on the seat. The carriage lurched into motion, and Tacenda found the following silence overpowering. She searched for something to say, and blurted out the first thing that came to her—though upon reflection it might not have been a wise choice.

“So,” she said. “Voluptara?”

Miss Highwater paused in her writing, and Davriel—sitting on the seat beside Tacenda—chuckled softly.

“You heard that, did you?” Miss Highwater asked.

“They name themselves,” Davriel said, leaning toward Tacenda. “If you couldn't guess that from ‘Crunchgnar’ and his fine, *extremely* creative moniker.”

“I was young,” Miss Highwater said. “It sounded impressive.”

“To a sixteen-year-old boy, perhaps,” Davriel said.

“Which was *exactly the point*. Remember, I was only twelve days old. I'd like to have seen you do better.”

“Sulterix,” Davriel said idly. “Lusciousori.”

“Can we stop the carriage?” Miss Highwater said. “I need to go find that demonologist and nail his tongue to something.”

“Bosomheavia—”

“Oh stop,” Miss Highwater interrupted. “You’re making the child blush. Look, why don’t you tell me the answer to Brerig’s riddle? The devils have a betting pool going.”

“Oh, that?” Davriel said. “It was a specific rock I saw once in Cabralin, shaped like a gourd.”

“That’s...oddly disappointing,” Miss Highwater said. “How would he ever have guessed that?”

“He couldn’t have, which is rather the point.” Davriel eyed Tacenda, and her confusion must have been obvious, for he continued. “Each of the demons has a contract with me, and the one whose conditions are fulfilled first gets claim upon my soul. Crunchgnar, for example, earns my soul only if I live until sixty-five without dying.”

“Which is clever,” Miss Highwater said, “because it gives Crunchgnar ample reason to protect him.”

“Brerig got to claim my soul if he answered the riddle I gave him,” Davriel said. “He didn’t place stipulations on what the riddle could be, unfortunately for him.”

“I still think that was intentional,” Miss Highwater said. “He was always happiest when he had a master to serve long-term. It gave him purpose.”

“The riddle,” Davriel said. “Was ‘What am I thinking of right now?’”

“That’s...not a riddle,” Tacenda said.

“He accepted it as one,” Davriel said. “So it satisfied the contract.”

“But there are no clues!” Tacenda said. “There isn’t even any context! It could be literally anything. Or, technically, *nothing*. And you could just change the answer if he *happened* to guess right!”

“That, at least, he couldn’t do,” Miss Highwater said. “Davriel had to write the answer on the contract before burning it to seal the pact. Anyone else summoning the contract to read would find that spot indecipherable—but if Brerig guessed right, he’d have instantly known. That said, he only got five official guesses a day. And, of course, Davriel picked something virtually impossible to get right.” She shook her head.

“You were pulling for him, weren’t you?” Davriel said, amused. He didn’t seem to care at all that they were discussing the fate of his soul.

“It would have been hilarious if Brerig had somehow guessed,” she replied. “I’d have liked to see Crunchgnar’s reaction. You know, I half expected you to give the answer to Brerig the day before your sixty-fifth birthday, just to make Crunchgnar explode in frustration.”

“Ah?” Davriel said, then spoke very softly, glancing upward toward the driver’s position of the carriage. “My dear, do you really think that I’d sign a contract that gave *Crunchgnar* a chance at my soul, even if I did

reach sixty-five?"

"I've read the contract," Miss Highwater said. "It's airtight. The definitions are specific. The contract spends two pages on defining times, measures, and ages! You..."

She trailed off as Davriel settled back, smiling.

"How?" she hissed. "How did you trick him?"

"He gets my soul," Davriel whispered, "if I live to sixty-five without dying."

"Ah, hell..." Miss Highwater said, her eyes widening. "You've died once already, haven't you? How?"

Davriel just continued to smile.

"All that talk of times and measures in the contract," Miss Highwater said, "it was just a distraction, wasn't it? I never realized... *Hellfire!* And they call *us* demons."

Tacenda looked from one to the other as the carriage bounced over a bridge. What a bizarre conversation. "So..." she said, frowning. "What's your stipulation, Miss Highwater?"

"Hm?" she said, turning back to her ledger. "Oh, I can claim Davriel's soul once I manage to seduce him."

Tacenda felt a spike of surprise, then blushed furiously. She clutched her viol, then looked from Davriel to Miss Highwater. Neither seemed the least bit bothered by the idea.

"He's quite stubborn," Miss Highwater continued. "I assumed I'd have his soul in under a day. Yet here I am, four years later. Doing his ledgers."

"Perhaps I just don't like women," Davriel said lightly.

"Please. You think I'm that oblivious?" She stabbed her ledger with a particularly sharp punctuation mark, then looked up. "You are something else entirely."

"Have you considered that perhaps you just aren't as attractive as you've always assumed?" Davriel said.

"I've claimed plenty of souls using this exact contractual stipulation. Both men and women."

"And it was *so kind* of them to take pity on you," Davriel said. "Really, they should be congratulated for bolstering your self-esteem by seeing the true beauty inside of you. Commendable people, every one."

Miss Highwater sighed, glancing at Tacenda. "You see what I have to put up with?"

Tacenda lowered her head in an attempt to hide her deep blush.

"Look what you've gone and done," Miss Highwater said to Davriel. "Scandalizing the poor thing."

"You..." Tacenda said. "You really... I mean..."

"It's not the only way I can claim souls," Miss Highwater said. "But it's worked well for me in the past. And, I'll admit, it's kind of *expected* of me at this point. I wasn't at all surprised when Davriel suggested it during the summoning and binding process. More, I was interested that a person who already had a

contract on their soul would dare try to make another. Davriel is a special case though. He's very persuasive. Infuriatingly so."

"But...earlier, you were so embarrassed by your name..."

"Because it's silly. It doesn't mean I'm embarrassed of who I am." She eyed Davriel. "I'm just rusty, that's all. I spent years trapped in that stupid silver prison."

"You could have practiced your arts of seduction on the other demons," Davriel noted.

"Please, have you *seen* what most of them look like?" She looked at Tacenda again, who couldn't believe this conversation was *still* going on. "Crunchgnar is comparatively good looking for a demon, child. Trust me. Some of the others have hooks for hands. *Literal* hooks."

"I've always wondered about that," Davriel said. "Seems terribly impractical. 'Thornbrak, will you pass me that pitcher of human blood? Oh wait, I forgot. You lack opposable thumbs. Or *fingers*.'"

They let the conversation die off finally, Miss Highwater returning to writing. A quick glance showed she was writing down what they'd discovered at the village.

Geists created from the souls of the people. Returned to attack their friends and family, so they're quite far gone.

Traitor likely involved, killing the priest who was protecting the church. Check to see if any bodies are missing from the village?

Bog seems likely involved. What is it, truly?

Someone—likely the traitor—was at the village physically earlier today. Tacenda heard footsteps. Why didn't they strike her down?

Tacenda determined not to break the silence with another stupid question. She instead drew up the window shade and watched the dark forest outside.

A fancy scholar from Thraben had once come to draw maps of the Approaches. He'd tried to name the forests closest to them "the Verlasen Wood," but they'd forced him to cross it out. The woods weren't theirs. Nobody could own these woods.

"The soldiers shouldn't have killed Brerig," Tacenda said softly. "Maybe we humans have been hunted for so long, we've learned how to survive at the expense of remembering what it means to *be* human. To be just and good."

Davriel snorted. "'Being good' is simply a method used to signal that one is willing to conform to societal norms. Agreement with the crowd. Look at any history book, and you'll discover that the threshold for acceptable conformation varies widely depending on the group."

"You said yourself that stealing the talents of good people is harder for you," Tacenda said. "So goodness must exist."

“I *said* that it is more painful for me to use talents leeched from people who view themselves as pure. Which is a different thing entirely.”

“I knew good people,” Tacenda said softly. “In the village.”

“The same village that locked you outside at night?” Davriel said. “Leaving a child to face the horrors of the forest alone?”

“It was my fate,” Tacenda said. “I was chosen by the Bog, and I have to follow my destiny.”

“Destiny?” Davriel said. “You need to learn to abandon this nonsense, child. You people put too much stock in fate—you must choose your own path, make your own destiny. Stand up and seize life!”

“Stand up?” Tacenda said. “Seize life? Like *you* do, sitting alone in your manor? Seizing the occasional nap?”

Miss Highwater stifled a laugh at that, earning her a glare from Davriel. He looked back at Tacenda. “Sometimes, the most ‘honorable’ choice a man can make is to do nothing at all.”

“That’s contradictory,” Tacenda said. “You want to justify being impassive while better people die. You want to pretend that nobody is good so that *you* don’t feel guilty for ignoring their pain. You—”

“That will be enough, child,” he said.

She turned away from him, looking out the window once more. But he *was* wrong. She had known people who were good. Her parents, and their simple love of making clothing. Willia, who had been determined to learn how to force back the darkness—so it could never make anyone frightened again.

One way or another, tonight Tacenda would see Willia—and the others—restored.

According to Davriel's pocket watch, it was almost two in the morning by the time they turned onto the last road, approaching the priory. Davriel had expected the girl to doze off at some point during the ride, but she continued staring out at the trees and the patterns of shadow made by their passing.

Of course, spending the ride in silence didn't mean that Davriel was left alone.

We cannot hide for much longer, the Entity said. We need to prepare for what to do when we are discovered.

You've been saying that for months now, Davriel replied in his mind. And lo, here we are. Still safe. Still alone.

They hunt you. They will find your hiding place.

Then I will seek out another.

Davriel could feel the Entity stirring inside his mind. Davriel smelled smoke, and his vision faded. The Entity was playing with his senses again.

Do you not remember the thrill, the glory of conquest? It said. Do you not remember the power of that day?

I remember, Davriel replied, smoke thick in his nostrils, realizing that I'd drawn too much attention. That the strength I had, no matter how glorious, wouldn't be enough. That the ones who wished to claim you would defeat me easily if I stood alone before them.

Yes, the Entity said. Yes, there was...wisdom in that realization.

Davriel cocked his head, then banished the Entity's touches upon his senses. *What?* he thought at it. *You agree that I shouldn't have used you further at that moment?*

Yes, the Entity said. Yes.

Odd. The Entity normally wanted him to draw upon it, use it for its true purpose—as a vast reservoir to power his spells. With the Entity, he could make his stolen abilities last *weeks* under constant use. As it was, spells he stole from the minds of others usually faded a few hours after he first employed them. Some lasted longer, and others vanished after a few minutes, particularly if he'd been holding them for a while before their first use.

You are not yet ready, the Entity said. I saw that. I have been working on a solution. The multiverse boils in your absence. Forces clash, and the boundaries between planes tremble. Eventually, the conflict will find you. I will have you ready and prepared. Ready to rise up, and claim the position that is rightfully yours...

It fell silent, and didn't respond as he prodded it. What was it planning? Or were these just more idle promises and threats?

Feeling chilled by the conversation, Davriel turned his attention to the task at hand. He'd stolen several abilities from the hunters at the church. Though—even as he considered them—it was difficult not to notice how they seemed so insignificant compared to the power of the Entity.

Never mind that. From the leader of the hunters, he'd stolen a very interesting banishing spell. It was strong, but—as proven by her attempt to use it on him—it couldn't affect a human. He could use it to dismiss a creature of magic, like a geist or even an angel, though the effects would be temporary.

The pyromancy, of course, would also prove useful—though now that he'd used it once, its strength would fade until it left him entirely. He'd hoped for something useful in the mind of the old diabolist, but the only talent he'd found in that man's skull was a scribe's inkspell—for making words appear on a surface as you imagined them. Hardly much use in combat. Though, he also still had the weapon-summoning spell. That would linger, like the pyromancy, for a few hours.

Not a particularly powerful arsenal, but he had survived with less—and he should add the prioress's talents soon enough. Indeed, light from ahead on the old forest roadway indicated they were near. Tacenda perked up in her seat. She was a tough one, though that was not uncommon for these Approachers. As hardy as rocks and as stubborn as boars—with roughly as much sense as either. Otherwise, they'd have found somewhere else to live.

Of course, Davriel thought idly to himself, *what does that say about me, a man who came to live here—of all places—on a whim?*

You didn't come on a whim, the Entity told him. *I brought you here deliberately.*

Davriel felt a sudden spike of alarm. He sat up straight, causing Miss Highwater—on the seat across from him—to snap her ledger closed and come alert.

What? Davriel demanded. *What did you just say?*

The Entity settled down again, quieting.

You didn't bring me here, Davriel thought at it. *I came to Innistrad of my own will. Because of this plane's demonic population.*

Again, the Entity said nothing. Miss Highwater looked about, trying to figure out what had concerned him. Davriel forced himself to paste an unconcerned expression on his face. Surely...surely the Entity was merely taunting him.

And yet, he had never known it to say anything that—at the very least—it didn't *believe* was true.

The carriage slowed as it approached the lights—two massive glass-covered lanterns, burning oil. Fire: the universal sign that civilization lay beyond.

“Ho, the carriage!” a friendly voice called.

Tacenda perked up. “I know that man, Davriel. It’s Rom. He’s—”

“I’m familiar with him,” Davriel said. “Thank you.”

Miss Highwater drew up the window shade, revealing the old monk as he stepped up beside the vehicle.

Rom performed a bow—a little unsteady on his feet—for Davriel. “The Man himself! Lord Davriel Greystone! I suppose we should have been expectin’ to see you tonight.”

“My visit became inevitable once those hunters were sent my way, Rom,” Davriel said.

“Aye, I suppose that’s true,” Rom said, glancing down the road toward the priory, visible in the distance with light pouring out of its windows. “Well, that’s a worry for younger men.” He turned back to the carriage and nodded to Miss Highwater. “Feaster of Men.”

“Rom,” she said back. “You’re looking well.”

“You always say that, miss,” Rom said. “But while you haven’t changed a blink in forty years, I know right well I’ve turned into an old scrap of leather left too long in the sun.”

“Mortals age, Rom,” she said. “It is your way. But I would sooner bet on the scrap of leather that has stood sturdy for forty years than I would the new piece untested.”

The old man smiled, showing a few missing teeth. He glanced up at Crunchgnar—who, judging by the way the roof groaned under his weight—had moved over to watch the old hunter.

“Well, let’s get you in to the prioress, m’lord,” Rom said to Davriel. “Ever since I arrived and told her about the village, she’s been wanting to speak with...” He trailed off, squinting into the carriage. Then he started, noticing Tacenda in the seat for the first time. “Miss Tacenda? Why, you said you were goin’ to stay at my cabin!”

“I’m sorry, Rom.”

“I found her in my washing room,” Davriel noted. “With an eye for vengeance and a rusty implement in hand. Ruined one of my favorite shirts when she stabbed me.”

“Did she now!” Rom said. Davriel might have expected the man to be aghast, but instead he just laughed and slapped his leg. “Well, that was right bravely done, Miss Tacenda! I could have told you it would be useless, but my, stabbing the Man himself? The Bog must be right proud of you!”

“Um...thank you,” she said.

“Well, I’m glad to see you safe, miss! I was goin’ to go back for you, after tellin’ the prioress what you told me. But she said she needed every soldier here, even an old one like me. Just in case. So she set me watchin’ the road instead.”

Rom opened the door to let Miss Highwater out. Normally, when Davriel visited, she and the other demons would wait outside the priory. Instead, one of the monks or priests would drive Davriel and the coach inward. Tonight, however, Davriel stopped her by climbing out himself.

“Dav?” Miss Highwater asked.

“I want you out here, with the carriage,” he said. “If something happens, I might need you to join me quickly.”

“You could just *all* come in,” Rom said. “Pardon, m’lord, but they could, if they wanted.”

“I’m sure the prioress would love that,” Davriel said.

“She ain’t the lord of this ground,” Rom said. “Pardon, but it’s the archangel’s own truth that she ain’t. And if you’re worried about the destroying light, well, I don’t think any of these young pups here have enough power for you to fear—and my own skill ain’t enough to singe a devil these days.”

Davriel looked toward Miss Highwater, and she shook her head. Crunchgnar likely would have relished the chance to stomp around on holy ground and desecrate an altar or two, but Davriel didn’t ask him. Instead, he waved for Tacenda to join him. The young woman scrambled out, bringing her viol.

Davriel left his sword-cane, confident he could summon it with his recently acquired spell. “Be ready,” he said to Crunchgnar. Then he nodded to Rom, who led the way farther along the road, toward the priory.

Leaves crunched underfoot, and things rustled out in the trees. Likely just forest animals. An unusual number of them lived close to the priory. Davriel passed between the burning lanterns along the road, entering the clearing where—at the very center of a gentle slope—the priory stood proud beneath the moon. The long, single-story building had always looked lonely to him.

Tacenda glanced over her shoulder, back at the demons. “I don’t understand,” she said softly to Davriel. “Rom acts friendly toward you, but at the same time I feel like we’re walking to battle.”

“My relationship with the priory is...complex,” Davriel said. “As for Rom, I’ll let him speak for himself.”

“M’lord?” Rom said, looking back from ahead of them. “I ain’t got nothin’ to say worth hearin’. I stay out of it these days. I had enough of that foolishness when younger.”

“You know Miss Highwater,” Tacenda said.

“I tried for ten years to destroy that demon,” Rom said, then grunted. “Damn near got myself killed a half dozen times on that fool quest. I eventually learned, never hunt a demon smarter than you are. Stick to the dumb ones. There are plenty of those to keep a hunter busy all his life.”

“I thought you hunted werewolves when you were younger,” Tacenda said.

“I hunted whatever tried to hunt men, miss. First that was demons. Then wolves.” His voice grew softer. “Then angels. Well, that broke stronger men than me. When it all settled down, I found I’d become an old man, best years of my life spent knee-deep in blood. Came here to try to escape that, wash a little of it off, spend some time huntin’ weeds instead...”

“Do you know a priest named Edwin?” Davriel asked.

“Sure,” Rom said. “Eager, that one. Young.”

“Tell me of him,” Davriel prodded.

“His head is filled with the talk of the righteous inquisition. Talk from the more zealous minds back in the heart of human lands. He’s started down a road already, the type that you never realize only goes one way...” He glanced back at Davriel. “I shouldn’t say more. Talk to the prioress.”

A few priory cathars waited by the doors of the southeastern entrance. White coats over leathers, with large collars and peaked hats that shadowed their faces. They glared at Davriel.

“Nice hats,” he noted as he swept into the priory. The church really did have the best headgear.

Rom led the way down a small corridor, and Davriel followed, his cloak billowing to brush both walls. The priory was a humble place. The prioress eschewed ornamentation, preferring bleak wooden corridors painted white. They passed the steps down to the catacombs, where they kept that silly artifact they said had been given to them by an angel.

Davriel’s passing drew some attention—heads peeking out of doors, others running off to spread the news that the Man was visiting. Nobody interrupted him, at least not until he approached the prioress’s door. Just before he arrived, a priest burst out of a side corridor, then—face flush from a quick run—positioned himself between Davriel and his destination.

He was a young man with stark black hair, peaked like a man twice his age. He wore no armor, just the robes of his station, but he immediately drew his longsword and leveled it at Davriel.

“Stop there, fiend!” the young man said.

Davriel cocked an eyebrow, then glanced at Rom. “Edwin?”

“Yes, your lordship,” Rom said.

“I will *not stand* your reign of terror,” Edwin said. “Everyone knows what you’ve done. An *entire village*? You might frighten the others, but *I* was trained to stand for what was right.”

Davriel studied the youth, whose off hand started to glow. It was often their first instinct, to try to hit him with destroying light. They were all so certain that secretly he was some kind of unnatural monster—rather than just a man, the most natural monster of them all.

“Edwin,” Rom said. “Calm down, lad. This won’t go well for you.”

“I can’t believe you let him in here, Rom. You forgot our first lessons! Don’t speak to the monsters, don’t reason with them, and—most importantly—*don’t invite them in.*”

“You claim you saw me on the road seven days ago,” Davriel said. “You say I was there, with two geists, attacking some merchants. How did I look?”

“I don’t have to answer to you!” Edwin said, holding his sword up, lamplight gleaming on the length.

“Did you even see my mask?”

“I... You fled into the forest before I could see it!”

“I fled? *On foot?* I didn’t use a carriage? And you just let me go?”

“You...you disappeared out into the forest with your geists. I didn’t see your mask, but the cloak is obvious. And I didn’t give chase, because I needed to check on your victims!”

“So you told everyone you’d seen *me*,” Davriel snapped, “when all you *really* saw was an indistinct cloaked figure?”

“I... I knew what you were...” Edwin said, wavering. “The inquisitors talked about lords like you! Feeding off the innocent. Searching for unprotected villages to dominate. Your type are a plague upon our land!”

“You were *looking* for a reason to blame me for something,” Davriel said. “This was just the first chance you found. Foolish boy. How tall was this figure you saw?”

“I...” He seemed to be reconsidering his accusation.

Davriel raised his hand and rubbed his fingers, summoning his stolen pyromancy. The power was still with him, though fading. He made flames dance around his fingers.

Was Edwin lying on purpose or not? Could Edwin have plotted to kill Tacenda’s parents for some reason, then let the sister escape so she’d be able to identify the killer as Davriel? Had he then attacked the merchants himself, then used the attack to focus everyone on Davriel?

Perhaps he could scare out the truth.

“Rom,” Davriel said, “You should fetch some water. I’d hate to burn the place down by accident. And maybe get a mop to deal what is left of this young man.”

“Yes, your lordship,” Rom said. He took Tacenda by the arm, steering her away from the conflict, farther down the hallway.

Edwin went white in the face—but to his credit, he tried lunging at Davriel. All in all, it wasn’t a bad maneuver. Davriel’s cloak, however, produced afterimages that confused all but the most precise swordsmen. The boy’s attack went to the right. Davriel stepped aside, then lightly tapped the blade with a flick of his fingernail.

The youth spun around, growling, then lunged again. Davriel, in turn, activated the weapon-summoning spell. Doing so sent a small spike of pain into his mind. Stupid spell. Still, it worked, bringing to his hand the last weapon he’d touched: in this case, the young priest’s sword.

Edwin stumbled, off-balance as his weapon vanished, then reappeared in Davriel’s hand.

Davriel raised his other hand, letting the flames rise around his fingers. “Tell me, child,” he said. “Do you really think that I would *run* from *you*?”

The young priest stumbled back, shaking—but yanked his dagger from his belt.

“Do you really think,” Davriel said, “that I would take souls in *secret*? If I needed them, I would demand them!”

He needed something to enhance the moment. Perhaps that inkspell he'd stolen from the old demonologist? It barely gave Davriel a twinge of pain as he used it to paint the walls black, like pooling ink. He made eldritch letters break off the main body of darkness and move across the floor toward Edwin. They flowed like shadows, written in Old Ulgrothan.

The young priest started to shake visibly, and stepped backward before the arcane scrawl.

"I did not kill those people," Davriel said. "They served me well. But your accusation has done incredible harm. Whoever is really behind this got away and has used you as a distraction. So, answer my questions. *What did this person look like?*"

"They...they were shorter than you are," Edwin whispered. "Slighter of frame, I guess. I...I was so sure it was you..." His eyes opened wider somehow, as the letters inched toward him. "Nameless Angel, forgive me!"

He turned and fled.

Davriel watched the youth go, lowering his hand, banishing the pyromancy. He couldn't know for certain, but his instincts said that this Edwin was no hidden criminal mastermind. He'd seen an attack on the roadway, perhaps one *intentionally* designed to provide a witness. Indeed, it seemed likely that the attack on Tacenda's parents had left the sister alive for the same reason—so she'd run and tell people what she'd seen.

Could it be that whoever was behind it knew that sudden disappearances would cause rumors to spread, and bring hunters to investigate? The first strikes could all have been about providing cover by deflecting attention toward Davriel.

Shorter than I am, Davriel thought. He was five feet ten inches. *And slighter of frame*. That didn't mean much, because with his cloak, people usually saw him as being bigger than he was.

"Are you quite done?" a voice demanded from beside him.

Davriel turned to find the prioress standing in the doorway to her room. With furrowed skin and a head topped by a silver bun, she was aged like an old chair you found in the attic—logic told you it must have once been new, but really, you had trouble imagining it had ever *actually* been in style. Simple white clothing draped her body, and her lips were stamped with a perpetual frown.

"Stop threatening my priests," she said. "You are here for me. If you must claim a soul, take mine. If you can."

"I *will* have vengeance for what you have cost me, old woman," Davriel said.

He met her eyes, and the two stared at each other for an extended period. Worried whispers came from the other end of the hallway, where monks and priests had gathered to watch.

Finally, the prioress stepped back and let Davriel into the small room. He stomped in and, kicking the door closed, tossed away the sword.

Then he slumped down into the chair behind the desk. "We," he snapped to the prioress, "were supposed

to have had a *deal*, Merlinda.”

The prioress idled by the door, poking at some of the inky letters that he'd put up on the walls outside—they had bled through the cracks around the door and into the room.

“Will these come off?” she asked.

“I really don't know,” Davriel replied. “Hopefully nobody in your priory can read Ulgrothan. I chose the letters because they look intimidating, but really, I only learned a few phrases when I was younger—mostly as a joke. What I wrote outside is a recipe for buttered scones.”

The prioress turned toward him, folding her arms. “That's my seat, Greystone.”

“Yes, I know,” he said, shifting and trying to lounge in the hard, uncushioned wooden chair. He finally got into a position where he could tip it back and put his feet on her desktop. “Would it kill one of you religious types to sit in a *comfortable* seat? Are you really that afraid of being happy?”

“My joy,” she said, settling down in a chair on the other side of the desk, “comes from other comforts.”

“Such as breaking contracts solemnly sworn?”

She eyed the door. “Don't speak so loudly. The inquisition might have been ended, but its embers still burn. Edwin isn't the only hothead in residence at the priory; several members of my staff would string me up if they got it into their minds I was consorting with demons, or their master.”

“That presumes *I* don't string you up first.” Davriel put his feet down, then stood, looming over the desk and the woman sitting on the other side. “I will say it again. I do *not* take the breaking of contracts lightly.”

The prioress slipped a small cup off the desk, then raised it to her lips, taking a sip of something dark and warm. Fool woman always *had* refused to be properly intimidated. Honestly, it was part of why he liked her.

“Did you kill all of those hunters, then?” she asked.

Davriel sighed. “A few escaped. The old man. The squires.”

“I see.”

“I've been a patient man, Merlinde. I ignored the occasional hunter, and even that *paladin* last week... ‘She must not have known they were going to attack me,’ I told myself. ‘Or perhaps they didn't stop at the priory first.’ But an entire task force of demon hunters, several with wards upon their minds? Our terms were clear. You were to dissuade such groups.”

The prioress looked down at her tea. “You expect me to honor a promise in the face of what has been happening? An *entire village* was murdered today.”

“Some of your priests are stupid, but you are not. You know me well enough to recognize I wasn't

involved. So why would you aid a band of *assassins* bent on murdering me?"

The prioress took another sip of tea.

"Is that Verlasen dustwillow?" Davriel asked, still looming over her as he stood beside the desk.

"The finest," she said. "Nothing is better at stilling the nerves. This is, unfortunately, my last cup."

He grunted. Figured.

"Perhaps," she finally said, "I hoped that the hunters would awaken you, Greystone. Your people suffer, and you barely take notice. I write you of their pains and hardships, only to receive rambling missives complaining about how your toes get cold at night."

"I honestly expected better hosiers out of a people who live in perpetual autumn."

"The only thing you do respond to is an interruption."

"Which was our *deal*," Davriel said, increasingly frustrated. He stalked past her, pacing in the room. "I leave the people of the Approaches alone. I don't demand more than food and the occasional gift of goods! In turn, you were to keep people from bothering me."

"Their suffering is *such* a bother, isn't it?"

"Bah. You'd prefer someone *else* were their lord? Perhaps some two-faced tyrant who crushes wills during the day, then howls at the moon during the night? Or you'd rather go back to a bloodsucking scion of House Markov, like the one I killed when I arrived? Fool woman. You should be preaching daily to the people how good their lives are."

He stopped his pacing near the back of the small room, where he noted a framed picture sitting on the floor, facing the wall. He tipped it toward him, and found a painting of the archangel Avacyn.

"I..." Merlinde said. "I *did* think it was you. Until I heard you interrogating Edwin just now, I thought you *must* have been the one who took the souls of the villagers."

He glanced back at her.

"After the merchants were attacked, I investigated," she said. "My gift for sensing spirits revealed that geists had been involved, just as Edwin said. It made sense. You're the only thing in this forest I know for sure has the strength to defy that cursed Bog. I thought it *must* have been you who took the souls of the people."

"And you did nothing?"

"Of course I did something," Merlinde said. "I sent to the church in Thraben, begging for their strongest hunters. I asked for men and women specifically talented in killing demons, and warned them that you could pierce minds. I had been...worried for some time that eventually you'd show a second face. The hidden face that so many lords have."

"Idiot," Davriel said. "You've been played for a fool."

“I realize that now,” she said, sipping her tea. “If you’d been the man I feared, you would have destroyed the priory instead of walking in to demand answers. But...what *is* going on?”

“I thought maybe it was Edwin,” Davriel said. “Someone physically stabbed one of your priests in the village late yesterday. They let whoever it was into the church, so your priests must have trusted them. Whoever it was killed the priest. With a knife—it was not the act of a geist.”

“Which...which one?”

“Which geist? How should I know?”

“No, Greystone. Which priest? Who was stabbed?”

He looked at her, frowning. The prioress was a hard woman, but she’d leaned forward in her seat, holding her cup and seeming...weighed down. *The priests she sent*, he thought. *She’s thinking how she sent them to their deaths.*

“I don’t know. The older one, with the beard.”

“Notker. Angels bless your soul, my friend.” She took a deep breath. “I doubt Edwin is behind this. He is difficult to manage, but he *is* sincere in his faith. I suppose, perhaps, we could get him to open his mind to you so that you could tell for certain.”

“I can’t read minds. That is not how my skills work.” Davriel spun the painting of the archangel on its corner, thinking. “What about your other priests? When I was a young accountant working ledgers for the partnership, one of the first things they taught us was to find embezzlers by tracing motivations. We were to look for the person with the unique mixture of both opportunity and incentive. A sudden financial pressure, or news in their life that left them desperate. Change is the true catalyst of crisis.”

“I can’t account for each of my priests specifically,” the prioress said. “But I don’t think any had opportunity or incentive. We’re here to save the people, not kill them—and we certainly wouldn’t consort with evil spirits.”

“But you’ll consort with evil men?” Davriel said.

She looked at him. “That depends on how much hope we have in them, I suppose.” She shook her head. “I think you’re ignoring the true culprit in this. The obvious answer. When I saw the trail of the geists who did this, the light was tinged a sickly green. I’ve lived here for almost twenty years now; I can recognize the Bog’s touch when I see it.”

“Someone stabbed that priest, remember. And Tacenda claims to have heard footsteps. Someone was controlling the geists.”

“That girl,” the prioress said. “She and her sister are an...odd case. I have read accounts of the past, and can find nothing like their curse of blindness. I was making progress with the people of the Approaches some ten years ago, bringing them to the Angel’s light—and then those two started manifesting powers. It made the people follow the Bog again, upended nearly everything I’d accomplished since arriving here.”

“The sister was claimed by the Whisperers,” Davriel said. “But Tacenda said they would not take her. I wonder why.”

“The answer is obvious,” the prioress replied. “I managed to get through to Willia. She was training to become a cathar. Willia turned against the Bog, and so it killed her. I never managed to reach Tacenda though...”

“I feel there must be more,” Davriel said. “Something I’m missing about this mess.”

“Perhaps the Bog left Tacenda because it has another purpose for her,” the prioress said. “You say you think this person was controlling the geists—but perhaps you have it wrong. The Bog could be controlling the spirits directly, but also be using one or two living pawns to accomplish its tasks. The priests might have let a stray villager, crying for help, into the church. Either way, the Bog is the *true* evil here.”

“But why would it kill its own followers?” Davriel said.

“Evil often has no reasons for what it does.”

No, he thought. Evil has the most obvious reasons.

He didn’t say it, because he hadn’t the energy for a prolonged argument. But it wasn’t the people without morals that confused Davriel—they tended to align best with their incentives, and were much easier to read.

It was the moral person who acted erratically, against their self-interest.

Still, the prioress did have a point. Multiple trails pointed toward the Bog. “Do you know what it is?” he asked her. “Really?”

“A false god,” she said. “Some horrible thing that lurks far beneath the waters, consuming offerings. When I first arrived—sent to this region to teach the people the correct path of faith—I confronted it. I went to that Bog and I looked into it, using my powers. There, I found something terrible, vast, and *ancient*.

“I knew then that I could not fight it with conventional prayers or wards. It was far too strong. I built up this priory on top of the catacombs, and I dedicated everything I had to converting the people of the Approaches. I felt that if I could prevent them from giving their souls to the thing, it would eventually wither and die.”

“You converted Willia,” Davriel said, thoughtful. “One of its chosen champions. Perhaps *that* provoked all of this.”

“It is...possible. I can’t say for certain.” She hesitated. “At first, I assumed that you had come here to study or control the Bog. Perhaps that was why I was so quick to believe you were behind these deaths. It seemed an impossible coincidence that a person of your talents had come to settle in a place so remote.”

“I didn’t know about the Bog before I arrived,” Davriel said.

Ah, the Entity said in his mind, but I knew about it.

What? *You did?*

“Whatever it is,” the prioress said, “it is hungry. The Bog consumes the souls of those who die here. Even the Seelenstone’s influence can barely resist it, despite being given to us by the Nameless Angel *specifically* for this purpose.”

What do you know about the Bog? Davriel asked the Entity. *You imply you led me here. For what purpose?*

For strength, the Entity said. *You will see...*

Davriel frowned, then looked to the prioress. “It seems, unfortunately, that I am forced to confront the Bog. What a bother. Still, if I can find the cause of these manifestations, I’m reasonably certain I can return the souls to the people of the village. Or at least an acceptable number of them, considering the circumstances.”

The prioress started, then twisted all around in her chair to look back at where he stood, still at the back of the room, idly spinning the picture of Avacyn.

“Save them?” she asked. “It is possible?”

“If it has been done, then I can see it undone.”

“I don’t think that is always going to be true. But it will be enough if you try. What do you require of me?”

“Once this is over, you must travel to Thraben and do whatever it takes to make certain the fools there believe I’ve died, or left, or been humiliated into hiding.”

“I could do better,” she said. “I could tell them that I was wrong, and that you saved us! If you bring the people back, I’ll cry it from the steps of the great cathedral itself! I’ll proclaim you a hero, and—”

“No,” he said. He dropped the painting and walked up to her seat, looming over her. “*No*. I must be made out to be nothing special. Another minor, petty lord who has claimed an insignificant slice of land nobody cares about. A fop unworthy of attention or note. Nothing special. *Nothing to care about.*”

She nodded slowly.

“For now,” he continued, holding out his hand, “I’ll need to borrow your talent for sensing and anchoring spirits.”

“You shall have it willingly,” she said, putting her aged hand in his.

“It will be painful,” he warned. “Our...natures do not align. And you’ll be left without access to the ability for a short while, perhaps as long as a day.”

“So be it.”

He gritted his teeth, then pierced her mind. In turn, he felt an immediate *spear* of pain right through his skull. Hellfire, this woman was wholesome. He couldn’t see her thoughts, but he was drawn, as ever, to *power*. The energy inside of her, the glow of ability, strength, *magic*.

He ripped it free, wincing at the terrible sensation. This granted a new spell, raw and radiant: one which would let him track the movements of spirits and—if needed—force them to remain corporeal.

The prioress slumped in her seat. He held her by the arm, keeping her from sliding to the ground. She *was* a tough old hound, and—to an extent—he did recognize the importance of her work. People needed something to believe in. Something to provide comfort, and keep them from being crushed by the realities of human existence.

The truth was a dangerous thing, best left to those who could realistically exploit it.

The prioress finally recovered, and squeezed his arm in thanks for supporting her. He nodded once and turned to leave, suffering—still—from the spear of pain through his mind.

“You’ve been roused to action,” she said from behind. “But you seem reluctant still. What *would* it take, Greystone? To make you really care?”

Corpses. Death. Memory.

“Don’t ask that,” he said, stepping back into the hallway. “This land is not ready for a version of me who cares for anything other than his next nap.”

PART THREE

Tacenda had always heard the Seelenstone spoken of in the strangest, most contradictory of tones. Villagers would bless the Nameless Angel herself for bestowing it upon the Approaches. They seemed proud of the relic, which stilled the souls of the church's followers, preventing them from rising as a geist or other foul creature.

But it also prevented a soul from returning to the Bog. And so while the Approachers were proud of the Angel's blessing, most resisted conversion to the church. Tacenda understood. The Seelenstone was an amazing blessing—but was like a gifted ox when you had no cart to pull or no field to plow. Somehow, she was both grateful for the thing and uncomfortable with it as well.

She hadn't imagined that they'd keep it in the catacombs. Rom led her down a tight and spiraling stair, his lamp illuminating ancient stones, weathered not by wind or rain, but by the infinite passing of human steps. The air grew chill, damp, and they entered a realm of roots, worms, and other sightless things. At the bottom, they found no door, but a strange stone mural depicting angels in flight.

Rom pressed a specific part of the stone—a little knob, disguised as a small angel's head, which sank into the rest. Some ancient mechanism made the stone slide open. It wasn't much of a barrier—anyone with enough time could probably have found the bit to push—but it *was* a reminder. Even in the most holy of places, even in the home of an artifact meant to still spirits, it was wise to keep a locked door between yourself and your dead.

They passed through the opening and entered the catacombs—which predated the existence of the priory in its current form. Tacenda had expected skulls, but she found only narrow passages. The walls were set with rows of odd stones, perhaps three handspans wide. Shaped like hexagons, many were marked with the symbol of the Nameless Angel.

“No bones?” she asked as Rom led her to the right.

“No,” he said. “Nobody here wants to put bodies on display. These people deserve rest, not spectacle. Those stones on the walls can be removed, each revealing a long hole burrowed into the wall. We set the body on a plank, push it in, then seal it up.”

She nodded, following silently.

“There's lots of [space] here,” Rom said. “Whoever built these catacombs made plenty of [space] for bodies. But your people don't often choose to be buried here, as is proper.”

“We...” But how could she respond to that? It was true. “The Bog is our heritage. I'm sorry.”

“Your people,” he said, “balance between two religions. I think you want to worship both at once, sufferin' the priests when they visit, but then goin' off to give your true devotion to the Bog. That troubles the prioress,

I know, but I'm in no place to chide. I followed two gods myself, you might say. Most of my life, it wasn't virtue—but the thrill of the hunt—that was my master.”

He led her around a curving tunnel, then rested his hand on a symbol engraved on one of the tombs. The rising wings, the symbol of the Nameless Angel. The same one wrapped around Tacenda wrist, above the hand where she carried her viol.

“I'd heard about this Bog of yours,” Rom said, “before I came. So I wasn't surprised by it. But this Nameless Angel...many of the local priests would rather wear her symbol than that of the church.”

“Avacyn is...was the Archangel,” Tacenda said. “And she presided over entire hosts of other angels. It is...was...her church, but she was always a far-off divinity. The faithful here, like my sister, always preferred a more personal angel.”

“You mistake me,” Rom said. “I was pleased to find it. After Avacyn's betrayal, finding news of another angel who still loved her people...well, it gave me hope. Hope that even a crusty, bloodstained hunter like me might be able to find peace.”

His lips turned down as he said that last part, for some reason, but then he just shook his head and led her down one of the many branching paths in the catacombs. He was right—there was a lot of space down here. She'd always imagined a couple of small crypts, not this network of tunnels. Eventually, they reached a small stone room with padded benches along the sides.

And there it was, the Seelenstone itself: a white rock like a large goose's egg, decorating a pedestal in the center. Rom closed the shades on his lantern to show that the stone glowed with its own soft light. A shifting, milky radiance, like the colors of oil on water. They spun in a serene pattern, as if the Seelenstone were filled with different iridescent liquids, flowing in an eternal circular procession.

Tacenda's breath caught. It was *beautiful*.

“They say it gets brighter each time an Approacher gives themselves to the church,” Rom said.

“Can...can I touch it?”

“Best not, young miss,” he said. “But you can look. Here, sit and watch the patterns.”

Unable to tear her eyes away from the transfixing course of colors, Tacenda stepped back until she found one of the benches, then sat down, laying her viol in her lap.

“They always put the new priests down here, as one of their first duties, to watch the stone,” Rom said softly. “We don't guard it always, but it makes good practice for someone to meditate here while remainin' alert all night. It's been a little while since I had that job. But I remember sittin' here for nights on end, just starin' and thinkin'. About all the years this stone has seen.

“It was first given to a lone priest, who kept it in a shrine. Then a church was built for it, and the catacombs to house the dead. Finally, the prioress came—and she saw a proper building here at last. The stone has seen all that and more. Perhaps I shouldn't be presumptuous, little miss, but this is your heritage as

much as that Bog.”

“Lord Davriel told me earlier that my people talk too much about destiny. He said I should stand up for myself and decide my own path, rather than believing in things like fate.”

She looked toward Rom to find light from the Seelenstone flowing across his face. “What do you think?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Seems to me that it’s basically impossible to choose for yourself. I mean...if I do what Davriel says, how is that any different from doing what my village tells me? That’s not independence. It’s just choosing a different influence.”

Rom grunted, and Tacenda continued watching the shifting lights. She recognized that Rom had brought her down here to keep her from being caught in the conflict between Davriel and the prioress. Instead of fetching water, he’d just asked if she was interested in seeing the stone.

Davriel...she remembered that look in his eyes, that shadow, when they’d found Brerig dead. Davriel had the second darkness in his eyes. A void to consume all life, and leave the world as cold as he was...

“Rom?” she asked. “Did you ever think about the demons you killed, when you were younger? Did you worry about the hurt you were causing them?”

“No,” the old hunter said. “No, when I was young, I can’t say that I did.”

“Oh.”

“When I was older though,” he said, “and the angels went mad? Aye, I thought about it then. I wondered, was my entire life just going to be about the killin’? Was there no way to stop it? Make a world where men didn’t need to fear either the darkness *or* the light?”

“Did you...find any answers?”

“No. That’s why I finally walked away.” He glanced upward, then waved to her, gesturing. “Come, let’s go see what the damage has been upstairs.”

Tacenda nodded, picking up her viol and joining him. As they left, however, she noted something she’d missed at first. She’d been so focused on the Seelenstone, she hadn’t seen there was a mural on the wall here too—carved stone, depicting the defeat of a terrible demon from a story she didn’t know.

“That mural,” she said. “There’s a knob like the one you pushed, under the demon’s feet. Is it a secret doorway too?”

“Aye,” Rom said. “You’ll spot more than a few of those down here. Most lead to nothin’ of note—little chambers where we store embalming equipment or dust bins.”

“Oh.”

“That one though,” he continued. “That leads to a tunnel out of the catacombs, into the forest. This place down here, it’s not just for the dead. It’s a place to barricade ourselves, if something attacks. We can hide

down here, get out through one of the secret exits.”

She nodded, thinking about that fact. Even the priory—perhaps in *particular* the priory—needed a place of retreat, should an attack come. All buildings and villages were really just fortresses out in the darkness, careful to close their gates and lock them tightly at night.

As they left, she glanced over her shoulder one last time at the iridescent stone. Strange that she’d lived in Verlasen all her life, but had never come here to see the Nameless Angel’s gift.

And who is she to you? Have you ever seen her? Perhaps it was best the Nameless Angel had vanished long ago. Stories had been enough for Willia—who had been drawn to anything that spoke of fighting against the darkness—but never for Tacenda.

She hurried after Rom, but as they wound back to the stairs, she noticed light coming from one of the other corridors. She tapped Rom on the shoulder, then pointed.

“Oh,” he said. “That? Just where we prepare the bodies of the dead and keep them until it’s time for burial.”

She froze as Rom continued on. The bodies of the dead, waiting for burial? Like...

Tacenda couldn’t help herself. She turned down that corridor. Rom called after her, but she ignored him. Soon she stepped into another small chamber, this one lit by flickering candles atop mounds of sloughed wax. The back wall held a carved relief of the Nameless Angel—her face hidden behind her arm—holding a carving of the Seelenstone.

Three bodies, in their burial regalia, lay on slabs along the wall. One was a young woman with short hair. Though others would mistake the two of them, Tacenda couldn’t understand how. Willia was leaner and stronger than Tacenda, her hair shorter but somehow more golden. And Willia was the far more pretty one—despite the fact that they had the same face.

Rom stumbled up, then noticed the bodies. “Oh! What a fool I am, young miss. I should have realized.”

Tacenda stepped up to Willia, lowering her viol in one hand, touching the other to the corpse’s cheek. No, not a corpse—just a *body*. Willia’s soul was still out there, recoverable. Just like that of Jorl and Kari, whose bodies also adorned the room.

Willia looked so strong, even in death. While the faces of the others were frozen masks of terror, she just looked like she was sleeping. Tacenda held her hand to Willia’s cheek, trying to impart some of her warmth to the comatose body—like she’d done in singing to her sister during long, cold nights, before either had known the extent of their powers.

You must choose your own path, make your own destiny, Davriel had said. That seemed an easy platitude when you were a powerful lord—when you didn’t have a village to care for or a family to protect. Maybe it wasn’t destiny that had kept Tacenda in her place by the cistern, singing away the first darkness. Maybe it had been something stronger.

“Is this where you’ve gotten to?” snapped a sharp voice. Davriel emerged into the room, and his cloak flared around him, as if stretching its arms after the cramped walk through the corridors.

“M’lord!” Rom said, bowing. “Is the prioress... I mean...”

“Merlinde and I have reached an amicable agreement,” Davriel said. “In which *she* agreed she was wrong and *I* agreed that killing her would be far too much of a hassle. Tacenda, I have what I came for. I wish to be away from this place before its stench starts to cling to my clothing.”

She drew her hand away from Willia’s cheek. The best way to help her—the only way—was to go with this man. “We came to see the Seelenstone,” she said, following after him. “Do you think perhaps it might be able to help us somehow?”

“Last I looked,” Davriel replied, “it was nothing more than a pretty piece of rock with a simple dampening ward set upon it. Your songs are several orders of magnitude more potent.”

“It’s a powerful relic,” she said, feeling a spike of protectiveness. “Given to us by the Nameless Angel herself!”

“An angel nobody has seen for decades,” he said with a sniff. “The old story is nonsense. I don’t know where the stone originated, but I doubt it’s from an angel. Why would she give such a supposedly powerful relic to an insignificant little group of villages? It would be far more effective in a larger population center.”

“Not everything is just about raw numbers.”

“Of course it isn’t,” Davriel said, reaching the steps. “The true import is in how those numbers *add up*.”

He took off up the stairs. Why was he suddenly so impatient? She’d practically had to bribe him to get him to investigate in the first place.

Tacenda hung back with Rom, who walked up the steps with a slower, more deliberate pace, gripping the handrail tightly.

“He’s wrong,” Rom said. “The Seelenstone’s magic might not be powerful, but it doesn’t need to be. It’s here to shelter the souls of the faithful, and the charm bein’ simple don’t mean that ain’t important. Just like faith. Don’t mean to speak ill of his lordship, but that’s the problem with bein’ smart as he is. You get used to figurin’ things all out in your head, and when the real world don’t match up, you make excuses.”

At the top of the steps, she noted a place farther down the hallway where the stark white walls had been marred by terrible black symbols, in shapes that made her eyes squirm. Had he summoned demons in the *middle of the priory*?

They reached the door out. “Thank you, Rom,” Davriel said, “for your service. If I’m ever forced to exterminate the members of this priory, I’ll kill you last. Miss Verlasen, we are off.”

He strode out into the light. Rom hastily raised his lantern. “My lord, you will want—”

Davriel held out his hand and summoned a jet of flame to light his way as he strode across the priory grounds.

Seeing that, Rom sighed. "I'd best be checkin' on the prioress," he told Tacenda. "Watch yourself this night, young miss. It's a dangerous dark watchin' us. That it is."

She nodded to him in thanks, then hurried after Davriel. Though he didn't seem to notice the heat from the flame in his hand, it made her face begin to sweat.

"Why are we in such a hurry, all of a sudden?" she asked. "Have you discovered something useful?"

"Not really."

"Then why are you so eager?"

The demons saw them coming, and Crunchgnar rolled the carriage up to them along the dark road. "I," Davriel declared as it arrived, "have decided that I'm going to take a nap."

He meant it.

In the middle of the quest to save the village—while the night was ticking away and each moment brought Tacenda closer to losing her vision—Lord Davriel Cane took a nap.

After traveling a few miles from the priory, Davriel kicked Tacenda and the demons out of the carriage, pulled down the shades, then curled up in his cloak. Miss Highwater shut the door with a click, shaking her head and smiling.

“I can’t believe this,” Tacenda said.

“It’s two-thirty in the morning,” Miss Highwater said. “He’s a powerful man when he decides he wants to be one, but he’s still mortal. He needs sleep, and tonight his bedtime preparations were interrupted by a child with an improvised dagger.”

Inside the carriage, Davriel started snoring softly.

Crunchgnar and Miss Highwater moved to a hollow on the side of the road where someone had piled rocks to make a firepit. It was probably a common stop on the way to the Bog. She might have stopped here before herself, but her trips this direction had always been during the day—when she’d been blind.

The demons hauled over some wood, then Crunchgnar touched his forehead for a moment, igniting a small flame on his fingertip. Soon he had an inviting fire crackling in the pit. Miss Highwater sat with the lantern behind her, sitting primly on a stone and looking through her ledger, then writing some notes.

Tacenda sat down near the flames, and found fatigue creeping up on her as well. She was used to staying up through the night, but...it had been a *long* night. Exhausting, mentally and emotionally. She didn’t want to let herself nap, though—not when alone with the demons, particularly Crunchgnar.

Still, despite his twisted face, prominent horns, and blood-red eyes, even he looked somehow...human as he squatted by the fire, warming himself. “I’ve never liked the overworld,” he muttered. “Too cold. I don’t understand how you humans can live like this, half frozen each night.”

Tacenda shrugged. “We don’t really have much choice. Though I suppose, if we really wanted to go somewhere warmer, you’d happily take us...”

Crunchgnar smiled. “I doubt you would find the fires of hell to your liking, girl. Lesser demons like me are usually forced to give up our prizes to our lords. I have claimed the souls of eight people during my existence, but have only ever been fed a small portion of each one.”

“Don’t you ever feel bad about that? Empathy for the souls you’re taking? Guilt for what you’ve done?”

“It is what I was created to do. It is my place in the world. Why should I feel guilt?”

“You could be something else. Something better.”

“I cannot ignore my nature, any more than you can, girl.” Crunchgnar nodded toward the carriage. “He likes to pretend that anyone can choose their own way, but eventually even he will have to pay the debts he owes. And his ‘freedom’ will last as long as an ember separated from its fire.”

Tacenda shifted on her rock. The words felt uncomfortably like what she’d said to Davriel herself, earlier. *I was chosen by the Bog. I must follow my destiny...*

“You understand,” Crunchgnar said. Hellfire, those eyes of his were disconcerting. At least Miss Highwater had pupils, even if they were red. Crunchgnar’s eyes were straight crimson. “You are smarter than he is, for all his confidence.”

“I...”

“We could make a deal,” Crunchgnar said. “I must keep Davriel alive for another sixteen years, but perhaps we could find a way to *stun* him. Hold him captive. He acts mighty, but has no power of his own—only what he steals. We could imprison him, and you could become the Lady of the Manor. Rule in his place.” The demon stood, looming beside the fire. Lit by its harsh light, he cast a long and terrible shadow into the forest. “I would serve you and deal with any who question your rule. I would make no try for your soul; I want only his. In sixteen years, I would leave you. No tricks.”

Crunchgnar stepped closer, and Tacenda cringed before him. She bit her lip, then started humming.

He flinched at the sound of the Warding Song. “There is no need for that,” he snarled.

Tacenda hummed louder, and the strings on her viol started to vibrate.

“Crunchgnar,” Miss Highwater said, “Some creature is making sounds over to the north. You should go see what it is.”

“Think about my offer,” he said to Tacenda, then nodded toward Miss Highwater. “And ignore *that* one if she pretends to extend you a better deal. *She’s* barely worth being called a demon these days.”

“And you’re barely worth being called sapient,” Miss Highwater said. “But we don’t rub your nose in it, now do we? Be a good boy and do what I tell you.”

He growled softly, but stalked out into the underbrush. Once out of the light, he moved with a silence that surprised Tacenda. For all his bulk, there was a dangerous grace about him.

Tacenda let her song die off, and the viol fell still. “Thank you,” she said to Miss Highwater.

“The song was hurting me too, child,” she replied. “Pity, as the music seems engaging. I’d like to hear you sing a complete song, something that wouldn’t seek to destroy me.”

Tacenda stared into the fire, remembering better days. Days when she *had* sung other songs, at Willia’s encouraging. Songs of Joy for the workers in the fields, or sung when she’d felt the warmth of her mother’s embrace. Songs now dead.

Tacenda leaned forward, warming her hands at a fire started with the heat of a demon's flame. "Do you... do you agree with Crunchgnar? About your nature?"

Miss Highwater tapped her cheek with her pencil. Her eyes reflected firelight, seeming to burn. "Did you know," she finally said, "that I was the first demon he summoned, once he reached this land?"

Tacenda shook her head.

"None of us had ever heard of him. We were newly free from our prison, where we'd spent what seemed like an eternity, though it was actually a relatively short time. Once free, we'd begun eagerly seeking contracts with mortals.

"I thought I'd make quick work of this dandy with the exaggerated clothing and the lazy way of speaking. I rushed into the contract, then applied myself fully to seducing him. But he barely glanced at me before sending me to count the currency in the former lord's coffer. Over the next few days, I tried every trick I knew. But each time he'd see me, he'd give me another task.

"'Oh, Miss Taria, there you are,' he'd say—as if that were somehow my last name. 'I've been looking over the receipts from the village taxes, and it seems that many of them have been paying in goods. Bartering *does* make my brain ache. Would you see if this ledger adds up?'" She shook her head, as if she still couldn't believe that it had happened. "There I am—looking positively *radiant*—and he just walks past and hands me a list with the prices of livestock on it!"

"That...must have been frustrating, I guess?" Tacenda said, trying not to blush too deeply.

"It was absolutely *infuriating*," Miss Highwater said. "I finally demanded to know why he'd picked me, of all demons, for this work. He'd summoned the *Feaster of Men* to balance his *accounts*? And you know what he did? He pulled out some papers. Copies of the contracts I'd done in the past. Demonologists make those, you know—they summon the contract, make a copy, and then read over the details to study their art.

"Well, he had about ten of my old contracts, and he absolutely *mooned* over them. Talked about how clever my wording had been, how neatly I'd ensnared my previous masters. To him, the contracts were the things of true beauty."

Miss Highwater smiled, and there seemed to be real fondness in the expression as she looked toward Davriel's carriage. "He didn't care what I looked like. He summoned me specifically because he thought I'd be good at doing his ledgers. And he was right. *I am* good at contracts; I've always prided myself on that. It has made me an excellent steward.

"I'm not ashamed of what I am or how I look. But...it's nice to be recognized for something else. A thing I've always prided myself on, but virtually every other person—mortal and demon alike—has ignored. So no, I don't think Crunchgnar is completely right. Perhaps we were all created for a specific purpose, but that doesn't prevent us from finding other purposes as well."

Tacenda nodded and stared into the flames, considering that until a sound in the forest nearby made her jump. It was just Crunchgnar lumbering back into the light.

“Banshee,” he said, thumbing over his shoulder. “Doesn’t seem related. I frightened it off, but we may want to wake Davriel anyway.”

“Let’s give him a few more minutes,” Miss Highwater said. “That spell from the prioress will have been painful to absorb, and he could use the rest if we’re going to confront the Bog.”

“Are you sure,” Crunchgnar said, “he didn’t summon you to be his *mother* instead of his lover?”

“Fortunately for me, you’ve already taken the position of pet dog.”

Tacenda winced at the traded insults, but fortunately the demons fell silent as Crunchgnar added a few logs to the fire. They didn’t seem terribly concerned that a monster like a banshee was lurking out in the woods—but then again, who could say what would frighten a demon?

It didn’t feel right to be sitting here without making music. Though she’d spent many a night alone, lit by a lonely fire, she’d spent those hours at least plucking out a variation on the Song of Warding.

She’d first manifested that when protecting her family. It had come without her needing to learn it—it had simply *happened*. The songs were an instinctive part of her. Wasn’t that proof enough of her destiny? That the reason she existed was to sing that song?

That... a voice seemed to whisper within her. And more...

Eventually, Tacenda raised her viol and began to pluck a soft melody. Not the Song of Warding, but something more sorrowful, more solemn. Crunchgnar glanced at her as she began to sing, but this melody wasn’t meant to drive them away. It was a song she’d never sung, but one that felt right for the moment.

She closed her eyes and let herself be absorbed into the music. In that state, the songs seemed to come *through* her, as if her soul were the instrument, and the viol merely an amplifier. Time, place, and self bled together as the song began to vibrate the strings on its own.

She sang of loss. Of death and the progress of time. Of unchanging woods that watched villages rise and fall, faiths burn bright and die, children grow to ancients, then be forgotten as generations piled on top of one another and infinite fires burned to ash. Of a girl who had been forced to stop her joyful music, and instead start singing only for the night.

The song expanded from her, and the viol wasn’t its only receptacle. The limbs of the trees vibrated, the stones hummed, the carriage rattled as a quiet percussion. Her song found any available path, and she was no more capable of controlling it than she would be capable of controlling the wind or the moon.

But slowly...it changed. Inched closer to that song she’d once known: that one her sister had loved. Tacenda reached for it, but found...found nothing.

She trailed off, the remnants of the song echoing inside her mind. She sighed, then looked up.

The demons were gaping at her. Miss Highwater’s ledger had tumbled from her fingers and fallen unnoticed to the ground. Crunchgnar stared at her, his jaw slack.

“What happened?” Miss Highwater asked. “I felt I was flying...”

“I...” Crunchgnar whispered. “I was kneeling in the molten pools of Dawnhearth, and the fires...the fires were going out...” He felt at his body, then looked around, as if surprised to find himself in the forest.

The door to the carriage slammed open, and Davriel scrambled out, leaving his cloak behind. He stalked toward Tacenda, his eyes wide.

She shrank back as he seized her by the shoulders.

“What was that?” he demanded. “What did you do?”

“I... I just...sang...”

“That was no simple warding,” he said, and she saw his eyes blur with white smoke. “What *are* you?”

Something slammed into Tacenda’s mind. An overwhelming force. She felt hands reaching into her brain, taking hold of her soul. She felt—

NO.

The music surged in her, and she shouted. A burst of light flashed from her—spraying fragments like sparks into the night sky—as it *slammed* Davriel away from her. He was flung backward some *ten feet* before crashing into the side of the coach, splintering the wood. He dropped to the forest ground with a muted thump.

Crunchgnar stood up, hand going to his sword—but it was Miss Highwater who arrived first, pressing a cold dagger to Tacenda’s throat.

“What did you do?” the demon woman hissed.

“I...” Tacenda said. “I don’t...”

Davriel stirred. He lethargically pushed himself up from the ground. Leaves sticking to his shirt, he shook his head.

Tacenda sat in a rising panic, a knife at her neck.

Davriel stood up and dusted himself off, then stretched. “Ouch,” he noted, then looked at his carriage. “Miss Highwater, I do believe I have marred this wood with an indentation made by my skull.”

“No surprise,” she replied. “It’s always been obvious to me which of the two was harder.”

She didn’t remove the knife from Tacenda’s neck.

Crunchgnar belatedly drew his sword. “Um... Should I kill her?”

“As amusing as it would be to watch her magic rip you apart,” Davriel said, “I might still have use of you. So no.”

He strolled up to Tacenda. She felt so nervous, she was certain the forceful beating of her heart would cause Miss Highwater’s knife to slip and draw blood.

Davriel nodded faintly to the side, and Miss Highwater whipped the dagger away, making it vanish into a sheath at her belt. She picked up her ledger as if nothing had happened.

Davriel, however, knelt down before Tacenda. “Do you have any idea what it is that lurks inside your mind?”

“The songs,” Tacenda said. “You tried to steal them! You tried to take my powers, like you did to those hunters!”

“For all the good it did.” Davriel snapped his fingers, dark green smoke coloring his eyes. A small light flashed, forming a kind of glowing green energy shield above his hand. “I stole a simple protection ward, which is what I expected to find inside of you. But as I touched it, I found something behind it, something deeper. Something grander.” He eyed Tacenda, making the shield vanish. “I repeat. Do you have any idea what it is?”

She shook her head.

“Has it spoken to you?” he asked.

“Of course not,” she said. “Unless...unless you count the songs. They seem to speak through me.”

He frowned, then stood and turned back toward the carriage.

“Davriel?” Tacenda said, rising.

“I don’t remember giving you permission to use my first name, girl.”

“I don’t remember giving *you* permission to reach into my mind.”

He paused, then looked back. To the side, Miss Highwater chuckled.

“Do *you* know what it is?” Tacenda asked. “The thing that you say you sensed inside of me?”

He climbed back into the carriage. “Come. It is time to visit your Bog.”

Davriel had used the power of the Entity only once.

It had been five years ago. By that time in his life, he'd been comfortable with his powers—and with his strange ability to walk between different planes of existence. He'd spent years traveling, exploring, learning how enormous the multiverse was. He'd suffered enslavement and found vengeance. He'd become expert at dealing with demons. He'd come to realize just how special he was.

And he'd decided, at long last, to claim himself a throne. It had been during that struggle—a desperate, climatic clash between armies and ideologies—that he'd finally relented, and drawn upon the Entity.

As they rode toward the Bog, he let the Entity control his senses. Instead of seeing the inside of the carriage, he saw himself standing on a field of corpses. Men and women in bright red lay scattered in heaps, spotted here and there with the black and gold tabards of his guard. Banners flapped in the wind, a forlorn sound. The air smelled sharply of smoke, a scent that barely covered the stench of blood.

Enemies had come to crush his defending army. And so, in desperation, he'd reached for the power. Even he hadn't been prepared for the result.

I can give you everything, the Entity promised. Worlds upon worlds can be yours.

It had been standing on that bloody field that Davriel had first sensed others hunting him. They'd arrived on the battlefield, drawn to the plane by his use of this power. Like moths to a flame.

He didn't know who they were. Likely, they were allies of the dying man from whose mind Davriel had originally stolen the Entity. But he knew that whoever they were, they'd hunt him through eternity for this power. They'd destroy him.

And so he'd fled, and left the corpses of both those who had opposed him and those who had believed in him. Their blood mingling on a battlefield that would know no burial.

The carriage rocked, shaking Davriel out of his reverie. The memory faded, leaving him with only the feeling of having used the Entity to power his spells. The sudden and awe-inspiring sense of strength that had come from touching something much, *much* larger than himself.

He'd felt that exact emotion minutes ago, after reaching into the girl's mind. His head ached from that encounter, but the ramifications were far, far more troubling than the pain.

He looked at Tacenda, who sat on the seat opposite him, her legs tucked beneath her. Miss Highwater pretended be reading a book, but he suspected from the infrequency of her page turns that she was actually watching Tacenda. With good reason.

There is another of you, he thought to the Entity. And it is inside the girl.

Yes, the Entity said. *Part of it is, at least. It is not fully alive. It cannot speak to her, except in the crudest of ways.*

Why didn't you tell me there was another of you? Davriel demanded. *All these years, and you never said anything!*

The others should not have mattered, the Entity said. *I am the strongest. But after sensing what you did—that those who hunted us would destroy you—I realized. You needed more than just me. Strongest though I am, I have weaknesses.*

You brought me here, Davriel realized. *You planted the idea in my head—you wanted me to come where another of you hid. So that...I would take that power as well.*

Yes, the Entity replied. *This Entity, like myself, is the remnant of an ancient plane. Destroyed, consumed, its power condensed. It is the soul of an entire land, you might say. The majority of its power hides in the Bog. You can take it and become mighty enough that none will ever dare challenge you.*

You still haven't answered my question, Davriel thought with frustration. *Why didn't you tell me there were two of you?*

I am bound to protect you, the Entity said. *You are my master and my host. But it was...hard to admit that I must share you with another.*

You could still have told me.

Perhaps you would have fled again. I do not understand you. To claim me, to use me, is obviously your destiny. And yet you hesitate. I can sense your ambition. I know you understand the glory that awaits you. Your delays confuse me. And so I waited for the right crisis to arrive, to make you move, act.

A spike of worry struck Davriel. *Are you behind this?* he demanded. *Did you kill the people of Verlasen?*

No, the Entity said. *But this is the moment. When you confront the Bog, you will see. You will draw upon me, and together we will consume and absorb the power of the second Entity.*

And the girl? Davriel asked.

She has but a bit of the power, the Entity replied. *I worried, at first, that she held it all—but when you saw into her just now, I knew the truth. She has a fraction of the power. I do not know why...or why the souls of the people are acting as they are. Perhaps the Entity of the Bog senses that we are coming for it. But once we confront it, and claim its power as our own, we can deal with the child.*

The implications of the conversation shook Davriel. Perhaps, then, he *was* behind all of this. Could the Bog have attacked the village in order to gather its power? Was it preparing to fight Davriel?

Could he truly confront and defeat an Entity like the one in his mind? A rogue power? The fraction of it within the girl had been enough to blast him forcibly back. How would he win a fight against an even greater power?

You will need my help, the Entity said. *You will make the choice, at long last. You will become as a god.*

These people, Davriel thought, have already been failed by enough gods.

A choice, the Entity repeated, its voice trailing off as the carriage started to slow. Tacenda perked up. At the sudden motion, Miss Highwater's hand moved—ever so slightly—toward her knife.

“We're here,” Tacenda said, opening the door before Crunchgnar had time to fully stop the vehicle. Light spilled out, illuminating an old keeper's shack and a dark watery pit.

Tacenda hopped down, her dress catching on underbrush as she picked her way toward the Bog. Davriel stepped out once the vehicle had stopped, then rested his hand on the place where his body had smashed against the wood.

He didn't relish the idea of a conflict. He was exhausted, and his head pounded. The Entity could heal most normal ailments, but it never removed headaches. Perhaps Davriel needed the reminder that despite it all, he really was human.

Crunchgnar's feet thumped against the ground as he leaped from his place atop the carriage. His body healed at an incredible rate—already the wounds he'd taken at the church had shrunk to mere scratches, barely visible as the demon held up his lantern and bathed the area in orange light.

“I knew that we'd end up here,” Tacenda said from closer to the Bog. “I knew it somehow.” She turned toward him in the shadows. “You did too, didn't you?”

Davriel approached the Bog, pulled as if by invisible chains. Tacenda knelt beside the black pit, staring into the waters—which didn't reflect light as water should. Neither did the light penetrate. The Bog seemed to somehow sit *outside* of the scope of illumination.

Spells. Davriel needed spells. But what did he have? A few minor charms? Some pyromancy that was dying away, barely strong enough to light a candle at this point? He should have prepared for months, leeching and stowing away the most powerful magic of the multiverse to confront this.

You don't need any of that, the Entity said. *You have me. The power you took from the prioress can contain rogue entities, like spirits—and it will work here. With my strength powering that ability, we can contain the Entity of the Bog.*

Flee. Davriel's instincts screamed at him to *run*. To scramble back to his carriage and race the horses to his mansion. Or, better yet, he should leave this cursed plane.

Let someone else deal with the Bog. Let them be heroes or tyrants; both were virtually the same. Numbers in a table, one with a plus before it, the other a minus. And this land? What was it to him? A temporary home. He could find any number of dominions identical to it across the multiverse. He should leave it. Right here, right now.

And yet.

And yet...he continued forward, stepping over a fallen log, to join the girl at the edge of the Bog. Like a black void, a hole puncturing reality.

“I knew we’d end up here,” Tacenda repeated. “It was our destiny.”

“I have no destiny,” Davriel said, “save the one I make for myself.” He raised his hands, gathering his power. “But your village is *mine*. These people are *mine*. It is time the Bog understood who rules the Approaches. Best you stand back.”

She didn’t retreat, though Crunchgnar and Miss Highwater wisely remained near the carriage. *Suit yourself*, Davriel thought. He took a deep breath, then plunged his magical senses into the Bog.

And found it empty.

An Entity had lived here once. Davriel could sense its remnants, like a lingering scent. The powerful force had distorted reality around it, leaving the location forever changed.

But that power was gone now. Empty as a tomb.

This is wrong, the Entity said. *It was here...it was supposed to be here... What has happened?*

I don't know, Davriel thought, kneeling down and dipping his fingers in the water, feeling at the remnants of power. There was nothing here for him to fight. There wasn't even anything for him to steal.

He looked up, and expressed the prioress's talent: the ability to see where spirits had been, and then anchor them. It caused him pain, another headache—but it allowed him to see a glowing green residue nearby.

The Whisperers had been here, their trails green, like the prioress had said. And there was something else, something more ancient...a trail that led away, toward Verlasen village. He could distinguish it only because he was familiar with the Entity inside him, and this was similar.

The power had moved. Left, long ago. Perhaps...two decades ago? Maybe a little less. The power couldn't tell him precisely.

"The thing that lived in the Bog is gone," he said. "And has been for years."

"What?" Tacenda said from beside him.

"Part of it is inside of you," Davriel said. "The Entity of the Bog resided here for centuries, infusing everything in the area with its scent. It seeped into your souls—like poison getting into bodies through the groundwater—and tied your people to it. So whoever has that power is controlling the geists."

This is bad, the Entity said within him. *I was not expecting to face a host who is trained in the power, using it to magnify their talents. We can still win, but it will be dangerous.*

"They left me alone," Tacenda said. "Because..."

"Because the geists can sense the power of the Bog inside you," Davriel said. "They likely mistook you for their master. I would have thought you could control them, but for some reason your song doesn't do so."

Davriel frowned as Miss Highwater approached, rustling the underbrush. "So where does that leave us?" she asked.

"Worried," Davriel said. "Why would the Entity leave the Bog?"

"It was afraid," Tacenda whispered as she knelt beside the waters, her eyes looking glassy.

"Afraid?" Davriel said. "What could cause something so powerful to be afraid?"

“Faith,” she whispered.

“What—”

“Cane!” Crunchgnar shouted.

Davriel spun back toward the carriage, where Crunchgnar had pulled out his sword. He thrust the weapon toward the roadway. “We have a problem! Get over here!”

Davriel scrambled to the carriage, trailed by Miss Highwater. Crunchgnar’s lantern light didn’t reach far into the night, but it didn’t need to, for the geists approaching along the road gave off a sickly green illumination. There were hundreds of them, their jaws drooping, their faces distorted and inhuman. They flowed through trees and brush, advancing with a steady gait.

One disjointed figure near the front lifted its finger, pointing toward Davriel, and its mouth further extended in a silent screech.

Dozens of dead eyes locked on him. Then their mouths twisted in turn as—one by one—they recognized him.

Tacenda knelt near the Bog. Davriel had to be wrong. She'd believed in the Bog all her life. It couldn't really just be empty, could it?

Tacenda... The whispered voice had the sound of rustling leaves. She stared into the glassy waters, and found—reflected back at her—the face of her mother. As if submerged in the inky depths.

Tacenda extended her hand, fingertips touching the top of the Bog's surface. The water was unexpectedly warm, like blood.

A hand seized her by the shoulder. Miss Highwater—her grip shockingly firm—pulled Tacenda to her feet, then yanked her toward the carriage. What—

Geists. They flowed through the forest. Terrible, twisted creatures only vaguely shaped like people. And on the wind, she heard their terrible whispers. Tacenda gaped, freezing in place, but Miss Highwater stuffed her into the carriage. Davriel was already inside, banging on the roof and shouting for Crunchgnar to get them moving.

The carriage lurched into motion as the horses bolted. Trees became a blur of darkness outside the window. Tacenda felt every dip and rock in the road, the carriage rattling something terrible at this speed.

“Miss Highwater,” Davriel shouted, “which peasant is in charge of grading this roadway? Should we happen to survive, I would like to have them flogged.”

“Well,” Miss Highwater said. “You remember that meeting we had about tax revenue allocations for maintenance of infrastructure?”

“No, but it sounds boring.”

“You—”

“Let's just compromise,” Davriel said, “and agree it's Crunchgnar's fault.”

Tacenda stuck her head out the other window and looked back along the roadway. Wind blew at her hair, whipping it.

The Whisperers gave chase. Their phantom light rolled over tree trunks and undergrowth—obstructions that the spirits ignored. They coursed after the carriage at a remarkable speed, and even over the rattling of the carriage, she heard their voices. Hushed whispers, overlapping one another.

Those are the people of my village, she thought, trembling. Taken by some force and made into geists. Was her sister's soul among them, then? Twisted beyond recognition? Had Willia come with the others and claimed the living of Verlasen while Tacenda played her fingers raw?

“Miss Verlasen!” Davriel said.

Tacenda pulled her head back into the carriage as Davriel picked up her viol and handed it to her.

“Perhaps a song might be in order?” he asked.

“It doesn’t work on the Whisperers!” she said, taking the viol in limp hands. “That’s the problem that started all of this!”

“They are constructs of the power you hold,” Davriel shouted back. “There is an Entity inside you that powers your songs. That strength should be able to control them somehow!”

“You said yourself that I have only a part of the power! Something stronger than me is behind this!”

He gritted his teeth, bracing himself as they turned a somewhat sharp corner. “Earlier,” he shouted to her, “you told me that you knew what had frightened the Entity of the Bog—you said the word ‘faith.’ Why?”

“I don’t know!” she said. “It just felt right!”

“That is *not* an acceptable answer!” He braced himself again on the side of the carriage as they took a corner. This time it was an even sharper turn, and Tacenda was smashed into the wood, grunting. A moment later they turned the other direction, and she slid across the seat and smashed into Miss Highwater.

“That fool is going to run us into a tree at this speed,” Miss Highwater said.

A green light shone out the window. Tacenda spotted ghostly visages in the woods, making pace with the carriage. They were *fast*. Crunchgnar didn’t have much choice—either he took the winding turns of this forest path at dangerous speeds, or he let the geists catch them. Indeed, he’d have to *speed up*, as the Whisperers were—

Tacenda slammed into the wall as they took another corner.

Davriel growled and gripped the door handle. “Too sharp!” he said. “We’re going to—”

Something *snapped* underneath the carriage. The vehicle tipped.

At that very moment, Davriel flung open the door. Tacenda lost track of him as she felt a stomach-churning sensation, then a sudden jolt as the vehicle tipped onto its side.

Tacenda tumbled in the carriage, frantically trying to protect her viol. Miss Highwater slid down on top of her with a grunt. The vehicle ground against the roadway, dragged briefly on its side, dirt and underbrush spraying through the window across Tacenda.

At last, the carriage slid to a halt. Tacenda groaned, trying to untangle herself from Miss Highwater, who was cursing softly under her breath. Outside, the horses whinnied and snorted in anxiety, and she thought she heard Crunchgnar trying to calm them.

Miss Highwater managed to stand, then she grabbed the doorway above them. Since the carriage had come to rest on its side, one door was down beneath them, the other above. There was no sign of Davriel, though Tacenda thought she had glimpsed him leaping out of the vehicle mid-tip.

Tacenda groaned and checked her viol. Remarkably, the instrument was in one piece. She cradled the viol as she climbed up on the sideways seat, then—with effort—pulled herself out onto what was now the top of the carriage. She was covered in dirt, her hair a tangled mess, and Miss Highwater looked little better.

Davriel had landed without apparent injury. He stood in the center of the roadway and—with a flourish—pulled on his long cloak. He looked remarkably self-possessed as he turned around, regarding the approaching Whisperers. His eyes bled to a pure white, his lips drawn as if in pain, and a flash of power exploded from him.

The bright flash almost blinded her in the night, and it made the Whisperers slow their approach. They circled the fallen carriage, twisted faces murmuring in an agitated way. They seemed to be wary of Davriel all of a sudden.

“The prioress’s power,” Miss Highwater said from beside Tacenda, both of them still crouched on top of the fallen carriage. “He can anchor those geists, force them to be corporeal.”

Ridiculous though the emotion was at a time like this, Tacenda found herself angry at the lord. It was *distinctly* unfair that he had been able to escape without getting tangled up or covered in dirt. How was it that this man managed to appear so composed all the time, despite being so useless?

“Miss Highwater,” Davriel said, turning around as the Whisperers started to draw closer, “unhook the horses and try to control them. Crunchgnar, your sword will likely be required.”

The large demon grunted and stepped over to Davriel, eyeing the spirits. Judging from the fresh scrapes on his arm, Crunchgnar had fallen when the carriage crashed.

Miss Highwater did as commanded, leaping down from the carriage and making calming noises toward the horses, which were tangled in their twisted bridles. Tacenda stayed in place atop the carriage, which seemed the safest spot for her.

At first, the Whisperers left a ring of about twenty feet between themselves and the carriage—then one tested forward. This act seemed to give the others permission, as they broke toward Davriel in a mass. Those terrible whispers accompanied them, a maddening sound, so *close* to being understandable.

She searched those twisted faces for signs of something she recognized. If these really were her friends and neighbors, shouldn’t she be able to tell? Unfortunately, the faces were so distorted, they were barely recognizable as human.

Crunchgnar began swinging about him like a drummer, slamming the sword down into spirit after spirit. Davriel’s spell had made them physical, and the weapon disrupted them—making their bodies puff and dissolve to green smoke that pooled at the ground, rather than evaporating away. Tacenda felt a hint of worry—these were the souls of people she loved. Would these attacks hurt them, permanently? Hopefully, the fact that the smoke pooled on the ground and lingered indicated that they weren’t being destroyed completely.

Miss Highwater frantically cut the horses free of their tangled harnesses. Davriel held his hand to the side to summon a weapon.

The viol disappeared from Tacenda's hands. She yelped in surprise as it re-formed in Davriel's outstretched hand, which he then thrust toward a spirit. Halfway through the maneuver, he seemed to realize he wasn't holding a sword. He froze, then shot Tacenda a withering look, as if it were somehow *her* fault that he'd touched her viol earlier.

He tossed the viol aside, causing her to cry out atop the carriage. But then, she gasped as Davriel was surrounded by glowing green figures. They clawed at him, but instead of marring his skin, their fingers sank *into* his face. He went rigid, others holding his arms and his cloak.

Horrified, Tacenda watched as a green light began to bleed from Davriel's face. *They're trying to pull his soul from his body!*

For a moment she was back in the village, screaming into the second darkness and the terrible whispering. Listening as the people she loved were taken one at a time. Listening as—

No!

Tacenda threw herself off the top of the carriage and landed on the soft earth beside the road. She had no weapon other than her voice, so she started belting out the Warding Song. Crunchgnar roared in pain, but the Whisperers—as always—ignored it. Frustrated, she stopped singing and instead seized a sharp stone from the ground. She used it as a bludgeon, slamming it into the back of a glowing green figure, trying frantically to fight her way to Davriel.

She had little effect. The spirits didn't even seem to notice her there.

Not him too! she thought. *He's the only hope I have!*

She felled the spirit in front of her, its form melting away to dark green smoke, but others pressed in and the whispers surrounded her. She thrashed, trying to fight through—and again she felt helpless.

The spirits didn't attack her, but they *would* take everyone around her. Everyone she'd ever loved, or even come to know. Leaving her alone in the infinite, pure blackness.

A blast of light washed over her, a blue wall of force, dissolving spirits in a ring. She stumbled to a stop, rock clutched in her fingers, to find Davriel crouching at the center. He stood up, blue smoke coloring his eyes. As another spirit came in—its head at a crooked angle, its gaping mouth as long as its forearm—Davriel raised his hand and released a blast of blue light.

"How?" Tacenda said. "I saw them taking your soul!"

"The ward I took from your mind acted as a shield for my soul, once I activated it," he said. Though his voice was calm, his face had gone pale and he was shaking. "That done, it was a simple matter to use the dismissal spell I'd taken from those hunters." He wiped his brow with a trembling hand. "You were worried for me? Foolish child. I was, of course, never in any danger..."

He glanced down toward the flowing green smoke. A head stretched from it, with a twisted, too-wide mouth. Hands reached up, re-forming.

“Hellfire,” he said, sending out a ring of blue light as he dismissed the spirits again. This flash seemed smaller than his previous uses, and the geists almost immediately started re-forming from the ground.

“Useless, idiot hunters,” Davriel cursed. “I’ve seen devils with more efficient magic. Go! Get to the horses.”

He shoved Tacenda toward the carriage, and she moved up beside the vehicle, pressing her back to it as Davriel sent a blast of light to aid Crunchgnar. The tall demon had no soul to lose—and the spirits weren’t pulling green light from him—but they *were* clawing at him, scratching his arms and trying to force him down to the ground.

Davriel’s blasts incapacitated many of the Whisperers, though stragglers were floating in from the forest. Tacenda started, realizing that a few of these had stopped at the edge of the roadway where they were looking at *her*. Too-long heads twisted in strange angles on their shoulders as they regarded her, then one raised its hand, pointing.

She felt a tremor inside. These newcomers were able to see her? What had changed?

“Davriel!” she shouted, backing along the fallen carriage, near the wheels. “Miss Highwater!” She held out her rock in a threatening manner.

The geists stopped in place. They...they were frightened of her rock?

No. It was the necklace she’d wrapped around her wrist earlier. The geists stared at it. While three just stood there, the last one *changed*, the eyes shrinking toward more normal human sizes. Its quivering form stabilized, and the face *almost* became human, recognizable.

It backed away, putting its hands to its face.

Miss Highwater leaped between Tacenda and the geists, slamming her knife into the side of a spirit’s head, causing it to stumble and start to disintegrate. She pulled Tacenda toward a skittish horse with a simple bridle, cut from the carriage harnesses.

“On!” Miss Highwater said. “You can ride?”

“Yes. My father taught me, in the evenings after—”

“Less storytelling. More getting the hell out of here. Dav! We’re ready!”

He emerged from the other side of the fallen carriage, looking somewhat haggard as he blasted the pair of geists who had been looking at Tacenda. The one whose face had momentarily started to re-form wasn’t among those. It had trailed away into the forest; she could pick out its green light moving among the trees.

Crunchgnar—bleeding from cuts along his arms—heaved himself onto a horse’s back and kicked the poor thing forward. The animal held him, barely. Miss Highwater held the reins of another horse for Davriel as he prepared to climb onto its back.

“Davriel,” Tacenda said, leaving her horse and grabbing his arm. “Something is odd about one of those spirits!”

“Which one?” he said immediately, scanning the area. His spell and Crunchgnar’s swords had left most of the Whisperers formless, but the coating of green smoke on the ground trembled, hands and faces re-forming.

Tacenda pointed out into the forest. “A group of them came after me—the only ones who have ever tried to attack me. But when they saw the symbol of the Nameless Angel, they stopped. One ran out into the forest!”

Davriel frowned. “Miss Highwater, keep the horses ready. I’ll return shortly.” He then strode out into the forest.

Tacenda hesitated, then ran after him.

“What?” Miss Highwater screamed after them. “Are you insane?”

Moving through the forest at night was difficult. There always seemed to be some unseen branch clawing at her dress, or some pitfall where the ground was a foot below where she expected it. The first darkness soon surrounded them, but Davriel summoned a light in the form of a small flame from his finger—the last remaining bit of his pyromancy.

She kept up with him, chasing down the glowing green light, which had stopped moving. They came upon the geist, who knelt beside a tree, head bowed. It had started to fuzz again, its shape distorting.

“The symbol,” Davriel said, waving his free hand toward Tacenda.

She unwrapped Willia’s necklace from her wrist and handed it to him. Davriel stepped around the geist and presented it. The thing looked up, fixating on the symbol—the shape of spreading wings.

“Is it the power of the church?” Tacenda asked.

“No,” Davriel said. “It’s the power of familiarity. Remember what I told you? Spirits such as these can sometimes be recovered through a reminder of something they knew in life.”

The geist reached out reverent fingers and touched the symbol of the Nameless Angel. The face faded from monstrous to human. Agonized human. Though it could shed no tears, this thing was weeping.

It...it was Rom.

The old hunter-turned-gardener was a geist now? But how? He wasn’t from the village.

“What...” Rom’s spirit whispered. “What have you done to me, m’lord?”

“What do you remember?” Davriel said, voice soft, even kindly. “The last thing you recall?”

“I saw you off into the night,” the spirit said. “I was tired, and returned to my room to sleep. I couldn’t. Like usual. Remembering all those that I’ve killed...” The glowing spirit blinked, then looked toward his hands. “Oh, Angel. I thought I’d find peace here. But no...never peace...”

“Why is a priest a Whisperer?” Tacenda said. “What is happening?”

“The priory has been attacked since we left,” Davriel said. “The souls of the priests made into geists. I

worry that whoever is behind this realized that the spirits of your village wouldn't harm you, so they have begun seeking the souls of people untouched by the Bog." He dropped the symbol. "Apparently, the Angel was no help to them."

"I saw her," Rom whispered. "When I first got here. That's why...why they asked me to come...she'd gone mad, like the others..." The spirit bowed its head, weeping softly.

"Rom," Davriel said. "Something happened a little under twenty years ago, at the Bog. The Entity within it fled for some reason."

"Twenty years ago..." Rom said. "I wasn't even here then. I was killing demons."

"Davriel," Tacenda said. "A little under twenty years? We know something that happened. Fifteen years ago." She gestured to herself. "I was born."

Davriel frowned at the words, then glanced back toward the road—where the army of spirits had reformed. They were now flowing out into the woods. "Come."

He quickly started through the underbrush away from the geists. She reached toward Rom, but the quivering spirit was beginning to distort again, muttering about his murders. Feeling a chill, Tacenda scrambled after Davriel. She pushed through the underbrush, stumbling, practically on hands and knees.

"Your warding power isn't simply the strongest it's been in generations," Davriel said. "The Entity of the Bog moved into you and your sister. What was left of it, at least. It was afraid, perhaps being whittled away by something."

"The church," Tacenda said, grunting as she pulled herself over a log. "Don't you see? The prioress arrived some two decades ago, and the priests arrived in force. Souls began being converted, and they gave themselves to the Angel instead of the Bog. The Seelenstone!"

"The Seelenstone is a trinket with a fifth-rate glamor charm on it," Davriel said. "Good only for wowing peasants. It stills souls, but otherwise..."

He stopped in the forest just ahead of her. She looked over her shoulder, feeling cold as the green light of approaching geists flowed toward them.

"You told me," Tacenda said, "that the Bog's power had seeped into the souls of the people here. What would have happened to that power when the people died?"

"I'd guess that normally, it would have returned to the Bog."

"Unless some device—some magical trinket—was collecting those souls instead? Might it have begun gathering the strength of the Bog, siphoning it off? So the strength of the Entity in the Bog shrank, until it grew desperate enough to try something new? To pull the rest of itself out and seek a host?"

"Two hosts," Davriel said. "By accident. It sought the womb, a child being born, but ended up split between twin sisters. Whoever is behind this must have realized the source of your power, and killed your sister for her half. But it couldn't touch you. Why?"

Behind, the spirits coursed around the kneeling Rom, who held the symbol of the Nameless Angel in his fingers. Tacenda thought she saw him drop the necklace and rise, his face distorting fully.

“Come,” Davriel said, pulling her along with him. They emerged into open air, reaching the roadway. It wove a winding course here, and they’d cut through the forest to emerge into another section of it.

“We should return to the mansion,” Davriel said.

“The power,” Tacenda said. “The rest of this...Entity that lives inside me. It’s at the priory. Inside the stone.”

“It *was* at the priory. Someone has obviously claimed it.” His expression darkened in the moonlight. “I swear, if I’ve somehow been played by the prioress after all...”

Tacenda glanced back at the forest. Those spirits were coming faster and faster. “They’re speeding up,” she said. “We have to try to outrun them!”

“Miss Verlasen,” he said, aghast. “Run? *Me?*”

She took him by the arm, but he remained steady. What was he waiting for? As she was about to begin running along the road, she heard the beating of hooves.

A moment later, Miss Highwater tore around the curve up ahead, riding bareback on one of the horses. Visible by the light of the lantern she carried in one hand, she appeared to have slit her skirt up the front and back for riding. She led two other horses behind her on a rope, and was trailed by Crunchgnar on his beleaguered animal, which seemed a pony by comparison.

Miss Highwater pulled her horse to a skittish halt near Davriel.

“Excellent timing,” he said. “*And* with proper flair, too.”

“I’m charging you for this skirt,” she said. “You’re lucky we rode off to try to intercept you on the other side here—Crunchgnar wanted to wait like you’d ordered.”

Tacenda eagerly scrambled up onto one of the horses, taking little notice of the lack of a saddle. “What made you decide to come for us instead?”

“If my years of service have taught me one thing,” Miss Highwater said, “it’s to *never* count on Davriel to be on time for an appointment without my help.” She turned her horse, fighting to keep the feisty beast under control. She appeared to have picked the most difficult of the animals for herself; Davriel’s stately black mare stood placidly as he hauled himself up.

“On toward the mansion?” Miss Highwater said, nodding along the road in the direction opposite the spirits, who were beginning to flood out of the forest.

“No,” Davriel said. He took a deep breath. “Back the way we came. To the priory.”

“But—”

He kicked his horse forward, straight toward the mass of geists, and Tacenda joined him. Miss Highwater

cursed loudly, but then followed, as did Crunchgnar—whose horse was making an incredible effort to not collapse under his bulk.

As they reached the spirits, Davriel let out a blast of blue light. This time it made only the very closest of the spirits disintegrate. Fortunately, the others did waver for a moment, as if stunned.

Tacenda and the others entered the mass. She was sure she felt the touch of ghostly fingers brush the skin of her legs. Their ice seemed to reach her very core, chilling a part of her that hitherto had always known only warmth.

Then she was out of it, thundering after Davriel, clinging to her horse. She didn't have to do much—she gave the beast free rein and tried to hang on with her knees.

It had taken well over an hour for them to reach the Bog from the priory—but they'd stopped for Davriel's nap during that, and had ridden the rest of the way at a leisurely carriage pace. Their return took a fraction of the time.

The ride worked each poor horse into a lather, but never once did Tacenda have to urge her mount forward. The whispering spirits chased them the whole way, and it seemed that no matter how hard the horses ran, the geists were always just behind. Flowing through the forest, staying out of reach—to the point that Tacenda worried she was being herded in this direction.

They eventually galloped from the forest onto the priory grounds. The suddenly open sky presented a field of stars—the moon had begun to set. That struck a sudden note of terror within Tacenda. She looked over her shoulder, past the ghosts, toward the eastern sky. The horizon was obscured by the trees as always. But she did see a faint glow, heralding dawn.

They'd been about their investigation all night. Soon, when the sun rose, Tacenda would become blind again.

She turned back around, trying to wrestle control of her horse as they neared the priory. Only then did she notice that all of the windows were dark. The bonfires and lanterns at the perimeter had gone out, and not a single candle seemed lit anywhere in the building.

Miss Highwater got her horse to stop, then climbed down. Davriel didn't bother with any of that. He just stepped off the horse and hit the ground, skidding to a halt. How in Avacyn's name did he manage that without tripping? Tacenda was far less skillful as she accidentally made her horse rear as it pulled up. She slipped off in a half intentional attempt at dismounting, and hit the soft ground in a heap.

Crunchgnar arrived last of all, his horse barely at a trot. He stepped free, grumbling quietly about his hatred of horses—though the poor animal had been the one to suffer. It, like the others, took off in a sweaty canter as the glowing line of spirits coursed out of the forest.

Instead of advancing, the Whisperers spread out, making a ring around the clearing. *We're going to be trapped here*, Tacenda thought. *Have I lead us to our deaths?*

Davriel let the horses go without a second glance. Perhaps he knew that after such a hard ride, they'd be

too exhausted to carry riders further. The poor animals would be lucky if they survived the night.

As will we, Tacenda thought.

Crunchgnar led the way into the priory, sword out, carefully checking one way, then the other. Davriel followed, then Miss Highwater with their single lantern.

The hallway was dark, empty—but two corpses lay just inside. Church guards, fallen where they had stood, eyes open and mouths frozen mid-scream. They looked just like the first victims of the Whisperers that the village had found.

Davriel nodded to the right, and Crunchgnar led the way—stepping with a silence that seemed at odds with his stature. Miss Highwater slipped a few half-melted candles off a windowsill, then lit them on the lantern. Tacenda took one, though the quivering light it provided seemed a frail thing.

They passed a couple more bodies—servant youths, who were priests in training—though most here had probably been in bed when they'd been taken. Tacenda's heart thundered in her ears, and she felt anxious at walking so slowly after their rush to arrive. A glance out the window showed the geists approaching the priory, surrounding it in an increasingly tighter ring.

Crunchgnar reached the point in the hallway where Davriel's disturbing runes covered the walls, then eased open the door to the prioress's office. They found the elderly woman's body slumped at its desk—frozen like the others.

Davriel cursed softly. "It might have been easier if she were behind it," he said, "as I leeches her powers away earlier."

Tacenda shivered, looking around the darkened hallway. Would the soldiers here have been able to fight back if Davriel hadn't stolen the prioress's abilities?

"What now?" Miss Highwater asked.

As if in response to her question, a faint vibration struck the building, thrumming through the stones. Something about it...there was a tone to the sound. As if...it was part of a song Tacenda knew...

"Down," Davriel said, turning and leading the way toward the stairs into the catacombs. They reached the stone steps, a hollow tunneling down into the earth. The shape of it, from the landing, looked reminiscent of the way the mouths of the spirits had twisted when screaming.

"I inspected the Seelenstone soon after arriving in this land," Davriel said, starting down the steps. "I recognized the wards it had on it, but I sensed no well of power as you describe, Miss Verlasen. Still, I believe you must be right on some points. The Bog Entity sought a host in you, after being threatened over time by the church's expansion here.

"But as it was split by the birth of twins, the Entity was not complete, and therefore cannot communicate with you. The Entities can affect one's senses, however—which could alone be the explanation for why you are sometimes blind. Perhaps it is trying, and failing, to override your vision as a way to communicate. I

cannot explain why the loss would be so regular.”

“How do you know so much about it?” Tacenda asked.

“Let’s just say, I have encountered a similar circumstance myself,” he said. “I...” He trailed off, stopping in the stairwell, cocking his head. Tacenda looked up, past the two demons.

Whispers.

She could hear them echoing above, soft but haunting. The geists had entered the priory.

Davriel continued downward, and Tacenda gave chase, holding up her candle and shielding it with her hand from the wind of their quick descent.

“Our focus must be on your talents,” Davriel said. “Though shrouded in superstition, there is likely a seed of truth in the stories your people tell of this Nameless Angel. I can only assume that I missed something about that stone.”

They reached the catacombs, and Davriel opened the door without needing to be told where to push. He turned right, following the winding path toward the room with the Seelenstone. Soon, Tacenda spotted its glowing walls and ceiling, lighting the way.

They stepped into the room where the stone lay, undisturbed, on its pedestal. Someone else sat at the back of the room, staring at the stone with its swirling colors. A young woman with golden hair and pale skin.

Willia.

Willia.

Willia was *alive*.

Tacenda tried to rush into the room to embrace her sister, but Davriel seized her by the shoulder, his grip strong and firm. And...something was wrong with Willia. The way she glowed, the power Tacenda felt emanating from her. She wasn't a geist.

She...she was the one controlling them.

"Willia?" Tacenda pled. "What have you done?"

Willia stood up, wearing her white burial dress. "They put me down here, you know. Guarding the stone is one of the duties they give the new acolytes. I made them give me duty during the days, because I didn't want to be down in this place of death when the pure darkness took me. You know that darkness, don't you, Tacenda?"

Willia stared into the stone's shifting light. "It spoke to me," she whispered. "Told me of power that I held, that *we* held. Power to stop the darkness. I just had to make it whole. Find the other pieces scattered through the people of the Approaches. Each one with a little sliver..."

That sweet voice was so familiar. And yet, the edge to it—the rawness—was so terribly wrong. "Willia," Tacenda whispered. "What did you do to our parents?"

Willia finally looked up at her. And she could see. It was night, but she could see? For the first time in her life, Tacenda looked into her sister's eyes and Willia looked back.

"I didn't mean to take them, Tacenda," Willia said. "They were carrying offerings to the Bog—what I thought was a false god. I yelled, and argued, but I didn't mean to kill them. But the power I'd taken from the stone, it combined with my power, and cried out for more. In the end, I let it loose on them, and...and it just happened."

"You *killed* them."

"Not killed. Reclaimed." Willia stepped forward, the Seelenstone's shifting colors reflected in her eyes. "At first, I thought the voice in the Seelenstone was her, you know. The Angel? I thought she was the one whispering to me. I didn't know then that she was already dead."

Crunchgnar slipped carefully into the room. Davriel kept hold of Tacenda, blocking the way out of the small chamber, Miss Highwater standing just behind him. Tacenda's worry spiked as she noted Crunchgnar easing his sword from its sheath.

"No!" Tacenda said. "Stop. Willia, Lord Cane can restore the souls to their bodies if you release them. It's

going to be all right. We can fix this.”

“You assume I want to.” Willia eyed Crunchgnar, then tipped the Seelenstone off its pedestal, sending it to the ground, where it smashed apart. “I don’t have to hide from the darkness any more, Tacenda. I don’t have to cower behind your song.” She raised her hands, and a deep, powerful glow began to rise within her. “It is time that the darkness *feared me*.”

§

Davriel had heard enough. He struck, piercing the young woman’s mind, digging for her talent. Perhaps she was new enough to her powers that he could reach inside, pluck the Entity she held, and—

Davriel slammed into something. An impossible force, even more vast than what he’d found in Tacenda.

Willia rebuffed Davriel with an almost indifferent stroke. He was forced back into his own mind with a grunt, a terrible headache stabbing him right behind his eyes. And then, Willia released a column of green-white energy, so bright it painted the walls of the room iridescent.

NO!

Davriel summoned the remnants of the power he’d taken from Tacenda—the protection ward. Pain split his head as he used it, raising the power like a shield. The glowing green barrier he created blocked Willia’s incredible bolt of light, forming a bubble of safety in which Davriel sheltered the surprised Miss Highwater.

Crunchgnar, however, was vaporized in the blink of an eye. The demon’s sword—which he’d been raising to strike at Willia—clanged to the floor. Tacenda screamed and fell to her knees, but this power was like a condensed, raw version of her Warding Song. It wouldn’t harm a human like her.

Bits of ash from Crunchgnar’s corpse blew around Davriel, who grunted, holding his protective ward firm. The Warding Light beat against his shield like a physical force, spraying around him like a river, filling the corridor behind him. Only the little space just behind him was safe from it.

“Hellfire!” Miss Highwater said, pulling against him as her finger touched the flow of light and was burned. “Dav?”

“I believe,” he said with effort, “I may have misjudged our opponent’s strength.” He stumbled beneath the force of the warding light. His shield was made of the same power, but was far, far weaker.

Here we are at last, the Entity said in his mind, sounding satisfied. The fight as I promised you. Here, we prove ourselves, and claim a second strength as our own.

Davriel grunted, sweat streaming down the sides of his face as he squeezed every ounce of strength from the shielding ward. It wasn’t going to be enough; he could see that easily.

Use me, the Entity said. Use me now. As you did once before.

No! Davriel thought.

Why? Why do you resist? This is your moment! Seize it!

Davriel turned, with effort, to regard Miss Highwater. She huddled close to him as his magical shield frayed. The two of them stood in the doorway into the room, the corridor behind them completely flooded with light. There was nowhere for her to run. If he let the shield fall, she'd be vaporized.

"I still have the dismissal spell," he whispered to her. "A little of it. It should work on you, as a creature of magic."

"I..." She looked at his green shield of force, which was crumbling at the edges.

"You should re-form, like the geists," Davriel said. "The dismissal was a temporary effect for them." He looked into her deep red eyes, sweat dripping down his face. "It's all I have."

She nodded. "Do it."

He prepared the spell, the power gathering, the room tinting blue as his eyes flooded with it.

Miss Highwater grabbed his shirt just beneath the collar, then pulled her face up close to his. "Don't you die, Davriel Cane," she whispered. "I'm not done with you yet."

He smiled, then grunted again beneath the force. "Remember. *I* wanted. To stay. *Inside* for the evening."

He used the dismissal spell. A piece of him cracked as her grey skin melted away to black smoke, her ledger dropping to the ground as she vanished.

Davriel screamed as his ward shattered, then light washed over him. It blinded him, tugged faintly at his soul like a child pulling on his cloak. But it didn't harm him.

He was, even still, human.

The light finally faded, but left him blind. Davriel stumbled to his feet, turning, blinking and trying to recover his vision. Seeing only white, he activated his weapon-summoning spell, to at least have a sword.

The object that formed in his hand, however, was of an awkward wooden shape. That blasted viol again. Hellfire. Why did the magic consider it a weapon?

Willia didn't attack him in his moment of weakness, though he heard her whispering. Orders? Distant whispers sounded in the catacomb halls, echoing her voice.

She was bringing those geists down for him. As proven with the priests, they could claim souls of outsiders as easily as they did Approachers. With the Entity powering such abilities, how long would it be before this entire plane was occupied with nothing more than terrible green spirits whispering to one another?

You will never defeat another Entity on your own, the Entity said inside his mind. She will destroy you. Unless you destroy her first and take the power for yourself.

A hand grasped Davriel's.

"This way," Tacenda said. In the moment, he'd almost forgotten her. The young woman towed him away from the room, and—still blinded by the light—he turned and fled with her.

Morning arrived as Tacenda led Davriel away from the room. And with the coming sun, her sight—already fuzzy from the flash that Willia had released—slipped away. The second darkness descended, and she found herself moving down the hallway by touch, pulling Davriel after her.

Willia's footsteps followed. "I should have been strong enough to kill you myself," the girl said, her voice echoing against the catacomb walls. "I didn't have trouble stabbing the priest, so my spirits could enter the church. Afterward, I stood behind you in the village, knife in hand...and I heard you begin singing. I have always loved that song, Tacenda."

Tacenda pulled herself along, feeling with one hand at the wall's crypts, leading Davriel with the other. Smooth, polished stone, cold beneath her fingers. Tomb after tomb.

"Willia," she said, "this is *insane*. You're not like this!"

"What am I like, Tacenda? Am I the confident girl that everyone saw? Or am I the terrified one you saw? The one who knew that every night, the darkness would come for her again..."

"No, Willia," Tacenda said, reaching an intersection in the catacombs. The stairs were to the left...but whispers came from that direction. She turned in the darkness toward Willia's voice. "Please."

"This is what we were always meant to be, Tacenda," Willia said. "We two are one soul. And our power... it was always only a part of what it *could* have been. I needed the souls of the others to put back together the pieces of the Entity. I needn't feel bad for doing that. It was inevitable. The Entity's destiny was to become whole again."

"And the priests?" Tacenda demanded. "What is your excuse for killing them?"

Silence, other than Davriel pulling up beside her, then cursing under his breath. He seemed to be getting his sight back—at least, he started toward the stairs but then stopped, as if he's seen the geists in that direction.

"I *won't* be weak again, Tacenda," Willia said. "Each bit I claim gives me more light. Right now, I'm blind for only a few hours around midnight. If I put the Entity back together, I'll be whole. I'll never have to be trapped in that terrible, unbearable darkness again."

That harshness seemed so strange to hear in her sister's voice.

"Come," Davriel said, pulling her by her hand away from the approaching Whisperers.

Tacenda resisted. Surely she could make Willia see. Surely...

"I know that tone of voice," Davriel said. "She's listened to the Entity's promises for long enough to start believing them. *Come*."

Tacenda relented, letting him pull her down a side corridor of the catacombs. It was hopeless. The Whisperers would flood the area. Soon she and Davriel would join that terrible, whispering throng.

Still, she followed in darkness. And as she did, she thought she...heard something over the whispers. A song that seemed at once distant and close. Something she knew, somehow, that she could only hear while within the second darkness.

Distant, because of its ephemeral, out-of-reach softness. Close, because it pierced through all other sounds and made something stir within her.

What *was* that song?

§

Davriel hastened down the corridor, pulling Tacenda with him. His eyesight had recovered, but Tacenda's curse had obviously taken her.

Fool man, he thought at himself. *You should have seen this outcome*. He'd recognized that Tacenda's power should have let her influence the geists—but he hadn't put together that the supposedly dead twin would be in an even better position to do so. Perhaps it had begun as innocently as she insisted, killing her parents by accident. Then she'd needed a scapegoat for her murders. And who better than the Man of the Manor?

She could have stopped at that, and likely no one would ever have known. But the Entity whispered that she needed more. And so, the attack on the merchants—witnessed by a priest. Had she arranged for him to be there, to corroborate her story that Davriel was the culprit? In any case, he should have seen. Someone had stitched a costume to imitate him, and he hadn't wondered if it might be the daughter of the village tailors?

"Davriel," Tacenda hissed as he pulled her down another corridor. "Look for murals on the walls. Rom said that some of them lead to hidden exits out of the catacombs. There was one in the room with the Seelenstone."

He pulled up short as green light lit the other end of the corridor. Hellfire. They were this direction too? He turned, pulling Tacenda down a side hallway.

Use me, the Entity said. *It is beyond time*.

He ignored the Entity, instead searching through his resources. He didn't have much left. The pyromancy was gone, as was the dismissal spell. The weapon-summoning spell lingered, but would be useless, as would the silly spell for making ink appear on a page.

Otherwise, the remnant of the prioress's power was the only thing he had left. Well, that and his last resort—his ability to leave a plane and walk the Blind Eternities to another realm. He could take nothing with him, however, and in so doing would abandon everything he'd built here.

You would run, as a coward? the Entity asked. *Before using me? Why?*

He risked a glance over his shoulder. Sickly green geists flowed in and out of the walls, moving toward

him. The young woman—Tacenda’s sister—stood at the far back of their ranks, just a shadow.

Right. His only chance was to find a way out of this maze and flee to the manor and gather reinforcements. To that end, he thrust his hand forward—braced himself for the awful pain—and used the prioress’s talent to force the geists to remain corporeal.

A flash of light left him, traveling through the entire catacombs. The Whisperers quivered as the power forced them out of walls and into the corridor, where—suddenly physical—they collided with one another and clogged the way forward. Their mouths twisted in terrible ways, though they didn’t scream or moan. Just uttered those whispers.

A few of the geists at the front escaped the clog, so Davriel grabbed Tacenda’s hand again, leading her down another corridor, lined with grave markers on the walls. The way was lit by candles, which were burning low now that the priory’s tenders had fallen.

He pulled Tacenda into a nook and hissed at her to be quiet—then he used the inkspell, painting a wall with darkness to look like shadows, extending farther down the corridor just to the right. He held his breath, waiting as the geists drew near. Thankfully, they took the bait and flowed away, chasing toward the shadows.

He pulled Tacenda by her hand out of the nook and headed to the right, hoping this path would wrap around toward the room with the Seelenstone. Awful whispers echoed through the tunnels, seeming to come from all directions.

“Willia will know about the secret exits,” Tacenda whispered. “That must be how she got in and out, after they brought her body here. Be careful.”

“She’s posted geists to stop us from going this way,” Davriel whispered, peeking around a corner. “Any thoughts on how to get around them?”

“No,” Tacenda whispered. She stared blankly ahead. “Could she really have done these terrible things? She...she faked her death, didn’t she? She pretended to have been taken by the Whisperers, maybe so suspicion wouldn’t fall upon her. She knew they’d bring her to the priory, instead of returning her to the Bog. But how did she fool us?”

“Intentional dustwillow overdose, I’d suspect,” Davriel said. “The leaves are a sedative; eat them in their strength, and it will induce a catatonic state.” It happened sometimes to the farmers, he was told.

Davriel turned and pulled her toward another tunnel, but she tugged back. “Do you hear that song?” she asked.

“No,” Davriel said. “I only hear the geists.”

He pulled her forcibly after him, around another corner—then pulled to a halt. Green light illuminated geists flowing toward him from that direction.

Right. He dashed back the way they’d come, turning another corner. Then pulled to a stop there as well. A tall figure stood at the end of that tunnel, blocking the way to the stairs, lit from the sides by green whispering

spirits.

He was tempted to try rushing her. She was just a girl of fifteen. But he recognized that glinting light reflected in her eyes. Power. Unimaginable power. Even if he could reach her through the geists, the Entity inside her would protect her from simple physical wounds.

“What would you do?” the girl asked. “To know that you’d never again be afraid? To know that you’d never again be hunted? To forever banish the things that scratched at your door at night? To—for once—rule instead of be ruled?”

“I know how you feel,” Davriel said back, smelling blood and smoke. “But there is always a price. Sometimes it’s too high to pay. That’s simple economics.”

It is time! the Entity said. *Why do you hesitate?*

Willia gestured, and geists flowed down the corridor, careful—this time—not to trip one another. Davriel, moved to run to the left, but Tacenda pulled on his hand toward a different corridor. “No,” she said. “This way. Toward the song.”

“That’s a dead end,” he said. “We visited that chamber earlier tonight.”

“It had a mural,” she said. “Maybe a way out?”

She pulled out of his grip and ran that way. As geists flooded down the corridor, Davriel cursed and reluctantly followed.

§

Rough stone under her fingers. Cool, dusty air. The second darkness, swallowing her.

And a song. A sweet, beautiful, mournful song.

Tacenda felt the tunnel end at an open room, circular. She remembered this place—it was where they kept the bodies awaiting burial. Trembling, she felt around the room until she reached the empty slab where her sister had once lain.

At that moment, Tacenda finally accepted what had happened. Her sister was a murderer.

Poor Willia. Terrified of the second darkness. She’d hid from it until, at long last, it had claimed her as its own. Just not in the way either of them had feared.

“Can you open the secret tunnel?” Davriel said, his boots scraping stone as he stepped into the chamber.

That melody...so haunting...

The song was closer now. Tacenda felt around the room until she touched a carved portion of the back wall. A relief depicting the Nameless Angel.

“The Man of the Manor.” Willia’s voice echoed against stone. Tacenda thought that she was approaching down the tunnel that led to this room. Whisperers walked with her, their voices overlapping. “Your reputation

proved helpful. Everyone was *so* eager to believe you were a murderer.”

“Let’s make a deal, child,” Davriel said. “I won’t insult you with an offer of riches, but I am worth more than simple lucre. Let me live. I can tell you many things about that voice inside your head.”

“It said you’d try to deal,” Willia whispered. “But it also told me that you hold something I need. Something that will make me so strong, nobody will *ever again* be able to challenge me.”

Tacenda felt at the carving, following the contours of the stone. She felt to the Angel’s hand, which held a carved version of the Seelenstone. There, that was the button.

“You’d kill your own sister?” Davriel asked. “Truly? Are you that heartless?”

Willia was silent for a moment. Tacenda could hear her breath, which had a ragged edge. She was close. Perhaps standing in the tunnel outside the chamber.

“Tacenda,” Willia said, her voice icy cold, “has always had the voice of an angel. And do you know what the angels did to us, Man of the Manor? The same thing every lord, devil, and demon in this land has done. They bled us. So we bled them back.”

Tacenda pressed the carving in just the right way, as she’d seen Rom do. The wall clicked, then her weight caused it to inch open, stone grinding on stone. She pushed into the hidden chamber, the source of the song.

Behind her, Davriel gasped.

“What?” she asked. “What do you see?”

“It’s...her.”

It was an angel.

With its wings nailed to the wall.

A beautiful—yet otherworldly—figure of pale, selenic skin and gossamer hair. Clad in a red and white robe, she slumped on the floor of the otherwise dull chamber. Colorful against grey, like a rose on a grave. Her head bowed, her wings were spread behind her like battle banners unfurled—but they'd been pierced by thick iron spikes that had been pounded directly into cracks in the stone wall.

Transfixed, Davriel forgot the geists. The pain of his compounding headaches. Anger, frustration, even a hint of fear—each bled away before this incredible sight.

The Nameless Angel. She was real. She was here. She was entrancing.

And she was dead.

The figure didn't stir as Tacenda felt her way into the room, then knelt. She reached out, caressing the Angel's doll-like face, then cupped it and lifted it in her hands—feeling at the skin. Since the girl's eyesight was gone, she didn't seem to notice that the Angel's throat had been slit. That robe must once have been pure white—the scarlet coloring was blood.

What an incredible waste. What an injustice that something so beautiful had been ruined here, in this crude prison. This was a place where men died. Something this heavenly should not have been forced to suffer such a mundane fate.

Fool man, Davriel thought, angry at himself. Your mortality betrays you. This thing wasn't pure, or grand, or innately good—it was simply created to evoke those emotions in you.

In any case, this was no secret passage out. The hidden stone door that Tacenda had opened looked in only at this small box of a prison.

He turned back toward Willia. The young woman stood in the doorway to the small funeral chamber, glowing green spirits gathering around her to light the hallway behind. Candles flickered in their alcoves, casting an inconsistent glow over the bodies of the newly dead who awaited burial.

Willia stared past him, toward the Angel. “She doesn't decompose. Nobody knows why. The blood stays wet, all these months. They made Rom do it, you know. They'd locked her away, when the madness struck her. And Rom, he came to the priory to escape the blood. But as soon as he got here, they made him kill our god.”

She looked up, haunted, meeting Davriel's eyes. “I came back here, after that first time I...I used the power. After I took my parents. I didn't say what I'd done, but I begged for the priests to promise me,

promise me that the Angel was real. They gave me false assurances, but Rom...I don't think he could bear it. He brought me down here and showed me. And that's when I knew. Nobody can protect me. I have to do it myself."

"The Entity will consume you," Davriel whispered. "It will feed your powers until they destroy everything you've ever loved."

"I don't care," she said.

"I know you don't right now. But you will."

Willia pointed, and the geists—who had stopped outside near her—flooded into the room toward Davriel.

Hellfire. What did he have left—the spell to summon a weapon? Useless. Tacenda's warding power? Only a sliver of it remained. The inkspell? He could write his last testament on the walls as his spirit was ripped from his body.

He had only two cards left to play. The Entity.

And the power to leave.

Davriel moved backward, soon bumping into Tacenda, who had still knelt before the dead angel. She was crying softly, a mournful song leaving her lips.

A part of Davriel knew he had to run. Leave this plane, slip through the Blind Eternities, escape. Deep down, he knew that this last ability he had was the source of his confidence. If things got too bad, he could always run.

You...you really are just a coward, the Entity said inside him, as if surprised. *I thought when you fled before, it was wisdom. You saw that the ones hunting you were too powerful. But now...now you could have enough strength to defeat them, if you wanted. And still, you think of fleeing?*

Davriel gathered his concentration and—pushing aside both the Entity and thoughts of fleeing—slammed his will into Willia's mind. He imagined his strength as a sword piercing her skull.

Willia grunted, stumbling back. Her control slipped. She was untrained, unpracticed. So for just a moment, Davriel touched the power lurking within her.

Hellfire...

Davriel's mind had expanded like an explosion. In the blink of an eye, he saw a hundred different planes. He saw millions of people living and loving and eating and sleeping and breathing and dying and never knowing just how tiny they were.

The same thing had happened to him when he'd first touched the Entity all those years ago.

Most people were so, so insignificant. But some...some individuals moved worlds. Some individuals *created* worlds. He wanted so desperately to be one of those. A person who controlled fate, rather than living by it. It was the great contradiction of his life, perhaps every life. He acknowledged that the world worked by

incentives. At their core, people were creatures of instinct.

Yet Davriel Cane wanted to believe he was different.

His control slipped. He was too tired, and the power inside Willia was too vast. Unless he used his Entity, he would never be able to defeat it. Davriel was forced back, and awareness of the room returned.

The geists surrounded him. They clawed at him, their icy hands sinking into his skin, brushing his soul. Davriel groaned, sagging, held up by the multitude of spectral hands. They picked at his spirit like ravens at the intestines of the battlefield dead.

Tacenda's song grew louder. A dirge for the fallen.

Davriel grunted beneath the touch of the Whisperers, and felt his soul—his very *being*—slipping from his body. He used the last sliver of Tacenda's power to resist them, and it just barely prevented his soul from being taken. But in that moment, he broke down and tried to flee. He tried to send himself into the Blind Eternities and leave this plane.

He failed.

The Whisperers had hold of his soul, and their touch anchored him to this place. He tried again, and again failed.

For the first time in ages, Davriel Cane felt a true panic.

It is time, the Entity said. *You know it is.*

No, Davriel thought, smelling blood and smoke.

Why? the Entity demanded. *Why do you resist? Use me!*

No!

Why? Why would you choose death?

"I," Davriel screamed, "WILL NOT BE THAT MAN AGAIN!"

He closed his eyes, waiting for the inevitable.

I see, the Entity said. *You are not the person I thought you to be. So be it. Die, then. I will find another.*

His strength exhausted, his options expended, Davriel fell slack in the grip of the geists. And yet, their fingers on his soul loosened.

He opened his eyes. Around him, the geists had stopped moving, withdrawing their hands. They were looking to the side, toward the dead angel?

No, toward Tacenda. Her humming voice rose in the room. The song had never worked on these creatures. He didn't completely understand why, or what had changed now.

It's her song, he thought. *The one she's humming. Is it different?*

Exhausted, he reached inside himself and found one of the only spells he had left, and used it. A simple summoning charm.

The viol appeared in his hand. “Tacenda,” he said. “Whatever you’re doing, *keep going.*”

§

Tacenda cradled the face of the dead angel, humming the song. The one she had heard in the distance, leading her here. Around her, the sounds of the Whisperers faded. She heard her viol somewhere, suddenly responding to her song—like a call and reply.

Everything around her was the second darkness. And yet, she looked upward, and something seemed to shimmer—glowing above her. A figure, made of pure white light, with wings that seemed to extend into eternity.

“Tacenda,” Davriel said. She felt him scramble up to her, crawling across the stone floor. “This song...it’s different. The Whisperers have frozen as they listen to it. Even your sister seems transfixed.”

“It’s a song I don’t know,” she whispered, breaking it off. “I’ve forgotten it.”

“That makes no sense! Just get back to singing!”

Instead, Tacenda reached upward, toward the light. The figure reached out its hand, touching hers.

“The Angel’s soul,” Tacenda whispered. “It’s still here. Trapped, like those of the faithful...”

“That’s nonsense,” Davriel said. “Angels are creations of magic. Like demons, they have no souls.”

And yet, Tacenda touched the light.

Child, a somehow familiar voice said, *why have you stopped singing?*

“How can I sing that song?” she whispered. “When they’re all dead? When I’ve forgotten the warmth of the sun? When I’ve lost even my sister to the true darkness? How can I *possibly* sing now?”

Because this is when songs are most needed.

“The Song of Warding doesn’t work. It’s what they needed, but it didn’t save them.” She lowered her head. “There’s no light left. And I cannot see.”

That is the secret, Tacenda. What do you do, when the night grows cold and the darkness comes for you?

She looked up.

What song would you sing, the voice asked, if you were to choose?

“Does it matter?”

It always mattered. Listen to the music, child. Hear it. And sing.

Tacenda started to hum. Again her viol responded, encouraging. Something stirred inside of her and she rose, resting her fingers on Davriel’s shoulder. She took the viol carefully from his hands, then stepped back

into the funeral chamber.

She walked as if into a cold wind. Among the spirits of the dead. These Whisperers had once been her people. They were not monsters. They were her friends, her family, people she loved. They had simply forgotten that.

It was time to remind them.

Tacenda opened her mouth, and sang. Not the Warding Song—that had always been the song of the first darkness, sung while the people slept. A song of haunted places and barred doors. As she felt their fingers upon her skin, she sang a different song. The song of her youth, the song she'd sung to them while they worked.

The song of lives lived. A joyful song, an emotion that kindled as she let it out. Cold fingers on her skin seemed to warm as she remembered days in the sun, a light she could not see, but could feel nonetheless. Days singing joyful tunes to the workers, the women of the village, the children who danced around her.

It was so hard to find warmth in the darkness. But when the night grew cold and the darkness came for you, that was when you needed to light a fire.

And make your own light.

§

Davriel pulled back against the wall. He'd been too tired to rise, too tired to do anything but crawl toward the girl.

Tacenda's song washed through the room, an incongruously—almost *impossibly*—joyful sound. It was not a song one expected in a crypt or on a night spent fleeing ghosts.

The geists stood mesmerized before this strange, almost forgotten emotion. Their master, Tacenda's sister, turned her head and closed her eyes—as if confronted by a sudden unbearable light, though Davriel saw no such thing.

The faces of the geists began to melt. Or...no, they began to *unmelt*. Quiverings ceased. Distortions reversed. Hollow eyes blinked with awareness, and mouths shrank from gaping maws into cautious smiles. All around him, terrors of the night became washwomen, farmers, smiths, and children.

Never in his life had he been so happy to see a group of peasants.

That song filled the chamber. It made stones rattle like percussion. It thrummed through Davriel, a jubilant, elated melody. He found himself standing up, his fatigue lost before that amazing, *exultant* sound.

Willia, however, growled. She seemed to visibly shake as she howled in anger, scrambling forward, losing all semblance of control. She reached toward her sister, as if to grab Tacenda and strangle her—or pull the power by force from her.

No you don't, Davriel thought, pointing at her and summoning the last remnants of a fading spell inside his mind. The inkspell.

With it, he painted Willia's eyes black.

She screamed immediately, stumbling and falling to the ground. "The darkness? No, I banished you!" She trembled, holding out her hands, unable to see them. "The second darkness..."

Hellfire. Tacenda's song overwhelmed Willia's mournful cries. The tune was so blasted optimistic, it made him want to dance. *Him*. Davriel resisted the urge as the song infused the catacombs. Crypts vibrated with the enthusiastic, eager tune, and even the bones seemed to be rattling with excitement.

The geists began to walk toward Tacenda, pulsing with a green light that was somehow more *alive* than the sickly glow they'd expressed earlier. One by one, they merged into Tacenda, their light adding to one that grew around her. Dozens upon dozens of them walked into the room, moving with increased speed, joining that pulsing light.

Until at last, Tacenda stood alone above the cowering form of her sister.

"I don't understand," Willia said, clawing at her face, trying to make herself see. "What happened to the geists?"

"They remembered who they were," Tacenda said.

"That song," Willia looked up. "I remember that song. Tacenda...I just want to escape the darkness."

"I know. But you shouldn't have done so by banishing it to everyone around you." Tacenda reached out and touched her sister. "I'm sorry. But for you, Willia, there must be a third darkness."

Tacenda pushed her sister lightly, and Willia's body fell backward, then a puff of light emerged from her. A soul, sickly and green. It distorted, then quietly vanished, fading away.

As soon as Willia died, a second—far more powerful—green light burst from her corpse and streamed into Tacenda. Tacenda tipped her head back, eyes opening wide, as the light encompassed her.

This is your final chance, the Entity said inside Davriel. She will be overcome by the power for a short time, and your talent gives you an ideal opportunity. Reach out and take her power, Davriel. You could still have us both!

The Entity was right. By instinct, Davriel reached out—and he found that the completed power of the Bog was settling within Tacenda. It didn't rebuff him as it had before. For the moment, it was as confused as she was.

He could take it. In that moment, he saw himself as the bearer of both Entities. He'd become a being with unrivaled strength. He saw kingdoms bending to his will. He saw himself with power over fate, over destiny, over millions of lives.

Such power! Such *incredible* power!

And such misery. Broken bodies as far as the eye could see. He saw himself as that terrible man, sitting upon a harsh throne. He saw himself forced to destroy rival after rival.

No time to rest. No time for fiddling with word puzzles. No quiet nights spent reading while Miss Highwater tried to figure out how to cook human food.

Davriel Cane was no hero. But he knew what he wanted from life. He'd discovered that truth after terrible personal experience.

He would *not* become that man again. And so he withdrew his hand, and left the power alone.

§

Tacenda's sight returned.

She gasped as light blossomed inside her. A wonderful, pure verdant light—a light that seemed so powerful as to shine through stones as if they were paper.

You have been chosen, a voice said in her mind. And you have done well.

Tacenda fell to her knees before the power, which somehow she already knew intimately. This power that had created her and given her purpose. The power they'd called the Bog. The secret of the Approaches.

Her destiny.

"You..." she whispered. "You were in all of us. Everyone in the Approaches. But strongest in my sister and me. An accident, splitting between us?"

No. I often seek the strongest host, the Entity said. Though once the priory began to siphon away my power, I had to accelerate the process.

The light grew, consuming all that she saw. Her soul vibrated with the pure beauty of its song. And within the Entity, she saw the souls of thousands who had been nurtured here in the Approaches. The Entity, seeding its power among them, letting it grow with their souls, then reclaiming it again—enhanced and aged—when the people died.

"My sister," she said. "Can we restore her? Can we make things go back...back to the way they were before?"

No. Your sister's choices changed her, and those around her, forever. That is life, and growth.

"I don't like it," Tacenda said. "I rediscovered the Song of Joy. Shouldn't that make things better?"

Different, yes. But 'better' is a matter of human perception. Regardless, I will not force you to bear me. If you wish to release me to another, you may do so. Or, in turn, you can keep me—and use my strength as your power.

"What...what will that do to me?" she asked. "Will I become evil, like Willia became?"

That depends on your choices. But you cannot go back to being what you were, either way. You can return to your village without me, and be forever changed. Or you can take me. And be forever changed.

For only the dead ever stop changing.

Tacenda wavered, then settled on a decision.

I will bear this power.

Perspective slammed into her like the weight of a mountain. She saw...saw *worlds*. Hundreds upon hundreds of them. So *many people*.

Power permeated her. She knew, instantly, the generations who had lived in the Approaches. Memories of the ages, the essence of all those who had come before. She gasped beneath the weight of it, becoming one person with ten thousand souls.

And then...she let some go. The Entity didn't like it, but she was its master. She would not keep the souls of those who could still live. She gave back Jorgo and his family. Dakna the schoolteacher. Miller Hedvika. Rom and the priests. Every person whose body still lived, waiting for the spirit to return.

That didn't include her parents, who had no bodies to which they could return. Those souls snuggled in against her own, warm and soft. But not her sister's soul. Tacenda had recovered the power she held, but poor Willia...she was just gone.

Tacenda's glow expanded. She *was* the power, the souls. The Entity of the Bog, Tacenda of Verlasen, and a thousand others all at once.

Tacenda turned, looking at the poor corpse in the prison, its wings nailed to the wall. "I saw the Angel's soul. I touched it."

I know nothing of this, the Entity said. *I do not think it possible.*

Yet it was true. She was a child of two worlds, two gods, two ideals. As she considered it, something deep within her exploded, awakening at the power.

Wait.

She stepped up to Davriel, who was actually looking haggard. She reached and touched the side of his face.

"Thank you," she said, her voice overlapping to her own ears as if a thousand people had said it. Then she stabbed her power into his head and withdrew the small piece of her strength he had taken from her earlier in the night. "But *never* try to reach inside my mind again."

Then—complete for the first time in her life—Tacenda vanished.

To Davriel, headaches were a familial kind of pain.

The kind of pain a family member could inflict. The kind of pain that you had known for so long, you sometimes welcomed it because you recognized it so well. The kind of pain you almost mistook for something else entirely.

He settled down in the prioress's chair, behind her desk, sighing and holding his cup of tea. He worked a little further on the contract before him, written in demonic script—but that headache *did* make it difficult.

Why can't you fix headaches again? he asked the Entity.

It didn't respond.

Still sulking? he asked. *Because I didn't take the power?*

Contemplating, it said softly. *I had always assumed that someday you would awaken. I've been forced to see that might not be the case. You are not worthy of me, and never were.*

Don't be like that, Davriel replied. *Think how jealous you'd have been with another Entity dividing my attention.*

You have failed greatly, Davriel Cane, it said. *You will know the cost of this day. You will curse yourself when that which you love burns, not because you had too much power. But because you lacked the strength to stop your enemies.*

Davriel shivered. There was something about the way the Entity spoke...a hostility he had never known from it before.

They will come for you, the Entity warned. *Those who search for you will hear what has happened here. You have just ensured you will never, ever be able to hide again.*

It fell silent. Davriel sighed softly, then took a sip of his tea. For the moment—that deliciously floral taste in his mouth—he didn't really care about the Entity. He gladly felt the tea soothing him. It always had helped with the headaches.

On the floor in front of the desk, a body stirred. The prioress blinked open her eyes. Elsewhere in the priory, Davriel heard calls as the other priests started to wake up. The girl had restored their souls before leaving—he'd ascertained that when he'd found the prioress breathing—but it seemed that it took a little while for their bodies to recover.

The prioress sat up, putting her hand to her head. She looked up and frowned, noticing Davriel at her desk.

"You lied to me, Merlinde," Davriel said softly. "You have kept terrible secrets from me."

“I...”

He held up the tea. “I found an *entire* tin of Verlasen dustwillow in your cupboard,” he said. “I expect you to explain yourself posthaste.”

She frowned.

“Also,” Davriel noted, “there’s the small matter of a deific angel kept locked in your catacombs—an angel who was slowly siphoning power away from the Bog, building a crescendo of untapped strength that begged for some foolish mortal to abuse it. But really, let’s keep our attention on the serious problems. You *explicitly* told me you were out of tea.”

She pulled herself to her feet and glanced out the window at the risen sun. “What happened?”

“Hmm?” Davriel said, sipping the tea. “Oh. Willia Verlasen killed her parents by accident, after reclaiming the power locked in the catacombs. She returned here, intending to confess—then lost her faith when she found out you’d murdered her god. She instead began gathering the power of the Bog and, enthralled by its promises, started to pull the souls out of the people of Verlasen.”

“Hellfire,” the prioress muttered. “Young Willia? Are you sure?”

“Well, the first few times she tried to kill me last night, I was a little uncertain. But when she actively commanded an army of geists to rip my soul from my body, the truth finally dawned on me.” He sipped his tea. “I stopped her, by the way. You’re welcome.”

“It was your duty,” she said. “As Lord of the Approaches.”

“I really should have read the entire contract,” Davriel said. “Where was the part about cleaning up your messes? Right after the articles of caveat emptor, I assume?”

She didn’t reply, instead standing in the sunlight and closing her eyes, then letting out a long sigh.

Davriel rested his fingers on a sword he’d placed on the desk—long, curved, and wicked. Poor Crunchgnar. Was it strange that Davriel was going to *miss* the sour fool? He’d never find another demon who was that fun to tease.

“We will need to prepare,” Davriel said, sipping his tea. “After the events of last night and this morning, we may see an increase in...inquiries after me. Ones we will not find easy to turn aside.”

She glanced at him.

“I am still rather put out to find a dead god in your basement, Merlinde.”

“She wasn’t our god,” the prioress said. “Any more than the Bog was. She was our burden. Both were.”

“Well, now they’re someone else’s burden,” Davriel said. “Poor girl.”

“What do you mean?” the prioress asked, turning. Then she paled, looking at what he’d been writing. “Have you been profaning my priory with demonic magic, Cane? How dare you—”

He looked up, pointing his pen at her. “Don’t even start. Just *don’t*. Besides, this is barely magic. It’s more a legal document encouraging the dark forces, reminding them that there is one being most likely to win my soul above all others.”

Hopefully. Almost, he would pray to that dead angel, if he thought it would help.

Please...

His heart leaped as he heard a group of startled screams echoing from below. He jumped to his feet, tucking a bundle under his arm and pushing out into the hallway. The prioress followed as he dashed down the steps, following the shouts, and entered the catacombs.

He quickly walked to the small chamber where the Seelenstone had once been kept. Several young priests were in the room, screaming in fear—likely they’d been trying to find a way to put the trinket back together. If so, they had been interrupted by a dark figure forming from smoke in front of them.

Davriel quickly took off his cloak, and settled it on the dark form as it took shape. It wasn’t entirely covering, however, and so the prioress gasped as Miss Highwater appeared. One of the priests actually fainted.

“Don’t gawk,” Davriel said to the others. “It only encourages her.”

The demon caught his eye, then smiled.

Relief flooded through him. It was *her* smile. He’d been half afraid a new creature would be created to fulfill the instructions he’d written.

“Did we win?” she asked him.

“Honestly, I’m not sure,” Davriel replied. “My peasants are back, but our little musician girl absconded with an ancient and incalculably valuable power.”

Miss Highwater, true to form, held out her hand expectantly. He smiled, then unwrapped her ledger from the bundle of clothing he was holding and handed it to her.

She eyed the priests, who were trying to inch out of the room. The prioress, showing good sense, had folded her arms but didn’t appear like she was going to make any demands of him.

“Only one fainted,” Miss Highwater muttered. “I really am losing my touch, aren’t I? And you. You let the girl *get away* with the power of the Bog? Really?”

“I was busy mourning Crunchgnar’s untimely demise.”

“You sap,” she said, flipping through her ledger and the notes at the back. “Joke all you want, but I know you’re going to miss him. Anything else I should know?”

“The priests were hiding an angel. They locked her up when she went mad—then made poor Rom slit her throat.”

“Cute,” she said. “And I’m supposed to be the demon.”

“They might be in the market for a new object of worship,” Davriel said. “You could apply.”

“What do you suppose their policy is on nudity?”

“I’d guess somewhere between ‘Hell no’ and ‘Oh, angels above, my brain is melting.’ But remember, they do have nice hats.”

She chuckled. “I’ll pass. I believe I still have an unfulfilled contract with a certain willful diabolist. As for Tacenda, I suppose I’ll need to track her down. Really, Dav. How did you let her filch that power from you?”

“Perhaps I just didn’t want it.”

Miss Highwater snapped her ledger closed, narrowing her eyes at him.

“Tacenda really did deserve the Entity,” he said. “She did most of the work—singing and reclaiming the souls of the villagers. You should have seen her. It was very heroic.”

“You don’t believe in heroism.”

“Nonsense,” he said. “I absolutely accept that it is an attribute others believe they possess. As for Miss Verlasen, well, the truth is that I needed to prove a point.”

“By doing nothing?”

“Nothing is the very thing to which I am best suited.” He held out his arm to her, and she took it. “Come. Do you think we can expect the peasants to get back to the harvest today? They’ve spent an entire day dead, so they should be well rested, and I appear to be down to a single tin of tea...”

END

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