

HORN & DAGGER

BY

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DEDICATION

To my Holy Trinity: Gabi, Skye and Trinity, always dreaming, always believing.

HORN & DAGGER

REFLECTION

THIS IS YOUR home—the land unto which you were born. You lived here long before it had either a name or a purpose. It was magical then as it is today, but now it has a name—Erebos—and a village called Gull. In contrast to those times, commerce, tourism, insanity, poverty, and darkness now litter your doorstep.

It started with the one they called the Seer. The island beckoned to him across the water, infecting his dreams and driving him on a quest to discover the genesis of the summons. Once here, that same energy compelled him to explore every inch of the island in search of magic and the answers to life's imponderable questions. Through his explorations, he uncovered so much more and became so much more in turn. You met him when you were still naïve, with no comprehension of the paradoxical human capacity for actions of extreme beauty and horror. But the Seer became your friend—your worshipper. He learned to harness your magical energy and that of the island's flora and fauna, utilizing these to increase his spiritual awareness. You, he, and the island became one, living in peace and harmony with all.

You know the origins of the island's magical energy. You were here when the ancients came but you know not of their goal. One day they flew over the island in their black machine and landed on the west side of the island. The machine changed the vibration of the air, modifying its frequency which changed everything. They came, seeding the earth with their blood, and then mysteriously vanished, leaving only their black flying machine and the mushrooms that spawned from their spilt blood behind.

You and the other horses began to eat of this new flora. You felt a change within you—one even more powerful than the energy generated by the amplified vibrations of the machine. These new plants awoken a light within you but they bring only darkness to your brethren. You can only watch as they die, lost to shadow. Then, you are alone, and your family and friends, dead; but not you—you are special. Although you don't know what makes you special, a transformation has begun, making you into something new. Until the Seer comes you are alone, with only the voices of the machine and the island to keep you company. At times you wonder if it would have been better if you had died.

After the Seer made his home here, others came in pursuit of one legendary thing or another. They were called by the dark trail of energy that reached out to them over water and earth, through thoughts and dreams. They formed villages and systems of rules, cults, and traditions. Seekers came in search of enlightenment or to become students of the Seer. These followers gave rise to a group of monastic mystics who sought to control and balance the dark and light energies. They developed systems of sorcery, marital arts, and psychic control. They named themselves the Order of Kur. When the Seer saw that a bastardization of his teachings had given rise to a monastic order with rules and levels, he moved away, henceforth to be known only as, the Hermit.

Others came in search of you, the legendary unicorn, hoping to catch even a glimpse of the beautiful mystical creature of lore.

You hid from such prying eyes, for your power was in mystery, which inspired awe. When they tired of the hunt, they turned their gaze to the mystics and chose to remain on Erebos, not to simply gawp at their abilities but rather to participate in a spiritual symbiotic relationship with them. These visitors built the town called Gull, whose citizens cared for the physical needs of the monks in the same way the monks cared for the spiritual wellbeing of Gull and the island of Erebos. As the Order of Kur grew, people came to observe their daily rituals and martial arts practice as if they were circus performers exhibiting their superhuman feats for mere entertainment.

At some point, the monks discovered the Norja. You had been eating this dark-skinned mushroom for centuries—eating and then fertilizing, spreading, and enriching. Over the years, many monks died from the deadly poison of the mushroom; however, this did not remove its allure but rather served only to spur it. You watched in fascination as a new group of dark mystics formed—mystics completely devoted to the dark properties of the Norja. They dwelled in the shadows seeking its dark revelation.

As more and more intrepid visitors came, the Gullians then searched for new areas of commerce and soon discovered the rich fungal ecosystem of the island. Gull's culinary delights, based almost entirely on mushrooms, originally brought the ships, trade, restaurants, and cafés to the island. This was done with the objective of sharing something unique from their home that embodies the spirit of nationalistic pride. Initially, there had been no profit motive but rather only a desire to enrich the lives of others. There were many species of mushroom that could be found only on Erebos, each with unique flavors and properties. The Ireلاك brought about a feeling of peace having a mellow taste with soft undertones of earth. The Crenalia, with its distinctive crimson cap, was said to bring elation and was often taken as an aphrodisiac, its rich earthy tang tied to Gaia, the Earth Mother. Gullians wanted only to live in harmony with the island, with others, and with you, the Lady of Erebos.

Then came the arrival of one whom would influence the social, economic, and spiritual course of Erebos. At first, he was not called the Engineer but was simply a man in search of himself, finding his home on Erebos like so many of the lost wanderers. Unlike his fellow Gullians, however, it was power and control that obsessed him and that changed everything. Suddenly, there was a government, as well as electricity, science, and technology. Mushroom gatherers and eateries expected to make a profit and sold their products for as much as the market would bear. Then, the man that would soon become known as the Engineer discovered memory glass—your magical excretions, used to fertilize the Norja with nutrients and the inhabitants of Erebos with happy dreams—which he began to form into trinkets that could be sold in the markets of Gull. In doing this, the Engineer saw profit before he ever understood its splendor or magic.

Then, he built his lab in the swamp, followed closely by the strange power plant whose noxious chemical reactions had created the Waste. Finally, he had added his technology to the black machine the ancients had abandoned. Standing in the center of Gull, this black tower cast its shadow over the cafés, shops, and citizens. The Engineer's manipulations were meant to create a false sense of contentment based on the illusions it proliferated, some of which were amplifications of your magic. When that failed to garner him further control, he then resorted to the amplification of the Norja energy of fear and terror.

Just like that your world was changed. It was no longer a land devoted to magic and mystery and instead became a world that exposed its magic only to have someone exploit and rape it. Regardless of the Engineer's intent, you felt violated. Tourists came in droves to see the monastery, the monks, eat mushrooms, sip Irelak tea, breath the air, purchase memory glass or magic mushrooms, and hear the strange music that came from the tower at dusk. Though the spiritual pioneers in search of you or the dark epiphany of the Norja still come, they are outnumbered by the thousands of unobservant sheep—they

never found you, but some found death or the darker revelation of insanity.

Most natives would not sell Norja as there was a taboo associated with such sale, for it was toxic and every visitor knew of its lore and was warned of its deadliness. However, that did not stop everyone. There was a black market for Norja, and a contingent of unscrupulous dealers that would sell the deadly poison to those who dared to believe they could overcome it somehow. Of course, no matter where you went there was always someone who would try to capitalize on a resource that should have either not been sold or was meant to be given freely to all. The Norja was such a thing—it was spirit food and could only be ingested by those that had the knowledge to direct its poison into the spiritual dimension, or by those who knew the alchemical process of transmuting it into something that could bring revelation without death, a technique the dark monks, the Norjans, had mastered. But it was also said, and you know it to be true, that all the mushrooms on Gull were linked with the Norja, and that every mushroom—whether sold, eaten, or sipped—contained a hint of its dark magic. That was Gull's allure, but Erebos was dying, together with you and the Norja.

Then, a prodigal son was born who, it was prophesized, would one day become the Shadow Monk of the Order of Kur. The monks had identified him as the one that embodied a powerful spiritual energy that could balance the forces of light and darkness. The Order raised and trained him at the monastery, but he questioned everything, wanted to know everything, and in his adolescence, sought out the Hermit, who later became his mentor and taught him arts that could not be learned through the monastic system of the Order. However, there was always one more mystery to reveal, so he began to ceaselessly look for you, adoring you before he ever saw you. Then, when he found you, you fell in love—an emotion you had never felt so completely before. You could become whatever he desired. He filled that gap you did not even know you had until he filled it. That hole had been born of loss, loneliness, and fear,

but suddenly it felt like there was magic in the world again, pure magic.

Then he left, and you know why. He wanted to experience what was outside, yet another mystery waiting to be explored and understood. When he left, you felt that gap, that gap that has become both a hole in your heart and in your being.

The ancients had seeded Ereobs with revelation, the potential for evolution, but it was now out of balance. You used your magic to try and maintain it but soon became tired. Darkness began to quickly spread like the infected cells of a cancer and you no longer had the power to keep it at bay. Without help, it would consume Erebos and perhaps even the world itself.

You called out to him, expressing your fear and needs. And now he is coming back. Now he is here. Now the end begins.

Absent Sun

THE MONK'S RETURN during a solar eclipse felt like providence, as if the primary forces of light and darkness were aligning to honor the event. Although the Monk could derive, expostulate, and examine so many layers of irony, subtext, and metaphor around such synchronicity, he chose to keep it relatively simple for a change. To him, the sun represented knowledge, and the moon a disk of uncertainty, paranoia, and delusion, which had covered the sun to create an unnatural night. The event opened a small window in which the two worlds were married and then quickly divorced. The daylight world was unexpectedly pitched into darkness, the mysteries of both worlds now revealed and unveiled to the other. Sunflowers exposed their petals to the hungry dark, while mushrooms, caught with their caps exposed, withered in the sight of the sun's winking rays when it reappeared after only a momentary absence. This was fortuitous, for he was the embodiment of such a paradox, the Shadow Monk, the dark uncertainty that would reveal the light.

His blue eyes were directed up toward the black disk, nuclear bursts sparking and pulsing around it with tendrils of blazing white light. The spectacle enthralled him and he had to force

himself to turn away, knowing that to stare any longer would blind him. The celestial afterimage burned his retinas, the ghost image strobing behind closed lids. The eclipse was auspicious, for he knew the magic of Erebos was opaque in the light of day, its veil of illusions difficult to pierce. The shadows stripped away the thin deceitful veneer of pleasantry and social conformity, thus revealing the dreaded horror that lay beneath. People tended to believe what could be examined beneath the revealing glare of sunlight, convinced that the truths it revealed were “more” true, and perhaps more real than those glimpsed in the transforming shadows. This was the enigma of Erebos. It reminded him of the mantras engrained in his head during his training as a monk. The words tumbled through his mind.

*Revelation is the illusion I create
 With the openness of my mind
 With the silence of my will
 With the passion of my heart
 Revelation is the illusion I perceive*

Turning his gaze to the village of Gull, the Monk was reminded that its inhabitants also shared in this illusory spirit of optimism, believing that what occurred in the daylight was pure and good. Visiting the outer world had armed him with knowledge that altered his perception and pierced through Erebos’s layers of illusion. There was magic here, true magic, but it was employed as a farce. This astronomic juxtaposition, where day was flung into darkness by celestial events, had thrown off this perceived balance, opening a doorway between these worlds for a brief period and allowing those brave enough to gaze through it to enumerate the enigmas and epiphanies of the dark. Few were this courageous but there were some. As he stood in thrall of these dark revelations, another mantra was released.

*Darkness is the illusion I create
 With the closing of my mind
 With the prejudice of my will
 With the hardening of my heart*

Darkness is the illusion I perceive

The small wooden rowboat shook as he sat back down on the crossbeam. The hull splashed against the water. Ripples streaked across the inky darkness of the sea, the island and its trees rose in a fuzzy gray haze from the black. Rising far above the trees at the center of Gull stood the black tower, its pyramid shaped cap piercing the dark disk of the moon like a spear threatening to obliterate or impregnate it as it passes over the sun. Time was ticking, the sun moving in one direction, the moon the other, their love affair ending in a sliver of white light that temporarily blinded him. Death's scythe flashed across his eyes, a blazing crescent that flies outward across the island, setting the landscape ablaze with silver light as it passes. For a moment, the fantasy came to light as Gull transformed itself into the gleaming citadel, which tourists flocked to in droves. Couples held hands as they skipped merrily down the docks, rushing to get to the Engineer's shop to purchase memory glass, or sit on a stool at a café sipping mugs filled with the earthy, alkaline-tasting Irelek mushroom tea. Getting their fill of the quaint and surreal, they would walk towards the safety of their ship with the euphoria of the tea still swirling in their heads, the purchased memory glass capturing a moment of magic, and the smiling happy Gullians waving their friendly goodbyes. Peace would overtake them and they would turn to each other, smile, and remark that this was such a wonderfully beautiful place. They would vow to return and explore but they never would. The dark energy that they had only a nebulous awareness of during their stay would fill their sleeping minds with nightmares for weeks afterward, and then Erebos would be forgotten as it always had been, as it must be.

Another moment passed as a hot, white light exploded, transforming the ink sea into a brilliant turquoise by the sun's glare. A lush forest of green pines, cedars, and spruce covered the green mountains. It was idyllic. It was a lie.

The Monk sighed, contemplating the illusion, the truth. He was returning as the prodigal son and the shadow, sun and

moon, night and day, darkness and light, a paradox, an aberration.

He navigated the rotting, leaking craft the last hundred yards over the dark water into a hidden alcove. The pines bowed, their trunks stretching out over the water, their thick canopy of needles creating a pocket of darkness that served to hide his re-entry to Erebos. As the Shadow Monk, he would be recognized by all of Gull's inhabitants, which was something he wanted to avoid, at least for now. Too many reactions were possible: sadness, fear, violence or even worse, indifference. He did not know of any Gullian Citizens that had left the island, let alone returned. The fact that he was also a monk and the first and only Shadow Monk placed him in an elite class that he was certain there was no equivalent for. Therefore, he had no barometer to gauge how such a return could be viewed as either a good or a bad omen, or if it could incite violence or hope. Only time would tell, but now was not the time.

His plan was to secretly make his way to the monastery. If still vacant, he could return to his old cell and think about his next move. Being here had a way of changing his resolve, of obscuring his mind with its magic and wonders. Later, however, the shadows would lengthen with the coming of evening and the true force of Erebos would be revealed. The wonders of the dark would begin to take hold, and at dusk, the forces of dark and light would continue their eternal struggle and he would sit and meditate within the confrontational balance of the moment. This is what he had always done when searching for peace. It was what had brought him to the realization that he must leave Erebos if he were ever to be whole. It would be what he did to try to understand what would make Erebos whole again. Erebos, his home, his cage.

He stripped, taking off his jeans, t-shirt, and sneakers, placing them on the floor of the rowboat. His gaze lingered on the block of plastic and silicon technology that he had become so addicted to, watching videos, listening to music, texting, tweeting all the while the device was stealing his soul as he walked zombie-like

down concrete pathways, faces and forms just a blur that haloed around the top of the screen. The block slipped out from the pocket of his discarded jeans and splashed into the thin layer of water forming at the bottom of the boat. Already he had said goodbye and good riddance and gave the drowned item a fierce look of disgust. He took the black robe from a plastic bag and pulled it over his head, drew the itchy cowl over his skull, and tied a golden threaded rope around his waist, synching it with a figure-eight knot. The tying was a ritual, calming his mind, as he spoke one line of the 8th level mantra for each twist and pull until the knot was done.

*Reality is the Illusion I create
With the insanity of my mind
With the separation by my will
With the force of my body
Reality is the illusion I perceive*

He donned his worn sandals, thick soled with a thong running along the inside of his big toes, the heel flapping as he walked across the sand.

He took a deep breath, the weight of the moment compressing his lungs, holding him in stasis. He then became acutely aware of the thick heaviness of the robes, the tightness of the rope around his waist, and the sandy soil feathering over his feet as a balmy breeze blew over him from the sea. Darkness seemed to coalesce around him, and even in the light of day, he looked like an ink blot on a white page, a dark soul in a gleaming heaven. Everything he wore had been fabricated on the island from the materials gathered from it. He had crafted them himself—they were of the island just as he was—there was no escaping that. And with one deep breath, inhaling the sweet air, he knew it to be true. He belonged to it and it to him.

The robes made him hot and itchy. It had been years since he had worn them and his smooth civilized skin was not used to rough fabrics or the rigors of a monk's life. He knew he would get used to it, but was amazed to find that his 13th level training had not immediately shut off his sensitivity automatically—the

fabric alighting neurons whose signals should never have reached the level of conscious awareness, and certainly not agitation.

Now clothed, he bent over the boat and retrieved the only other possession he had brought with him—the one thing that would stay with him, in one form or another, until the end. It too had been crafted in Erebos and was stitched together with the spiritual fabric of the island. It too was returning. The object seemed to congeal and take form as he touched it, knitting itself based on his perception and expectation. Years of patient painstaking work had gone into crafting it. It was a hybrid, a chimera, born here, molded and shaped abroad, retaining pieces of both worlds. It was the tool that would carry out his plan and the culmination of all his desires.

He used the wand as a walking stick. To craft it he had pulled an acacia sapling from the ground, ensuring that the roots stayed intact. The roots were wound around a globe of black, gleaming metal that flashed silver before turning to dark tar, shifting in the light. He felt its black power running down the shaft of the stick into his hands, humming against his skin, shaking his bones. It was a small chunk of material from the tower, a remnant of the dark power of the ancient inhabitants of Erebos.

Turning around, he gazed out to the sea, lost to his daydreams and memories, time had slipped away and evening was approaching, with the sun setting below the sea, one last sliver of red-gold brilliance flashing across the water. He turned again, the summit of the mountains awash in red, orange, and purple light, while a dark blackness spread outward from their base. He felt a shift and turned to the sea once again. It had become a black solid surface with a single tunnel of light pulsing towards him, the disk of light becoming a fire-worm that wriggled across the horizon.

Using the staff, he pushed the boat out into the ocean, the last vestiges of another life floating away with it. With that, he turned to face his destiny. His shadow lengthened in the hazy afterglow of the sunset. His shadow did not depend upon light—

it was ever-present, and as it should, it pointed in the direction of his path, which at this moment was north-east.

He skirted the edge of town, taking only a momentary glance down Main Street, nothing had changed but it all looked so new somehow. The cobbled streets, the antique stone buildings each a different shape and architectural style that would give rise to a vision of chaos everywhere but here, where the eclectic style felt right, with Florentine arches winding to Roman columns, then to the colonial stone face of a general store. Magic was woven into each piece of brick or stone which was either formed or quarried under ceremony and etched with a sacred sigil that would never again see the light of day once set. Magic was the hidden foundation of the village. Copper trim gleamed in the rays of the setting sun twinkling gold in his vision.

At the center of the village was the tower. The dying rays of the fire-worm's light flickered upon it; its dark polished stone gleamed like hematite. The light then changed, or maybe the tower did, as the light penetrated the black stone and filled it with a fiery light, a red and gold flame blazing within the village square. It was a beautiful and amazing sight. The tower was the focal point of the town and one of the main tourist attractions, rivaling even the draw of memory glass and mushrooms.

It has been so long and it was not until seeing it again that he realized how much he had longed to see it and how there had been an emptiness inside of him that only the tower could fill. Now that he was in its presence, he could only wonder how he had not noticed the void before. He longed to hear the Erebus Anthem as it tolled in the darkness, a wonder far beyond even the beauty of its structure and architecture. However, he wanted to be away before he grew lost to the illusions and before the town and its wares turned his mind, thus leading him to forget his purpose. It had captivated him in the past and whispered promises it never kept, but that had not prevented him from falling under its spell. But now he was the Shadow Monk, and now that spell could only entice, it could not twist his mind from his purpose. That was the secret he carried. The moment he

pierced the 13th Gate he had known it all—the secrets, the lies, and the beautiful truth.

Moments ticked by, trapped by his reverie as the world continued its transformation from golden fire to gray, twilight settling in, the gleam turning to the undifferentiated hazy soup of dusk as tourists and citizens alike began to amble towards the tower in anticipation of the Anthem. Arms hung at their sides, eyes wide but blank, mouths hung agape, the spell of night was beginning to infiltrate their minds as they waited for the tower to sing.

The Monk turned away from the crowd, crossed a back alley and came to a dirt path that wound its way between the dark pines and cedar trees which would lead him to the monastery etched within the granite peak of Mount Arach to the north-east. The shadows of the trees stretched across the path transformed into the sharp nails protruding from a witch's knobby fingers that clutched at him greedily, fingers expanding and contracting in the shifting blue-white light of the moon. He had been down this path and could identify every turn, and could perhaps even navigate it in utter darkness; however, there was something different now. There was an ominous quality to the shadows, the surreal landscape that had once whispered promise now growled a threat. Coldness began to creep into his body through his feet and up his legs, chilling his heart. The breath he took in froze his lungs. When was the last time he had experienced raw naked fear? The trial of the 13th? No, that had not been fear. That had been something completely other. A new vocabulary would have to be created to explain that experience. Then what?

He tried to target the source of his fear. Was it her? Was it her call? Even now, was she sniffing at his scent, exploring his heart, and calling him to her through the darkness? Had she been the one to call him here, or was that just delusion, justification? The outside world had had a way of making him forget Erebos, Gull, the Engineer, the Order of Kur, and the Lady. In that other world, this had all become a dream—a fantasy he

had created in his mind. Slowly, his memory of it began to dissipate as if it were smoke. Then, he heard a whisper deep in his mind and it had all come flooding back in a torrent of memory and emotion. In that instant, he knew he had to return.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, felt the warm air rush into his lungs and remembered his training, acknowledging that he was the Shadow Monk in every part of his mind and body.

*Life is the illusion I create
With the projections of my mind
With the desires of my heart
With the actions of my body
Life is the illusion I perceive*

He removed his sandals and held them in his right hand, breathing deeply. Before opening his eyes, he pushed a command to his retinas to hyper-stimulate the rod cells in his eyes. He could feel the neurons firing in his mind, which then moved to his eyes as his biology obeyed, as it must. Slowly, he opened his eyes. The trail transformed into a bolt of white lightning in front of him, clear to his elevated vision. In the distance, he could hear the drone of the Erebos Anthem. The minor keys wormed into his ears, infecting him with its dark virus, squirming through the narrow hallways in the recesses of his mind. He shook his head as if attempting to dislodge them and then took off at a run into the darkness of the woods. The sound waves of the Anthem crashed against his back, the cool air laced with the fragrance of pine and cedar caressed his face, one driving, the other calling. He felt at one with these conflicting sensations—at one with Erebos.

Shadows flashed past him. He could feel the drum of his heart and the joy of adrenaline. The pine needles covering the path caressed his feet. The Anthem was ending, the final ring rolling through the trees. The wave of that final gong caught up with him, flowing over him like water. He pressed further, telling his heart to pump faster, his adrenals to spill more chemicals into his blood, and his muscles to fire more quickly. He swam with the wave, caught in its relative timelessness. No matter

how fast he traveled it felt like an eternity as he was caught within the stasis of motion, like two beings traveling at speed but appearing to each other as if at rest. It was an ecstatic moment. As he allowed the wave to overtake him, the gong rang in his ears. The wave passed him and he chased it, watching it spill against the rough stone steps that led up to the monastery.

He came to a halt at the foot of the steps and slowed his body down, his heart, his breathing, and the frenetic pulse of his nervous system. Then, he pushed the lactic acid from his muscles. It had been a long time since he had exhibited such a level of control over his biochemistry. It felt as if he was remembering himself, finding his true home back within his skin. It felt wonderful.

Gazing up the steps, however, he sighed, remembering all the torturous trips to and from the monastery over the years. The pain of those journeys had been hell before he had learned to control the reactions of his body. Even now, their ominous presence had a way of dampening his mood, stripping away his confidence. His eyes surveyed the twisted jagged path up the mountain while his mind projected the anticipated pain through his legs and feet. He cursed himself a fool, thinking of his mad dash through the woods while he raced sound waves. He had done too much at once, and doubted he would be able to clear his mind enough to take those steps without experiencing the physical consequence. He could already feel the heaviness in his legs. He sighed, "So be it." Control would return. Maybe not tonight but soon. Besides, there were times when feeling that deep tired muscle soreness was good, because it would allow him to sleep deeply, without dreams, without heartrending thoughts of her.

The ancient steps were etched in the hard granite stone of the mountain. They were steep and uneven, winding around crags and boulders, while other areas were completely exposed to the face with no handrails or edges. One wrong step could pitch you over a precipice to your death. The mountain's peak was at 9,000 feet where the steps became narrow, winding, and

treacherous. The heaviness in his legs spread as he calculated the energy it would take to reach the top.

After only a few dozen steps, he could feel the tightness in his chest, his labored breathing, and the acid forming in the muscles of his legs. He cursed himself for not having the ability to take things in stride. It had been over ten years since the last time he had climbed these steps; he had known what to expect, and yet, he had chosen to sprint to them through the forest, using his physical and psychic energy in one exertion. There would be consequences for his mind if he tried to push the pain away by raising the level of some specific body chemicals, so he resorted to another ancient technique the monks had taught him—he began a mantra. Lift, place, push... left leg, lift, place, push, repeat, don't look up, just look at the next step, lift ... The mantra freed his mind from resistance, and before long, his breathing became regular again as he reached the first bend. The steps narrowed and he became more careful about where he placed his foot. He tuned up the sensitivity of his eye cells again. Although it used a lot of psychic energy, he had to be able to see if he was going to get through this. The steps lit up with the aid of his augmented vision and the glare of the moon. He proceeded cautiously, taking up the mantra again. Some of the bends disappeared into caves and fissures in the rock; here, the steps were damp, and some even had a thin layer of slippery moss. He used the wand to balance himself, making sure he had at least two steady points stuck to the rock before taking his next step. He began to sweat.

Above him, he heard the gong of the evening prayer bell, which was followed by the low, resonant vibration of the watcher's horn. He had been seen. The horn was used to inform the monks that they had a visitor, who, in accordance with custom, needed to be greeted at the top of the steps. Visitors were rare, and given the hour, it may also have had the effect of acting as a foreboding warning.

With only a few hundred feet left to climb, he stopped repeating the mantra and immediately felt tired. He wanted to

devote all his senses to observe the atmosphere around him. Already, he heard the fluttering of robes as some of the monks began to gather at the balcony that jutted out from the cliff face and gave an overarching view of the last few hundred feet of steps. They would know who he was, but would they be afraid? Would they question him? What would they think? He suddenly became anxious. Emotions and feelings he thought he had said goodbye to all the way back when he had become a 10th degree were welling up. The insanity of the world outside the island had a way of provoking anxiety and worry, and once immersed in it, it also served to make him forget his training. Being back on the island and now at the monastery, he had assumed all his training would take hold instantaneously, as if being handed an old worn and familiar jacket that felt at home on his body. Instead, he felt as if he had been given a new formal creased starched shirt that felt stiff and scratched at his neck as he worked to break it in. The shirt would only become as comfortable as the jacket over time, and that process would be uncomfortable.

He raised his head, tilting his face to meet the sputtering light of his fellow monk's torches. Beneath the cowl, his features swam in the orange-red glow. Even with his features in flux, he saw the dawn of recognition in their widening eyes, lips parting slightly. He could hear their hearts flutter.

For the last few stairs, he leaned more heavily on the wand, and when he brought it down on the stone of the balcony with a crack, he observed that many of the monks took a flinching step backward. Eyes that had gazed upon him in remembrance and reverie were now filled with a mixture of fear and confusion. He did not believe they fully discerned what the wand was but they could feel its alchemical nature, its dark doom.

All wore their cowls over their heads as was the custom, but even those few features revealed by the amber glow were recognizable to him. They had no names, only degrees, with each face setting off a memory in his mind that was used as the catalog for that individual. That was something he had missed in the outside world, where everyone used names as a tag to

nothing but a collection of features that had no feelings behind them. To his right was a man with a crooked nose and a jagged scar down his cheek who had cradled him in his arms as he struggled against the stomach pains caused by ingesting the Norja. The familiar compassionate gray eyes of the monk that had held him down while another monk with dark almond colored eyes had set his broken leg, stared at him in the torchlight. At each face, there was a penultimate memory that was personal and profound. It was a frozen moment filled with a golden reverie that was so much better than a name. Gazing into each face, staring into each pair of eyes, he wondered what memory they had stored of him. Had it been at his best or his worst?

“Brother! Welcome back. Will you be staying with us?” The monk’s voice rolled like distant thunder. He was a 9th degree who had taught him the intricacies of neural and biochemical manipulation through deep meditation, ritual, and visualization.

The Shadow Monk nodded his head slowly. The monks rarely spoke and their sentences were always short. Verbal communication was seen as a symbol of separation. Communication should be empathic, communal, and a sharing of feeling and experience. The more verbal communication a monk used, the further he was from the ideal of silence and the abolition of separation. The 9th degree monk raised a hand and pointed to two of the 6th degree monks and curled his index finger twice before straightening it. Both took their direction to prepare the Shadow Monk’s cell. Another monk stepped forward. This one had been an 8th degree when he had accompanied him to the trial of the 13th Gate, ritually checking that his robes were properly pinned and zippered for the challenge. His icy blue eyes studied him, and the Shadow Monk could feel the loose perusal of his thoughts and knew that he was now a 10th degree at least. Then, he clearly saw the image of steaming food—charred squash and carrots atop a bed of leafy spinach—as a thick sauce with sautéed mushrooms slid across the surface of white fish meat. Next to it was a bowl filled with

Juas, a fermented drink of local fruit, mainly grapes and apples, with a syrupy maple sauce added to it. His mouth watered and his stomach rumbled. However, the Monk was not here for comfort or nostalgia. He replied by sending an image of the path along the ledges and a view of the Waste.

The monk nodded, bowed, and turned from him. The others followed suit, one after the other. A slow ritual bow to a higher-level monk was required by custom, followed by the stylistic turning, the monks' robes fluttering as they quickly made their way back to the main hall of the monastery.

The Shadow Monk, now alone, proceeded to a staircase hewn into the steep cliff face of Mount Arach. These stairs differed from those leading up to the monastery as they were barely more than hand and footholds, while a rusted chain hung along the steps acting as a railing and at times a rescue chord. A single slip or misplaced step could easily mean death. As the darkness did not make the journey easy, he removed his sandals so his bare feet could feel the edges of the steps to test his footing before placing all his weight on the narrow ledges. His muscles groaned, his feet ached, his head swam with pain, and his muscles cramped as they filled with more acid. Though he knew he should have waited, he just had to see. To remember.

*Pain is the illusion I create
With the beliefs of my mind
With the creations of my will
With the faith in my body
Pain is the illusion I perceive*

At the top of the climb was a ledge that traversed the mountain's face twenty feet from the summit, forming a scar across its hard granite brow, whose crest overhung the ledge, curling over his head like a crashing wave, shielding him from the sky, and enveloping him in a tunnel of darkness. From his vantage point, he could look out over the whole island, forest trees transformed to unappealing scrub in the darkening gray of dusk. He looked down over the monastery and could see the thatched square roof of the interconnected buildings, the open-

air walkways between some of the training areas, the meditation areas, and the numerous landings and passageways that curled around the mountain. He had walked all of these thousands of times and was sure his feet would recall the feel of every stone and crag present on their surfaces. To the north was the Waste, sulfurous smoke rising from black volcanic rock. The inhabitants of the Waste had been pushed there by insanity; their psyche's crumbling under the weight of the ceremony of the Norja that occurred during the monk and Norjan training. The Waste was where they fled, hoping to find safety or normalcy in isolation, forming a tribe of other like beings. It was difficult to determine, given the circumstances, whether this was by choice or necessity. Gullians called them Wastelanders because of where they lived. There was another term used to describe their physical transformations by the toxic environment of the Waste, mutie. It was considered by many to be a derogatory term but that did not stop it from being used.

On the fringes of the Waste was the swamp and the Engineer's lab. He did not allow his attention to dwell there and shook his head to chase the memories away; the thoughts and the anger they solicited were for later.

At the end of the ledge was nothing. There was a 2000-foot chasm between Mount Arach and the tubular shaped granite rock that rose 200 feet above its summit. This was Thrakkon, the highest place on Erebos. It was also the only place from which one could see the 13th Gate. There was a chain held in place by screws embedded into the rock face that traversed the gulf. To reach the top of Thrakkon, one would have to shimmy across the expanse by hanging onto the chain and then perform a difficult free ascent to the summit. He would not make the climb or the traverse to the adjoining peak tonight, but he intended to do so. He must, but later.

Gazing south-west, he saw the village of Gull. Its main square was packed with tourists as they were herded by whatever caught their eye. The tourists tumbled from their luxury cruise ships down the docks and into Gull, stopping to view the quaint

island town that was seemingly untouched by the trappings of a modern technological society.

With this quaintness came the curio shops that sold local oddities and trinkets. And then there was the Engineer's shop. The Engineer sold odd inventions—some just whimsical oddities, while some others contained a touch of real alchemy imbued with true Erebos magic, of which there were many varieties ranging from the pitch black to the blindingly white and the various shades of gray in-between. To most, the apparent pointlessness of these odd inventions sparked curiosity. For instance, the Engineer had produced a pair of glasses, which, on the surface, seemed to simply transform everything examined into photo negative, but if one looked closer, the glasses revealed the aura of the living objects it gazed upon. There was also a jewelry box that swallowed jewels into its bowls through wooden lips, which would only spit up these treasures when given a specific command that had to be uttered at the time of purchase.

Of course, the biggest draw was memory glass. There was rarely a visitor that would hop back onto the ship without acquiring at least a small shard of this expensive substance. Rumor, myth, whatever you wanted to call it, stated that the glass was created when the unicorn touched the sand with her horn. The Monk knew this was a lie, but it was a much better marketing story than the truth. Of course, tourists would be enticed to search for the lone unicorn, the Lady of Erebos, but none had ever seen her. Some told elaborate stories where they had been healed or enlightened when she had blessed them by touching them with her horn. These stories were enough to keep the legends alive and offer a continued draw to tourists and their attitudes, cell phones, and modern trappings. The tourist's techno-trinkets had taken on the allure of magic to the locals who had never left the island or seen such things. He knew these things to be in the same category as the trinkets the villagers sold; they only seemed important because the tourists seemed to think they were. Even though their smartphones received no

signal on the island, the tourists still had the compulsion to take them out and look at them, demonstrating their addiction to insanity and banality. What was even more ironic was that the tourists had been informed that Gullians would trade their wares for these devices, even though they would not work on the island. Thus, tourists would come with old phones using them as currency for the trinkets of Gull. Technical sorcery traded for old world wizardry; the trading of one illusory thing for another.

Having lived in both worlds and having the full knowledge of each, he could see beyond the forms of these objects and saw no differentiation between the two. They were just illusory toys with no intrinsic value, designed with a desire to lead one's focus from what was truly important. He mused upon these things as he watched the procession of tourists move towards the dock. With the Anthem over, they made last minute purchases and then shuffled off to the safety of their ship.

The more adventurous tourists would go down the dark alleys to explore the shadier spaces of Gull. Here, a number of engineers—those fluent in neurochemistry and local botany—would sell the other reigning commodity of Gull—Norja, which was a word used by the mushroom clan that meant “bringer of paranoia and revelation”. The Norja mushroom itself was deadly if eaten directly; however, the mushroom clan had found methods of mixing and cooking the Norja that made it usable as a powerful psychedelic. They supplied the monks and dealers with this mixture. Some of what was sold was the true Norjan mixture, while others sold Nefti or Havith, which were powerful psychedelics in their own right but did not have the profound dark power of the Norja. For those that wanted to truly experience the revelations of Erebos, only the true Norja would do.

The drug tended to bring about periods of both paranoia and enlightenment and had the ability to awaken the darkness in the psyche. All citizens of Gull, as a rite of passage, were expected to take the drug at least once during their life and journey into the dark forest for a night. In their reports, some experienced an

existential terror so complete that they were never the same afterward, while others swore they had met the Lady of Erebos and that she had revealed the secrets of the island and the universe to them when she touched them between the eyes with her horn. Erebos, as some others had revealed, was a black hole in the universe sucking down all the spiritual energy of the solar system into it.

Monks were required to take the Norja fusion once a year as a part of their philosophical and alchemical training. It was during these psychedelic episodes that the most daunting and intellectually-troubling concepts would be learned. The experience of Norja was so dark and powerful that few monks would take it more than the required once a year. Consuming the Norja was a ritual they all feared. The Monk had even known 10th degree monks who had dreaded the experience long after they were thought to have shed their emotions.

All this occurred to him as a momentary recapitulation, reliving the intensity of those experiences as he gazed over the darkening town, wondering what revelations the Norja would bring to some tourist who had no background for such a journey. It seemed almost irresponsible of the citizens to allow it. There were rules against such sales, but for the most part, Gullians looked the other way. Gull had become a tourist trade village and needed to maintain the dark legends of the Norja in order to retain its hermetic mysterious allure.

The thought about legends and hermetic secrets had him turning his head to the east. He had always believed it had been his Norja experience that had allowed him to find her, but now he wondered. And in finding her, he had found the Hermit. Both were the tools of each other's destruction. She was the enigma he was attempting to solve and the Hermit had been the teacher that had armed him with the ability to solve it, potentially ending Erebos in the process.

He surveyed the island, taking it all in. Letting it infect him. It was beautiful—a force of nature tainted by the ever-present possibility of death, and beautiful in the same way a distant

thunderstorm that produced scintillating shards of lightning accompanied by a thunderous procession was beautiful, provided it was observed at a safe distance. But once you were in it, and once it encircled you with its powerful dangerous energy, it became something else. Still beautiful, but with an accompanying sense of impending doom, it was what he imagined the phrase, “Fear of God” meant to those that were religious, which was what he felt now.

Gazing off into the forest, he recalled the ecstatic moments in his life. The wondrous mystery, the blissful ignorance, and the awful knowledge. A part of him longed to recapture those moments and the innocence of soul and psyche that accompanied them as if nature, the island, her, were just toys to be manipulated and played with.

The smell of incense and the low drone of the monks’ chants wafted his way as they began the evening meditation, pulling him from his contemplations. The chants rose within the wisps of incense smoke, creating a tonal cloud that made him one with the congregation—one with All. And for that one instant, he had recaptured that ecstatic feeling he had come up here in search of.

A scream in the distance, guttural and primordial, ended his euphoria. It was not the scream of attack or physical pain, it was the scream of someone confronted with the darkness of Erebos, of the darkness within. It was a scream he had heard before—one he had made himself.

He had left Erebos with a title, poems, dreams, and a guitar, in the hope of fashioning them into a new life filled with redemption and glory. He had returned with a nightmare and a dagger. The darkness was rising on Erebos, in him, in everything.

DAGGER

YOU KNOW THE moment he arrives. You feel a slow churning in your guts when he steps onto the shore, causing bile to rise in your throat. His presence scars the air, adding a new scent carried on the breeze that blows through your hair. Change comes with him, marking the end of things as they are. It is not clear if that is good or bad, or if judgment can even apply to things such as this or to beings the likes of him; however, one knows that there must be change. By not confronting the darkness and hiding it behind the thin veneer of your illusions, it has only grown stronger.

Those that hide in the Waste are festering like a slow growing cancer that has been denied for too long, metastasizing into a deadly concern. Driven insane by the Norja they grow more powerful. It has all come to a head, reaching the boiling point with no slow release valve. The darkness of the Norja is spreading, and without the counterpoint of illumination, Erebus is tipping out of balance towards annihilation. The ballooning illusions must be punctured with a dagger, letting out the pressure of the dark air before it poisons all beyond the point of salvation. Thus, the veil must be pulled back, no matter what it hides.

Feeling his presence, now you know that he is that dagger. There will be no gentle awakening. There will be defiance, hostility, violence, and all those things that a dagger brings.

The fox has also arrived. You felt his arrival in the same way you felt the Monk's—nausea rising from the pit of your stomach as it flips. The fox is an ancient being and his presence can mean only one thing: that the Deranger of prophecy has set the process of extinction in motion, for he comes only to observe the death of last things.

In many ways, you are glad that it is almost over. You are tired, so tired.

You touch the earth with your horn and can feel the dark energy pulse through you as it spears upward through the layers of dirt. You feel the nervous system of the dark, dendritic roots covered in bark that carry dark impulses. Those dark compulsions spill into the poisonous Norja mushrooms, which are the embodiment of the dark's intent. You attempt to diffuse some of that darkness by pushing it deeper into the earth away from the roots, hoping to win even a small battle. Although you know you cannot, you have to try. The darkness spreads and you pull your horn away. There is not much time left. He must come to you soon.

* * *

Striding down Gull's Main Street with its familiar sights and sounds split the Monk's mind in two. One part of him sensed the warm, smooth cobbled stones beneath his feet, while he could also smell the pine and cedar of the forest mingling with the salty aroma of the sea, creating a powerful nostalgia perfume that forced him to remember all the times he had walked this thoroughfare. Thinking of all the people he had met, the things he had learned, his parents, and his discoveries, his head tilted upward as he had listened in rapt attention to the Erebos Anthem. A ghostly dampness wet his brow, and the phantom taste of apples, pumpkin spice and mushrooms rose in the back

of his throat. He salivated as he took a whiff of the heady aroma carried by a breeze that blew over the various carts selling fruits, fungus, and vegetables. From the forest, there was the constant earthy, moldy aroma that awoke darker reveries, those native parts of him that were engrained in his genes, aligned with the energies of the island and the tower like an antenna tuned to a particular frequency.

The other part of him felt removed from the village, an uninvited interloper that would be forced to leave once discovered. It made his skin itch. He wanted to recede into the shadows and spy the scene from behind walls and doors, but he knew that was impossible. There was no doubt that some of the monks had already heralded his return, but even if they had not, he would be recognized, for he was a local celebrity—the Shadow Monk—the only native to ever leave the island and return. Immediately, he saw the recognition in the faces of the locals that did a double take as he tried to nonchalantly stroll down the street. Monks did not visit Gull often, so that alone was an event to be remembered. And none wore the black robes of a 13th degree. That made it impossible for him to hide. The monks of the Order of Kur were as much a part of Erebos as the village and the forest. Its members came to the island in search of revelation. The Hermit had taught the first few the martial, spiritual, and alchemical arts, and before long, they had formed a society. However, it was the gravitational pull that came from the island and the powerful energy it emanated that brought people to Erebos, and those that learned to understand or accept its magic chose to stay.

Some had chosen to follow the path of a monk, while others to serve, realizing that in this incarnation that was their path and purpose. Thus, Gull was formed out of a symbiotic relationship that the Shadow Monk had not observed anywhere else during his travels. Religious centers tended to bring other practitioners who would take care of the elders and provide for them, but here, the villagers were not practitioners; rather, they were

more like interested helpers who believed in the spiritual system of Karma and displayed that belief with caring action.

As he walked past the store fronts and kiosks surrounding the village square, he saw a mixture of surprise, caution, and trepidation pass across the faces of those that recognized him. A widening of the eyes followed a sneer as they watched the Shadow Monk saunter down the street. He did not know what they felt or expected from his return, but there were no warm greetings. At best, he received a reticent nod, which told him nothing except the acknowledgment of his existence. It was clear that a psychic nervous system linking all the locals' thoughts together had sent out a signal that made them congregate towards the village square to observe the Shadow Monk's passing. They stood in storefront doorways, peered around corners, or glanced through shop windows, making him feel as if he were a parade of one as he continued through the town square. All eyes were on him, watching in eerie silence. The itching had become a burning, his skin flush, his head pounding. As soon as he passed the tower, he took a narrow alleyway to the lone door at its end. He took a deep breath and let out a sigh of relief as the pressure of all those eyes boring into him began to fade. Then, he glanced around at his surroundings and realized he had subconsciously arrived at the Engineer's shop, causing the corners of his lips to twitch nervously.

If Gull could be said to have anything close to government, then the Engineer was that entity—he was the entire governing body. For the most part, Gull was a collective democracy. Things ran the way they did because the people that came here were of a similar mind, starting with the monks and then extending outward to those that had decided they wanted a life of quiet contemplation, basking in the magic that seemed ever present throughout the island. At least that was how it had always been—a collective that helped each other and wanted nothing in return. It was common to hear natives of the island reminding others to, “keep it simple,” or “go with the flow.” There had been no reason to contemplate laws, governments, or electing

leaders. Yes, there were groups with different beliefs—the monks, the mushroom cult, the farmers—but no one ever questioned these differences, for it just was the way it was, each revealing something to the other.

The Engineer had changed that. He had brought electricity to Erebos with his nuclear alchemy and modern chemistry and had created a need for wealth, for comfort, for modernity, and somehow, the inhabitants of Gull began to lose a little of themselves, slowly becoming enslaved by these new things instead of being freed by them. No one had raised a finger when the Engineer's power plant was found to be killing sections of the island. He and his technology had created the Waste and turned the insane monks and Norjans into mutants that now ran the plant and hid within the shadows of the Waste. It was then that the soul of Erebos began to wither, as its citizens turned a blind eye to the desecration taking place. The illusion was mistaken for the truth and the Erebos Anthem became a requiem, and all sat in slack-jawed rapture to the song it sang.

The desire for more than simple beauty, had been the seed planted in the mind of Gullians and the Engineer had watered it until its roots reached deep down and began to change the very make-up of the island and its culture. Was he to blame for that or was he just a force of nature? If it had not been him, would it have been someone else? The Monk had contemplated these questions countless times and had surmised that, at some point, there had come the concept of *one more*. Needed *one more* this, *one more* that and that striving, that desire had led to better than, or even more than. The equality of economics had soon become a spiritual economy, where there were the haves and the have nots, thus breeding a holier than though attitude. It was this belief in more and better than, that he strove to undo and restore Erebos to its previous state of simplicity. Those who could read the purpose of his return in the energy he disrupted as he scarred the air with his intent were conflicted by this. He was the prodigal son—loved by some, hated by others. Some wanted change, whereas many others did not, and the line could

easily be drawn between those that believed they had and those that felt they had not.

The Engineer was the pivot point of those groups, using subtle manipulations to determine which factions had and had not. To restore balance, the pivot point would have to be destroyed, with the various forces balanced on its tip falling back into their proper place. However, it would not be painless. Stepping through this door was a declaration. "I've returned. Let it begin."

When he opened the door, a series of small bells and chimes were set off as the corner of the door hit one bell which then cascaded to the next in a series until the sound of twinkling wormed its way through the small shop to the rear doorway, which was cordoned off by a curtain made from shavings of acacia branches held together by twine, which began rattling together once the sound parade reached them.

The Monk closed the front door behind him. He leaned against it and took a deep breath, attempting to slow the pounding of his heart. The sound of shuffling containers and boxes arose from the back room, followed by the sound of approaching footsteps. Suddenly, the Monk felt a rising panic hammering in his chest and even all his years of training seemed unable to slow or stop it.

The familiar triangular face with its hard edges and jutting cheek bones parted and slid through the curtain. The Engineer's thin lips disappeared as they formed a sneer, then reappeared as they relaxed into a knowing grin. Large goggle glasses were perched on the wide, flat, bony edge of his long nose, which resembled the spine of a book, with the clips of the glasses pressed painfully against the bridge of the spine. The glasses pressed into the orbits around his eyes, a rubber strap ran around his head, disappearing into the thick, wiry hair that was always standing on end, each distinct patch going off in different directions. He was the picture of a mad scientist, and the Monk knew him to be mad.

The lenses of the goggles telescoped out, increasing the magnification while also making his brown eyes seem larger-than-life. The Monk would have found this look comical if he had not detected the insanity that swam within the dark pupils. The eyes seemed to swirl as if being flushed down a toilet as they roved in the examination of the Monk in decreasing orbits, until they finally centered upon him again. The goggles collapsed back to normal magnification with the sound of turning gears and whining metal. The Engineer's lips thinned further as he smirked.

"Heard you were back."

The Monk did not reply but simply stared at the Engineer, his heart hammering so loudly in his chest he thought the Engineer must hear it.

"Yes, Yes. Here to save us all are you?" The Engineer's lips disappeared as his smirk returned to a sneer, the corners of his mouth rising devilishly.

The Monk cringed when the Engineer said, "Yes, Yes." It was an annoying vocal habit that had always driven the Monk crazy. The word was voiced and accented in such a way that it simultaneously sounded like an affirmation and a question.

"Not save. Expose."

"Yes, Yes. Call it what you will, but I think you will find there are levels to the truth."

"There is only The Truth and The Lie, no levels."

"Yes, Yes. As you see it, perhaps, but I think you will find that there is a subtlety that will make the difference between the two. Blur the lines, add some gray."

The Engineer tried to adjust his glasses, but they were tightly pressed into his orbits and wouldn't budge. He shrugged as if it didn't matter. "But then that is something between you and her right now. Yes, Yes?"

The Engineer's eyes bulged outward, studying the Monk's face—they seemed only inches away and eclipsed his entire vision.

"Or maybe it's between you and the Norja."

This confused the Monk, "How so?"

The Engineer smiled and then twiddled his thumbs in the air before him. Then, he snapped his fingers and clapped his hands together loudly, which was the Engineer's equivalent of a nervous tick. "No, No. Don't know everything now do you?" Each syllable dripped sarcasm. "What could I mean? The connectedness of all? The illusion of separation? Light defined by dark and vice versa. Yes, Yes but then what do I know? I'm just one part of this trinity. For completeness, you need to take more than the rational reductive scientific views of the lowly Engineer into consideration, or that of a holier-than-though Monk for that matter." The Engineer cackled at his own wit, a sound that made the Monk wince—he had always hated that sound. There was little about the Engineer that didn't annoy him.

"Tell me how that has anything to do with her or the Norja." The Monk commanded, taking one threatening step forward. The Engineer did not flinch but instead glared at the Monk, both now wondering where this would lead, as the tension thickened to threat.

The bells tinkled behind the Monk, and a few tourists, chattering away about nothing in particular, entered the shop. The Engineer smiled conspiratorially at the Monk and winked with one magnified eye that clicked like a camera shutter. Was it relief the Monk saw pass across the Engineer's face, lips reappearing, facial muscles relaxing as he turned away, or was it his own relief transferred onto the Engineer?

"Ahh, ladies! Good day. May I help you find something magical?" he said with a flourish, before flashing a crooked smile. The Monk lowered his head to look down at a dinner plate-sized piece of memory glass. As he turned, for a moment his image was frozen in the glass as if capturing a snapshot of his reflection. A few moments later, the image jumped to his present position and then froze again. The jumps created an odd sense of dislocation when staring at the image and moving, as if you were looking at a mirror image that refused to mimic your motion, and instead, took on a life of its own. He stared deeper into the reflection of his eyes, his attention pulled into the dark

pupils where a dream of another life is unfolding. There, he saw the Lady of Erebus galloping through the forest, tipping her head to eat the Norja mushrooms as shadows coalesced around her, growing long fingers with sharp nails that hungrily clutched at her. A river of blood formed around her, widening its banks as it began to flood over the small patch of earth where she stood. All of sudden, a wave washed over her and she was driven deeper into the dark forest by the crimson current. The Lady of Erebus let out a scream, causing the Monk to pull back and look away, his heart hammering in his chest. Memory glass is an amusing illusion, but only if one does not gaze too deeply into its reflections of the past to the true darkness beneath.

He forced a smile to push the nightmare away, but the glass only continued to reflect his previously dour expression. "If they only knew what the glass really was," he whispered. He chuckled to himself, attempting to ease the tension he felt pulsing through his body and then exited the shop, not bothering to say anything else to the Engineer.

Near the tower on Main Street, the Monk encountered a small group of people circling a man lying on the ground. His first thought was that he was glad that something had taken the focus away from him, but he quickly cursed his callousness as he got closer and discerned the nature of the scene. Members of the group were muttering something back and forth to each other in hushed whispers. The crowd of bowed heads parted for him as he reached the outer ring of onlookers and saw the dead body they had been staring down at. No one had taken any action, they just stood with their heads bowed, mouths hung open. Muttering rose from the gaping mouths like a chant, forming awed observations directed at no one in particular. All were hoping someone else would do something, too stunned to do anything themselves.

"Ate raw Norja," someone spoke in a deep voice just beyond the circle. "A few people saw him wandering the streets drooling

and talking to himself. Then he lets out this awful scream and that ...”

The Monk studied the horrid expression twisted onto the man’s features and remembered the horrid scream he had heard the previous night during his walk on the ledges. The man’s bloodshot eyes were pushed from their sockets, the black pools of his pupils filling the irises, leaving only a moon blue rim around the edges. One side of his mouth was open in a scream while the other half was pulled down into a snarl. It was as if half his face had frozen during the scream, leaving the other half to form a snarl before freezing in turn. The combination seemed physically impossible to recreate without torturous motivation. Unconsciously, the Monk found himself trying to mimic the expression and failed. The dead man’s skin was a dull gray and appeared paper thin, almost translucent, stretched taught over his narrow chin and cheekbones, the sharp-angled bones threatening to pierce through. It was a face that would haunt sleepers—a nightmare rictus.

“How long ago did this happen?” the Monk asked an observer.

“Just two minutes ago,” the observer replied.

It must have all transpired while he was in the shop with the Engineer. The Monk took a step closer and knelt next to the man. He proceeded to draw symbols on the man’s forehead, cheeks, and chin with his thumb before placing his index finger on the man’s lips. The rictus relaxed. There was a collective gasp from the crowd. The dead man’s lips moved, the throat filling with the air of his last breath, “The deeper dark reveals ... and death,” a choked whisper drifted over the crowd like wind moving over sand.

There were a few yelps of surprise and genuine horror at the sound of the dead man’s voice, which was immediately followed by a reverential silence, waiting to see if there would be a further miracle. Was the man about to rise from the dead, get up and walk away? The silence lengthened and the circle began to disperse once their patience had worn out and they realized

there were no further wonders to see. Most would remember the dead man and his last words for the rest of their lives, knowing in their hearts that this had been no trick. The man had been dead, and this monk had touched him and made him speak his last words aloud, using breath from dead lungs, through a dead throat and bloated tongue.

The Monk eventually retreated after the rest of the crowd had scattered. He does not have the power to raise the dead; his necromancy only allows a momentary re-animation. Those final cryptic words provided him with many things to contemplate, but that missing word or words was most likely the secret key to revealing the true meaning. ... *Life ... Light ... Illumination ... Awakening*. He tried a few fillers but none felt right.

These final insights as one died and accepted its embrace were often simple but incomprehensible using normal modes of thought. Similar to a Zen Koan, these words served to mystify and trick one's mind into epiphany through circular contemplation.

Wanting to sit and consider these words while that mystic energy was still fresh, the Monk walked across the street to a café and sat at one of the tables under an awning, where he could feel the pine-scented forest breeze caress his face. The waitress gasped when she saw him but attempted to cover up her surprise, going so far as to pretend to not even know who he was. But it is a poor act—she took his order and flitted away, relieved to be out of his presence.

Many of the people strolling around the square could do nothing but stare at him, but when he caught their eye, they would quickly turn away. The Monk caught a flash of recognition in their eyes, followed by a twisting of their features, their lips tightening, eyes narrowing, trying to understand what they are seeing. However, they all seemed to express fear. He could tell from the squint of their eyes, the furrowing of their brows, and the creases on their forehead deepening to crevasses, each forming a countenance that struck them with a mix of confusion, fear, and perhaps even awe, as they asked themselves if he was

the coming of Heaven or Armageddon but knowing that either meant change, which they feared more than anything else.

A Norjan wearing the customary gray-black robes of that order walked up to his table, bowed his head, and then pointed at the chair opposite the Monk. The Monk gestured toward the chair with a slight wave, welcoming the Norjan to sit and join him. The Norjan's cowl was so deep that even in the light of day his features were mired in shadow. It was rumored that the Norjans were hyper-sensitive to the sun's rays, to the extent of suffering allergic reactions that would cause their skin to burn.

When the Norjan spoke, it was in a whisper that sounded like the hiss of a snake, with a long 'sss' sound trailing through his speech.

"It'sss an honor to meetsss you, Alchemisssst."

The Monk nodded, staring into the dark void where a face should be. The whisper of his voiced sounded as if it had been issued from a long tunnel, echoing slightly as he hissed through his sentences. The Norjan's head turned ever so slightly to look at the Monk's wand, which he had leaned against the empty chair next to him.

"I knowsss the nature of that."

The Monk raised his eyebrows at this but remained silent, begging the conclusion that did not arrive. The waitress returned with his tea and fruit pie. The tea's bitter aroma wafted up to his nose, but even the chai, cinnamon and coconut could not mask the aroma of earth and fungus. He had forgotten how strong the food and drink was here in Gull, as everything was completely natural, whether pulled directly from the earth or from an animal. The bitterness was extreme, the sweet screamed sweetness, the fruit so heady it almost made him sick.

"Ever wonder what sssuch ssspccccsss masssk?" The Norjan hissed, motioning with a skeletal finger at the cup of tea. Again, the Monk chose silence to respond.

"The Norja is everywhere. It iss what connectsss all thingsss here. Pleasssure, pain, death, light, truth, fake, you ... me ... her ..."

Silence. The Monk took a sip of his tea, a multitude of flavors exploding on his tongue. The cornucopia dizzied his senses and overwhelmed him, growing bitter as it made its way towards the back of his mouth and entered his throat, finally souring in his stomach.

In spite of the taste, warmth began to spread through him. He placed the cup back on the table. The Norjan extended a bony finger, stained gray by the Norja, the blackening fungal nail tapped on the ceramic tiles of the table top.

“Everywheresss, in all, iss all.”

The Monk looked at the cup and back to the Norjan, not following the flow of the conversation. Each statement seemed to have no connection to the previous one. His mind replayed the tape of the last minute but could not find the thread that strung all the statements together.

“Your return can mean many thingsss, with many outcomesss. Your leaving wasss mourned, now sssso is your return. But that isss fear,” the Norjan explained.

“I had to come back.”

“Yesss.”

The Norjan now surveyed the café, turning in all directions as if looking for eavesdroppers or spies. The Monk knew this was not merely the paranoia of a Norja user. There were things to fear and there were those that would spy on them. The Norjan seemed satisfied with his survey, believing that his words would not be overheard as he leaned over the table to get closer to the Monk. His voice barely registered over the low hum of activity around the square as he whispered.

“One week from today will be the full moon. It isss the only time the true darknesss of the mushroomsss isss revealed and can be harvessted. I would like you to join me to learn the truth of the Norja, to tell you what hasss previousssly been sssecret to all but the Norjansss.”

The Monk nodded assent, trying to hide his excitement behind a stern countenance, his eyes narrowing, lips strained straight, and facial muscles relaxed, but his eyes must have been

gleaming as he could feel light emanating from them. He was not aware of an outsider ever being invited to see the ceremony of the harvest and to be told the secrets of the Norja, and he wanted access to that mystery. It was a fire that ignited in his belly and then exploded in his heart. Knowing there was always one more mystery to encounter and one more revelation to experience was one of his prime motivators for seeking more knowledge, for being a monk, for leaving, and for returning. There was always more to learn, and the more he learned the more he realized he knew nothing.

“I cannot show or tell you the recipe—that would be an outright breach of my oath, but I can tell you more secrets than have ever been revealed to one that was not initiated or has taken the oath of the Norja.”

The Monk knew that raw Norja was poison. The dead body lying in the middle of the square in front of them was a reminder of this. There were other ingredients, preparations, and cooking procedures that made the soup consumed during the Norjan rituals and ceremonies. This psychedelic tincture was Erebos’s philosopher stone and he would have welcomed learning the procedure for preparing it, but he did not let the fact that he would not learn all the secrets deflate him, as this was still a singular opportunity and he would take advantage of it.

The Monk nodded slightly, indicating that he would accept the Norjan’s offer gratefully. “Very well. Meet me at the tower after the Anthem one week from today.”

The Norjan bowed his head to the Monk, and left silently. He was a dark shadow that quickly traversed the square, the motion of his legs hidden by the long robe, making it look as if he was flying over the stones hovering a few inches from the surface. He then disappeared down an alley engulfed by deeper shadows. The Monk gazed down at his tea, contemplating the Norjan, his words, and his offer, understanding none of it, but he understood that this was where he was meant to be.

