

The Faire Folk of
GIDEON

Pin the Tail on the Donkey



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Table of Contents

Pin the Tail on the Donkey.	5
An Extended Rant	6
Spontaneous Cognition	10
City in a Box	13
Divine Madness	17
Next Train to Market.	22
Alicia Firelight Del Morgan	25
J.A.E.S.	28
The Rules of the Game	33
The Party Thereafter	38
Cravings of the Soul	42
Crocodile Fantasy	48
The Old Hometown	52
Seeking Dragon's Breath.	56
Trinkets and Other Strange Inventions	57
Voice of a Stranger	61
Underground Follies.	65
An Afternoon's Diversion.	68
Chess, Life and Death.	72
The Luck of the Fates	75
Cannibal Frogs	79
And Then There Was Hobbes.	83
Classroom and the Field	89
Life by Firelight	93
Crossing the Threshold.	98
Dark Night of the Soul	102
Watching the Light Fall.	106
Memories for the Taking	109
Falling Toward Center.	114
Flailing Rebellion	120
Jumping at Shadows	121
A Brief History of Life.	124
Path of Resistance	128
Serendipity's Plan	132
Forbidden Discoveries	137

The Wheel of Time	141
Lucifer's Widow	147
Irrational Expectations	148
Memories of a Market.	151
The Unforgiven Familiar	154
The Shadow Behind You	159
The Gift of Freedom	162
Dimensions of the Cage.	166
A Whispering of Voices.	169
Seeking Forgotten Stories	174
Halle's Driving Service	178
Misdirected Thoughts	182
Small Town Secrets	188
Conversations of the Hunt.	194
A Nightmare Lacking Only Words.	199
Touch of Infinity	203
Fragile Creations	208
The Hunter's Voice	209
The Fugitive's Thoughts	211
Fallen Verse	215
Subterfuge Unaided	218
Another Style of Hunting.	223
Tracing the Void	227
The Source of All Troubles	231
End of the Line	237
Friend of My Enemy	241
The Other Side	246
Forgotten Machinations	250
Test of Faith	253
Falling Toward Destiny.	258
Blood in the Water	261
The Shape of Worlds.	265
Home.	270

***Pin the Tail on
the Donkey***

one
An Extended Rant

I don't know where to begin. Everything is a jumbled blur. Impossible to tell one thing from another. I feel like one of those guys you hear about who feels things with a passion. Wants to write about it. Knows things. Wants things. To inspire. To tell their side of it. If only they could write it down, then people would understand. If only they could write it down, they would inspire people to action. To overthrow corrupt governments. Feed the homeless children. End crime. Paradise. The only problem being that when they actually sit at the typewriter, notepad, pen and paper, whatever. The mind locks up. Everything wants to come pouring out at once. Everything. This is important. That is important. If I don't explain this then that won't make any sense. Guns, candy, lost puppies, interest rates fluctuating, the price of stamps going up. Baseball. Apple pie. Where do you begin? Where? With what? Why?

Know how I feel? Every story has a beginning, right? Right? That means every story has an ending, right? That means the beginning of every story is the ending of another someplace else. Or was that every exit is an entrance somewhere else? It's been too long since I read *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. The players. See? They do on stage the things that are supposed to happen off. But, I'm already drifting way off into the sunset.

But, it fits. It fits. Ever read *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*? They basically have no clue what is happening all around them. Strange things happen. And, they end up dead. Yeah, it fits. They even talk to the audience. I'm way off target, but every exit is an entrance someplace.

So, this isn't a narrative. This isn't a story. It just looks like one. This is an extended rant. I think Henry Miller said that. At the beginning of *Tropic of Cancer*. Or, one of those weird-ass books. Anyway. This is a rant. This is a wild assortment of all living things. Stream of consciousness. Random, beguiling, out of order. Chaos.

Yeah, chaos. Every ending is a beginning someplace else. So, I'm going to get stuff out of order. I'm going to forget things. I'm going to remember things. I'm going to tell you that this other stuff over here happened before all that other stuff I talked about yesterday. I'm going to get confused and tell you stuff that is never going to get mentioned again because it was irrelevant and I never should have mentioned it in the first place.

I don't care. I've got to do this. I've got to do this or die. Explode. Go boom. Blood everywhere. You have to understand. I want you to understand. If I don't get through to you, then there is simply no hope. Why should I care? Why should you? I should explain. I should try. God, have you even read this far? Okay. Things are complicated. The world is complicated. More complicated than you might realize. Than I ever knew. More things in Heaven or on Earth than are dreamt of in philosophy or something like that. Shakespeare. *Hamlet*. Funny, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* wasn't written by Shakespeare. Just the names are the same. Everything else was changed to protect the dead.

Okay, here goes. Things are complex. There's this world. The one we wander around in day by day. And there's the other world. Or worlds. Or whatever. If you've read any science fiction or comic books, you're probably already thinking other dimensions. Like from *Another Fine Myth*. No, don't think dimensions. Don't think elsewhere. You start thinking like that, and you'll start thinking someplace totally different. Someplace totally removed from you. You're safe. It can't hurt you. It's another dimension. Someplace else. Not here. Elsewhere. Well, you're wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

It's right here. You just don't notice it. It's like. Pick up a telephone, okay? It's a telephone. You can call people. You can talk to them. You can order pizza from your car as you're driving home. Did you know it's a pencil sharpener? No, really, it's a pencil sharpener. Not a telephone with a pencil sharpener in it. It's a telephone. It's a pencil sharpener. You pick it up. You talk into it. It's a telephone. You stick a pencil in it. You turn the little hand crank. It sharpens your pencil. Wait, a second. That little hand crank wasn't there when you were talking into it ordering your pizza. When you sharpen your pencil, you don't get a dial tone. You can't order that pizza. You're going to be hungry. Confused? Oh, boy, you should

have been me. Freak-out city. And, I didn't have anyone trying to explain this shit to me. I just had to survive it.

Okay, another example. Did you know there are people watching you? No, really, they're standing just over your shoulder. They're laughing at you. Don't see them? Oh, they're there, I can assure you of that. You just haven't noticed them standing there reading this over your shoulder right now. Made you look? Did you just get a shiver like someone had walked over your grave? No, they're not invisible. You just haven't noticed them standing there.

Another example? Look down. See the ducks? There are little ducklings munching on your toes. A whole flock of them. With feathers and little webbed feet and everything. They go quack quack when they talk. They're munching on your toes. Feel anything yet? You just realized they are there. Munching on your toes. The pain just grabbed you like an anvil to the face. Blood all over the floor. Gushing out of your feet because they've eaten your toes. Are you freaking, yet? Are you screaming in pain? Shock? Fear? Grab the pencil sharpener. Dial emergency. Wait for the ambulance. Kicking at the ducks. Trying to make them stop. You make it to emergency. Bandaged feet. Little bite marks. Everything red from the blood. Ready? That's when you realize that there never were cute little ducklings munching on your toes. It never happened. That's when the doctor walks in to check your bandages. That's when he checks your bandages and finds nothing wrong. You've got all your toes. The doctor looks at you like he's crazy. As if he must have walked into the wrong room. Nope, sorry. Right room. Right person. It just never happened. No, you didn't imagine it. Imagine what? It never happened. In fact, you never went to emergency. You're still reading this.

Crazy? Are you freaking, yet? Understand? Got the hang of it? If you do, then you're way ahead of me.

A little history? Who am I? No, forget it. It doesn't matter. You'll understand. Yes, you will understand. I was working. Sitting at my desk. In my office, I remember. I remember sitting there, and suddenly, I realized that it was all shit. That my life was empty. Meaningless. Look at the paper on my desk. What was written on it? Garbage, crap, shit! Important to no one. I had clawed my way to this point in my life. Fought, laughed, loved. All so I could sit at a desk and push pieces of paper around with stuff written on them. Did any of it mean anything? Did it matter? What if that piece of paper

didn't get shuffled into the right pile? Would someone live? Would someone die? A tree had died, but who cares about trees?

I suddenly realized that I cared about trees. I cared about them more than anything written on any of the meaningless scrapes of paper shuffled around and about my desk. Dear God, what had I done with my life? How did I get to this point? What had happened to my dreams? My ideals? Did I ever have any? Did I ever care about anything worth fighting for? Did I ever have a soul to lose in all the shuffled paper?

That was when I looked up from my desk. Looked from my office to all the people. All the people helping me helping them shuffle paper. Did they have dreams? Did they have ideals? Did they care? Were they the walking brain-dead? That was when I realized there was a man standing in my doorway.

Okay, realize something. He hadn't been standing there a moment before. I had looked up and around the office. The door had been empty. Then he had been standing there. Not like a movie. He didn't blip into existence like film spliced together or like those fancy computer generated effects where someone kind of morphs into the room. He hadn't been there. Then he was. As if I had finally noticed him standing there.

Another example. Look over your shoulder again. No one standing there, right? Now, while you've got your back turned, someone sneaks up behind you. On tiptoe. Real nice and quiet so you don't even notice. Turn your head slightly. Catching them out of the corner of your eye. Scream! It's like they just magically appeared there. Punch them halfheartedly on the shoulder. Cuss them out. Fuck, you scared the living shit out of me! Don't do that again! They laugh.

Follow me? Except I hadn't turned away. He didn't sneak-up on me. I simply noticed him standing there. My reaction was similar to what I just described, but I didn't scream. I was at work after all. I just quietly freaked way the hell out. I was whacking out the walls. I had just realized that my life was a joke followed quickly by this guy just sort of standing in the door. Have I got your attention? Did I explain enough? Do you understand? Fuck, don't sneak-up on a person like that you'll give them a heart attack! That, of course, was when he said my name.

two

Spontaneous Cognition

Another digression. The Faire Folk of Gideon? No, they're not elves. Let's get that out of the way right now. They are not elves. They're not aliens. They're not visitors, guests or Punch and Judy. You've been reading way too many fantasy books. The Faire Folk? What can I say about them? You ever read anything by Neal Gaiman? There's a great line in one of his funny books, which I'm not going to repeat here. Gaiman? Oh, yeah, it must be elves. Shut up! They're not elves, okay? I'm sorry I brought it up. There's just this great line in one of his books.

Okay, think about your boss. No, this isn't from Gaiman. It's just kind of sort of based on something he wrote, which I think he must have pinched from someplace else anyway. Probably a history book or folklore or something. Like I said, think about your boss. You're at work, and you're talking about your boss. The thing is you know he's listening. You know he'll fire you in half a heartbeat if you gossip with your coworkers something he doesn't like. So, what do you say about him? He's a kind man. A good man. Caring. Loves children. Fair. Never mean to anyone.

The Faire Folk of Gideon? Now that I think about it, I don't think I've ever heard them mention the place as being called Gideon. That may just be my name for it. I had to give it one, after all. That or I'm just remembering things faulty. The Faire Folk? Oh, they're kind. They are just. They are a reasonable and fair-minded people. You would never expect them to be selfish, petty or cruel. Nope, never, and I should know. I've met quite a few of them.

Starting with Fahrenheit just sort of stepping into my office. Yeah, that's his name, Fahrenheit. You got a problem with that? Good. Another word about that sort of thing. The just stepping into my office while I was looking right at him but just didn't notice him standing there thing. You probably think it's all totally whacked-out, right? Could never really happen, right?

Okay, quick example. Let's use telepathy. It's fast. It's easy to explain. Well, mostly easy to explain, but first I have to tell you about this guy named John Cage. Who? Oh, yeah, he's this really famous modern composer. Wrote really wild music. Strange stuff. Loved mushrooms. No, really, he did. Don't read anything into that. John

Cage was the kind of composer who would put a guy on stage reading the newspaper in a really breathy whisper that no one could understand and that would be the music. No, really. He would stick stuff between the strings of a piano and get really wild sounds out of it. Stuff you wouldn't normally think you could get out of a piano. Great music. Loved it. I think his most famous piece was this little treat called 4'33". Basically someone would sit at a piano on stage and not do a damn thing for exactly four minutes and thirty-three seconds. Give or take.

Why did I bring this up? Well, one day, John Cage goes into this room that is supposed to be totally quiet. It's got sound dampening stuff in it or something. The shape of the walls. Whatever. Anyway, he's expecting it to be totally and perfectly quiet. Not a sound. Not a whisper. Really cool. Sort of like a sensory deprivation tank, I suppose. So, he's standing there, and he hears two sounds. Two? In the totally perfect silence? What a rip! So, the story goes he stepped out of the room and tells the guy who built it that there must be something wrong. He heard two sounds. Oh, that, well, one sound was the synapse in his brain firing. The other was the blood pumping through his veins. Most of the time there's just so much noise all around us that we never notice these two really soft sounds.

Let's focus on the slight sound of electricity bouncing around in your head. That means if someone listens really hard. Knows what to listen for and knows how to listen for it. They can literally hear your thoughts. Okay, shut-up, I know what you're thinking. Totally bullshit. What do I know about neurology? Nothing. Just suppose that there was someone who could hear the sound your brain makes. Someone who had trained enough or whatever to have an idea of how snap, crackle and pop translated into words. Well, you've got a mind-reader, my friend.

Of course, with this method, all you can do is listen. I never got to be any good at it. Thoughts just sound like someone brushing a comb through static electricity if you were to ask me. The thing is that if you can hear it then it'll just sort of sink in even if you don't understand a word of it. Something surprising can happen then. You just sort of realize that you know what someone thought. Not in any great detail. Just in general. Concentrate on what you remember the person thinking, and you will start to get details. This is what the Faire Folk call spontaneous cognition. Don't laugh, I've done it. No, really, I've done it. Freaked the hell out of me, I can assure you.

I just suddenly realized that I knew what someone had been thinking. Spontaneous cognition. Try it sometime. Amuse your friends.

But, I've gotten way ahead of myself. There's still a long way between this guy appearing in my office and me doing mind reading. I look up and bam! There's this guy standing in my door. I just sort of stare at him as if my head has just exploded. I don't say anything. He doesn't say anything. Until at last, he says something.

"You are Matthew Drake."

I don't say anything. It's not my name. I don't comment on this. I just kind of sort of stare at him as if he just floated down from Heaven pointing his glowing finger at me and declared me the chosen one. Free my people! Nope, sorry, didn't happen. No glowing finger, anyway. Me? Brain-lock. I just look at him as if I'm one of those mouth-breathers. Don't say a word. Think about it. I had just had a startling revelation. I hated my job. Blam! I hated my life. Boom! This guy appears in my door. Just sort of up and appears there as if it is an everyday occurrence. Tells me that my name is Matthew Drake. Whoa, sorry if I'm something at a loss for words. You try and do any better, okay? Let me know.

That, of course, was when Charlie Thurman should happen to walk into my office.

"Hey, Matt, I need to run this by you."

Okay, ready? The talking man is gone. Poof! Like he was never there. You are Matthew Drake, my ass. Disappeared just like he had appeared. As if I had been distracted by good-old Charlie waltzing in my office. Gave the weirdo time to duck out of the way. Pay no attention to the asshole behind the curtain. Yeah, I know I said the guy's name was Fahrenheit. I didn't know that yet, okay? So, Charlie screeches to a halt in front of my desk and gives me one of those *who is this psycho* kind of looks.

"Where's Matt?"

"What?" Yeah, I know, what a time to find my voice, right? "Charlie, it's me."

Charlie does this quick double-take like his eyes finally have a chance to blink.

"I'm sorry, have we met? I've gone and forgotten your name."

"Charlie, it's me. Jerry. Jerry Christiansen."

"Well, it's a pleasure to meet you Mr. Christiansen. Matt must have stepped out for a minute. Do you know when he'll be back?"

“Be back? What are you talking about? This is my office. You know that. Who’s Matt?”

Well, to make a long story short, my dear good-old friend Charlie Thurman calls security, and I am forcefully ejected from my office. They pay not the slightest attention to my protests. They fail to recognize my picture sitting on my desk, claiming it to be a picture of Matt. I’ve drawn quite a crowd by this point. I quiet down a notch when I catch the name on the door. The name engraved on the door to my office is Matthew Drake. I don’t stay quiet for long. By the time they’ve got me in the elevator, I’ve got my wallet out. Guess whose driver’s license I’ve got? With my picture on the license, of course. Why the license belongs to none other than Matthew Drake. So, why is my name Jerry Christiansen?

three ***City in a Box***

And, that is how I found myself sitting on a bench in front of my office building, staring at my driver’s license with my picture on it but with Matthew Drake’s name. It was my picture. As security dragged me out of the building, kicking and screaming, I caught my reflection in a mirror or shiny elevator door or something, and I recognized my face. So, I knew what I looked like, and that was my picture on my driver’s license in my wallet. The problem was that it was Matthew Drake’s name on the license. I even thought to check out my credit cards. I was sitting on a bench in front of my work. What else did I have to do? Security had lost interest in me as soon as they had got me out the front door. I was somebody else’s problem now. The name on the credit cards? Matthew Drake.

So, how does this happen? One minute, I’m sitting happily in my office, doing whatever the hell it was that I was doing. The next minute, this freak just kind of sort of steps into my office and points his finger at me. No, wait, he never pointed his finger at me. He just told me that my name was Matthew Drake. That’s all he did. That’s when Charlie walked into my office. The freak is gone like he was never there in the first place. Charlie doesn’t recognize me. Security takes over. Good-bye, office. Hello, concrete bench.

Oh, let’s get this out of the way as well. I was chosen. Fahren-

heit decided that my name was Matthew Drake. No argument there. But, I'm nobody special. I'm not some long lost prince of the realm or any dumb shit like that. I'm nobody's brother. Evil twin. Frankenstein's monster. Add nausea. I think I'm going to puke. It could have been anyone. I'm anyone. Why me, Lord? Well, why not me? If not me, then some other me. Someone would be sitting on a concrete bench somewhere wondering what they had done to deserve this. It just so happens that Fahrenheit did his eenie-meanie-minie-moe routine, and I came up it. I got to sit on a concrete bench and wonder what I had done to deserve this.

So, what was going on? I've had time to think about this. It was like *Pin the Tail on the Donkey*. No, really. Have you ever played that game? Well, what happens? You put a blindfold on and then have to pin a tail on a drawing of a donkey, right? Okay, what else do you do? You put the blindfold on, right? Then, someone spins you around and around so you get all dizzy and don't know which way is up, what way you are facing, or where the hell the damn donkey is. That's what was going on. The Faire Folk had dropped a bag over my head, and they were spinning me in big lazy circles, hoping I would fall on my ass and not know which way was up.

Of course, I didn't know any of this at the time. In fact, I don't think anyone ever actually told me any of this. I just sort of slowly managed to multiply seven by nine and get forty-two. At the time, I was just kind of sort of sitting on a concrete bench thinking that the whole world had gone crazy. Someone had stepped into my office. Stood in my door. Suddenly, the guy was there. Suddenly, the guy was gone. In-between, he had told me that my name was Matthew Drake. Everyone believed my name was Matthew Drake. My driver's license. My credit cards. The name on my door. They all believed that I was Matthew Drake. In fact, the only one who didn't believe I was Matthew Drake was me.

So, maybe I was crazy. It could happen. You hear about it on TV all the time, right? Maybe I had had some kind of trauma or shock or something. Hit on the head. Been smacked around by a car. Something so horrible had happened that the only way I could deal with it was to pretend that it hadn't happened to me. That it was all fine and dandy if it had happen to this Matthew Drake guy because I wasn't really Matthew Drake. Nope, I wasn't. I was fine. I was safe. Bad things only happen to other people. Trauma. Partial amnesia. Post-traumatic stress disorder or something.

It could have happened. Or, that other one. Multiple personality disorder. Yeah, I had heard of that one. That is where you have one person and sometimes he thinks he's Fred and other times he thinks he's Charlie. When he's Fred, he's never heard of Charlie, and when he's Charlie, he's never heard of this fellow Fred. I didn't know much of anything about it. Just what I had seen on TV. It was usually caused by trauma, right? Something bad that happened when you were a kid. But, what causes the switch? One minute, you're Fred and then suddenly you're Charlie. How long could the split exist before a switch happened? I could have been Fred for twenty years, never switching into Charlie. Then one day. Something on TV. Driving to work. Who knows? Wham! Suddenly, I'm Charlie, staring at Fred's driver's license.

Yeah, I know. Pencils, telephones and *Pin the Tail on the Donkey*. The thing to remember is that I didn't know any of this at the time. One minute, I'm sitting at my desk. Next, I'm sitting on a concrete bench wondering who the hell this Matthew Drake person is and why his name is on my driver's license. The one thing I did know was that I was totally fucked-up. I was schizo. I was ready to cash it in. The crazy train had left the station, and I'm the engineer. I was staring at Matthew Drake's driver's license, and I had heard of multiple personalities. The mind is a wonderfully stupid thing. If you totally screw with your head, you will believe the wildest and most outrageous things as long as they seem to explain whatever the hell is going on.

So, I believed. Sitting on that concrete bench in front of my office building, I absolutely believed that I had multiple personalities. I was Matthew Drake.

"Hey, Matt, you okay?"

Which is exactly what you want to hear when you have just finished convincing yourself that you are someone you are not. I looked up as if someone had just dropped a bomb right behind my bench. That total shock reaction where all your limbs go flying in every direction and you try to look everywhere at once. It was Charlie.

"Whoa, Matt, you okay? What are you doing out here?"

"I don't know. I really don't know."

"Come on, man. Is something wrong? You look awful."

"Susan left me."

"No! Oh, shit, man, I'm sorry. When?"

“The other night. I thought I could carry on. I thought everything would be okay.”

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner? That’s rough, man. You two were high school sweethearts, right?”

“That’s right. I thought I could carry on. I just got so confused. I think I need to take a personal day.”

“No, problem. Take as many as you need. I’ll clear it with the boss if you don’t even want to go back inside.”

“Thanks, Charlie. I just got so confused. Like I didn’t know where I was. Maybe I should see a doctor.”

“Life is shit, man. Hey, they’ve got the number for a crisis counselor inside. Maybe I could get it for you. Set up an appointment?”

“Yeah, thanks, man. I just got so confused.”

That, of course, is when I made the mistake of trying to stand up. This next bit gets a little blurry. I think I tried to stand up and just didn’t stop when I was standing. I went down face first into the pavement. Started shaking like a son of a bitch. Couldn’t move. Couldn’t do nothing except piss myself. My teeth hurt. I could taste spit and blood. I thought I was going to die. Charlie ran for it, screaming something about calling emergency. So, I finally stopped shaking. My head hurt like someone had been using it for target practice, but I felt better for knowing that emergency would be coming soon. I could just lie there like a dead freak, and someone would come to my rescue. I was so tired I didn’t think I could move.

After a while, I felt better. Felt good enough to crawl back onto the bench and wait for emergency to come rescue me. So, I waited. And, I waited. And waited. And, that’s when I started to wonder when Charlie was going to come back and look after me until emergency arrived. What? Had they told him to wait someplace special so he could lead them to me? Fuck, it could take emergency half-an-hour to send someone for me. Where were they? I was going to have a word with the boss about our health plan when this was all over.

Where the fuck was Charlie? That was when I realized that there was nobody around. Nobody sitting on any of the benches. Nobody walking by the office building. Nobody on the street. The street? Where were all the cars? It was quiet. And, that was creepy. No cars honking. No people talking. No birds chirping. No wind. No nothing. And, that was as weird as anything else that had happened that day.

So, where was Charlie? I wasn’t going to wait any longer. No peo-

ple? No noise? I must be having another episode. Fuck! I had better find help. So, I try to stand and manage not to flatten my face again. That was a good sign. I could walk. So, I start walking back toward our building. That's where Charlie had run off to. Security will have to notice me. And, as I'm walking back toward our building, I start to notice something weird. There's something wrong with it. The building. It was. Well, how to explain? The perspective was all wrong. It looked great from where I had been sitting, but as I walked toward it, it started to look off. Like forced perspective in a movie. You know how that works? I understand they use the same kind of trick at theme parks. You build something a lot smaller than it really is. Place it real close. And, it looks really far away. Or something like that. The front of my building was flat like the wall of a movie set.

I reach the door. Push on it. Nothing. Push harder. It finally gives. I open the door and see the ocean. No, really, I open the door, and I see the beach. I see the ocean. Holy shit! I kind of half-stumble half-fall through the opening, and I get a mouth full of sand. In the lobby? Where's the fucking lobby? Where's the damn building? I stumble. Belching forward. Crash into grass and sand. Spit. Gag. Puke. I hear waves. I hear the surf crashing into the beach. I turn and look back at the door. I see plywood. I see a facade. I see the backside of a movie set. Well, not the whole movie set. I see wood being supported by these two-by-fours, and I see the door. One side of the door is ugly brown wood. The other side is a glass door. I look around. It's a box. A really big wood box. Maybe twenty feet on a side. Plain brown wood being supported with two-by-fours on one side. The outside. A city street on the inside. Mock-ups of buildings and everything. I've been living in a big brown box? How? That is about when I passed out.

four ***Divine Madness***

Okay, enough gibbering. I mean there was quite a bit of it. I was completely round the bend for a while. Hey, don't laugh. You try it sometime. I had just discovered that the outside was really inside and the inside was really a nice little white sand beach with trees

and the deep blue sea. Huh? Yeah, that was more or less my reaction. After I woke up. After I stopped screaming.

Now, the thing is that one can only scream for so long before one's voice becomes sore. One can only sit gibbering and rocking slowly back and forth for so long before one becomes cold and hungry. Instincts that you didn't even know you had begin to kick in. Or, can kick in. I'm sure there are some people who would have continued to sit on that beach gibbering and slobbering and rocking back and forth until they died. I think that was kind of the point of the beach. Could I handle it? Could I survive?

There is something very soothing about a beach on a nice sandy hill with the whole of the ocean spread before you. You can watch the most spectacular sunsets, I can tell you that. Yes, I gibbered for a time. I jabbered. I slurped and slobbered. I spent a lot of time on that beach just staring out at that ocean. Watching the waves grow and fade. Watching the tide. After a while, you sort of calm down. A kind of divine madness begins to take hold. You start to accept your fate. Well, resign yourself to the possibility that you're going to be spending the rest of your life on a little stretch of beach before the great huge ocean.

You start to think about how you got there, and you just kind of sort of start to accept it. Let me see if I've got this straight. Some guy appears in the door to your office? Just up and appears there without occupying any space in front of or behind that moment? There he is? Sure, why not? So, this guy doesn't do much of anything after that. Oh, right, he does say that your name is Matthew Drake; even though, you had no reason to believe that your name was Matthew Drake. You were kind of under the impression that your name was Jerry Christiansen. So? Okay, point two. Charlie walks in and doesn't recognize you. He's looking for Matthew Drake. He then has you thrown out of the building. You convince yourself that you really are this Matthew Drake person. At which point, Charlie recognizes you as Matthew Drake? Why didn't he recognize you before? Who cares? Okay, last question. How the hell did the great outdoors that exist in front of your office building turn into the contents of a big ugly brown wood box sitting on a beach out in the middle of nowhere?

Are you really expecting an answer to that question? I didn't think so. It just is, okay? Deal with it. It has to do with that whole *Pin the Tail on the Donkey* analogy. See, the Faire Folk dropped a

bag over my head and spun me in circles until I fell on my ass and puked my guts out. Now, they are waiting to see if I can still stick it to the ass. None of which I knew at the time, of course. I was still working on that divine madness analogy.

A sane person cannot touch God. I think he was Greek. Dionysus? I think that was him. Well, anyway, I'm drifting again. My point is that the touch of God exists outside of science. You can't study or prove it through scientific observation, right? To say that a holy angel just fluttered down from Heaven and touched you on the tip of your nose. I mean, prove it. There she is! Where? Where? I don't see shit! You must be crazy. Some call it faith. I've come to believe that it takes an ounce of madness to believe in something that by its very definition can never be proven. Can never be seen, photographed or recorded in any way. Can only be seen by those crazy enough to want to see it.

Yeah, I had a lot of time to just sit there and watch the ocean wax and wane. I tell you. One cannot sit on a beach and contemplate the fact that the whole of the world that he knew could fit into a wood box twenty feet on a side and remain totally cognizant in the head. For all I knew, I really had gone round the bend, and I was really in some padded room somewhere wrapped in a nice warm straitjacket while drooling at the mouth. It could be true. Everything around me could be the fantasy. The sand. The surf. The ocean. Thoughts like that affect you. Divine madness. You're never the same again.

But, first, I got hungry. That's what finally woke me from my stupor. Hunger. Easily solved. Bananas. Coconuts. Strawberries. All easily available on and around the beach. Yeah, wild strawberries. They're tiny little red things. Have you ever had wild strawberries? Oh, let me tell you that once you have tasted wild strawberries those giant red things you find in the store can never compare. Shelter was a little harder to come by. Shelter that first night was little more than keeling over next to a rather large piece of driftwood.

I did eventually get organized. Dragged great big pieces of wood around the beach. Made something resembling shelter. Fire? Forget it. I couldn't rub two sticks together if my life depended on it. Fortunately, the weather was nice. It never got that cold at night. I did eventually get fire, but that was because I went more than a little funny in the head. It all goes back to that divine madness thing I was talking about.

Like I said, I had a lot of time to sit on that beach. I did do some

exploring. I think I was on an island, but I was never able to explore enough of it to satisfy myself that it was an island. I mean the world I had known had totally vanished. The space in front of my office building turned out to be a box sitting on a beach so why should I believe that I was on an island, right? Well, why not? So, it's an island. Sure. I never got to explore the whole entire thing so maybe it was a promontory of a much larger continent or something. Why not? The beach was enough for me.

Oh, right, about the fire situation. See, spend enough time on an island that shouldn't exist, and you will start to wonder what it is all about. What anything and everything is all about. Someone had appeared in my door. Just up and suddenly he was there. Like magic. So, why not magic? If people could appear and disappear. If people could know me but not know me. If my name could change without me knowing it. Then what else? What if I could do shit? Like? Oh, I don't know. Start a fire?

Touched by the strange. Touched by the mad. Touched by the divine. Why not? So, I started a fire. Yeah, I did. Just because I wanted a fire. He said let there be light, and there was. And, he found that it was good. I was so far gone by this point that it didn't even spook me that I was able to spark a fire through sheer force of will. Well, not quite like that. I didn't grunt and struggle and strain or anything like that. I held my fair share of staring contests with bundles of sticks before I finally got it. One does not get fire by wanting fire. One gets fire to exist where there was no fire a moment ago by accepting the fact that fire was already there. Was always there. You just had to realize that it was there. Accept it. Notice it. There are cute little ducklings nibbling on your toes. Quack. Quack. Kind of a Zen thing. I can get away with saying shit like that because I've got no clue what I'm talking about.

Or, maybe I was just stark raving buggo.

After that, things got real interesting. If fire, then why not wood for a nice house? If wood for a nice house, then why not telekinesis to put that house together without having to do any actual work? If telekinesis, then why not flight? If flight, then why not swimming? Water breathing? Shape changing? Yeah, I had some grand old times on that island.

A butterfly wakes from a long night of sleep, hungry for some nectar or whatever the hell it is that butterflies eat, and remembers a really wonderful dream it had. The butterfly had dreamt that it

was a man. In the dream, the butterfly had done man stuff. Walked. Talked. Squashed a spider. Ate beef. Fucked. Taken a shit and slept. Yes, the butterfly thought that it had been a most excellent dream. Of course, the butterfly, being a butterfly, had a very amusing thought. Why, the dream had ended with the man drifting off to sleep. So, who was to say that the butterfly was not really a man dreaming he was a butterfly? It was such an amusing thought that it entertained the butterfly for the rest of that long day and for many a day that followed after.

Oh, I don't know how long I lived on that island. It got to the point where I enjoyed it. You ever see *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*? The part right before the infinite number of brooms with arms start carrying an infinite supply of water into the hovel until it floods? Yeah, like that. Fire, storm and sun. Clouds and lightning bolts. With just a touch of *Night on Bald Mountain*. You know, the part where he's making those women born of fire dance on his fingertips. That was fun.

So, anyway, one day I did something really stupid. I realized that I had never gone anywhere back near the big old ugly wood box. I mean, what was up with that? I know why I had stayed away from it. The thing scared the shit out of me. It represented chaos or something like that. Contact with that box had a tendency to adversely affect my lifestyle.

So, one day, I had a hankering to do some exploring. Check out the box. See if anyone was home. I went to the door. It was still kind of dangling open. Wood on one side. Glass on the other. Really cool, I could see the lobby of my office building through the glass of the partially open wood on one side door. I couldn't see anyone, but I could see part of the lobby. I step back through the door, checking out the strange little world inside. It's really amazing. Hard to believe that all the buildings and everything are just pasted on the inside of a wood box.

Okay, I'm standing there. I'm looking at everything. I notice someone sitting on that old concrete bench that I had sat on staring at my driver's license. He looks okay. Fancy suit. Snappy dresser. Expensive looking shoes. Nice tie. Not too gaudy. I hate ties that are so bright they can put out an eye. He looks at me and smiles like the Cheshire cat.

five
Next Train to Market

Yeah, I know. The Cheshire cat had a grin not a smile. I've seen a cat without a grin, but I've never seen ducks fly out of my ass. Why did I do it? Why return to the big ugly wood box? I've had lots of time to think that one over, and I figure there are two reasons. I'll start with the less obvious one. I think it was an attempt to reenter my old life. For all I knew, I really was stark raving sane in an institution somewhere with a nice warm straitjacket all nice and tight and snug around my shoulders. The only way to get a hang on things and get out of that straitjacket was to walk back into what passed for the world I had known. Another reason why I might have been crazy was that I had never actually explored the entire island. I had walked, swum and flown all around it but never all the way around it. I never found the end. So, I had no way to really know that it was an island, but I never found any more land either. So, what gives? How can that be? It made sense if I was off my nut. I mean I had walked around the island on two feet. I had flown around the island as a bird, and I had swum around the island as a fish. Does that strike you as particularly sane? I didn't think so.

The other reason is actually more obvious. I had mentioned finding some guy sitting on the bench, right? Well, he had been sitting there the whole time. I mean, not since I had sat on that bench thinking I had multiple personalities. He had been sitting there the whole time I was checking up on the big ugly wood box. I noticed him from the doorway. Not in detail. It just registered in the back of my mind that the box was occupied. I knew he was there when I stepped back into the city in a box. I knew he was there when I took that look around admiring all the fake architecture. I knew he was there when I walked right up to the bench. See? I had been on that island for Lord knows how long, and I was feeling just a tad lonely. I wanted someone to talk to.

No, I'm not going to go into any great detail trying to describe the guy. It's something you just sort of learn about the Faire Folk. They change skins as easily as most people change clothes so you just have to sort of get a sense of who someone is through instinct or something. You can't trust one of them to look the same way twice. You can't trust that who you're talking to is who you think you're

talking to. Spending time with the Faire Folk can leave a body feeling just a little paranoid. You have to get a sense of the person. Even then, you can still be faked out. What did he look like? Raul Julia from *The Adams Family*. There, are you happy?

“Ah, Matthew, I’ve been expecting you. The lands beyond agreed with you, I see.”

I didn’t know what to say. I had just spent I don’t even want to think about how long on a little stretch of beach overlooking the ocean. I had spent my time playing with reality. Shape shifting, skipping fireballs like rocks over the surf and making stuff out of stained glass like wood. I had gotten there when I discovered that the world had turned into the contents of a big ugly box twenty feet on a side. What could I say? Words failed me.

“You may call me Beowulf Drake.” That’s another thing. When one of the Faire Folk tells you his name? Don’t believe him. “No relation, of course.”

“Of course.”

“You are rested. You are fit. You are well. You have returned from the lands beyond of your own free will.”

“The where?”

“Huh? Oh, over there. There is much you will learn in time. For now, we must away to the common market.”

Without another word, he began to stroll with a purpose away from the facade of my office building and away from the door in the box. I could still see the beach and the surf beyond. How far could he get? The box was only twenty feet on a side. But, I hadn’t seen another human being in far too long. I followed him. He walked to the corner bus stop, and we descended into the underground. Flight of stairs. Escalator for anyone too lazy to climb back out. No people. I noticed that as we stood on the platform waiting for the train. Since I had reentered the world, the only person I had seen was Beowulf, and I use the term loosely when talking about him. Soon enough, a train arrived, puffing smoke. Clattered to a stop. Doors opened, and we got in. Nice big windows. Of course, all we could see was the inside of the tunnel we were traveling through.

“Have you ever been to market? No, of course not. Silly of me. It’s quite a thing to see. You’ll never forget it. The common market? You can get anything there. Anything. You need it? Just go to the market, and somebody will be selling it. You have something to sell? Just go to market. Somebody will buy it.”

I really must agree with him. The common market is like nothing you have ever seen before. What does it look like? Try to imagine a farmer's market, county fair and science fiction convention all kind of rolled together. Yes, I went to a science fiction convention once. When I was sixteen. Have you ever been to one? It's hard to describe. People and costumes and booths and women in skimpy come-hither outfits. I had heard that conventions were the last bastion of swinging sex. That's why my sixteen-year-old buddies and I had gone to the convention. We were looking to get some. Why am I telling you this?

So, the train stopped, and we stepped into the middle of a great open plaza. People everywhere. Of every description. I swear I saw a group of Klingon. Tables, booths and buildings. A triumphant babble of voices. Everything was for sale here? Believe it.

Beowulf has me by the hand now. Doesn't want to lose me in this throng. I must look like an easy mark. Mouth hanging open. Gawking at everything. The sights. Sounds and colors. You remember what the dinosaurs sounded like in that movie? Yeah, I swear I heard them bellow off in the distance somewhere. We find a table somewhere. He sits me down.

"Hungry?"

He disappears into the throng for a moment. Returns with a paper sack dripping with juices and flush with steam. Opens it. I swear to you. I cannot remember for the life of me what it was that I ate. I have tried to remember what it looked like. I have tried to remember what it smelled like. I have asked after what it was. No answer. All I remember was that it was the most incredible food that I had ever had in my whole entire life. I take that back. The best food I had ever tasted until I had dragon biscuits. I can't even pretend to describe them they are so good. Of course, the joke is that dragon biscuits are shit. No, really, dragon biscuits are what you get from the servant's entrance of a dragon after it's done digesting its meal, and I swear to you. I swear to you that dragon biscuits are the best and most wonderful food that you will ever have in your entire god-forsaken life.

At some point, I realize that Beowulf Drake is nowhere to be found. He left me at that table very happily licking juices from my fingers. I didn't even start to catch on to this until some thing sat at the table and started talking about this terrible war. It was really horrible. Great kingdoms and foul monsters and ancient evil. It was

so compelling that I just found myself listening to him, it, whatever, and I was hanging on his every word, wondering how it had ended. Not knowing if it had ended. Were we in danger? That was when I realized he was telling me the plot of *The Lord of the Rings*. I laughed. I couldn't help it. Everything that had happened that day was finally starting to catch up with me. I stood, meaning to find something. Anything.

That was when Beowulf came back, and he had someone with him. She was beautiful. Tall. Willowy. Blond hair. Looking all the world like Uma Thurman. And, this next bit I should have seen coming. I should have recognized it miles away. Stupid! All I can say in my own defense is that I was still in the grip of that divine madness I was telling you about. Beowulf Drake had taken me to market. You can buy or sell anything at market. Anything.

six

Alicia Firelight Del Morgan

A few words about Alicia Firelight Del Morgan are in order, I think. She was born of the House of Fire and is the daughter of Gypsy and Roux Firelight Montgomery. She was married briefly to August Stonegarden Del Morgan. He died under rather suspicious circumstances when she ate him. Yeah, you heard me right. I should also mention that there are four extended families, if you will, of the Faire Folk. Firelight, Stonegarden, Windsong and Fathom, but you'll be hard pressed to find anyone left claiming to be of the family Windsong.

That's going to require a digression. The Faire Folk rarely if ever fight amongst themselves. In open conflict anyway. They don't raise armies to smash against each other. There are simply not enough of the Faire Folk to manage anything larger than a small skirmish, anyway. Imagine the Lady's Auxiliary's Reenactment of the Battle of Pearl Harbor and you've pretty much got it. Evidence of the common market notwithstanding, there are more than twenty but far less than a thousand of the Faire Folk. So, I understand. The common market is open to all who can manage to reach it. Many peoples and groups go to the market, and the Faire Folk watch over them.

So, if the Faire Folk don't raise armies against each other, what

do they do when one of the families comes calling about a feud? Oh, they choose champions and settle things with a nice rousing game of chess or more likely with fencing. They are very good with the rapier. It's like watching the Olympics only without all the protective stuff that the athletes get to wear, of course. I don't mean you won't find the occasional poisoning over a blood feud. It just doesn't happen that often.

The last real conflict occurred after the rather spectacularly failed attempt to assassinate the Majus. The idea for that one fell to the family Windsong. Why they thought they could overthrow the Majus is something I have never been able to learn. I understand that the other three families rose as one and didn't rest until the lands of the family Windsong were soaked through and through with blood. I've had the unfortunate distinction of having seen what remained of the Windsong family's lands first hand, and a more wasted, blasted, fallow place I cannot describe. I can think of no finer sense of relief that I have ever felt than when I turned my back on that wasteland for the last time. Del Morgan fought for the allied families in that genocidal little conflict.

It was only the second time that such an alliance had been forged. The one time the four families all banded together was in the Elryth War. It was the only time that the Faire Folk were ever in any real danger. They still speak with awe and hushed voices of the war. The Elryth were a group not unlike the Faire Folk, wishing to be overlords to all the people of all the lands both far and near. It was a truly great and terrible war, I understand. Del Morgan fought as one of the Second Bastion to the One Majus' Irregulars.

In more peaceful times, Del Morgan has acted as an advisor to the Folk of Minor Darraghman. There are other things. Conflicts both great and small. Politics and intrigue. Disasters both natural and most unholy. Nothing to compare to the alliances of the Faire Folk. Nothing worth mentioning anyway.

Except for one other little thing. Del Morgan stood against the Popular Uprising. The Faire Folk were unkind. The Faire Folk were cruel. Something like that. Many of the people of the lands both known and largely unknown rose against the Faire Folk in that terrible time. What amazes me the most about the whole thing was how many of the Faire Folk actually sided with the uprising. Amazing that they survived. An army. No, a mob comes knocking at your door with flame and steel. Desiring your head. And, you answer,

hey, I'm on your side! Let's get those foul vermin who have ground you under their boot for far too long! Amazing. Simply amazing. The hypocrisy. No, the unmitigated chutzpah of it all. Or, maybe they just recognized which way the wind was blowing.

Del Morgan would not bend. She would not turn traitor to her own kind. She stood against the Popular Uprising even when they drove her from her family lands. Deprived her of her very home. She did not yield. Even when she was forced to flee her lands and home and hide from the strength of the uprising, she would not abandon the Majus. It was unlike the Elryth War or even the alliance of the three families against the Windsong Clan. Don't get me wrong. The Popular Uprising was a terrible time of unrest. Nothing was ever the same. Del Morgan fought back from her place of hiding. Did not rest until the uprising was put down, and she had reclaimed her lands.

But, enough of this kind of talk. Enough of conflict and war. I have told you more of Del Morgan than you should have need to know. I knew none of this at the time. All I knew was that Beowulf Drake was standing before me with a woman at his shoulder. She was tall. Willowy. Blond hair. Expensive dress. Leather great coat that flowed around her like a cloak and reached to the point of almost touching the ground.

“Matthew Drake, this is Del Morgan.”

She looked at me, saying nothing, and extended an arm as if she expected me to take her hand and kiss her fingers. I stopped myself before taking her hand, realizing my fingers were still a mess from the food that Beowulf had acquired for me. I looked round and about the table, wiping at my hands. Pushing them against my pants. Against my shirt. My companion of the table was gone, I noticed. He had taken one look at Del Morgan and fled without even trying to finish his story. Scraping fingers to my satisfaction, I took her hand with my own and touched her fingers to my lips.

Why did I do that? Kiss her like that? I really don't know. The way she stood there. The way she looked at me, holding out her hand. It was just expected of me. I really didn't have much say in the matter. I had let go her hand before it even registered in the more coherent portions of my brain that I had done anything of the kind. I was still lost in the grip of divine madness. I was tripping. I was so high I could not see the ground. Why did I kiss her hand? Why not?

Del Morgan didn't even smile.

seven
J.A.F.S.

I don't think I ever saw Del Morgan smile. Let me rephrase that. I don't think I ever saw Del Morgan smile because of me. Anything I did. Anything I did not do. Anything I did right. Anything I may have done wrong. Anything she may have found amusing. She may have smiled. She may even have laughed. I just don't remember it. She did not speak to me then, standing in the common market, holding her hand so that I could swear my undying allegiance to her. Okay, it wasn't quite like that, but it might as well have been. *Down on one knee! Say the oath, dog! Say it!* It didn't go off like that at the time, but I'm sure you get the idea. Did I know what the hell I was doing at the time? No, of course not, but that is hardly the point. The point is that I was shanghaied.

So, she did not say anything to me as I sat at that table at the common market with the scent of hunger's food still fresh on my hands. She only spoke to Beowulf Drake. She thanked him for his services. I'm not repeating her exact words because I swear to you that I do not remember what she said. I only remember that she thanked him. I only remember her voice. Not the words. Her voice. Rich. Deep. Born of the earth. How to describe? This was the voice of someone who was born to lead. Who was used to giving orders. Someone who was used to being obeyed without question or comment.

Something I should have mentioned before. Del Morgan had the spark. The gift. Glamour. She had it. The mysterious whatever that cannot be described that divides the world into leaders and followers. She took command through sheer force of personality. You wanted to obey her. You would die for her. Many had. Many more would.

She said nothing to me. Only turned and began to walk away. I wanted to follow her. I wanted to spring from that table and walk in her shadow. Like an excitable puppy to lick at her heel if she would but give me the chance. I looked to Beowulf. Not knowing what to do. Not understanding. He had brought me to this place. Was I free to go? Free to leave? Did I want to? Where would I go? What would I do? What was this place?

"Well, go on."

That was the only permission I needed. The thing I had been waiting for. I followed after Del Morgan. Reaching her before she disappeared into the crowd. She did not look to see if I was there, as if she knew I would be. As if it was so natural that I would follow after her that there was never even the slightest doubt in her that I would be. Waiting for her to notice me. Waiting for her to acknowledge me. Waiting for Heaven's grace.

I followed her to the train station just as I would have followed her to the end of the Earth. We waited for the train. A special, belching smoke. Whistle so mournful that it was like nothing you have ever heard issue from a train before. The train was for us alone. Well, for her. I was just along for the ride. She did not speak to me then. Only looked out the window, watching the hills flow by.

We returned to the city. Walked its streets. Forget about the box, okay? And, the beach. I never saw it again. We exited the subway. Left the underground. Del Morgan led me to her penthouse. As high above the street as you can get and not have the sky and the stars beneath your feet. My new home. Don't try to find the place on a map. This particular apartment building is in that part of the city which exists just around the corner. Over there. Keep going. You've almost found it. It's the second one on the right and straight on 'til morning. Yeah, that's the place.

The lobby is impressive. No, it's not. Very nondescript. You would never guess the importance of the people living there if you did actually manage to stumble across the place. Small. Gray walls. Potted plant dying in the corner. Smells like piss. The lobby not the plant. One guy sitting behind a dinky desk that looks like it was made out of old newspaper and then varnished. Guy looks like a disgraced linebacker. Looks so bored that he doesn't even blink when Del Morgan walks toward the elevator.

"That's Door. Think of him like a concierge at a hotel. You have any questions. You need anything. Ask him. He'll set you up. Tell you how to get it. Anything."

So, I give the guy a closer look as we wait for the elevator. He returns the look with barely a turn of his head as if he can size me up just from the corner of his eye. He has a voice like twenty pounds of old gravel.

"JAFS?"

"Yeah, Door, he's my new JAFS."

All evidence to the contrary, Door is really a nice guy. Like Del

Morgan said, if you need something, Door can deliver. Your continued happiness and welfare is his purpose in life. I should also point out that Door doesn't work directly for Del Morgan. He belongs to the building. Until I learned otherwise, I thought he was part of the building. Because he is part of the building staff and is so well respected by the tenants, he can get away with saying shit like J.A.F.S. It took me a while to figure out what he meant. It was my first clue that maybe I wasn't going to like the place. Just another f- servant. I can't even say the word. Not when it's directed at me. Just another f-with-an-ing-on-the-end servant.

And, this next part is a cliché. Ugly downtrodden lobby. Opulent penthouse apartment. Ooh, I never would have seen that one coming. Elevator was a bit of a rat-hole. It was a little nicer than the lobby but not by much; after all, the elevator does open onto the lobby. Why, we can't have the scum thinking that the lobby is trash but just look at that elevator. They might catch on. Personally, I don't understand the theory of Hell's Lobby. They can stand on the street and see the really swank building, right? So, who are they trying to fool? I gave up trying to understand them a long time ago.

The penthouse? It's huge. It's grand. It must take up the top couple of floors. Elevator doors open and *wow! Check out the spread!* Well, not quite. Elevator opens onto a little foyer. Thing looks just about as blasted as the lobby. Then, you get the door to the penthouse open. The little coat closet just inside the door must be as big as my entire apartment. My old apartment. The one I used to live in before I took a little walk on a beach.

There are two women waiting for us. One of them takes Del Morgan's coat and places it in the closet. Now, I know what you're thinking. Two women? One's short and the other is tall, right? Maybe one is skinny and the other is fat? No? Oh, they must be twins, right? Nope, not even close. They're not Faire Folk proper, but some stuff does seem to have rubbed off on them. Hell, stuff has rubbed off on me. So, what do they look like? Let me just say this and then I'll give up on trying to describe anyone ever again. Sometimes, they are men, and sometimes, they are women. The annoying thing is that their names never change. That may be the only way to keep track of them.

"Hannah and Romana. My housekeepers. This is Drake."

And, that was it. End of the introductions. Hannah and Romana took one look at me as if they hated my guts and then wandered

off as if they didn't need Del Morgan's permission to disappear. They are always very busy. What with a place this size and only two housekeepers. Oh, yes, they are busy. Del Morgan doesn't even have to boss them around. They know their job.

Interesting tidbit, Del Morgan doesn't have a cook. That surprised me at first. You would think that someone as well off as Del Morgan would have some kind of master chef preparing all her meals. Nope, doesn't happen. Del Morgan cooks all her own food. She didn't strike me as the cooking type. I didn't even believe her at first. Now, I know better. There is a very good reason why she prepares all her own food. Remember when I said that the Faire Folk were not above poisoning a rival? Among the Faire Folk, find a survivor. One who has played the game long and hard. And, you'll find yourself a gourmet chef. I take that back. It sounds like another cliché. I'll tell you what. If you believe that someone who cooks all her own food to avoid poisoning would eat gruel for three meals a day, then she eats gruel. If you believe that someone who cooks all her own food to avoid poisoning would become a rocking good cook, then she can whip out food like you wouldn't believe. Master of the spice rack, too.

Oh, and, I didn't get a tour of the place. I would be left to my own devices for exploring, but that doesn't happen, yet. She takes me to a living room, entertaining room, sidebar or whatever you want to call it. There's furniture and paintings on the wall. Really nice multimedia center. Anyway, I think it was more of a servant's living room than for guests.

"You are my personal assistant. Not directly attached to the household staff. A gopher, if you will. If I need something, I send you to fetch it. Deliver messages. Sort my mail. It is a hard job. I'll be sending you on a lot of errands. Difficult tasks. That's why I acquired you. You survived the lands beyond. You should have little problem here. Many things you see will be new to you. I'm not going to lead you by the hand. You'll have to sort things out as you go. Ask Door. I'm not going to repeat myself on this. You're going to have to remember to ask Door on your own. Oh, and, one more thing. I don't need you. I want to make that perfectly clear. Don't think you're special. There is nothing you can do that I cannot do for myself."

As if to prove her point, she sticks her hand in my chest and rips out my heart. No, shit! I can't believe it. Hurts like hell. One min-

ute, she's giving me that stupid *welcome to the family* speech. Next, she reaches over. Her fingers sink into my chest. I can't describe it. Hurts like you wouldn't believe. I can hear bones crack as she digs through my breastplate. Blood. Slimy with blood. I can feel her reaching around in my chest. A ring on her finger. She's got my heart. She's got my heart. I can feel her fingers slipping around it. Pull! There's this great sucking sound. And, then, pop! She's holding my heart in her hand. I feel void. I can't scream. I'm looking at my heart. Still pumping. Blood slurping onto the floor.

"I'll keep this someplace safe. Can't have anyone just up and killing you now, can we?"

I want to talk. I want to scream. I want to cry out. My whole shirt-front is soaked. There is this great gaping maw in my chest. Oozing fluids. Spitting blood. I feel a draft. My heart in her hand continues to beat. I can feel her fingers touching it. They are warm and slippery. Don't drop me!

"That's another thing you may have noticed. You cannot speak unless someone gives you permission. Asks you a direct question. That sort of thing."

It's true. I open my mouth. Find no words. No voice. Just a rasping sound like an engine that is about to die. I'm on my knees. Looking at the blood. Trying to breathe, I feel shards of bone dig into my flesh.

"Look at this mess. Well, don't just sit there. Clean yourself up."

It hurts. Hurts so much it burns. I've got my hand over the hole. Trembling fingers. Feeling void. Slick with blood. I want to puke. I want to vomit hot blood. Choking. Rasping. All I can do is look at her.

"What are you waiting for? Clean yourself up. I paid five million dollars for you. If you can't handle this, then you're useless to me. A waste of good money. I should crush your heart right now before you have a chance to embarrass me."

Oh, shit! Oh, God! Oh, fuck me, I don't want to die! I can't do this. There's a great gaping hole in my chest! I can feel my heart beat. Oh, God, I can feel her fingers. Squeezing! Squeezing the life from me! I'm alive! I can feel my heart! Her fingers. Blood still pumping. Just close the wound. It's like shape shifting. Hey, get off your ass, you fuck! You dumb shit! You can do this! You're alive! Feel the pain! Telling you, you want to live! Feel the blood flow! Pumping in your veins! Heart is in her hand. In her hand! But, it's

still working! You're alive! Like shape shifting, close the wound. I know you feel void. Feel your heart! It's over there, but it's in you! Bind bones. Mend skin. Close the void. Feel your heart beat. You can breath again.

"That's better. You may turn out to be a good investment, yet."

With that, she turns and leaves. My heart in her hand. I gasp for air. Try to stand. Slip on my own blood. Smear the floor. Flounder for the couch. And, as I lie there, breathing, feeling my heart, I saw her lick her arm. I remember. As she left the room, she had licked the blood that had dripped down her arm. Her tongue touched my heart. I turn my head. Look. Romana is there. With a mop and a pail. She starts wiping the blood on the floor. And, she looks at me crumpled on the couch. Looks as if she wants to find my heart. Eat it from Del Morgan's outstretched hand. And, that's all I remember.

eight

The Rules of the Game

The penthouse apartment was huge. It must have been at least the top three floors of the building. There were living rooms and dining rooms and a billiard room. A great hall. A formal ballroom. Big enough for several hundred guests plus twenty piece orchestra. Kitchen. Bathroom. Not as many of those as I would have thought. You could do laps in the bathtub in more than one of the bathrooms. Visiting room. Recreation room in addition to the billiard room. This one had a very fine multimedia center. Library. I've seen real libraries that are smaller than Del Morgan's private collection.

Okay, I take that back. The apartment must have been more than the top three floors. I never was a good judge of that kind of thing. And, contrary to what you may be thinking, the inside was not larger than the outside. Meaning, this isn't *Doctor Who*. It was a very well designed place. Everything fit. It wasn't like suddenly finding the outside was really the inside of a box sitting on a beach. The apartment was huge, but it was still an apartment in the city. I mean, sure, just try and find the building on a map. But, once you were inside, everything made more sense than some places I've been.

Why? If you could fit the city in a bottle, then why bother coloring inside the lines? I don't know. I've given up trying to understand

these people. It's a fad. Like slumming. Not coloring outside the lines. For the Faire Folk that takes skill. So, yeah, the apartment building required a sustained level of commitment if you wanted to live there. It was a true sign of your station in life. Something like that.

The other reason I'm not sure how many floors the place took up was because I don't think I ever saw the whole thing. I mean there was no tour. Nobody showed me around and told me what was what. I was simply left to my own devices to figure out what went where. After Del Morgan did that little stunt where she ripped out my heart, I didn't see her again for days. That's also why I figure I never saw the whole place. I mean, of course, I went looking for my heart. What do you think I am? Stupid? I want my bloody heart back! She took it. Like she owned me. Getting my heart back was high on my agenda.

The thing is I never saw any part of the place that looked like Del Morgan's personal chambers. No private study. Bedroom. Bathroom. That sort of thing. Okay, I know what you're thinking. The whole place was her personal residence, d'uh! That just shows you need to hang out in opulent homes more. See, there is personal and then there is personal. The parts that are on display so everyone can see how wonderful you are. And, the parts that are really none of your business. Like private bedrooms. And, the ever-popular private study.

I never found any of it. Nothing that looked like it was really her private rooms. And, I looked. Oh, they were there. I know that. I figure what happened was that I was not allowed to notice them. Take that staircase over there. What staircase? Oh, never mind. There were no doors I couldn't open. If Del Morgan didn't want me turning a knob, she hid the whole door from me. Crazy? Oh, I don't think so. See, there was something else I couldn't find. The front door. I looked for that, too. Couldn't find it. Didn't notice it. Where was it? Oh, yeah, I was trapped in this place. Also, I couldn't talk unless spoken to first, remember? This went right in line with that I figure.

That was freaky. Not being able to talk. I mean, sure, it wasn't as if I had done a lot of talking of late. I mean, being all alone on that beach. Who was there to talk to? But, see, there is a difference between not wanting to talk and not being able to. On that beach, I could bark at the moon to my hearts content. I could stand on that

beach. Throw my arms wide to the sky and scream. Working for Del Morgan? Nope, no way, forget it.

So, I woke up on that couch. All crumpled up. Del Morgan was gone. Rohana was gone. The bloodstain was gone. My clothes were still a mess. Ugly. Ripped. Stained. Smelled, too. But, I was still there. What was I supposed to do? I finally clawed my way off that couch and started to do a little exploring. Don't know what hour it was. The day? Forget it. I wandered through a whole mess of rooms. All descriptions. Found my rooms. Nobody told me they were my rooms. I just sort of claimed them. Maybe that was just part of the deal. Like not being able to talk and not being able to find the front door. Found the kitchen. Well stocked. Nobody ever told me what to eat or what not to. So, I just took whatever I felt like. Something looked yummy? Well, I just claimed it by divine right of conquest. Manifest destiny and all of that. Never should have left it where I could stumble across it. That's what I say.

So, that's how things went for a time. Never saw Del Morgan. Just wandered around. Exploring the place. Looking for my heart when I felt like it. Looking for the door. Slept when I was tired. Ate when I was hungry. Avoided the evil twins as much as possible. Yeah, I know what I said. They are not twins. Not even related. Don't look anything alike. Or, grossly different. Or, anything, oh, God, I think I'm going to be sick. But, come on. Hannah and Romana? They hated me. I'm calling them the evil twins, okay? If that ticked them off. Good.

What was their problem? Why did they take such an instant dislike to me? Now, that has an interesting answer. And, it has to do with what the Faire Folk want. What do they want? Money? Power? Fame? Fortune? Power. Oh, definitely power. With just a touch of fame. Money? Who needs that? They've got buckets of the stuff. What do the Faire Folk want? That's an easy one. They want to be your parents. No, really. I mean, not literally. Give birth to you? No, they'll pass on that part. They just want to look after you. Or, more importantly, tell you what to do.

That is what the Faire Folk get off on. They want to make the rules. They want to tell you what to do. How to live. How to love. What is good. What is bad. The whole bit. Why? That's simple. They know more than you do. They know what ails you, and they know how to make it all better. They have only your best interest at heart. Yeah, right. To be more exact, they want only what they believe is

best for you. And, they do know what's best for you. They've been around the block a few more times than you as I've just finished explaining.

It's what they argue about. The Faire Folk. They argue and bicker and fight over which of them gets to make the rules. Which family really knows the best way to look after all of us. Wars get started over this kind of thing. Well, not exactly. Chess. Intrigue. The whole thing I was telling you all about. They don't go to war. But, sometimes, the people they're looking after go to war for them. Get it? Does one family's interest in being right get in the way of actually doing what is right for the people? Of course not. They are the Faire Folk. Silent "E," remember? Why they would never let such a thing as their arguments over the best way to look after people actually cause people harm. Nope, they would never let such a thing happen.

So, how do they enforce their will? Sorry, their benevolent leadership and moral guidance over all the people of all the lands both real and wholly imaginary. Do they go out and conquer? No, of course not. That is what the common market is for. Can you imagine such a thing? One place where all people can meet and do business. Trade. It's what makes the world go round. And, if you doubt me, just remember that one of the root causes of the American Revolution was over the taxation of trade. Do the words "Boston Tea-Party" ring a bell? They should. A bunch of smugglers and merchants discovered that England was going to start enforcing the tax on the importation of tea, and the hilarity ensued.

So, imagine a place where you can go to get anything. Absolutely anything. Now, imagine that not everyone knows about it. Why, you might be the only one. You might be able to corner the market. Wipe that drool off you chin.

Which brings us to the next question. Why would anyone build such a place? To get rich. Okay, beside that. Remember, the Faire Folk are not interested in money. They made the common market. What do they get out of it? Not trade. Remember, they can go to any of these places for any of the stuff they need. Besides, if it was for them, why make it possible for others to find it? If the Faire Folk are the smugglers and merchants, why not keep the riffraff out? Because they want all those greedy little beggars to come to market. To want the market. To discover that they cannot live without free access to the market.

You want to do business in the common market? You're going

to have to abide by a few rules of fair trade. We're all interested in fair trade, right? Of course, we are. You want to continue coming to market? You're going to have to abide by these other rules as well. We only deal with civilized people. You are civilized, right? A civilized person would accept the rules of fair trade. Would accept the high standards that all civilized people must abide by in order to remain a civilized people. We must be eternally vigilant.

And, that is what the Faire Folk want.

Which brings us by-and-by back to Hannah and Romana. They are of the People of Minor Darraghman. I may have mentioned that Del Morgan has acted as an advisor and patron to Darraghman. In exchange for her support. Well, let's be honest here. In an effort to curry her favor, the People of Minor Darraghman gave Del Morgan the services of Hannah and Romana. Volunteers, of course. Remember the rules of civilization? See, on the whole, they tend to be more beneficial to some groups than others. As long as Del Morgan looks favorably on the People of Minor Darraghman, she will insist that the rules of fair trade as well as the rules of civilization continue to benefit Darraghman.

Which brings us by-and-by back to me. Del Morgan acquired my services. Okay, let's be blunt here. She bought me. Like a fish. Or, a six-pack of beer. Because she felt like it. I was nobody's gift. It certainly wasn't my idea. But, what does that matter? Obtaining me has caused the People of Minor Darraghman some small concern. It could quite possibly mean that Del Morgan has taken an interest in us. You and me. All of us. Darraghman could be on the way out. That's a thought for much concern. My existence has probably caused the leaders among the People of Minor Darraghman many a sleepless night.

They have got to get ride of me. Or, at least, destroy my reputation. And, do so without Del Morgan catching on that they are up to something. So, there I was. Strange new world. Forcefully in the employ of one of the Faire Folk. My very life resting on her slightest whim. And, the household staff want to see me fail. Isn't life just grand?

nine

The Party Thereafter

That is how I found myself working for Del Morgan. I woke up on that couch. Still alive but missing one heart. Could I believe it actually happened? Hell, yeah! It had hurt like blazes. Fire and brimstone and all of that. Don't believe me? You try having someone rip out your heart and tell me what it feels like, okay? I mean there was an element of total fantasy to the whole thing. Life is meaningless. Nobody recognizes me. Find myself awash on the shores of reality. Taken to market. One heart to go. There was definitely something very unreal about everything. Dreamlike. I mean, even if I was in a rubber room drooling on my chin, how did I hallucinate Del Morgan walking off with my heart? For safekeeping?

It's that damn divine madness. I just kept accepting everything. That's why I crawled off that couch. Nobody around. Like the place was deserted. I just got up and started wandering around. Exploring. What was so different about the apartment from the beach? I just accepted things as they were presented to me without question or hesitation. So, maybe I was crazy. Did that mean I should start acting as if I was wearing a straitjacket and simply sit on that couch and gibber? No, of course not. If I was just going to lose it, then I never would have gotten off that beach.

So, I went looking around. Found all those really huge rooms. Discovered just how large my new home was. Took a couple of days of exploring. Never saw Del Morgan. Almost ran into Hannah and Romana once or twice. Quickly learned how to avoid those two. Never found the front door. So, what happened? When did you finally see Del Morgan again? Well, that was interesting. There was a party. I'm half convinced it was in my honor. Okay, not really in my honor. More like showing me off. But, not as if I was on display. Expected to do anything. Juggle. Sing. Roll over. Fetch. Good boy. Here's a nice little treat for you. No, nothing like that. I was simply expected to be there. Not supposed to say anything. Not even introduced. More of a *stand in the corner and don't get in anyone's way* kind of thing.

Wait a sec! So, why did I think the party was for me? Well, that's a little hard to explain. I'll try to start at the beginning.

I went back to the rooms I had claimed as mine and found a suit

laid out on the bed. Very nice. Fancy suit. But, not overly so. Not pretentious. Gaudy. Or, anything like that. Still, a very nice choice of clothes. So, I'm standing there holding the suit. Looking it over. I turn my head, and Del Morgan is standing there. Kind of in the doorway. What? She's actually respecting my space or something? I don't say anything. Can't. Don't have her permission.

"I'm hosting a Salon tomorrow. I expect you to be there."

Then, she's gone. That was it. End of discussion. Oh, sure, I'll be right there. Your wish is my command. I put the suit down. I was shaking. I couldn't believe it. I was afraid of her. I had to sit down. I mean the last time I saw her she had ripped out my heart. It had left a lasting impression on me. It had never occurred to me that I might have such a reaction until she faced me down. Oh, sure, people rip out my heart all the time. No, sweat. I can deal. I mean I suddenly realized that I didn't know if I could be in the same room with her. Oh, shit! And, I was supposed to attend this thing? This Salon? What the hell was that? And, wasn't I supposed to be her personal assistant or something? How had she notified people about this gathering? That was what first made me think it was about me. I mean, if you want to show someone off for the first time, you don't send him around with the invitations, right?

None of which matters. So, I went to this little gathering. This soiree. This party. This vinaloo. Salon. Quaking in my boots and all. What else was I supposed to do? Del Morgan had my heart. She could kill me for disobeying. So, I was there. Nice suit and all. Stood in a corner.

I'm not going to try and describe the Faire Folk. I'm not. It was a big gathering. Held in one of the nicer rooms for this sort of thing. Lots of places for people to stand. Sit. Sip their drinks. And, chat. Politics. Mostly it was about politics. That and an ounce of gossip. Personally, I think the two are so intricately woven together that for the Faire Folk gossip is politics. There wasn't much witty banter. That surprised me, I guess. They weren't hanging-out trying to one-up each other. Nope, the talk was all die-hard, cut-throat, serious shit. I must say that I learned a lot. The shards and crumbs I could pick-up and understand anyway. It was all very complicated. And, very civilized. Nobody raised their voice. Nobody showed the slightest hint of anger or displeasure. It was all very civilized. Call that a description of the Faire Folk if you wish.

They ignored me. I was part of the window-dressing. Or, maybe

it would have been bad form for one of them to get caught checking out the new help. Except for Windermere. She had no trouble walking right up to me. Talking to me.

“Do you like it here? Do you enjoy working for Del Morgan, Drake? Matthew Drake? It’s alright. You can answer me.”

“It’s all very strange to me.”

“That is understandable. Returning from the lands beyond, you find yourself in the employ of Del Morgan. Against your will? No, don’t answer that. The lands beyond must have been strange enough. How did you find yourself there?”

“I don’t know.”

“Of course. But, know this. You were chosen. You were- sent is a good word- to the lands beyond. Not by Del Morgan. No, of course not. See, I understand something of all of this. What it is like in the lands beyond. I have a Grendel. A Drake. Like you. Only female.”

“What?”

“Oh, yes, like you. A Man of Earth. But, female. I think you would like that. To be with one of your own kind? Male? Female? That is how it works among your people, I understand. She has been with me for a year or so. I have grown quite found of her. She has told me much of Earth. Of what it was like to find herself in the lands beyond. What it took to survive.”

“Please, I don’t.”

“It’s alright. Quite alright. I understand. You have been here less than a month. You are still very much confused. Disorientated. That is why Del Morgan has been so kind to you. But, that will change, I fear. Once you have found your feet. Yes, that will change. But, I should not distress you so. You should meet my Grendel. That would make you happy. When I told her that I would be meeting you, she became quite excited. Knowing there was another like her. Only male.”

“There are others like me?”

“Yes, you should definitely meet her. Only. There is one condition. For the two of you to be happy. You really should share the same roof. The same home. You should work for me. Not to speak ill of Del Morgan. You should join me. Leave Del Morgan. You will find her to be a cruel taskmaster. I can give you a female Man of Earth.”

I really didn’t know what to say. Another person like me? I was not alone in this place? Other people had found themselves opening doors and found the ocean and the beach beyond? I mean I was

kind of grossed out by her offer. Work for me and I'll give you a plaything? Was she looking to start a breeding program? At the same time, she was talking about others like me. Other people. Like me. Someone who had been through what I had been through. Temptation, thy name is fellowship. There was more temptation. If one other like me, then more? How many People of Earth were here? Slaves to the Faire Folk? Another thing. She was talking as if I could simply say I didn't want to be a slave to Del Morgan anymore and that would be the end of it. Could I quit at any time? Go my own way? Or, would I always require a patron?

Why was Del Morgan allowing this conversation to happen? I looked to the room. The others were there. Still talking. Still ignoring me. I had noticed this. As Windermere had continued talking to me, the others had grown more distant. I mean they had not walked farther away. They had simply seemed to grow distant. Their voices had slowly become faint. As if they were talking in another room. The same room. No walls had magically appeared. But, at the same time, it was as if we had slipped into another place. Somewhere the other Faire Folk could not overhear us. Somewhere that Del Morgan did not know what Windermere was saying. Strange as it may sound, I suddenly realized that I was trapped with Windermere.

If the other Faire Folk did not know what was being said. Did not know what was happening. What could Windermere do? I had no love for Del Morgan. She scared the shit out of me. She had hurt me. Violated me. Raped me. Taking my heart. Telling me she would kill me if I did not clean up the mess. She had my heart. She could kill me. Crush me. Eat my soul. Could I betray her? Without my heart? Could I afford to? I was in Windermere's trap. What could she do to me? She needed my heart to kill me, right? The others were distant. I was alone with Windermere. To be free of Del Morgan. To be with one of my own kind. If I betrayed Del Morgan, would Windermere ever trust me? If I betrayed Del Morgan, how long would I live? For the love of God, I didn't know what to say.

ten
Cravings of the Soul

So, that was everything that was screaming through my head. More or less. There were other people like me. All prisoners, I figured. All slaves. There was a chance that we could throw off our shackles, and all we had to do was ask. Of course, I didn't know that for sure. I mean it wasn't like anyone had told me that if I didn't like the meatloaf I could send it back. So, maybe that was the trick. All you have to do is ask. But, you don't know if it'll work. You never hear about anyone who did it. They are not going to tell you. That is for sure. Are you going to try it? Are you? Easy for you to say. Reading this. You weren't cornered by Windermere. Telling you to betray Del Morgan. She had ripped out my heart. Del Morgan had. It still burned. What else could she do?

What could Windermere do? I mean she must have had a pair of big hairy ones to stand in Del Morgan's house and offer me a job. That was enough to make me think. What could she do? All of this was racing through my mind. All of it. I was standing there. Not knowing what to say. Fumbling for words. And, she wasn't going to give me an out. She wasn't going to offer to let me think it over. No, she wanted an answer right there and then. The only question was how carefully could I word the answer? Could I get my mind to behave enough to think of one? You have to be careful what you say. Even a polite neutral answer can be enough to be considered binding. Hey, I had just spent the last couple of hours listening to the Faire Folk talk politics so I think I had a sense of how carefully I had to word this.

"You have given me much to think about. Everything is so strange."

"I can help."

Shit! Okay, she didn't want to take *let me think it over* for an answer. Not that I didn't want to leave the option open. Okay, I didn't really want to leave the option open. I mean she was basically offering me sex in exchange for working for her. But, not in a good way. More like she was offering me a whore to screw anytime I felt like it. No, not even. A slave whore. Like those women you hear about on the news who are trying to escape Third-world poverty and persecution and discover their ride to freedom is really a ride to a back

alley exotic massage parlor. Ick! Yeah, all of this went screaming through my head at the time.

“There are some things that one must discover on his own.”

“Or else he is less than a man?”

Ooh, that sounded good. I wonder if I can run with it?

“Everything is so strange. If I cannot. I am nothing.”

“And so, everything is bound up by your sex. I suspected as such from my Grendel.”

“I must think. Everything is new to me. You. Everything.”

“Of course. But, I must warn you. Del Morgan is being kind because everything is yet new to you. There will come a time when she will force herself upon you. I can only offer my hand for so long.”

Yeah, and Del Morgan ripping out my heart was a kindness. Okay, so, things were only going to get worse. I kind of suspected that. By this point, I was totally confused by our clever little conversation. I didn't know if I had turned her down flat or if I could give her an answer tomorrow. Was she not going to take “no” for an answer? I mean I didn't really want to turn her completely away. What if I discovered that I could use her help later? Oops, sorry, burned that bridge already. I mean there was still that whole breeding program ick factor. But, then again, what wasn't icky around here? Then again, she seemed to be accepting my fast-talking side-steps awfully fast. Should I have been worried about that? There was still the chance that she was going to end our little conversation by ripping out my throat. And, on top of all of that, I thought I could hear the others growing closer. As if things weren't strange enough. Argh! My head! It's going to explode! All this thinking and second-guessing! I could feel my brain start to squish out my ears. No, not literally! What were we talking about? Oh, right, she had said something about only being able to help me for so long.

“Risk. The universe is risk. That is how we live.”

“A gambler, too? Splendid. We must play chess sometime. One more gamble then I must go. Know this. You were chosen, as I said. But, it goes beyond that. I know why you were chosen. They have plans for you, and it isn't to be Del Morgan's errand boy. I can help. Remember. I can help.”

Oh, great, that is exactly what I wanted to hear. You know I have never been able to figure out if she was serious or if that was just some kind of parting *screw you, too* kind of thing. If I cannot have you, then nobody can! See, after she said all that *you have a destiny*

crap, she turned and reentered the party, leaving me to stand at the edge of silence all by myself. Well, she had given me a lot to think about. That's all I can say.

I don't even think anyone noticed our little conversation. Not right away, anyway. Someone did notice. Of course, I didn't learn about that until much later. Not until after the party. Nothing that interesting happened for the rest of the evening. Everybody got good and drunk, and they all went home. Del Morgan disappeared. Hannah and Romana swooped in to start cleaning everything up. So, of course, I made a hasty retreat.

I couldn't sleep. Sprawled out on my bed. Tossing and turning. The old brain-pan was too fired-up. And, what was I stuck on, I ask you? Why, the possibility that there were others like me. People who had found themselves on a little stretch of beach where there had no business being anything resembling anything of the kind. People who had found themselves doing stuff like flying and shape shifting and dancing lightning bolts and all of that. That's another strange thing. I had started to doubt myself. That I had done any of that freaky stuff I had done on the beach. Then, Del Morgan had ripped out my heart. Oh, yeah, having to heal a gaping chest wound does a lot to convince oneself that you really can do all of that shit. To find others like me? Why, then there would be no doubt at all. We really could do all kinds of fancy not of this earth shit.

Like I said, I couldn't sleep. I was also hungry. I hadn't eaten since long before the party. I decided that it was time for some food. Maybe something sticky chewy gooey. Yeah, that sounded good. There was a light on. That was strange. Not from the kitchen. It was coming from one of the other rooms. Okay, maybe not so strange. I mean I didn't even know what hour it was. It could be day. It could be night. I found it hard to keep track of things like time in this place. But, it meant that someone else was out and about. Probably Hannah and Romana. I didn't really want to run into them. So, the concept of food kept dragging me toward the kitchen. Maybe some fresh bread. There was always fresh bread in the kitchen. Stuff it full of cheese and mushrooms and this strip steak that I had seen in there the other day. Little olive oil. A dash of mustard. Flash bake it. Yeah, that sounded really good.

The light was coming out of the billiard room. That was interesting. Hannah and Romana never really went in there. So, curiosity got the better of me, okay? I should have known better. I found Del

Morgan in the billiard room. She was playing a solo game. Knocking the balls into the pockets. Setting up trick shots. Sinking them all. She was smoking, too. A really thin cigar. I mean I always think of cigars as being those monster things you see in movies or bad TV. Symbols of wretched excess. No, really, what do you think of when you think of a cigar? Fat cat sitting back. Lighting one up. Laughing over these bulging sacks with green dollar signs painted on them, right? Del Morgan's cigar was slender. It was sleek. Looked almost like a cigarette, but I don't know. I just couldn't bring myself to believe it was one of those. Smelled like a cigar.

Del Morgan noticed me standing in the doorway. Didn't say anything. She motioned me into the room. Oh, well, so much for food. And, you want to know something really strange? I wasn't scared. I mean the last time I had seen her I had almost pissed myself. Flash-back to when she ripped out my heart, I guess. This time? Oh, it's you. Noticed something else. She looked scuffed-up. Like she had been in a fight or something. Bruise high on her cheek just under the eye. Skin was cracked. If that's the right way to put it. So, she looked back up from her game. Brushed her hand past her face as if she were moving hair away from her eyes. Looking at me. I swear she was reading my mind.

"Just protecting my investment. Windermere won't be bothering you again."

I thought I was going to throw-up. I mean, the first thing to flash through my mind. Oh, shit, she knows! I'm going to die! Like I had done something wrong. Del Morgan had stumbled across my fiendishly clever plot to escape. Something like that. I had a secret, and she had ratted it out already. It's not like I had wanted Windermere's help. The problem was that it was no longer an option. Del Morgan knew everything. Everything was ashes before it had even begun. And, the one thing going through my mind as she lined up her next shot was how long did I have before she punished me.

More than that really. I mean she was scraped-up. Like she had done ten rounds with a lawnmower. Okay, nothing that bad. But, I mean, at that moment, I wanted her bloody. I wanted her to have been reduced to a bloody pulp. Gruesome. To need Romana to arrive with mop and pail to sop up all the blood. Aside from the bruise, she had maybe a couple of scratches. Here and there. Nothing requiring even a Band-Aid. I knew. I just knew that she had confronted Wind-

ermere about our little talk. That Windermere was the one gushing blood. The one who had lost the fight.

So, Del Morgan didn't say anything. Sunk another billiard ball. The cigar went all but ignored between her fingers. Trailing smoke. As if she just liked to hold them or something. I just stood there. Watched her sink trick shots. Waiting for her to strike me upside the head with the pool cue. I could feel her do it. Her fingers slipping around my heart. I could image her taking a big swing with that pool stick in her hands. Me? Lost my appetite real fast. I couldn't have said anything even if I wanted to. She hadn't given me permission to talk, yet. Finally, she looked back to me.

"Fancy a game?"

Didn't even wait for me to answer. Just started racking up the balls. Looked like she was setting up a game of Nine Ball. Let's see if I can remember how to play. You have to knock the balls back in order starting at one. If you miss a shot or sink one out of turn, you have to let the other person shoot. Something like that. Well, if there was anything odd about the rules, I guess I would just find out as we went along. Handed me her pool stick. I almost flinched. Like I expected her to hit me. I can't believe that I flinched. That's it. Look guilty, why don't you! She didn't say anything. Waited. I took the cue. She went to the wall to get another stick for herself. I lined up my first shot. Took a deep breath. And, almost dug a deep furrow in the billiard table with my cue. Cue ball goes flailing off to one side like it's making a break for it. Whack! Whack! Whack! Finally, smacks into the other balls. They break. Leisurely, like they are in absolutely no hurry to get anywhere. Cue ball just sits there, looking all smug about itself. Hey, I can't remember the last time I played. Shoot me, okay?

Del Morgan doesn't say anything. Takes a drag on her cigar. Surveys her first shot.

"Are you married, Drake?"

"No- I mean I was. She left me recently."

"Oh, I am sorry. Truly sorry to hear that. What happened?"

"I don't know. Who ever understands these things, anyway?"

"I was married once. Don't like to talk about it. There is always a reason."

"Oh, I know. I guess it's that old joke. Never go out with someone just because their locker is next to yours. We got married out of

High School. We got family student housing at my university that way.”

“Let me guess. She paid the bills. You studied.”

“Yeah, she waited tables so I could get a degree. The idea was that once I had a big fancy-paying job it would be her turn to get an education. The thing is. Once I got that job. I could support both of us. She didn’t need to keep working. So, why get a degree?”

“Pride.”

“Pride? That’s a funny way to say it. But, yeah, sense of self-worth. Self-fulfillment. But, I mean I had the job. I had the wife. What else was there to make my life complete? Kids. I wanted kids. There is her self-worth. Her fulfillment. As a wife and mother. A degree? How long would that take? I wanted kids. So, did she. I wanted them right away. Why did she need a degree to raise kids? My mom didn’t need one.”

“And, look how well you turned out.”

“Hey! I didn’t want to be sixty before my last kid left home. What would the guys at work think? Your wife’s too busy for you, huh? Maybe you’re not satisfying her needs. I mean. Fuck you, Charlie! Oh, sorry.”

“As well you should be. I will not tolerate cursing in my household. This one time I can forgive you. But, you were not able to reach an understanding?”

“No, it just got worse and worse. All we did was argue. She even tried to go back to work. We didn’t need two incomes. Why go back to work? I thought she would enjoy the free time.”

“And so, she left you.”

“Yeah, just came home from work one day. And, all of her stuff was gone.”

Del Morgan didn’t say anything. She just looked at me from across the billiard table. She hadn’t taken a shot in a while. I couldn’t even remember whose turn it was.

“Do you believe in God, Drake?”

“Wha- what? What kind of question is that?”

“It’s a perfectly natural question. Do you believe in God?”

“Not anymore.”

“When did you lose your faith?”

I remember looking up from that desk. Before Del Morgan. Before the beach. I had looked up from that desk. Looking around and about the office. I remember looking to all the other people.

Working. Talking. Taking phone calls. Shuffling paper. We had all just been shuffling paper. This way. That way. Someone must have cared, but it certainly had not been me. We should have burned the building and danced around it naked.

“I don’t remember.”

“I am sorry. I hope you find your faith again.”

We didn’t talk after that. Finishing the game, there was nothing more to say. It was strange. I couldn’t look at Del Morgan. She had bought me. Paid five million dollars. Had ripped out my heart just to prove that she owned me. But, after that game, I couldn’t look at her. I couldn’t see her the same way again. She seemed almost human. She had almost been kind. Gave me all the time I needed to adjust to her world. Well, almost all the time. It wasn’t long after that talk that she put me to work. Del Morgan sent me on my first errand.

eleven

Crocodile Fantasy

Yeah, my days of wine and roses were over. I mean everything had been very much like a dream. A lot had happened that was totally bizarre and horrible. Sure, I know. But, what had I done in that time? Really, it was almost a vacation. I certainly hadn’t worked. It’s a funny thing to say. I mean, looking back, I can say it was a wonderful time of leisure. At the time, it was hell. I still had yet to learn what hell was. If I can be so bold as to abuse the phrase. I think it all ties into the survival instinct. That divine madness thing I told you about. The only way to survive the sudden and irreversible transformation of your universe is to get kind of dreamy about it. Like it’s not really happening. Or, happening over there. Not here. Over there.

And, think about exactly what had happened. I had gone from a stress filled work-a-day world to a nice quiet little corner of beach out in the middle of nowhere. I mean if it hadn’t been so freaky and cut off from everything I had ever known. I might have actually enjoyed it. Throw in the fact that I went round the twist for a while there. Fantasy to magic and all of that. Hey, it was close to paradise. Then, I mean, sure. Del Morgan ripped out my heart, which was

more painful than I can describe. But, like the beach. I got used to the place. What did I do in Del Morgan's apartment? I wandered around. I explored when I felt like it. I listened to her wonderful music collection. I slept when I was tired. I ate wonderful food when I was hungry. Nothing was required of me. Hey, it was pretty close to paradise. Except I had been bought and paid for. Yeah, that kind of sucked.

So, I don't know how to describe this. In a strange way, it was all very nice. It was all very relaxing. Like a dream. Like a fantasy. One brief, shining, glimpse of Heaven. Do I miss it? Well, I know this is all going to sound very strange. But, yeah, I miss it. Not constantly needing to avoid Hannah and Romana. Okay, I give you that. And, the fact that I didn't have my heart. But, yeah, I miss it. Why? Well, that would require me to get a little ahead of myself, and I was just about to tell you about the first thing Del Morgan ever asked of me. Well, she did ask me to go to that party. And, it wasn't exactly as if she asked. But, you get the idea.

"Crocodile eggs? Real live crocodile eggs? So, I just go to the corner exotic pet store and ask for a dozen crocodile eggs?"

"That is for you to figure out."

And, that was about the extent of our little conversation. Del Morgan wanted crocodile eggs. Weird. And, when I had them, I was just to put them in the kitchen. Not even give them directly to her or anything. The first time she would know if I accomplished my task would be when she had a hankering for an omelet. Oh, joy, that meant I didn't even know what kind of time frame I had for acquiring the eggs. Or, where to begin. Or, anything.

Crocodile eggs? Where does one get crocodile eggs? Okay, first things first. Crocodile eggs? Okay, ick. That was first. I shouldn't say things like that. I'm sure they are a delicacy. Second on the agenda. I didn't know where to begin. What? Whip out the yellow pages? Yes, I would like to order a dozen crocodile eggs, please. Why, to go, of course. Which raised its own problem. I had never noticed a telephone in this place. Okay, so, ordering them by phone was out. Probably no phonebook anywhere in the entire place. I would just have to ask someone. Not Del Morgan. No, she had made that abundantly clear. And, not Hannah and Romana. I wasn't that crazy. I could just see them laugh at me. Or, worse, they would send me on some wild goose chase.

Who else was there? The doorman? Oh, yeah, that's right. Del

Morgan told me to ask the doorman if I ever needed anything. What was his name? Door. Oh, yeah, right. How original. Okay, first problem solved. Ask Door. Which raised an otherwise impossible to imagine or describe problem. I couldn't find the door. No, really, I'm serious. Door was downstairs. That would require me to take the elevator. Which was outside the apartment. I hadn't seen the door to the apartment since my first day here. Since that time, I hadn't found it once. I had even gone looking for it pretty seriously. This was crazy. I had to find crocodile eggs. I didn't know where to begin. I had to ask the doorman for help. I had to find the door to ask Door. Watch out! My brain! It's going to explode! I had to find door to ask Door. Oh, yes, that is funny. Watch me cry crocodile tears. Kill me now, Lord!

Okay, I suppose locating the front door wasn't as hard as I thought. I had already done a lot of searching for it. I had looked in all the reasonable and logical places. It was time for a little reverse psychology. I figured the best thing to do was come across the door unawares. When it was least expecting me. Kind of sneak up on it. Wander the halls. Look at the ceiling. Whistle. I'm not looking for the door. No, I don't need the door. What? Now, you're going to think I'm crazy? Now? Hey, I had spent a lot of time in this place. I didn't even know how long. I think I've got a handle on how this place works. No, it didn't help me find the door, but that is totally beside the point.

So, how did I finally find the door? Well, that is still interesting. More reverse psychology. If I couldn't find the door, then the door was going to find me. Just remember I had spent a lot of time on that little stretch of beach. Doing interesting things that should have been impossible. I was getting desperate. I had healed a great gaping chest wound so I figured I could do this. I drew an imaginary door in the air. Just kind of traced the outline of it. Well, I didn't see anything. I'm not crazy. I was just tracing an imaginary door in the air. If there were an invisible door freestanding right in the middle of the kitchen, what would it look like? So, I just traced a big rectangle in the air. Reached down. Opened the door. And, stepped into the foyer. Just like that.

Told you, it was easy. After that, it was simply a matter of waiting for the elevator. Riding it down to Hell's Lobby. I told you about the lobby, right? I can't always keep track of these things. Door was waiting for me. Well, not exactly waiting for me. I mean I don't think

he ever left the lobby. Day or night. He just sat there. Watched me walk right up to the desk. And, I discovered something interesting. I couldn't talk. Shit! You think I would be getting used to this by now. I couldn't say anything until he gave me permission. Now, here's a scary thought. What if I'm with a big group of people? Do they all have to give me permission before I can say anything? Ooh, that's going to keep me up nights.

"Good morning, Drake. What can I do for you?"

Morning?

"I need to get crocodile eggs."

"Of course, nothing simpler. There's a little shop around here that can set you right up. Do you know the neighborhood? No, I didn't think so. I'll scrounge you up a guide. Jack!"

Jack is this sleepy-eyed looking kid. Well, kid in the sense that he looked like he was in his late teens or early twenties. He wandered out of some back room behind Door that I would never have guessed was there. Wearing some grunge jacket and ripped jeans. I mean, just try describing one of these guys. I give up. Don't think that was what he was actually wearing. I'm just trying to give you a sense of the guy. The kid half-staggers up to the desk, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

"This is Drake. Works for Del Morgan. He needs crocodile eggs."

"Take him to Old Man Whetstone?"

"Yeah, that will do. Drake? Whetstone runs a little shop where you can get all kinds of stuff. Not all of it as exotic as crocodile eggs."

So, that was it. Jack was going to take me to meet this fellow Whetstone. I've never been able to figure out if he was one of the Faire Folk. Jack and Door? No, they're not Faire Folk. Like Hannah and Romana, they had been around enough to pick stuff up. Especially for Door, I'm convinced they've got talent because of the job. Anyway, I followed Jack out the front door of the apartment building. Down the street. And, we waited for the local cross-town bus. I found myself clear across town before we reached this Whetstone guy. I love Door's idea of a shop around the corner. Clear across town? Oh, boy. What does he consider far away?

twelve

The Old Hometown

You want to know what was really weird? We were in the city. My city. The one I had been living in before the beach. The one I had called home. The place I had had a job before that freak had told me my name was Matthew Drake. And, that was really freaky. Walking down that street behind Jack. Looking for crocodile eggs. I recognized stuff. I mean I was never the greatest expert on the city, but I could tell the different between a hawk and a handsaw. I still can't find Del Morgan's apartment building on a map. Ask me for directions, and I can get you as far as a local cross street. At which point, you'll say that I'm lying. There's no apartment building near there. The worst part? You can see the building. No, really, if you're standing on the city street and look that way, you can see the building. Just try to find it. I dare you.

Crocodile eggs? Yeah, you heard me right. I still can't believe it myself. I had to find crocodile eggs for Del Morgan. So, I had done the only thing I could. I went to Door. He gave me Jack to lead the way. Hey, I've got it. Jack looks like a bike messenger on his day off. Not that it matters. That's how I knew we were really back in the city. Not because of Jack. I mean, waiting for the bus, I had a good look around. There were people walking down the street, too. Ignoring us in that way that only city folk can.

And, that was the freakiest part of all. The people. Standing among perfectly normal ordinary people. And, I couldn't talk to them. I couldn't say anything. Nobody had given me permission. It wasn't even as if we were invisible or anything like that. Think about it. I mean, how often do you stop to look at or talk to someone you don't know as you're walking down the street? I felt like the star attraction in a one-man production of *The Purloined Letter*. I thought about just reaching out and grabbing someone. Get them to talk to me somehow. Let me cry for help. Anything. But, take a guess. If someone tackles you in the middle of the street, do you stop to ask what their problem is? No, and you certainly would have believed me crazy.

So, we took the bus. Even had to pay the fare. Ride it cross-town. We got off in a part of town where the streets are almost too narrow for cars. Winding crooked streets. Shops and buildings sort of leer-

ing over us. So many pedestrians that cars couldn't maneuver even if they wanted to. You know where I'm talking about. That is where we found Old Man Whetstone's shop. Had to climb down a flight of stairs to reach it.

How to describe the place? It's not as strange as you might think. I take that back. If you want to believe the place looked like the eccentric oddity shop that time forgot, you just go right ahead and believe that. Looked more like a cross between a hardware store and a corner grocery store to me. Smoked and dried meats hanging from the ceiling. Especially near the door. Oh, yeah, it's not an eccentric deli and market unless there is unnamable foodstuff hanging from the ceiling. The place was really dark and full of shadows. Hard to see much of anything.

I'm not even going to try and describe Whetstone. The man spoke with an accent that wasn't born of this earth, I can tell you that. In fact, I have my doubts he looked even vaguely human. That's probably why it was so dark. Don't want to discombobulate the passersby.

"What can I do for you gentlemen?"

"I'm looking for some crocodile eggs."

"You're in luck. I have fresh. Very rare."

What? As opposed to day old crocodile eggs? I know. I know. I'm sure they are a sweet delicacy. I watched Whetstone hobble toward the back of the store. He dug the eggs out of a pile of dirt. I swear to you that the eggs were buried in sand or dirt or something. Whetstone took a bag. Poured some sand in it or something. Then, he scooped a bunch of eggs into the bag. Topped it off with some more dirt. Brought it back to me. The bag was warm. I almost dropped it.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"No, not at this time. Thank you."

"Oh, anything for Del Morgan."

Hey? When did I say anything about Del Morgan? It was just going to remain another one of those things I was never going to understand. Like paying for the eggs. I mean Whetstone just turned and walked away. Accounts settled or on the tab or something. I didn't say anything. I didn't know what to say. I just looked at Jack. He looked like he had gone to sleep waiting for Whetstone to fill the order. My eyes must have brought him around because he blinked once and then looked at the bag.

"Let's go."

That was that, I guess. I just followed him back out of the store.

We had to walk a couple of blocks to find the bus stop. It would be a couple of minutes before the bus pulled up. Jack hadn't said anything the whole trip to Whetstone's shop. So, I was kind of surprised when he spoke up, waiting for the bus.

"You from around here?"

"Yeah, I used to live in the city."

"No, that's not what I meant. I've lived in this city all my life, but I'm not from around here. You look kind of dazed. Not used to being around your own kind, right?"

"You could say that, I guess. I haven't been back since the whole world went kafooie."

"It's best not to talk about that. How you got here. I like that word. Kafooie. What does it mean?"

"I don't know. It's one of those words that doesn't have a definition in the dictionary. You just know what it means when you hear it."

"Kafooie. I'll have to remember that."

"So, you're not from around here?"

"Yeah, didn't you hear? I'm a Jack."

"Are you saying that's your title? Not your name?"

"My title? You don't know, do you? I like that."

"Jack is a good name. You didn't say where you are from."

"You know? I would rather not get into that. I like thinking it's my name."

There wasn't much left to say after that. The bus arrived. Jack didn't say much on the bus. Something about being surrounded by all the normal people, I guess. I mean, what would you do if the people sitting next to you were talking like us? I know what I would have done. Ignored us. If I overheard too much, I would probably try for another seat. Bunch of weirdos.

That bus ride was one of the hardest things I had done in a really long time. Think about it. I was in the city. Really in the city. I could get off the bus at any stop and disappear. I mean, simply wander off into the crowd. What? You think Jack would really try to stop me? Somehow, I didn't think so. All I had to do was tell Del Morgan I didn't want to work for her anymore, right? Okay, I didn't know, but that is what Windermere had told me. Did I believe her? It was too good to let go. I mean I didn't know if I could test it. First, I would need Del Morgan to give me permission to speak. Then, I would need the chance to speak freely. Then, what would happen?

Maybe it would just be easier to get off the bus. Or, not get off the bus. Miss our stop. That might work. Could I do it? Holding crocodile eggs. I didn't know. Where would I go? It didn't matter. I would just walk away. Toss the eggs. Give them to Jack. Maybe there was something easier. I mean Del Morgan would come after me, right? I would need protection. Maybe I could pick a fight with someone on the bus. Get myself arrested. Spend the night in jail. That just might help protect me. I don't know.

It was tempting. It was so tempting. What stopped me? Why did I get off the bus at our stop? Why did I follow Jack back to our building? Well, sitting on that bus. Holding a bag of crocodile eggs. Thinking about city streets. I felt something. In my chest. An empty spot. Like something was missing. I was not whole. Like the Tin Man from *The Wizard of Oz*. I didn't have a heart. Or, to be more exact. Del Morgan had my heart. I couldn't leave without it. I just couldn't.

So, I went back to Del Morgan's apartment. Said goodbye to Jack. Thanked him for his help. Rode the elevator. Placed the paper bag full of crocodile eggs in the fridge. Went back to my rooms. That wasn't the last time I would go to Old Man Whetstone's shop. Odds. Ends. Trinkets. The strangest shit. I won't bore you with the details. How many times do you want to hear about riding the bus? Oh, one more thing. I could find the door. After that, the door stopped hiding from me. Maybe it was ashamed. Maybe I had outsmarted it. Maybe finding the door once meant that you could always find it again. And, no, the door wasn't in the middle of the kitchen where I had traced it. The door was about where you would expect the front door of an apartment to be.

Now, I've got a thought to keep you up nights. How many people do you really pay attention to as you're walking down the street? Riding the bus? Driving your car? I kind of like the idea that more of them than you want to think about are not what you think they are. The person sitting next to you. No, not the one talking to himself. And, not the one who smells like he hasn't bathed. Ever. I would rather look at the one in the semi-formal business suit. Holding a briefcase. No, that's too formal. He's holding a fancy gym bag. You know the kind you probably don't put your sweaty gym stuff in, but it looks like you do. I wonder what could be in that bag. Maybe crocodile eggs.

***Seeking
Dragon's
Breath***

thirteen

Trinkets and Other Strange Inventions

And, that is how things went for a time. Little errands. Small jobs. Mostly collecting things that involved a trip to Old Man Whetstone's eccentric little store. You could get all manner and kinds of stuff from Whetstone. But, not everything. That surprised me at first. That there were things you could not get from Whetstone's shop. It was just an exotic food market, after all. More like a supermarket. You could get stuff like batteries and soap and shoelaces. Actually, I never thought about that one. Can you get shoelaces from the supermarket? Or, does that still require a drugstore? I think the last time I got replacement shoelaces was from a drugstore.

Anyway, I'm not going to bore you with every little detail. After the crocodile eggs, she sent me in search of dandelion beer. I mean, not right away. It was some number of days maybe even weeks later. I never did get the hang of time in that place. You really want to know about this? Right, dandelion beer. I even checked with Door to make sure that Old Man Whetstone's place was the right kind of place to go after the stuff. Yes, it was. Did I need an escort? No, thank you, I thought I could remember the way. That was an act of defiance that was. Kind of a *maybe, I wouldn't come back* kind of thing. Well, why did I? Why get the dandelion beer? Why not simply wander off? I sense this is going to be a repeated theme. Escape? Just wander off? Why didn't I escape? You make it sound so easy. Let me tell my story. Try to explain. Listen now. Judge me later, okay?

Like I said, she sent me on odd jobs and errands. Mostly collecting things from Whetstone. And, always one item at a time. She never sent me with a shopping list. Which was strange because the kitchen was always full of fresh food. I thought I was the gopher around here. I don't know where everything was coming from. Maybe Hannah and Romana did most of the boring stuff. Maybe Del Morgan bought her own groceries. Risk of poisoning and all of

that. It didn't matter. Crocodile eggs. Dandelion beer. I was the man for the job.

Then, there was the Magic Box of Psalm and Prophecy. The what? Magic Box of Psalm and Prophecy. She wanted one. Okay, whatever. Ours is not to reason why. Ours is any old excuse to get out of the apartment. I lived for getting out of that place. To be out from under that roof. I mean there was nothing to do between errands. I just sat around all day or wandered the halls. Looking from room to room. I never left the apartment between errands. Never. Now, that I think about it, I really don't know what I did between errands. It's all kind of one big blur. Wandering. Not looking for anything. Just wandering. Doing the couch-potato thing. This may sound a little strange. But, it was almost as if I was switched off between errands. Nothing to do? Just go into hibernation mode until called for. Weird. I never really thought about it before.

Whatever. So, I went to Old Man Whetstone to get a Magic Box of Psalm and Prophecy. I was getting pretty good at finding the place. Walk to the corner. Take the bus. Find just the right narrow little cross street. Down the stairs. And, voila. Old Man Whetstone.

"Yes, I'm looking for a Magic Box of Psalm and Prophecy."

"Magic Box? That's not really the kind of item I have around here. You need to go to a music store. Yes, I know just the one."

So, Old Man Whetstone gave me directions to a completely different part of town. The industrial district. Lots of rundown old warehouses around there. I mean I wasn't the greatest navigator of the city, but I had an idea of where he was directing me. You can see it from the freeway. And, not that far from the center of downtown. Which was kind of odd even by itself. I mean one block you've got skyscrapers and assorted fancy buildings. One block over and you've got dilapidated old warehouses all standing off on their lonesome. Scarred and blasted neighborhood. You never see anyone there. Not that I was in the habit of hanging out around there to find out. Strange place for a music store.

The smart thing to do at this point would have been to go back to the apartment and ask Door for help. Find out if that music store really was the best place to get a Magic Box of Psalm and Prophecy. Stupid. I mean I keep saying that. That I kept doing really dumb and stupid things like that. Like not going back for a second opinion when I had the chance. What can I say? I was still new at all of this. Don't worry. I learn. As time goes on, you'll hear me talking less and

less about how incredibly dumb and imbecilic my decisions were. Just had to become good and jaded that's all. It's one thing to say. Ooh, trust no one. It's another thing entirely for it to sink in. No, really, trust no one.

No, nothing bad happened at the music shop. Nothing I would regret. It was stupid because I didn't go back for a guide when I had the chance. That left me cocky. Thinking that I wouldn't need a guide later when I should have actually used one. Like when Del Morgan sent me after dragon's breath. Oh, boy, should have asked Door about that one. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. But, I'm getting ahead of myself.

Why didn't I ask for help about the Magic Box? Well, Whetstone had given me directions. He had always done right by me. He gave me directions. I could follow them. We were in the city. I knew where I was going. Besides, asking Door for help would have resulted in getting Jack for a guide. And, I didn't really want to do that. Jack had been acting weird. Like he didn't know me. It's hard to explain. And, Jack didn't give me permission to talk so I couldn't ask him what was up.

Like the rock hammer. Del Morgan asked me to fetch a rock hammer. Well, not knowing where to get one, I asked Door. I suppose that I could have tried Whetstone first, but I had just discovered that he didn't have everything. He had not had a Magic Box of Psalm and Prophecy. That had taken me by surprise. I thought Whetstone had everything. So, Jack had escorted me to this little store where I was able to acquire a rock hammer. Simple, really. But, it bugged me that Jack was acting completely different. Like he didn't know me. Like I was some kind of bug.

Which is why I didn't go back for help with the Magic Box. I wasn't sure I could face Jack again. And, Whetstone's directions were simple enough. Why should I submit myself to the cold shoulder again? No, wait, that doesn't make any sense. I must be thinking about dragon's breath. I had gone after the Magic Box of Psalm and Prophecy before I went after the rock hammer. So, how could I not want to face Jack for directions to the Magic Box if I hadn't gotten the rock hammer yet? That's when things got strange with Jack. With the rock hammer. Which happened after the Magic Box. But, I didn't go for help with the Magic Box because of the rock hammer. Which happened before the rock hammer. The Magic Box. Oh, screw it. I don't understand this place.

I followed Old Man Whetstone's directions. No problem. The bus doesn't go all the way there. You have to walk. No problem. And, when I say blasted neighborhoods, I mean blasted neighborhoods. Empty. Desolate. Like a ghost town right in the middle of the city. All of these ancient warehouses. Standing empty. Giant spiders sort of lurking between them. Yeah, you heard me right. Giant spiders weaving these truly immense webs between the buildings. Cobwebs so thick and interwoven that they were like buildings onto themselves. Gray as dust. Like ghosts. Or, the husks of ancient buildings that the spiders had completely drained of life. Weird. I bet you never knew that giant spiders lived in the heart of the city. Simply never noticed them before. And, I am talking about giant spiders here. Huge. No, bigger than that. We're not talking Godzilla size here, but I mean they were big. Climbing the side of one of those old warehouses for them was like climbing one step of a staircase for us.

They didn't pay the slightest bit of attention to me. Just too small, I guess. Maybe they really did feed on the living hearts of the buildings. So, I followed Whetstone's directions. Walked among ancient warehouses draped with cobwebs. Giant spiders moving to their own rhythms. Ignoring me. I found the music store. It was huge. Took up an entire warehouse. I never knew such a place existed. Never thought there was that much music in the world.

Think about music. What do you see? Rowdy kids hammering on their day-old electric guitars. Dreaming of being rock stars. Testosterone and booze so thick you could cut it with a knife. All living in a haze of noise that could hardly be considered music. Who cares? Bang the head slowly. Fast! Then slow. Sing? Who sings? Just scream to the beat. No one understands the words anyway.

This place. This music store was different. There was no loss. No blinding pain pretending to be noise pretending to be music. Losing oneself beneath a sledgehammer of sound because it was easier than accepting the world. Not here. Not in this place. My God, it was beautiful. I wanted to stay. I wish I could have remained there. Just basking in that place. I can't describe it. What it was like. I don't even think it was music. I mean I don't think they were playing music. It was just the place.

I don't remember talking to anyone. I don't remember seeing anyone. I just found myself leaving the music store with the Magic Box of Psalm and Prophecy in my hands. I don't know. I don't understand what happened.

Remember. Remember, I said something about discovering my life was empty. Wondering if I had a life. Not even remembering how I had lost my soul. Holding that Magic Box in my hands. I don't know. I just don't know. I mean I'm not trying to romanticize the place. I mean music sucks. Deal with it. Empty noise. A way to hide from the world. Bang or whisper. Flute or drum. Who cares?

But, I'm drifting again. The reason I mention this. The reason I brought up the whole story. Searching for the Magic Box of Psalm and Prophecy. Asking for help with the rock hammer. Was because of what would happen next. Del Morgan asked me to fetch her some dragon's breath.

fourteen

Voice of a Stranger

Dragon's breath? Del Morgan wanted me to get dragon's breath? What? Is that anything like prop-wash? I mean, just try to imagine it. Are we talking literal? Here, mister dragon, just breath into this balloon. That's a good dragon. Not a balloon. That just doesn't have the right feel to it. More of a bottle. Like a genie's bottle. Pull the top and get a big whoosh of air in the face. That kind of dragon's breath. Or are we talking less literal here? Just the fancy name for some really strong drink. Take a sip. Oh, yeah, that is as strong as a dragon's breath. Could take the paint right off the wall.

So, I didn't really know what to expect. I mean it did sound to be some kind of food related item so I did figure that all it would take would be a quick trip to Old Man Whetstone's little corner of the world. Nothing fancy. Nothing worth mentioning. Just something to get away from whatever in the world it was that I did between these little errands. I mean, what did I do? It really was like I was just switched off between jobs. That was starting to bug me. That I couldn't remember. Well, not entirely true. I could remember. It's just that it was so boring that it all kind of blurred together. In fact, the only time I even thought about it was while I was on some errand. I mean the only time I tried to figure out what I did between errands was while on an errand. While I was sitting round and about Del Morgan's apartment, I didn't think. Wandering the halls. It was like nothing mattered.

I don't know if I can explain this. Waiting for the bus to Whetstone's shop, I would think about stuff. Like what I did between jobs. Not at first. But, I mean like I said. I had done a number of these meaningless little errands. More than enough time to become complacent with the trip. For the mind to start wandering. Wonder what it was all about. Realizing that all I did was sit around all day chewing my cud. Oh, that was useful. I mean, couldn't I be using my time to better advantage? Like. Looking for the exit? Oh, you know what I mean. I knew where the door was. I mean, the exit. Way out. How to get out of the loony business. Where was my heart? I wanted my heart. Del Morgan had it. What did she do with my heart? Did she have it on her mantle? Watch it closely? Was it gathering dust?

I never thought about not returning from a job. I mean I thought about it. I mean I never took the thought seriously. I wasn't going to leave without my heart. That's all there was to it.

So, there I was waiting for the bus to Whetstone's place. Looking for dragon's breath. Dragon's breath? That sounds nasty. Is it a soup? A drink? A loaf of bread? Rubbish bin? Does it make your clothes come out smelling minty fresh? I don't think I really cared. Crocodile eggs and Magic Boxes and rocks for hammering. No wait, that last one is the other way around. But, that's not my point. My point? All this strange shit. It was all one to me. She could have sent me after duct tape every single time. I wouldn't have cared.

So, there I was waiting for the bus to Whetstone's place. Wait, I said that already. Oh, never mind. Took the bus cross-town. All because Del Morgan wanted dragon's breath. Now, I suppose what I really should have done was ask Door about dragon's breath. I mean, what is the stuff? Whetstone had not had a Magic Box of Psalm and Prophecy. He had not had a rock hammer. Yeah, well, that was two things out of thirty. Well, not quite thirty.

The thing is Whetstone is always a good place to start. Besides, asking Door would have resulted in having Jack for a guide. I think I mentioned my reluctance to use him again. Should have. Would have. Just didn't do it. Things would have turned out a whole lot less interesting if I had.

"Dragon's breath? That's not really the kind of item I have around here."

"Oh, well, do you know where I could get some?"

Which was when Whetstone and I were joined by a third person.

I use the term loosely when referring to him. I mean I don't think he was human. Probably one of the Faire Folk.

"Dragon's breath?" He walks out of the depths of the store as if stepping from shadow. "Hard to get. Very rare. Those who possess it are reluctant to part with it. Yes, let us say that. Reluctant to part with it."

I know I've described Whetstone's shop before. In a part of town where the streets collide. You have to step down into the place as if it was an afterthought. The building was put together. Then, they decided it needed a basement. Got to start digging. Now, you have space for the store. The place was very dark. Not enough windows. It's got those little ones scrunched between the walls and the ceiling. You can see people's feet go by. The shelves are low. Covered with exotic looking things that I would never expect to be food. Hard to tell by the light, anyway. I didn't even know there was a third person in the store. I thought it was just me and the proprietor, Old Man Whetstone.

This other person? I won't try to describe him. I mean I can't describe him. I mean I'm really not certain what he looked like. Very gallant. Snappy dresser. Kind of got a fog-breaker cloak thing going. Definitely makes me think he must be one of the Faire Folk.

"You see? If you want dragon's breath, you must go to the source. You must take it from the dragon's mouth. As it were."

Which is when I try to ask the mystery guest a question. Which is when I discover that he hasn't given me permission to speak. I really hate that. The not being able to talk without being given permission thing. It really gets on my nerves. I try to get around it. Ask Whetstone a question.

"I don't understand."

Whetstone doesn't even try to answer. He sort of glances quick at the other guy. Opens his mouth as if he might utter words. The stranger doesn't give him the chance.

"You see you get dragon's breath from a dragon. You must go and ask one. Very politely. The trick is finding one. A dragon. That's the hard part. They tend to like it underground. In the tunnels. In the caverns. Really, I don't think it will be any trouble for you. One such as yourself. No trouble at all."

I think I've said it before. Don't trust the Faire Folk. Like the old joke. How do you know he is lying? His lips are moving. You can look right at one and not know who you are talking to. You can think

you're with Del Morgan when it's really Windermere who is holding the pool cue out for you. Not that Del Morgan was a saint. I mean she bought me. Paid good money. Ripped out my heart, too. That had hurt. Which raises an interesting question. Why the hell did I listen to this guy?

I wish I had a good answer. No, really, I wish I had an explanation. I know what happens next. You don't. I'm getting to that part. But, if you knew what I know, you never would have listened to the guy. Why did I listen? What strange disease suddenly made me take leave of my senses? Well, it's a lousy answer. But. I think it was an act of defiance. Maybe even a suicidal gesture. No, really, get myself in trouble. Embarrass Del Morgan. Make all that money she spent on me a wasted investment. Flailing rebellion. Do something I'm not supposed to do because I'm not supposed to do it. Supposed to be smarter than that. Oh, yeah? Just watch how dumb and literal minded I can be. I've got your free will right here, baby!

The fact that it would be painful didn't even enter into my head. Another reason is because of Whetstone. He had always done right by me. Always nice. Friendly. Polite. Gave me directions to the music shop. I liked him. No reason for it. I just liked the guy. Or, whatever he was. I had no reason to believe he would cause me harm. Well, to be more precise, I had no reason to believe that through inaction he would allow me to come to harm. Just goes to show that he runs a little store. Knows which side his bread is buttered on. The customer is always right? The most important, rich and powerful customer is always right.

Why am I going on about this? God, I'm digging my own grave here. I had better have quite the payoff, right? Oh, it goes beyond payoff. If by payoff, you mean things blowing up and blood and body parts and assorted whatnot. Up until now, I've been complacent. Taking things as they come. Accepting them out of hand. That divine madness I was going on and on about. A seed of defiance grows here. Questioning. Why the hell did Del Morgan send me after dragon's breath? I mean, did she know what was going to happen? But, I'm getting ahead of myself. There's going to be more flailing rebellion. After dragon's breath. Hell, I'm going to lead a rebellion. Not what you think. It has to do with a book. But, I'm getting ahead of myself, again. First, I have to follow a total stranger's directions into the underground after dragon's breath.

fifteen
Underground Follies

So, there I was standing on a platform in the underground waiting for the last train to pass so I could descend into the very depths of the city. Wasn't my idea. I had gone to Old Man Whetstone's shop because Del Morgan wanted dragon's breath. Another patron had told me I would need to follow the underground. I had to find a dragon. Why? Well, if you know a better way to get dragon's breath, I would just love to hear it. You get dragon's breath from a dragon. That's the only way I know. Dragons like the underground. They like the dark places where shadows sleep. Nice and quiet or something. How the hell should I know? Maybe they live down there to avoid the crowds. If I saw a dragon walking down the city street, I think I would notice. It's not the kind of thing I see every day. Then again. If I did see a dragon walking down the street every day, it wouldn't be special then, would it? They would be ordinary. Boring as streetcars. Maybe that is why they stay out of notice. They want to be special. Mysterious. Magical. That's it.

Standing on the platform. Waiting for the last train to pass. Ignoring the people. They got on the train. Got off the train. Waiting for the next train. Paying no attention to the guy just standing there. Standing in everyone's way. Not getting on. Not getting off. Just waiting for his time. When the last train should pass.

It vanished down the tunnel. I didn't even bother to check if there was anyone watching. I jumped off the platform. Let them notice. Let them care. Call the police. Have me arrested. That would be fun. What was that I said about flailing defiance? Anyway, I started walking down the track. Past the end of the station. Into the dark. Walking into those places where people never go unprotected. Never venture without the train to protect them. Wrapped around them like a shield. Which it is. It is a shield. Sweet comfort. A security blanket. You never know what lurks in the dark where shadows sleep. You never think about it with the train to protect you.

I followed the track. The tunnel all around me. Wrapped in shadow. In dark. The city above me. The world below me. Only the footstep of the great protector. The path of the train to guide me. Sloping down. I never noticed that before. Riding the train. Never

noticed the train descend as I rode it to work. Wrapped within its protection as the world swallowed me whole.

You never think about how dark the tunnel is when you are riding the train. The stations are bright. They are lit. Shadows hiding from the light. The underground tunnels are lit. They have to be. Workmen must walk there. They must. I mean I've never seen one walk the dark path, but they must. They need light. Right? They must see. You can see the light from the train. Whizzing by like streaks against the window. Never noticed how far apart they are. Walking.

The path continued to descend. Not a lot. It wasn't steep. A gentle slope. One you would never notice riding the train. One I noticed because I was following the path. It wasn't really a train-track anymore. More like ruts. You know. Tire ruts on a dirt trail. Not so much this and not so much that. The lights were farther apart. Drifting. Fading. Descending. Should have brought a flashlight. Or, a torch. Yeah, that would have been more in the spirit of the occasion.

Descending into the underground. Leaving the city behind me. The last train was gone. Even its path through the dark was fading. Even that protection was falling before the dark. Before the night. What am I talking about? It's still daylight outside. Noon. Lunch. People are leaving their desks. Grabbing a quick bite. How can it be night? In this place. Maybe it is always night?

Did you hear that?

I stand still. Listening to my own heart. Trying not to breathe. Beneath the city. In the underground. Looking for dragon's breath. I have to find a dragon. Not knowing what I am looking for. I have to find a dragon. Ask him. For dragon's breath. Somewhere down here. Where the shadows sleep. There must be light. There has to be light. Workmen walk this way.

What was that?

Maybe it's a train? That's all I need. Run over by the underground. Yeah, some damn fool was looking for dragon's breath, again. Doesn't have the sense to get off the tracks. Or what passes for tracks down here. The rails are gone. Steel long since faded into dust. It's just me. Without a light. Looking for dragon's breath. I should have found something by now. Ghosts and goblins. A gatekeeper. That's all I need. Someone to block my path.

God!

What the fuck was that? I'm running. Stumbling over dark. Slip-

ping between shadows. Something dark. Heavy with fur. Course hair like a steel brush. Many arms. Breathing like a train. Deep. Thick. Labored. I don't want to know what it was. Maybe it was a dragon? Yeah, with my luck. I trip over darkness. Arms flailing. Crush the earth with my shoulder. Look up. My head hurts. There is something there. Bigger than me. Like a spider. Or, a lizard. Or, hell, I don't know what it is. It's big. It is ugly. It's got too many arms. A tail. And, it is way too close to me.

I crawl to my feet. Stumble. Almost fall. My arm hurts. That mix of fire and ice that shouldn't exist. I've lost the track. I've lost the trail. I don't even know if I'm in the tunnel anymore. I wish I had a light. All I see are shapes. Shadows among shadows. Dark within dark. I know it's back there. I can feel it behind me. Breathing. Deep. Thick. Like something really big and dangerous and hungry.

I stumble run. Like I'm falling but never hit the ground. That thing is behind me. In the dark. I can't see it. I know it's there. Waiting for me to fall. I hit cobwebs. Like old cloth. Sticking to me skin. My hair. Filling my mouth. Spit. It tastes like cotton candy. Smells like old dust and mothballs. I rip through it like paper. Don't even slow down. Well, just a little. While I flail my arms around. Fingers struggling. Ripping at my skin. Pulling at my clothes. Trying to get this fucking stuff off. Why is it so sticky?

There's another one! Oh, shit! More monsters. Like the bastard following me. Strange looking thing. More lizard than man. More spider than lizard. What the fuck are they? Damn harry bastards! Moving quickly. Surrounding me.

Oh, shit, I've got it! Oh, shit, I've figured it out. They're too fast. The wall hits me. Twisted arms of coarse hair smash me into the side of the tunnel. I can't breathe. That first one. I never should have run. That first one wasn't chasing me. It was driving me. Herding me into the trap. Pain between my shoulders! Strange shadows moving behind my eyes. Sticky stuff. I can't move! I can't lift my arms! They're wrapping me. Like a mummy. Like leftover dinner. They've got me. I can't run. I can't escape. I am the dragon's prisoner.

sixteen

An Afternoon's Diversion

The dragon was an old gentleman. Kind of tall. Skinny. Thin-boned. Close cut gray hair. Stubble like he hadn't shaved in a week. Old suit with this weird frilly collar. He didn't move like an old man. Very smooth. Very regal. Very still. Like he didn't make any unnecessary motions. I don't even think he was breathing. Watching me, his eyes were so dark I couldn't see any color in them. Me? I was chained to the wall. That really sucked. Have you ever been tied up for a long time? You feel it in your arms. In your legs. Standing. Hanging from your wrists. My back hurt. My arms burned. I couldn't feel my legs. My throat was dry. My eyes stung. I couldn't remember the last time I ate. The dragon looked at me. Like he knew everything. He didn't need to ask me questions.

"Drake? Matthew Drake?"

"Yeah?"

Holy shit, I just answered him! The dragon didn't give me permission to speak, but I opened my mouth and spoke all the same. Maybe he did. He made a question of my name, right? But, it doesn't work like that. You actually have to give me permission to speak. I don't understand these things. My head hurt.

"Why are you here? Allowing yourself to be captured. Why are you here?"

"I don't recall having much of a say in the matter."

"Really? Do you know yourself so little? One who has returned from the lands beyond?"

"Oh, so you are saying I could have beat the crap out of those things? That I could just burst these bonds with but a thought?"

"Something like that. But, not these bonds. No, what kind of host would I be if you could slip these shackles?"

Okay, let's back up here a second. Those bastards in the dark had captured me. Bound me in thread like old cobwebs and cotton candy. Smashed me against the wall a couple of times to get my attention. Carried me to their master. The dragon. The old guy in a rumpled suit. Chained me to the wall. Slithered out without a backwards glance. The dragon ignored me for a couple of days. Just left me hanging there. At least, I think it was a couple of days. I don't know. I was just left there. Nobody around. I faded in and out for

a while. Time kind of blurs together. All because Del Morgan had bought me. Paid good money. All because I had returned from the lands beyond. I didn't even know what that was. A little stretch of beach on the ocean. I don't even know how I got there. Even my name was a gift from someone else.

"What to do with you? Most amusing. Why are you here?"

"Because I'm too stupid to light a fire in the dark. Because I didn't turn freaks of lizard kin and spider blood into field mice. Because I haven't done anything since I got here."

"You forgot."

"Yeah?"

"You forgot what is real. Everything is a dream to you. A nightmare you cannot control."

"Well, thank you, Doctor Freud. I've seen giant spiders spin ancient webs between whole buildings. I've seen my heart. My heart! In someone's hand. How real is that?"

"Did anyone else see these spiders?"

"No, I don't know. There's a guy on the street corner says he can see hair wigs crawling out of the sidewalk."

"How do you know he doesn't?"

"Because he is crazy."

"No, he can see. Just as you are starting to see what is really there."

"Then, I am crazy."

"Maybe that is why you are here. Break your bonds."

"No."

"No?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because you asked me to."

"Defiant to the last. You are mine. Del Morgan will not rescue you. You are mine. What to do with you? That is the question. Yes, that is the question."

With that, he left me. Hanging there. In a nicely furnished room. Big room. Like a banquet hall. Oak paneling on all the walls. Dark varnish. Smelled like fresh earth. Strange place to leave someone chained to the wall if you ask me. And, nobody has.

Well, shit, what to think of the dragon? Looks like an old man. But, that is just skin. There was more to him than that. Like the old man was just the surface. Like there was something far greater

resting there. Looking like an old man. Something far more powerful than just skin. Scratch the surface and find something that had witnessed the birth of the world and would live to see the end of time. Those eyes. You could not hold that gaze. The way he moved. Like a dancer. Every step. Every turn. Every glancing look. That was power there.

And, why exactly was I still chained to the wall? Break the bonds, my ass. Like I was going to do what he told me to do. I was still his prisoner, last time I checked. So, I was just going to hang there and think about the world. Let time drip by. Del Morgan must be wondering what had become of me. Let her wonder. Let her curse the money she wasted on me. The dragon had me now. I was his plaything. Oh, that sounded so much better back at the Del Morgan cursing her lost millions. I had traded one master for another. Oh, what joy.

Well, I was just going to hang there. To think I could have beaten those monsters. Those strange creatures. Remember the island? I had done all kinds of fancy shit there. Walking. Swimming. Shape shifting. Flying. Throwing fireballs and lightning bolts. Why hadn't I fried myself a spider lizard thing? Fuck! It simply had not occurred to me. Like I wasn't used to it. Oh, I mean it was one thing when I was sitting around an island in the middle of never nowhere land. It was quite another to have Frankenstein's long lost brother chasing me down the underground. We call that the difference between the classroom and the field.

And, why was I still chained to the wall? Because I was his prisoner? His toy? His plaything? By having me chained to the wall, I was chained to the wall. His prisoner. By telling me to break my chains, he was giving me an order. If I freed myself, I was falling into his trap. Becoming more his slave. By freeing myself. So, the only way to defy him was to remain chained to the wall. Remain his prisoner. Oh, screw it, I'm sick of this wall.

That's all it took. A decision. An application of will. Like shape shifting. Walking on water. Juggling fireballs. Just like that, I snapped the chains. They drifted like smoke while I fell to the floor. Ooh, that hurt. Stupid legs. Standing way too long. Gone all numb. I tried to crawl to the table. Gave up on that. Flopped over onto my back. Just lay there and looked at the ceiling. Felt my legs start to tingle. You know, like when your foot or arm has gone to sleep?

Times ten. It hurt. Hurt like fire. Like I was being stabbed all up and down my legs. My arms, too, for that matter.

That passed. Eventually. I think I slept for a while. Woke up. Looked around. Crawled to the table. Nice old wood. Must have been oak or something. What do I know about tables? Oak or redwood or something. So, I just sat at the table. Resting my arms against it. Rubbed my eyes. Felt like I could sleep another week. Which was when the dragon walked in. No, that can't be right. I must have been asleep again. He had a box in one hand. Chessboard in another. Opened it on the table.

“Fancy a game of checkers?”

“Why checkers?”

“You don't know how to play chess.”

“Don't I? Now, you listen to me. I'm not some total rube. Hick. Slacker. I know how to play chess.”

“No, you don't.”

“Yes, I do. Hey, put those flat chips away. That's a kid's game. Bring out the real pieces. The pawns. Bishops. The knights and rooks. Do I know how to play chess.”

“Very well.”

He slipped the checker pieces back into the box. Drew forth some exquisitely carved figures. Polished stone. Bronze. Silver and gold. They were beautiful. Not that I cared. I knew the rules. How the pieces moved. Defend my king. I knew how to play chess.

The board was ready. My pieces were white stone and polished silver. They were so finely detailed they looked almost real. Like living breathing men. Just for a moment, I could not move. I thought maybe they really were alive. Then, I touched a pawn. Lifted it from the board. Placed it before the dragon. He looked at me with eyes so dark as to be windows on the abyss. He looked to the playing field between us. My pawn standing bold and defiant before him.

“Checkmate in fourteen moves,” was all the dragon said.

seventeen

Chess, Life and Death

“What?”

“Checkmate in fourteen moves.”

“What do you mean checkmate in fourteen? How can you? You haven’t even moved, yet.”

The dragon didn’t say anything. He simply looked at me with those eyes of his. Eyes that held no color unless you consider midnight to be a color. I could not hold his gaze. With my one pawn to protect me, I had to look away. One pawn. That’s all I had done. I had made one move. Begun the game. Placed one pawn before him. And, the game was over. Because he said so.

“You do not know how to play.”

“Oh, are we back to that? Forgive me my rudimentary understanding of the game. How do you know that it is checkmate in fourteen moves? Should I take your word for it? Fine. Let us try this then. You go first.”

I grabbed my pawn. Drawing him back from the dragon. Stamped him into his place as if I were pressing a coin. Checkmate in fourteen moves, my ass. The dragon looked at me. His slender bony hands held together. His old man’s hands. The dragon looked once to the board. Looked once to the forces assembled before him. His army of pawns and knights and bishops and rooks. All there to protect the king and the queen. He looked to my forces standing ready. Waiting to be unleashed. To begin their stealthful dance of power and conquest. He looked at me, the dragon did.

“Checkmate in eleven moves.”

“You can’t be serious! You haven’t even made a move, yet. How can you be so sure? Why should I believe you?”

“One need not assemble the puzzle to know how the pieces fit together.”

“And, just because I know a quarter has two sides doesn’t mean I don’t look. If you didn’t want to play, why did you bring the board in here?”

“Very well.”

And, he did make his first move. Placing one pawn before the others. Leaving the figure of bronze and gold defenseless and alone on the playing field. I answered. A pawn to match his. Meaning to

count. I was going to count each turn and each move. Eleven moves. I was going to hold him to that. Checkmate in eleven moves. Pompous. Arrogant asshole. I mean I was his prisoner. What was I going to do? Refuse to play? Make him beg? Raise the stakes? We shall play chess for my soul. Ha! Glad the pot wasn't so rich.

There it was. I couldn't believe it. Each move was a victory. With each touch of finger to polished gold and molded bronze, he drove me back. Didn't even claim my pieces. Didn't need to. I lost count. I couldn't count. I was too busy trying to figure out how to beat him. Where to place my queen? My pawns were in disarray. Useless. Worthless. I couldn't move. I studied the board. For each crushing defeat. I studied. I pondered. I considered my options. It was like the dragon had the whole game mapped out in his head. He didn't wait. He didn't look. He didn't consider. He knew where I was going to move before I did.

“Checkmate.”

He left me there. Left the board, too. And, the pieces. Where they stood. Stunned on the playing field. The battlefield. Wondering what had happened. Not comprehending how they had lost. I knew how to play chess. What the pieces did. How to plan strategy. Protect my pawns. My queen. My king. All for nothing. It was over. I had lost. I was the dragon's prisoner. He could predict my actions before I made them. Del Morgan would never get her ounce of dragon's breath.

I left the pieces there. After I had studied them. Still not comprehending the swiftness of my defeat. I abandoned the pieces. Left the table. Crawled into a corner. Tried to sleep. That had been real bright. Following a perfect stranger's advice. Going after dragon's breath. Descending beneath the city because that was where dragon's lived. Oh, yes, you had to get fresh dragon's breath. You need to find a dragon. Well, I had found one, alright. The only thing left to ponder was what was he going to do with me. Keep me for thirty years? Play checkers? Oh, I don't know how to play chess.

I was the dragon's prisoner. His pet. His plaything. Anything he wanted. There was nothing I could do. Look at the chessboard. Checkmate in eleven moves. He didn't even need to raise his hand. He had known exactly what I would do before I knew it myself. How do you beat that? How do you fight it? Escape it? I had traded one prison for another. Del Morgan had paid good money for me. Taken me from the world. Stripped me of all that I had ever been or

known. Ripped out my heart. Was that such a waste? I had simply traded one prison for another.

Think about it. We are born into this world. Given choices? Sure, but what kind of choices? What do you want to be when you grow up? A fireman? A policeman? An artist? Grow older. Discover money. It's a good thing to have if you want to eat. Keep a roof over your head. Pay the bills. When was the last time you wanted to be a fireman? Okay, dumb question. Just ask a fireman. When they ask you. What do you want to do with the rest of your life? Do you really know what the options are? Not really. What do you know? Can you draw? Can you paint? Can you add two plus two? Next thing you know, you are staring at a desk covered with paper wondering where your life went. Trading one prison for another. Was it really so bad? Maybe I was just crazy. Sitting on the street corner. Watching hair wigs crawl out of the sidewalk. Yeah, that was it.

On the other hand, the dragon had not given me permission to speak. There was that. I mean I wasn't going to get technical here. Maybe he had made my name a question. Given me oblique permission to speak. Like the thing with the bonds. Telling me to break my chains. Was that freedom or was I just following orders? Same absurd thing with the room. I mean, what was holding me? Why not try the door? Maybe it would open. It could be as simple as getting off my ass and turning the knob. Like Kafka. Guarding this door for you. Nope, still doesn't make any sense. Kafka is just too deep for me.

So, try the door, already. Maybe it's what the dragon wants. The next move on the chessboard. Like the chains. I could only break them when it was what he wanted me to do. So, I could only open the door when he let me. Or, the only thing standing between me and freedom was an unlocked door. Maybe I wasn't the prisoner. I was the jailer. Okay, that is just too whacked even for me. And, I'm not even stoned.

All I did was lie around Del Morgan's apartment. Stare at the walls. Wander the halls. Pretend I'm looking for the door. The phone. My heart. Anything. As long as I don't find it. Because it is easier to wander the maze than to climb over the wall. Ouch, nobody should spew such rot unless they are as high as a kite. Of course, the thing of it is that in this place. In this crazy place. It just might work.

Which explains why the door opened when I turned the knob. It creaked. Ooh, I almost freaked. Listening to the door open. That

smell of old wood and varnish. The hallway was hard to explain. It was some kind of mix of old wood and stone. Like you might imagine in a castle. But, with bricks made of wood. Hell, I don't know. It was a hallway. Settle for that. It went left. It went right. That was good enough for me. Time to choose a direction. So, I turned left. Began walking. This was a big hall. Like in some old forgotten mansion. The kind of place you would expect your footsteps to echo on forever.

I came to a room. Nice place. Stone was kind of winning the whole paper wraps rock equation. Looked like someone's study or possibly just a sitting room. Fireplace in one wall. Papers scattered across the table. Books on the shelf. And, off the shelf. In stacks and piles all over the floor. Looking like islands in a wasted ocean. I went to the table. Pages scattered like dishes in a bachelor's pad. Books. Writing. Maps and drawings. Nothing I could read. I turned to the fire. Wandered close to it. There could have been half a tree roasting in there.

"Why are you here?"

Oh, Jesus, he scared the crap out of me. I swear I sucked air so hard I thought I was going to swallow firelight. He was sitting on the table, the dragon was. Sitting like a bird. Looking like an old man. He had not been there a moment ago. Checkmate in eleven moves.

eighteen

The Luck of the Fates

Do you believe in fate? No, really, are you one of those people who believes that everything happens for a purpose? Things have been chosen long before you ever put thought to paper? Or, are you more of a free spirit? The course of your life has not been set in stone. You can choose your own path.

Personally, I never got into that whole predestination versus free will crap. I mean, what is the difference between a predetermined destiny that you don't know and free will? What is the difference? I've never been able to figure that one out. If the universe really is a random place where free will reigns supreme, that's all for the good. You just go out there and screw up your own damn life. You've got nobody to blame but yourself.

On the other hand. If the fates wove the tapestry of your life long before you were ever born. How would you know? I mean, would you find yourself one day wanting to eat a pastrami sandwich and discover you couldn't eat it because you were destined to go hungry that day? Just picture it. You're sitting there. You're holding your sandwich. It smells good. It looks good. You're hungry as hell. But, you're fighting with yourself. You can't raise your arm to get the sandwich to your mouth. Get into one of those little tug-of-wars with your own arm. One hand gripping the other arm, trying to force the sandwich into your mouth. But, it just isn't working. You're struggling. You're fighting. You're straining. But, you just can't get that sandwich anywhere near your mouth. Oh, well, guess you were destined to go hungry.

I mean, seriously, how would you know if predestination ruled? Even if you did figure it out. Were able to prove that everyone is following some master plan. Some story that was written long before you ever entered into it. Would it matter? Even if you knew the ending? It would be like a movie where you already knew that the boy gets the girl in the end, right? I mean you know how it is going to turn out, but a lot of stuff happens on the way there. Maybe the ending is enjoyable. Maybe not. If you go see a movie about the Titanic, I think you know walking into the theater that the ship is going to sink. Does it stop you? Did I just ruin the movie? Are you never going to go see it?

So, I guess I never really got caught-up in the whole debate. Predestination. Free will. I guess it could get a little frustrating. Not feeling in control of your life. Like all of your decisions were made for you. That everything was mapped out. An open book that anybody could just pick up and read. Know what you were going to do even before you did.

Which is exactly how I felt standing in the dragon's study. The bastard knew what I was going to do. He knew I was going to leave that room he had left me in. Explore. Pawn to queen's four. He was ready for me. Watching me. As if everything I did had been scripted out long before I ever did anything. All he had to do was sit back and wait. Which was what he was doing. Sitting on the table. In this room I took to be a study. Lots of books. Table scattered with papers. Fireplace in one wall. That's where I was standing. Next to the fireplace. He was on the table. He had not been there the moment before. Scared the crap out of me.

He had asked me a question. That was his way of announcing his presence. Letting me know that he was watching. What was the question? Looking at him, I did not know what to say. I sure as hell didn't want to answer him. Bastard. He had chained me to a wall. Played chess. Checkmate in eleven moves. Without even touching his pieces. He beat me without even making a move. What did he want? He wasn't saying anything.

The dragon was tall. Thin. Gaunt. Like an old man. But, he had a grace about him. Like he was made of silk and steel. Eyes so dark I didn't even know what color they were. He looked as if he could go for days without flinching. Blinking once. Looking away. As if he could sit on the table. Sitting like a bird. Until the world died.

He wasn't going to say anything. He had asked me a question. I didn't want to answer. Damn, how do you face down a dragon? Looking like an old man. There was more to him than skin. Something just below the surface. Barely contained by his old man's skin. As if that was a concession to me. If you are a mythological creature as old as time itself, I guess you can look like just about anything you want. I could see the shape of him in the back of my mind. Everything that was more than the old man's skin. Of course, I flinched first.

"Dragon's breath."

"You're looking for dragon's breath? Del Morgan would demand it so fresh?"

"Well, I went to the market. The guy said it really wasn't the kind of thing he carried. More of a specialty item. So, I got directions to the underground."

The dragon looked at me. Saying nothing. Sitting on the table. It sounded so stupid. Oh, well, of course. I listened to a total stranger give me advice on how to find the stuff. I do it all the time. You want honey? Okay, first you are going to need a balloon and an umbrella. The dragon did not blink once.

"Why are you here?"

"Because I'm an idiot! I turned left at Albuquerque! I didn't ask the doorman how to find dragon's breath! I don't even know what dragon's breath is!"

"Matthew Drake, you allowed yourself to be captured. You let my servants bring you directly to me."

"It wasn't my idea!"

"Really? You slipped your bonds without a thought. Chains that

could bind a hurricane. You escaped your cell. Opened the door as if it were unlocked.”

“You told me to break my bonds!”

“No, I merely suggested that you try. It does not mean I thought you would succeed. I find you free of your prison. Searching through my chambers. Dragon’s breath? Again, I must ask you. Why are you here?”

“Because I was born!”

“Do not mock me. Why are you here?”

“I don’t know! I don’t know why I’m here!”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t know who I am!”

He was silent. Looking at me. Saying nothing. Me? I was hot. Burning like the fire. I was so angry I couldn’t think straight. I wanted to strangle the dragon for forcing me to admit that. My life was gone. Taken away in an instant by one man. Pointing his finger at me. Stripping away my life. Giving me a name. No, wait, he never pointed. Just my life. My life was gone. I belonged to Del Morgan. She had held my heart in her hand. Blood dripping down her arm. The dragon slipped from the table. Stretching wings I could not see. Walking toward me.

“Now, we are getting somewhere.”

I didn’t answer him. I couldn’t. It was as if he had stripped me raw. Taken claws I could not see and ripped the flesh from my bones. Leaving me nothing. I could not answer because I had no voice to speak with. I had no words. I didn’t even have a heart.

He looked at me, the dragon did. Looked me up and down as if he were appraising a side of beef. Or, a contestant at a beauty contest. The side of beef gets more respect.

“I have a challenge for you,” the dragon said.

“What? Are we done with games? Time to double the wager? Shall it be fisticuffs at twenty paces? Russian Roulette?”

“I want you to find me something. Succeed and I shall let you go. The water of life.”

Even as he said it. The words half-formed on his lips. Tracing their way to my ear. I could hear it. At the back of my mind. At the very edge of sound. Teetering on the abyss. Even as he said the words, I could hear music. Rising like a voice. Echoing his own words. I could feel it. Taste it. Touch it. The river in the forest. Fresh. Clear. Cold as crystal wind and new felled snow. I could not speak. My

mouth was filled with mist. It sent a chill through me standing next to a roaring fire. The dragon said nothing.

“I do not understand.”

“It matters not. I want it. You shall have it for me. It is as simple as that.”

“Why?”

“Because you, my Drake, almost slipped through my grasp without so much as a thought as to how you did it. Because you, my Grendel, want your freedom.”

“It is not enough.”

“Not enough? Would you parley with me?”

“I have something you want? You have something I want.”

“Dragon’s breath?”

“Yes.”

“You value your freedom so shamefully?”

“My freedom was never yours to give.”

“Well spoken, Drake. That is why you shall fetch me the water of life.”

“In exchange for dragon’s breath? I do not know where to begin.”

“Drake, you are a Grendel. A Drake. Shaper of worlds. You left the city behind you, searching for me. How many turns did you make? Crossed paths? Wonders of the dark distract you before I found you? No, my Drake, you are a shaper of worlds. Seek the water of life and it shall find you.”

nineteen

Cannibal Frogs

And, that is how I found myself searching for the water of life. Yeah, really, the water of life. The straight shit. Accept no substitute. You drink it from the holy grail. No lesser vessel will do. We’re talking about the stuff that feeds the tree. What tree? The fucking tree of life at the root of the world. The one that Odin shaped the spear of law from. He took a branch from the tree of life and carved the spear of law. No shit, that tree. At least, I think that’s how the story goes. His name was Woton depending on who is telling the tale. It’s the staff that Sigfried broke, ending the reign of the gods. Something like that. Do I sound like an expert? Go look it up.

Who cares about any of that shit, anyway? All I knew was that I had to find the water of life. I had to find the garden to find the tree. I had to find the tree to get the water. I had to get the water to get dragon's breath. I don't know why he swallowed the fly. To get to the other side, no doubt. I didn't care. I mean I didn't even know about the garden yet. I just wanted to find the water of life so I could get the damn dragon to breath into a balloon. Oh, you'll have no trouble finding it. When you go looking for something, it finds you. Oh, gag me. That's almost as bad as the line about being a prisoner of my own mind. Argh. I mean, why wasn't the dragon getting his own damn water of life? There was a catch. There had to be a catch. There's always a catch.

I was running errands to run errands. I mean, how did I get myself into this mess? Some freak pointed his stinking finger at me and kablamo. Next thing I know, I'm sitting on a little stretch of beach trying to remember what my life used to be like. Next thing I know, I belong to this ice water for blood bitch going by the name of Del Morgan. Next thing I know, I'm playing chess with a dragon. Checkmate in eleven moves, my fucking ass. He didn't even lift a finger. Didn't even make a move. Checkmate in eleven. So, I have to find the water of life.

The name sends shivers down my back. The water of life. I hear music just thinking about it. I smell the river. Flowing over stone. Bubbling from the ground at the root of the tree. Nobody had told me about the tree. I knew. I just knew. I heard it. Felt it. Saw it. The water was fresh as snow and cold as ice. It was icicles melting over a campfire. It was waking in the deep mountains. Lifting the flap of the tent. Watching my breath turn to frost before my eyes. God, when was the last time I went camping? Not since I was a little kid. Roasting marshmallows over an open fire. Drinking steaming hot chocolate. Watching sparks leap from the flames like so many fireflies. Who has time to go camping anymore? Work sucks. Life sucks. It just sucks the life right out of you.

The dragon walked me to the edge of his domain. His arm around my shoulders. Talking about. Well, I don't know what. But, it was about something. You can be sure of that. I just wish he had said something about the water of life. Oh, like where to get it. How to find it. If anything was guarding it. Cannibal frogs. Yeah, that would have been useful. I really would have liked a little warning about the cannibal frogs, thank you very much. Okay, they weren't exactly

frogs. But, I'm getting ahead of myself again. That's the problem with trying to tell you about this. I already know how it turns out. I can't always remember what I've told you. I'm making it up as I go along.

So, there I was. Wandering the underground. The city somewhere high above me. Being held up by I don't even want to think about what. Kind of like spelunking, I guess. Just wandering. Looking. Wondering where the fuck I was going. Oh, when you search for the water of life, it finds you. It finds you. Be sure to make a note of that. When you are a shaper of worlds, shit finds you. You don't find it. It finds you. I mean, who rights this stuff? It finds you. It's like that definition of coincidence. A cheap trick to keep the story going. Why don't you use a little imagination, you freak!

I mean, who comes up with this stuff? Cannibal frogs? How do you come up with an idea like that? Cannibal frogs. What? You're just sitting around bored one day. And, think. I know. Cannibal frogs. Yeah, that's just what this story needs. Some good old-fashioned cannibal frogs. Or, giant spiders living between buildings in old downtown. No, wait, those are real. Why not throw in a moose and a squirrel while you're at it? Get a life, you sadistic freak! And, give me back mine!

Oh, that is just great. Now, I'm talking to myself. I'm wandering around a subway tunnel. Spelunking really. In huge caverns. I mean, really huge. We could fit Notre Dame in here and have room to spare. And, where is that light coming from? How do you get light underground? I mean those lizard-spider-leprechaun things were chasing me through dark passages. Let's try for a little story continuity here, okay? Suspension of disbelief only goes so far, you freak!

Where was I? Wandering off talking to myself again. God, I hope I wasn't screaming any of that at the walls. They'll think I'm crazy. Where was I? No, really, where am I? I had been wandering these dark halls. Carrying one of those forever last lanterns. No, seriously. If you looked inside, it was actually burning wood. I checked. Hey! Where did the light go? I was wandering caverns that were filled with a diffuse glow kind of like this really strange fog just a moment ago. Now, I'm in the dark and holding a lantern? Where did the lantern come from? I don't understand this place. I really don't.

None of which matters, anyway. I was wandering. Walking paths. Climbing over rocks. Forgetting I was underground. No, really, I was convinced I was forging mountain paths. I could look a far ways

down. See the trees and the valleys and the snow far below. Above me was the night dark sky. Stars and patchwork clouds above me. Sliver for a moon. The lantern in my hands. That's when I heard it. The stream. Running water. The scent was fresh in my nose. Clear. Crisp. Like crystal wind.

I found it. Running. Stumbling in the mountains. The dragon's home lost somewhere behind me. I really didn't know if I could find it again. He had sent me forth. To wander caverns and long halls and mountain slopes. It wasn't really a river. Just a stream among rocks. A fountain bubbling from between stones. Flowing down the mountainside. I slipped to the rocks, smelling that water. Letting it fill me. The scent of it. Clear. Clean. Like mountain wind and deep forest dew.

I dropped to my knees, dipping my hands in the stream. Feeling the water flow around my fingertips. Like ice. It was so cold. A shock to my hands. I wanted to cry out. So cold it burned. Music like God's own chorus in my head. I raised my hands to my lips. Sucked water as it slipped from my fingers. Felt it against my tongue. So cold it tingled. Such was the water of life. It wasn't. But, what did I know.

Dipping my hands again. Drinking as it poured down my chin. Search and it shall find you. What did I know? The dragon tells me to find the water of life. No directions. Just go look for it. Why did I even bother? That's what I want to know. I mean I was free of the dragon, right? He had let me go to find the water. Why was I searching? I should have just forgotten about it. Found my way back to the surface. Gone back to the apartment. Asked Door about dragon's breath. Yeah, why not? Maybe the dragon had just pissed me off. I had to prove something. Checkmate in eleven moves and all of that.

So, I stood up. Water dripping from between my fingers. Looking for a way to carry it. Take my trophy back to the dragon. Show him a thing or two. That's when I spotted her. Out of the corner of my eye. Turning. Spinning. Reaching for the lantern. Almost slipping from the rocks. Falling from the mountaintop. Managed to get the light on her.

Looking at her. She was a cat. More cat than man. Kind of a charcoal gray girl. Cat face. Mountain Lion's nose. Ears pointing for the sky. Looking like a cat standing on her hind-legs. Shoulders like a man. I mean, like a woman. Why is it that nine times out of ten an anthropomorphic cat is always female? Have you ever noticed that? Maybe it's because they're technically naked under all that fur.

Must be a guy thing. I couldn't figure out how anthropomorphic she was. Not by lantern light. Meaning she didn't have breasts to speak of. Tastefully hidden by fur. She was holding a staff. Not leaning against it. Just holding it. Looking at me.

"What are you doing?"

Oh, great, I had stumbled across the water of life. The river had found me. Meaning the guardian had found me, too. She had a nice voice, by the way. Deep. Sultry. I would just love to hear her purr.

"Nothing. Just looking. Exploring."

"Looking? Found something, I would say."

"Yes, well, when you go on an exposition. Wherever you stop. That is where you will find it."

"And, what is it that you have found?"

"The river of life, I hope."

"The river?" She laughed. Just threw back her head and laughed. Mouth opening wide. Showing lots of cat teeth. You ever watch a cat yawn? Then, you get the idea. "Oh, my friend, if you look for the water of life, you must search far from here."

"I knew this was too easy. Where might you suggest I look?"

"It is not where you must look. It is who you must look for. To find the water of life, you must first find the dragon."

twenty

And Then There Was Hobbes

To find the water of life, you must first find the dragon? My dragon? The dragon who had held me prisoner and whomped my ass at chess? That dragon? He was the guardian of the water of life? I was going to kill him. I was going to go back to his study, and I was going to fucking kill him. Imagine. Sending me on some wild-goose chase. If you search for it, the water of life will find you. Oh, he must be having some laugh at my expense.

"What?"

That was me. That was about all I could manage. This cat. She just looked at me. She had just told me that to find the water of life I must first find the dragon. The dragon who had kicked me out of his home? Sent me in search of the water of life? All so I could get my hands on dragon's breath? Well, I guess that was one way to get ride

of me. And, here I thought I was his prisoner. But, let's not be too hasty here. After all, there could be more than one dragon, right?

The cat woman didn't say anything. Just looked at me. Standing like a cat. Fingers holding leisurely to her staff. Ears twitching in the wind. Fur as gray as charcoal. Saying nothing. I seem to get that a lot. People and assorted things looking at me without saying much. She looked as if she were figuring how fast I could run. I guess she got tired of saying nothing.

"The water of life is well guarded. You want the water of life? You must first seek the dragon who guards the way."

"And, I suppose you know the way."

"After a fashion."

"Meaning you know of it. You've never been there. Never seen it. Never faced the dragon. You don't know the way."

"Neither do you."

"A mere technicality. I don't brag about things I don't know."

"I know things."

"Name one."

"How many angels dance on the head of a pin."

"As many as want to. Ask me something I don't know."

"What is your name?"

I took the lantern in both hands. Gave it a good swing. And, sent it sailing over the cliff. It spun frantic arcs through the air. Looking like a falling star fighting for the sky. It struck something on the way down. Spitting light. Flailing like a mad thing. Then, it was gone. Swallowed by midnight. I was underground, and I had just thrown my lantern off a cliff. Weird. I turned back to little miss puss with no boots. Seeing nothing for the dark. And, sat on the stone with the stream bubbling from the earth beside me.

She stepped toward me. Didn't make a sound. I just knew she was getting closer. Struck a light like a new star. It was one of those sparkler things you see at firework shows. She held it out for me. I didn't want to take it.

"I didn't ask how many can dance on the head of a pin," she said. "I know how many actually do. How many angels want to dance on the head of a pin. Not all of them do." She offered me the sparkler, again. "My name is Hobbes, by the way."

"Drake. Matthew Drake. It's what they call me anyway."

"Well, Drake, Matthew Drake, would you seek the water of life?"

"I would not. I have no choice."

“We all have choices. Even to have none.”

“That is so profound I could just puke.”

“Why are you here, Matt?”

“Because I want my heart back.”

“Then, let us begin.”

She offered me the sparkler, and, this time, I took it. She offered me her hand, and I stood. Her fur was soft and felt good against my skin.

“Don’t trust angels, by the way,” she said. “They are deceitful and manipulative. They would kill you just as soon as look at you. Never trust an angel.”

I didn’t really know how to answer that so I just kept my mouth shut. Followed my angel in dark fur. Really, what did I know about her? Maybe she was taking me to lunch. Me being the lunch. We walked over rocks and mountains and scrub. Slivers of trees and this stuff that looked more like moss than grass. We were underground, I guess. Such things are hard to tell in this place. I mean I was following a cat on two legs. More cat than man. I mean if she were truly an anthropomorphic cat she would have more feminine features, right? Not necessarily big breasts. Discreetly covered by fluffy fur in the general region of the chest in her case. However, she should have a shapely tail if you know what I mean. I was walking along behind her. Couldn’t see much by the light of the sparkly thing she had given me. Her tail was more cat like than traditionally feminine. It did swish nicely from side to side as she walked. Sigh, must be a guy thing.

Why am I thinking like this? There I was. Following this cat on two legs. Name of Hobbes, if you really must know. Because I was looking for the water of life. Seek the water and it shall find you. How’s that for directions? Well, I was following a nice lead. We seemed to have been traveling for a time. Didn’t know how long. Didn’t know where we were going. Back to the dragon? Which dragon? Where were we going, anyway?

“Where are we going, anyway?”

“What? I was following you.”

“How can you be following me? I was following you.”

“Then, where are we going?”

“I don’t even know where we are. I was following you. Something about finding the water of life? You said we should begin. I distinct-

ly recall hearing you say something like that. You started walking. I kind of figured you knew where you were going.”

“Yes, I do know where I am going.”

“Then, how can you be following me? If you know where we are going?”

“Oh, you mean where I am going right now. That I couldn’t tell you because you are lost. Don’t even know what you are looking for.”

“I’m looking for the water of life.”

“I thought you were looking for your heart?”

“I know where my heart is. Someone took it.”

“And will give it back for the water of life?”

“No, if I give her dragon’s breath, I can continue to search for my heart.”

“And, the water of life?”

“So I can get dragon’s breath.”

“So you can try to get your heart back. You don’t go about things in a very organized fashion, do you? It’s probably why you’re lost.”

“Are you trying to be helpful? Is that what you do? Try to be helpful?”

“Where are you, Matthew? Look around. This is my home. I can be helpful. I can be treacherous. The choice can be as simple as my mood. Look at you, Matthew. You are the most amusing game in town.”

She had stopped. Watching me by frazzled light. She was an outline. A vague shape. I could see almost nothing by the sparkling light I held. I didn’t know what to think. She had either just paid me a compliment, or she had insulted me. I couldn’t figure which. Not by this light.

“To answer your question, I am trying to be helpful,” she said. “You say you’re looking for the water of life, but you’re not. You talk about your heart as if you’ve lost your soul, but you’re not looking for that either. You’re wandering blind, expecting it to find you. Pick a direction.”

“How can I pick a direction? I have no direction. I don’t even know where I am. You want to know my directions? If you seek it, it will come.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“If you search for the water of life. A pair of boots. A walking

stick. Life, the universe and everything. You will find it. The thing of it is I don't think you're searching."

"Pocket philosophy. I've done nothing but search for it. What am I doing then?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing. A cheap shot, I know. More pocket philosophy."

"From a pocket philosopher. Hey, where are you going?"

"Home."

"I thought you were home?"

"We are."

We were standing before a door. Just popped up out of nowhere. Damn it! I hate it when that happens! Shit just sneaks up on me all the time. I wanted to laugh. I felt like I was going to piss myself. Vomit hot blood. Choke on my own puke. What a mood I was in. Now that I think about it. I'm not sure about the door sneaking up on us. I think it was nothing other than the dark that had fooled me. I was kind of surprised by the door, by the way. I kind of figured her for more of a cave dweller.

"You need rest, I think," Hobbes said. "And food. Yes, definitely food. Time to think."

I didn't really know what to expect from her home. It had kind of a wood and straw feel to it. Furniture was no surprise. Table. Some chairs. An old Franklin wood-burning stove. Pallet off in some far corner of the room. She put the kettle on. Tossed something that looked like a side of fish into a skillet. When did she add wood? I don't know. I was watching her from a chair at the table. The place began to smell of green onions and chestnuts.

Funny thing here. I don't recall eating. Like a continuity glitch in a movie.

Hobbes sat on my chair. Straddling me. Legs around the back of the chair. Twining with the chair legs. Fingers in my hair as if she were grooming me. Face almost brushing the fur of her chin. Her neck. Her chest. Soft as silk.

"More pocket philosophy, I think." Her voice was a purr in my ear. "You've been seeking without purpose, I think. Not wanting to find something because you just might find yourself. Even taking an exposition, you must have an idea of what you are searching for when you stop and find it."

"That doesn't sound right."

"It's been too long since you read *Winnie-the-Pooh*, then."

“Much too long.”

“When did you forget?”

“What?”

“When did you forget what they went looking for?”

“I don’t know. The North Pole?”

“Close your eyes.”

“Was I right? Pooh found the North Pole, right?”

“Hush. Yes, he found the North Pole. Now, where can you find the water of life?”

“In the garden.”

“Is it guarded?”

“Yes, the dragon. Caretaker of the garden. I must ask the dragon for a thimble of water. How did I know that?”

“Because you are finally seeking. You need not be walking to search. It helps, but it is not necessary.”

Her fingers were like the touch of Heaven in my hair.

“There is danger.”

“Yes.”

“Why are you helping?”

“Because, I told you, silly goose, you’re the most fun I’ve had all day.”

It may seem strange to turn coy, but I think I’ll stop here. There are some things that are just too personal to share. We didn’t even do anything. I’m not even sure we were anatomically compatible. Look, if you want to believe that there was some major bestiality going on, I can’t stop you. If you can’t imagine that it was enough simply to fall asleep with her fingers in my hair, then I just feel sorry for you.

When I woke, she would be gone. The cottage too for that matter. I would have to continue the search on my own. I wasn’t going to forget Hobbes. All I had to do was think about her and she was there. My first moment’s peace since I had lost my way. Fahrenheit pointing his finger. Why am I convinced he pointed a finger? It doesn’t matter. Yesterday was a memory. Tomorrow would be cannibal frogs. I could hardly wait.

twenty-one

Classroom and the Field

The underground was nice for this time of year. Little on the damp side maybe. But, no rain. No snow. I hadn't been attacked by any low flying elephants in quite some time. Okay, I made that last one up. Sorry. Could have done with some low flying elephants. No more mountains. I was traveling through places that would more traditionally be thought of as underground places. Large caverns with walls that slope. Stalagmites. Stalactites. Although, I must say I never can remember which is which. One hangs down. The other points up. Doesn't look anything like dragon's teeth. Nope, not at all. There weren't any tight passages either. No narrow little twists and turns. Squirming through. Wondering if I was going to get stuck. Claustrophobia setting in. Nothing like that. I was wandering through large caverns. Places you could park an aircraft carrier. Couldn't always see much. What with the fog. Which is what got me thinking of rain.

I was wandering with a purpose. Sort of picking a direction and just going. Knowing that I would find the water of life in that direction. Kind of the reverse of how you might think it would go. Most of the time, you figure out where something is. The bank is at the corner of Fate and Malice. You turn until you are facing that direction and then start walking. Me? I was doing just the opposite. I was picking a direction. *That one looks like fun* kind of thing. And, I would start walking. Therefore, the water of life must be where I am going.

This is basically what I was doing before Hobbes found me. My cat in gray fur. Never trust an angel. Told me I was going about it all wrong. Instructed me on the intricacies of pocket philosophy. Now, I was wandering with a purpose. As opposed to simply being lost. That's what she said, anyway.

Anyway, I had gone from wide mountains and cold water to deep caverns beneath the earth. All without leaving the underground. Yes, the city was still somewhere way the hell above me. With all of its noise. And people. And trains. And ordinary things. Here I was. Wandering the dark without a light. Making good time in spite of it. Sort of seeing without eyes. Having trouble getting used to the idea. I know I could do all kinds of shit. Had lots of fun back on my

island. Trick was remembering it under changing circumstances. I had to work on that. Focus under pressure. Don't panic or die. Easy enough to remember, right? Learned my lesson from the dragon's servants. Don't panic. That was the key.

Not panicking was going to come in handy right about now. I wasn't alone. At least, I don't think I was alone. I had traveled through many places both light and dark. Seen many passages. Long corridors. Caverns. Not many inhabitants. Just a dragon in an old man's skin. An angel in dark fur. Spiders that walked on two legs. And, not one flying elephant. I kind of missed those. Wish I had seen one.

I knew there was danger. I knew there were many things between me and my destination. And, I hadn't seen one of them. Okay, maybe one or two. Really nothing worth mentioning. Except the elephants. But, let's just forget about them. Enough with the elephants. This was different. The way had gotten darker. Much more musty and damp. Stinky, stagnate water taste to everything. Drip. Drip. Okay, it was definitely time to start thinking about my surroundings. Get the juices flowing. Anything that tried to jump me would find itself on the receiving end of a thunderclap. Make your hair stand on end just thinking about it.

The wall hits me like a freight train. I stumble. Stagger. Try to recover. Crawl to my feet. There's nothing around me. Nothing! Where the fuck did that come from? My back is all sticky. Hurts like hell, too. Something smashes me in the shoulder this time. Like getting hit by a hundred mile an hour fastball. I can't feel my arm. Hobbling to my feet. Don't panic, my ass! How about a little light? I blast the walls like a million-watt bulb. Anything looking at me has just looked into the sun. Ouch! I can't see. Used to the dark. The world reflected back at me is blinding. That was dumb. Real dumb.

Staggering forward. Bleeding from the eyes. Feeling with my fingers. The edge of light is my sense. Knowing where the cavern turns. Following the edge of it. I still don't know what hit me. There and gone again. Just a quick whistle of sound. A scream like something breaking the sound barrier. Down! Fumbling. Sliding across the rock. Something above me. Slicing the air so fast it almost wasn't there. Like? Hell, I don't know what it was. Like a wrecking ball on a bungee cord. So fast I couldn't see it. Scrambling to my feet. But, that last shot was wild. Firing blind. Which means my light is working.

Okay, so I'm being attacked from a distance. I can work with that. Find an opening. Leave the cavern a glowing ball of blindness. White as molten rock. Almost running. I can see if I don't use my eyes. I get a glimpse of the thing. Lurking behind natural stone to shame an artisan. Watching. It looks like a frog. No, seriously, it looks like a giant frog.

Enough with the rubbernecking. I want to leave it far behind me. Rethink this whole fight in the face of panic thing. Leave the frog behind. Hit between the shoulder blades. I fall, screaming. I'll never walk again. It doesn't need eyes. It heard me scramble for the exit. Bullseye. Oh, god, I just realized what hit me. My back sticky with pain. It looks like a frog? It's hitting me with its tongue. Like I was some kind of insect. Some giant bug to be sucked into its waiting mouth. I can feel it lumbering toward me.

Fire! Burning between my fingers. Arching outward. Striking almost blind from my outstretched hand. I scorch the room like a flame-thrower. I'll cook the walls if I have to. Make them run with burning stone. I'll not be an easy mark. Where is it? I douse the flame. The smell almost makes me puke. It didn't even have time to scream. Charred flesh and blackened bones. All that remain of the thing.

"Don't fuck with me! Don't fucking fuck with me!"

Did I just say that? Damn, I thought I kept the words confined to my head. My back hurts. Shoulder is a mass of pain. Arm isn't doing much better. Fingers still tingle with the flame. Time to move on. Take a second to collect myself. Deep breath despite the stink. Listen to my heart whistle. I still can't feel my arm.

Okay, just think about this for a second. Only one frog? Why only one frog? The last time I faced only one monstrosity it wasn't alone. It had driven me into a trap. What should I have expected from the fried frog? Only one? Oh, where there was one, there were many. So, rethink which path to follow. It had been behind me, right? Maybe I was supposed to run forward.

What the hell is that?

Damn, it's another frog. I hadn't seen it at first. Farther back. Half charred and flash baked. The good news? It's showing no sign of moving. Which means I had more than one assailant. Which means there are more back there. Fuck! Which way do I go? Wait a second. Listen. I can hear them slurping over the ground. More of

them. They must have faded when I blasted the cavern. Becoming wary of the guy with the flame-thrower up his sleeve.

God, they're making my skin crawl. Frogs. Getting hit by their tongues. Makes me want to wretch. Spill my insides over the old rock and stone. Okay, time to start moving. Pick a direction. The way I was going is as good as any other. I start walking. Running will probably draw their attention. I'm a firebrand. Ready to strike.

I can hear them. Run! Over rock and slick stone. Where are they? I can hear them back there. Making booming, bellowing noises like turbines. The world turns upside down. Inside out. Like I've just tumbled down a thousand-foot waterfall in a barrel. Head hurts so much it's numb. Ear ringing with blood. They tagged me. In the ear. Why the world flipped. Burning. Sticky. God, their tongues are sticky. Dripping with slime. Hit in the leg. Just below the hip. Screaming! Falling, I turn the world into a blast furnace. A whirlwind of fire and lightning. I hear them cry. I hear them scream. Gurgling with pain. No, wait, that last one was me. The wind is baking my skin. I can feel it crack. I've got to stop the storm.

I can't get my mind around it. Like trying to hang onto a soapy cat that doesn't want its bath. All claws and slick fur. Slicing at my fingers. I falter. Falling. Damning my own storm. Before it can consume me. Control. What the fuck do I know about control? Grasp the storm as it shreds my fingers, tearing my hand apart. Screaming. My voice is the wind. Hold the fire. Let it burn. This is nothing to getting my heart ripped out. Strangling the hurricane. Nothing left but bone. Don't let it consume you. Twisting. Turning. Shuddering with the storm. I shove it back into my pants.

The world is quiet. I fall. Gasping for breath. It's one thing to start a forest fire. It's quite another to put one out. My arm hurts. My head is numb. Ringing in my ears is the afterimage of a nuclear bomb. Slimy fingers around my throat. A weight to break the world on my back. Oh, shit! Oh, shit! The frogs held back! I can't breathe. I can't even scream for the memory of flame. Eyes bulging. Thunder and lightning. But, nothing comes. The stone hits my head. Again and again and again. Pain like they're using baseball bats on me. I curl around my arms, hoping that I die. Remembering nothing after that.

twenty-two
Life by Firelight

I don't remember much of anything after that. Except for the pain, of course. That is what made it hard to remember anything. Hard to think. Hard to feel. Just hard to do much of anything. Like I had had all of my skin removed. And, I was just lying there. Skinless. How to describe? You ever have a fingernail removed? Like when you were a kid and got your finger smashed in a door? Doctor has to remove the fingernail. Keep it bandaged. Apply antiseptic goop every so often. It's a sticky wet pain. Even the touch of fresh air against the exposed flesh is icy pain. Pain so sharp it's all you can do not to pass out. Hell, I don't know how to describe it. If you've never had a fingernail removed, you just would not understand. Well, that is the kind of pain I was experiencing through my whole body.

No shit, ouch. When I was conscious, anyway. Which wasn't much of the time. I would start to come around. Just start to drift into thought. The pain would hit and off I would go again. Pass from this world of thought and pain and into an emptiness so vast it consumed the world. Nothing escaped. Not hope. Not memory. Not even thought.

I guess there were dreams. Or, nightmares. Depending on how you wanted to look at them. Never really had much of a chance to focus on them. What with the sudden onrush of all consuming agony the second I started to formulate a thought. Now that I think about it. There couldn't have been any dreams. Hell, I can't even remember the last time I had a dream. Not since long before I spent time on that little stretch of beach. So, maybe there were memories masquerading as dreams because it was the only way I could contemplate them.

Little snatches of vision. Lying on the rock. All crumpled to shit. Can't see a damn thing. One of those froggy things comes slurping over. Froggy thing? What the hell do I know. Barely holding it together what with the pain. Like my body has been scraped raw and I've been soaked in rubbing alcohol. Froggy thing looks at me. Standing on two legs. All hunched over like a frog. Big shoulders. No neck. Big slimy eyes. So, this frog kind of absentmindedly picks up a rock. Smashes me in the face with it. Say goodbye to the waking world.

Other times, I would come to. Can't move. So used to the pain it's nothing more than a dull ache. Stare at the rock. What else is there to do? Listen to the frogs. Off in the distance somewhere. Making strange slurping noises. I swear that's all they do. Make slurping noises. Like they're dragging shit through mud. Stare at the rock until I lose all track of time. Forget I'm awake. Regain consciousness without knowing how much time has passed. Frog wanders by and smacks me against the wall until the darkness takes me again.

What the hell is going on, anyway? I mean, what the fuck is going on? We don't need to rehash the whole story here. We can gloss over the part where that strange fuck pointed his finger at me. Had fun on a beach. Sold at market. Working for Del Morgan. Lost at chess. Okay, got it covered.

These strange monsters. Look like giant frogs. Standing on two legs. Sort of hairy. More gray and dirt red than green. Scrawny hands with long sticky fingers. Floppy webbed feet. Walking on two legs but hunched down. As if they don't like being so far from the ground. Sometimes resting a hand on the ground to keep their balance. Throat working like he's breathing shallow. Breathing as fast as most people's hearts race. All around really weird fucks. They speak with a kind of gurgling slurping noise. If you could call it speech. Can't image what they might say.

What do they want? That's what I want to know. What do they want with me? What are they doing? Leaving me on the rubbish pile until I die? Are they taking bets? Wondering how long I'll take? This could take awhile. Del Morgan has my heart. Said it was for my own protection. That I cannot die without it. Instead, I get endless suffering. Immortality? Immortal pain. That's what it is.

What happens when they get bored? Figure out I'm not going to starve to death. Bash me with a rock all they want. I keep coming back. Which raises an interesting question. Am I immortal? Can't die unless Del Morgan destroys my heart? Is that it? What happens when they figure that out? Are they going to get more creative? Bashing doesn't work. How about smashing? Grinding into pulp. Mush or gruel. They'll try dismemberment. Dragging different pieces of my body around. Watching them wiggle and squirm their way back together. I wonder if they've tried any of these things yet? I'm in enough pain. It wouldn't surprise me. Like I've got no skin. God, that's it. They've skinned me alive. They're watching it grow back.

Wondering how long it'll take. And, then, just for kicks, they'll skin me again.

Oh, then, they'll start getting real creative. Maybe they'll eat me. There's a thought to turn your stomach. Keep you up nights. If I grow new skin. Wiggle back together. Whatever. I'm some kind of regenerating food source, right? No, really, just think about it. Rip off an arm. Chew. Chew. Chew. Throw the bones back. Watch them heal. Reattach themselves to the shoulder. Rip the arm off, again. Chew. Chew. Choke. Gag. Spit. Puke. Hey, that arm's gone rotten! Let him heal a little longer. He's not ripe, yet.

That's not even the worst of it. I mean at least they haven't burned me to ash, yet. That sounds real nasty. We're really pushing the envelop on this whole *can't be killed* thing. I mean, what happens? Do I retain consciousness even without a body? Do the ashes reconstitute themselves into me? What happens if some of the particles get blown away?

Here's an alternate theory. Skin and hair and shit is constantly flaking off, right? All the shit that falls off is replaced, right? Something like every seven years we're all new cells. I have no idea if that's even close to accurate. Beside the point, anyway. So, if I were burned to a crisp. Or, had a few limbs ripped off. Would I re-grow them? Like a lizard's tail. Skin and hair. Forget that old limb. I'll just grow a new one.

Oh, wait, I've got a better one. What if each piece grows a whole new me? No, seriously. That limb over there never gets reattached. That torso over here needs a new limb. So, they each go to work. Never realizing the other is doing the same thing. Almost the same thing. The limb is growing a new torso while the torso is growing a new limb. Before you know it. There are two of me. Even better. Which is the real me? Are they both me? And, best of all, who gets to decide? I'll let them fight for it.

God, I'm in so much pain I'm delirious. It's really kind of settled into a dull ache. I mean the pain is still as horrible as it ever was. I've just gotten used to it. It's just truly amazing what a body can adapt to. Oh, wait, here comes one of those damn frogs. What kind of fun and games are we in for tonight? If I don't move. Maybe it won't realize I'm watching it. Slurp. Slurp. It's watching me. Big lips moving. They must eat me. That's got to be it.

Oh, for the love of God, that has got to be it! I can taste it! On his lips! Between his teeth! He's thinking about me! Thinking which

are the good parts. Grab an arm. Suck the blood and flesh from the ribs. I can feel teeth sinking into flesh. Lips sucking. Slurping at the juices. Crack a bone. Take the marrow. Throw the waste back. It'll be good again tomorrow. Oh, God, I'm going to puke! Oh, God, I want to die! Ripping flesh. Licking blood. Rummage around until you pull free the liver. Swallow it whole. Wait for it to grow back.

I can feel fingers on my leg. Touching me like it knows where the good meat is. Pulling at my leg. Slurp. Slurp. Not again! Let the firewind have them all! The thing blisters. Skin ripping. Flesh shrinking. Pulling away from bone. Blood sizzling before it even touches the ground. It's hand shrivels. Charcoal. Snapping off at the wrist.

I let the storm grow, filling the catacombs. Any moment now, the stone will begin to melt. There are more of these things. These froggy monstrosities. All I need do is find them waiting for their supper. Not knowing that their supper is going to fight back. I leave the room, walking between pillars. Find more monsters. Shying back. Wary of the flame. They had touched me. Fingers slipping over skin and bone. Teeth grinding into muscle. Chewing. Tasting. Swallowing. Rubbing slime over their lips. Waiting for the feast to grow back.

I consume them. Let the flame rush! Let the flame roar! They cry. Scream. They cannot run. Hoisted by a fiery whirlwind. I peel them like fruit. Squash them like grapes. Tomato juice and pulp slipping onto the floor. Even their death cries are like sloshing through mud. Slurp. Gurgle. Silence. Only the voice of wind to answer.

I let the storm build. The fire rage. So hot that lightning follows in its wake. Thunder drowned by firelight. There must be more. There's always more. And, I will find them. Wipe them from the earth. Teeth marks on my arm. Biting into flesh. Tearing skin from bone. Sucking intestine like spaghetti. Enough! No more! I will find them! Make them suffer! Make them pay! The hall is an inferno, melting around me like wax.

I listen for cries. The telltale sign of distant slurps and gurgles. The thud-thud of breath. Moving on, I find more rooms. Larger caverns. A fire-pit. Trash heap. And, bones. Lots of bones. Arms. Legs. Fingers. A foot. Skulls. My skull? I lift it between tendrils of fire. Hold it before my eyes. It is my skull. There are several. All mine. These are my bones. Cast aside. Picked raw. Licked clean. More added to the pile as I grew new limbs. Face. Chest. Arms. Teeth.

I'm going to be sick! God! How can you condone such horror? The inferno with them! Let the flame consume all. Bones snapping beneath flame. Reduced to dust in an instant. Hurled like specks of ash in a hurricane. I turn. Searching. Seeking. Letting the firestorm be my eyes. Creatures of frog breath hiding. Cowering from me. My blood still on their lips. Quivering with fright. Piss flowing like wine. Skin already cracked and dry from the heat. Flame so hot skin slurps from bone before the fire can touch them. Before they can cry. Wind scarring their lungs before they can breathe. Hacking. Gurgling. Dying before I can reach them.

More! There must be more! How many have I consumed? It's not enough! Rock had ground my face to powder. Pulling apart the skull and picking at the brain. Nibbling. Tasting. Watching it grow back. It will never be enough! I will have them all! Their home! Their world will be mine!

The ceiling gives way. So hot it's turned to liquid. Filling the world. I watch, stepping back. Letting the fire flow. The flame burn until there is nothing left. Then, I watch some more. Turning. Stepping back. Watching their world die.

Funny. How long ago had I lost control of the firewind? Almost consumed by my own flames? Blinded by panic? Now, watch. I shape light like a glassblower. Mold stone. Like I'm not part of it. Watching from a distance. What will happen when the fire dies? When the stone cools? Will there be anything left of me? I can still feel the pain. Like a dull ache. Surprised it ever used to bother me. As my body slowly heals.

Let the fire go. I have done enough. Destroyed their world. I am death. Let the stone cool. The world fade. With the passing of the light, I feel cold. The stone will continue to glow. From the heat. Maybe years before it cools. I cannot stand. Feeling nothing. Not even the gap where my heart should be. The one thing they could not consume. What kept me alive. Kept me in pain.

The fire gone. It is cold. So cold. The glow slowly fading. Do I even have a body? Hadn't thought about that. Is it down there? Somewhere? Buried beneath all that molten rock? What is left of me? Fire? Rage? Pain? The storm is passing. So is the pain. I can feel the world fade. Growing dark. Drifting from the sky. Will there be another morning?

twenty-three

Crossing the Threshold

That's about it, really. Not much left to tell. I found the garden. Wasn't too difficult once the cannibal frogs had been disposed of. It was almost as if they were the last test. The last guardian of the gate. Or something like that. Kind of a cliché, I know. But, that's not my problem. I had more important concerns. Like trying to remember who I was. What I was doing lying on some rock out in the middle of nowhere. The stone had cooled. Oh, yeah, that's right. I had turned the world into an inferno. How? That's what I wanted to know. It had been so easy. Let the flames rush. Let the flames roar. The cliché would be that I got angry enough, right? That's not what happened. At least, that's not what I think happened. I mean I had gotten mighty freaked-out and pissed-off, sure. Nothing like finding a pile of your bones picked clean and tossed aside to turn the blood. But, see. With the flames roaring all around me, I had been cool. In a totally freaked and angry to the point of bloodshed kind of way, sure. But, I don't know. Distant at the same time. I could say something like the flame didn't consume me. I consumed it, but I don't want to throw-up.

So, I got off my ass. Remembering something of why I was there. I was looking for the water of life. And, that's all it took. I could touch it. I could taste it. Fresh as the world. Sweet as destiny. The water of life flowed through me like the touch of the breeze. The song was an echo at the back of my head right behind my ear. This was crazy. I wanted to laugh. I did laugh. I wanted to cry. Not knowing how. I knew where I was going. At least, that was a start. I chose a direction. Started walking. Over rock and under stone. Knowing I had a destiny. Well, a destination. Let's not get carried away here. It must have been the scent of the river talking.

And, that is how I found it. Wandering. I don't know how long. Not that time really seemed to make much of a difference in this place. One day is just as good as any other. That's what I always say. Which is how I found it, I suppose. Wandering. Looking; therefor, it was there. The garden opened up before me. A great expanse of life in the underground. Sculpted. Molded. Like. Hell, I don't know how to describe it. Like a planned community. The trees were uniformly tall. If you looked at them side by side. Stick a straightedge between

them. It would be level. And, they weren't exactly tree shaped. Let me try to explain. The trees had been clipped and pruned and cared for. Shaped into art. That one was a cone. The other one was more of a cylinder. Sort of an unnatural pointy hat shape. The lawn was freshly cut and manicured. The bushes and the brush? Small plants and flowers? Sculpted into lawn ornaments. Depicting scenes from the wild. That bush resembled a deer in green leaves and flowers. This other one was a rabbit. Over there, I could see a bird. This was an enlightened man's garden, if you know what I mean. The kind of place the Romantics and the Impressionists railed against. That's the best description I can offer. Take it or don't understand it. I don't care.

I was following the river. It flowed through the garden. From whence it came and where it might go, I did not know. Flowing in its bed of white stone. It filled me. Flowing around me. Through me. Drinking me in. Tasting me. Laughing among the stones. I stumbled toward it. Not knowing what I should do. Not knowing how I might take up the water. Transport it back to the dragon. Which brought up another interesting little problem.

The dragon. Not my dragon. The gardener or guardian or whatever it was that lived in this place. Between me and the river was the dragon. Big as life. More snake than lizard. Short, stumpy legs. No wings that I could imagine. All dark skin and gold scales. Red and gold as the sunrise. A shock of dark hair like a lion's mane. Eyes that shamed the sun. Kind of awe-inspiring, really. I mean. Wow. Words most definitely did fail me. Facing the dragon. Wondering if it might speak. I take that back. About words failing me. I mean they did fail me. That magnificent beast stretched out before me for as far as the eye could see. I didn't have two words in my head. Not that it mattered. I couldn't say a damn thing until the dragon gave me permission. The dragon didn't look to be saying anything anytime soon. This was turning into a staring match. A match I would lose. It was only a matter of time before I cracked. Went screaming off into the sunset. Or, what passed for sunset underground.

"Leave this place."

"I am here."

Whoa! I don't know what was freakier. The dragon's voice. Or, my answer without permission. What is it with dragons? Do they give their consent by simply bothering to say two words to you? Or, was I breaking my programming, so to speak? Maybe dragons are

just such forceful and overwhelming bastards that their will overrides absolutely anything and everything else. Including Del Morgan's prohibition against my speaking without permission. I can tell you one thing. The blood was racing like fire beneath my skin for hearing my voice unannounced. The thrill was almost overwhelming. Better than sex.

"You do not belong here."

"You know? I get that a lot. In fact, it is my main point. I don't belong here. This place. I mean this place is a perfect freak-show. And, I don't mean you in particular. I mean this whole world I have stumbled into. Nothing. And, I mean nothing has made a lick of sense since I stumbled upon a little stretch of beach in the lobby of my office. Nothing."

The dragon gave me no answer to that. I guess I should say a few words about the dragon's voice. Since I brought it up. It was like a freight train in a silent movie. No, really. Like a whisper in a church that makes the whole congregation turn and stare. If it had been an earthquake, I would have been shattered glass. Of course, in the face of all of that. Standing kind of nose to nose with something that must use giraffes for toothpicks. I would have to fill the void. Make a noise. Say something. Say anything, stupid!

"I was wondering. Thinking. Hoping. I was wondering if I might have a thimble."

No answer. Okay, well, that never stopped me before. Deep breath. Better than sex, remember?

"I know it must be much to ask in this place. I am not prepared. When I woke this morning, I did not think I would find myself here. In this place. I mean, not this morning. This morning, I was wondering how long I had been somebody else's breakfast. I mean, when I started out. Left home. Looking for dragon's breath. I did not expect to find myself here or else I would have come prepared."

No answer.

"Look, if it really isn't too much trouble. I would very much like a pound of water."

No answer.

"No, huh? Well, why not? The river flows whether we mind it or not. So, if it is all one to you."

"You do not want it."

"What? Why? Are you a mind-reader? Why don't I want it? Is there something wrong with it? Does it make your breath stink?"

Am I allowed to make up my own mind as to what I might like or dislike? Maybe I've heard of this stuff and I just want to try it. Did you ever think of that? Of course, I want it."

"You do not want it."

"What did I just finish saying? Yes, I want the water of life. I need it."

"You do not want it."

"What is this? You do everything times three? I just finished telling you. I want it. I've got big plans for this stuff."

"You're going to trade it for dragon's breath."

"Hey, how did you know that? Maybe I'm thirsty. Did you ever think of that?"

"No, you told me. You want dragon's breath."

"Well, maybe I should just shut up! I don't care about dragon's breath. I don't even know what it is! I just want the water of life. Is that so much to ask?"

No answer.

"Do you play chess? I suck at the game myself. Learn something new every day. So, what is the price? For the water, I mean. I'll wrestle you for it."

No answer.

"I know. Hardly a fair match. I'll tell you what. I'll tie one hand behind my back if that'll make it fair."

"What if I could offer you a fair trade? Fruit from the tree of knowledge instead of the water of life."

"What kind of trade is that? I haven't given you anything."

"You don't want the water of life. Not really. Take the fruit with my blessing."

"Where are we? *Genesis*? Are you really offering me an apple from the tree of knowledge of good and evil? I hate to break the news to you, but I think I already know the difference."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"I do not think so. Take the fruit and be sure."

"Nice try. In exchange for confirmation of what I already know, I give up the water of life. What else do you got to sell me?"

"I could give you the water of life."

"There you go! Just what I always wanted. I knew you would see it my way."

“No, you do not understand. I will give you the water of life. Not to the one who sent you. I will give it to you.”

“That makes as much sense as a clockwork orange. So, if you give me the water of life, what is to stop me from doing whatever I want with it?”

“It can free you from Del Morgan.”

No answer.

“As long as Del Morgan has your heart, she controls you. If you should but drink of the water of life, you would be free of her. Free of your heart.”

“What’s the catch?”

“There is no catch. Drink and be healed. Drink and be free. In time, you will forget you ever had a heart.”

“What do you mean? Forget I had a heart? You mean I can be free of her control? Drink and sever the connection? Lose my heart? What am I without it?”

“It’s not exactly as if you had been using it.”

“Shut up! Just shut the fuck up! What am I doing here! I want my fucking heart! That’s what I am doing here!”

“Yes, I think I shall give you what you wanted. The water of life.”

“No, I don’t want it!”

“You said you wanted it. The water of life is a gift without compare. You cannot resist. Many would kill for it. Many more would die. Empires would rise and fall for but a single drop.”

“No!”

“It is yours.”

twenty-four
Dark Night of the Soul

So began the worst night of my young and stupid life. Worse than discovering a pile of my bones next to someone else’s dinner table. Worse than having Del Morgan rip out my heart. Worse than looking up from my desk and realizing that I hated my job. Worse. Much, much worse. I had everything I could ever hope for. Everything that I could ever want. Freedom. Power. True immortality. It was right there. In my hand. Right there in my hand. I was holding a flask. More like a wineskin, really. But, made of clay or I don’t know

what. That really wasn't at the forefront of my mind. I was holding the water of life. Maybe a pound. Maybe more. Maybe less. I really didn't know. All I had to do was drink and be free. No more dragon's breath. No more errands. No more Del Morgan. No more heart.

That was Del Morgan's power over me. She had my heart. As long as she had that, I would always go back. As long as she had my heart, she could kill me whenever she wished. All she had to do was squeeze. It also meant that anyone who got their hand on my heart could kill me. Crush me like an overripe tomato. If I drank of the water, I would be free. My heart would die, and I would live. Nobody could take that away from me. Maybe someday I would even forget that I had ever had a heart.

That was the problem. I wanted my heart back. It wasn't exactly as if I had been using it, my ass! I wanted my heart back. I wanted it! I wanted it! I wanted it! What else was worth living for? What else was worth dying for? Neglected? Unused? I wanted it. Hard as stone? Cold as rock? I didn't care. I wanted my heart back. I would find a use for it.

The problem was the water of life was sweet. I could feel it. I could taste it. Holding the flask at arm's length like it was poison. Gripping the cord that wound its neck like I was strangling the bottle. The flask swinging, dangling at the end of its noose. My hand shook. Fingers trembling. It was all I could do not to open it. Break the seal. Tip it back. Let the water splash against my tongue. Drink it in. Lose my heart. Forget my heart. The water of life was a song in my head that I could not forget. Dancing behind my ears. A jingle to drive one insane.

No, I would not forget. I would not lose. Old. Neglected. Dead. I did not care. I wanted my heart. More than anything. More than life. I wanted my heart. What did the water offer? Empty life. Meaningless existence. The world without a heart.

It was sweet. It was tempting. It was freedom. It was all I could do not to drink. Holding the flask at arm's length. Crawling. All but crawling with the garden lost behind me. I did not know where I was. I would find the dragon. The one who had sent me after this foul water. He would yield me dragon's breath, and I would return to Del Morgan. I would finish the errand, and I would look for my heart. I would find a way. If it took forever and a day, I would have my heart.

I did not know if I would make it. Crawling. Struggling. Walk-

ing. Wandering. No direction. Only a destination. I would trade the water of life for dragon's breath, but first, I had to find the dragon. I had to resist the pull. Ignore the music between my ears. The taste as cold as ice and fresh as the morning against my tongue. I did not know. I did not know where I was wandering. How I would get there. With the water of life in my hands. I was afraid. I feared for my heart. I did not know if I could resist temptation. I was so thirsty. All I had to do was drink.

"What are you doing?"

What? Where was I? Who had said that?

I was wandering. Stumbling. Walking forever onward. Holding the flask like a thing alive. I did not know where I was. I did not know when I was or what I was doing. I looked for the voices, finding nothing in the dark. Was I not going to get an answer to my call? Oh, right, I hadn't said anything. Merely thinking in my head.

"You look funny."

No, that wasn't me talking. Before me, I was not alone. My angel in dark fur.

"Help." My mouth was so dry I could not talk. Not even a whisper. A gurgle. Just the touch of wind to grind into my throat. All I need do was drink.

"That's what I think it is, isn't it?" Hobbes said, filling my world, touching my shoulder with hands soft as fur and gray as charcoal. Fingers stroking my arm. Reaching for the flask. "Do you realize what you have? That is your life in your hand. Your future. Freedom."

No.

"What do you mean, no? That's the water of life in your hand. The water of life. You got it. From the dragon. I can't believe you got it. It's what you always wanted. What you told me. It's your ticket out of this funny farm."

It's not mine.

"Oh, trust me on this one. It doesn't matter who sent you or what they sent you for. Dragon's breath? Forget it. That's history. The past-tense. Nothing else matters other than you are the one holding the bag. That's destiny in your hand. You can shape the future."

No, it is nothing. Nothing of the kind. I do not want it. I did not ask for this. Not when I was sitting at my desk. On the beach. When Del Morgan ripped out my heart. Waiting for the dragon. Losing at chess. All I wanted was my heart. The water of life was death to me.

“Listen to me, Matt. Listen. Trust me on this, okay? If you took this to Del Morgan, she would never remember dragon’s breath. She would give you back your freedom. But, don’t sell yourself so cheap. There are others out there who would give you anything you wanted for just a sniff. You want your heart back, right? They would get it for you. Hell, you want Del Morgan’s heart in the process? They would make it happen.”

Everything I could ever want? There had to be a downside to this. There’s always a downside. Del Morgan would know, right? That I had taken the water of life elsewhere? That I was selling it to the highest bidder?

“There is that. She would know you were stalking her heart. Del Morgan would crush your heart and that would be that. You have to protect yourself.”

No!

“What? Yes, there is no way around it. You want to be free? You want your life back? You’re going to have to drink. We can bring you your heart, but you are going to have to give it up first.”

What kind of life was that? All I wanted was my heart. Hey, how did she know what I was saying, anyway? I wasn’t saying anything. It was just voices in my head.

“I can hear you just fine, Matt. Now, listen to me. I can offer you everything you ever wanted. Even your heart. You can have that back.”

In a box on the mantelpiece.

“You don’t realize what you are holding. The water of life. It makes things happen. People will do anything for it. Anything you want. Anything you desire. They will make it happen. All you have to do is offer them a sip. A drip. One tiny thimble of nectar and they will make you a god. You want to rule the world?”

And, I looked down my arm. Trembling. Holding the flask by the neck. Listening to it sing in my head. The world was mine, she said. I could have everything. Anything. Raise an empire. Cast down Del Morgan. Kill the frogs. Speak without permission. And, all I had to do was forget I ever had a heart.

“No!”

I watched the flask sail through the dark much as I had watched the lantern so long before. It tipped end over end, falling, tumbling, and I remembered that it had been Hobbes who had watched the light fall. Somewhere beneath our feet the flask struck rock and

stone. Shattering like a mason jar. I listened to the echo of the pieces as they collapsed to the ancient rock. The water of life made not a sound as it vanished beneath the old stone, and I realized something for the first time in forever. The world was quiet. I was free of the siren song of that river water. Hobbes looked at me, saying nothing. She just looked at me. Silent as the grave.

twenty-five

Watching the Light Fall

I don't know how I did it. How I managed it. How I turned down freedom at the end of the rainbow. It was everything I could have ever wanted. Anything I could have ever needed. And, I had thrown it away. Tossed it into the abyss. Like the lantern before it. Watched it tumble. Watched it fall. Listened to it strike the cold and unyielding stone. Shattering. Splintering. Spilling the water of life over the stone. It had been the future. The water of life was fate and destiny, and I had cast it aside. Sending it lost. Sending it spinning off into the dark. With the flask in my hand, I had held the world. Many had died for such as I had held in my hand. Many more had killed for it. It was all things to all people, and I had given it up. I still don't know how.

I know. There had been a price. So, they told me. The dragon. Long and slender like a snake with stubby little legs to wrestle with the ground. He had told me the water would free me from Del Morgan. Loose me from my heart. I did not need it. I would not want it. I would soon forget it.

Hobbes had said much the same thing. Del Morgan would give me much for providing her with the water of life, but she would not give me as much as others. Forget dragon's breath. If she learned that I was shopping the water of life around, seeking the highest bidder, Del Morgan would kill me. I must drink of the water or die. That is what Hobbes told me. My angel in dark fur. Anthropomorphic cat.

I must surrender my heart to save my heart. Give up that which I was. Forget all that I had been. I could have my heart if I so wished. Offer half a glass to any who could pry it from Del Morgan's cold

and lifeless hands. I would have my heart at last. I could even place it in a box on the mantle above the fire.

How did I manage it? I don't even remember letting go. I remember watching it. Following the flask end over tail as it sailed off into the dark. Thinking it could fly. Watching it falter. Watching it fall. Disappearing into the dark. And, Hobbes had looked at me. Listening to the water fall. An ear twitched as the water of life splashed impotent over the stone.

"Well, that probably wasn't the brightest thing you could have done." She said that. It definitely had not been me. "I wish. I had. If only. You. What? If only."

She turned, stalking away, saying not a word more. I watched her fade as the light might fade. Looked over the edge of the world. Looked where I had thrown the flask. Sorry, I looked after where I had thrown the flask. Not Hobbes. She wasn't looking at me. It wasn't the edge of the world, either. It was only the mountain. In the underground. Only the mountain in the underground where I had first tasted sweet nectar and honey. Bubbling from the earth. Hobbes had found me. Hands dripping. Water coloring my shirt. The lantern at my side. I had still had the lantern. She did not look at me. A shadow in the dark. Half-hidden by light that had no source. She had her back to me, looking at the world. Tail swishing in jagged streaks.

Well, what did she expect of me? I could not take it. Accept it. Consume it. Be consumed. Give up my heart. I could not hold the water of life and not surrender my heart. It was too sweet. Filling my nose. My eyes. I could still taste it, having never touched it to my lips. That had been the end. Knowing it. Like the water had crept up my fingers. Seeped into my hand. Traveling by ways unknown into my mouth. Touching my tongue. So that I could taste it. Know what it was I held. What I was resisting. So I wouldn't give it to the dragon. Wouldn't give it to Del Morgan. If only I might drink, I would not surrender. Torn forever from my heart, I would have belonged to the water of life.

I don't know what I'm talking about. I had caste the flask far from me. Now, I didn't know what to do. No water of life. No dragon's breath. Shit. Del Morgan was going to kill me. I suppose I had options. Do what I should have done in the first place. Asked Door after the water of life. Learned how to fetch it. Even been given a guide. That is what I should have done.

"I suppose I really shouldn't blame you," Hobbes said. "What do you know?"

I didn't have an answer to that. Would have kept it to myself even if I did. Watched Hobbes turn. Walk back toward me. Making not a sound.

"I suppose I have a confession to make." She struck a light. A sparkler like the one she had given me so long before. Held it between us. Watching me by the hissing and flickering light. "I wanted the water of life. Not all of it. Maybe a thumb. Half a thimble. You never would have missed it. My consultation fee for taking you to those who would want it. Now? I feel somewhat responsible. Oh, well. I should do something for you."

I suppose I really didn't have an answer to that one either. She watched me, saying nothing. Held the sparkler so that she could get a better look at my face. My eyes stung with dancing light.

"You're looking for dragon's breath, right? I know where you can get some. Little market not far from here. Well? Come on."

"Why should I trust you?"

"What?"

"You lied to me."

"Never."

"Everything you did. Everything you said. You were using me."

"Oh, no, Matt, I would never do such a thing. Del Morgan is using you. It's the water of life. You can't trust me because I never told you of the water of life? Oh, Matt. I never would have taken it from you."

"But, you wanted it."

"Well, I never thought you would get it. I mean that did come as quite a shock. Look. I know that someday you might be holding a pound of grapes. Does that mean I should tell you now I'm going to ask you for one?"

"Yes."

"Now, you're just being contrary. Look. If I really wanted the water of life, I could have taken it from you. I could have thrown you over the cliff to get it back for me. Have I done that?"

I didn't answer that. I was thinking about how her flesh might burn if she tried. Like the frogs as they burbled and gurgled as they died. Bursting like week old fruit in the sun.

"There's an image I'll take to the grave."

"Stop doing that!"

“What?”

“I don’t know! Reading my mind! Whatever the hell it is that you’re doing! Just stop it!”

“Okay, I’ll stop. Anything that you want. I want you to trust me. You can trust me. If I wanted to hurt you, why would I work out this whole thing about a market?”

“Why do you care?”

“Because I made you throw a whole flask of the water of life over a cliff. That was. That was more than you could ever understand. I want to make it up to you. Pay you back somehow. Besides, you’re still the best game in town.”

I didn’t want to answer that. Never wanted to say anything ever again. Well, I suppose that’s not entirely true, but it was true at the moment. So, I reached out. Reaching for the sparkler as if she might give it to me. She looked at me. Watching my hand as if it might hold a trap. Then, she gave me the sparkler. Hobbes was taking me to market, and all I could think about was Beowulf Drake.

twenty-six **Memories for the Taking**

Yes, I remembered Beowulf Drake. He was the one who had found me when I returned from the lands beyond. That is what he told me, anyway. I had been resting my heals on that little stretch of beach before the wild blue ocean for as long as I could remember. Then, I had made the mistake of checking out the big ugly wood box that contained the whole wide world. That’s where Beowulf Drake had found me. That’s when he took me to market. Sold me to Del Morgan. And, the hilarity ensued.

So, I must say I was a little anxious about Hobbes taking me to market. At least, it was a different market. Not the common market of the Faire Folk. Nope, this was just some little underground market. Not that that wasn’t unusual in and of itself. I mean, after all, we were still somewhere under the city. Any moment now that next train was going to come roaring down the track, and we were all dog food. Any moment now. Just you wait.

The things one will do for dragon’s breath. I still don’t know what dragon’s breath is. All I know is that Del Morgan wanted it. She

wanted it so I was off to the underground. Dodging trains. Prisoner to one dragon. Sent after the water of life. Was introduced to Hobbes. My angel in dark fur. She was the one now leading me to market to find dragon's breath. The water of life forgotten. Ancient history. Didn't work out. I could still taste it on my tongue. Which is actually kind of funny since it wasn't exactly as if I had tried the stuff. That would have been stupid. One sip of the water of life and I could have kissed my old mislaid heart goodbye.

Hey, what do you want? A recap? Go read something, okay?

So, I was wary. Didn't know what to expect. Definitely wasn't expecting a little town. More of a village. Basic two-street kind of place. All clustered together. Which is kind of strange, I suppose. I mean, down here. Underground. They had all the room in the world. Wide open spaces. Nothing but sky. Instead, we got houses kind of jumbled up against each other. All wood, too, as if bricks and stone must be sacred or something.

So, anyway, I was kind of cautious as Hobbes lead me into this little community. All noise and bustle for a place so small. I'm not going to complain. Maybe it was a gathering place for those far and wide? The underground. The under-city was a strange place. Full of strange and exotic critters. Including my anthropomorphic cat. Well, she wasn't mine, but you get the idea. At least she had stopped answering questions I had not asked. I mean, answering questions I had only thought and not asked.

We reach one of the stalls. Kind of an indoor/outdoor kind of place. I won't try to describe it any better. Reminded me of Old Man Whetstone's place. A description I'm not going to repeat here. Go read something, okay?

"Hunter!"

"Hobbes? Hobbes! Always a pleasure! It has been too long since I saw you last! What is this? Could it be that you have brought me a gift?"

What?

"I wish that I had, Hunter. This is my most excellent good friend Drake. Matthew Drake, by name. It would seem that I owe him a favor, and I mean to make good on the debt."

"And, you thought at once of me. I am touched. I am flattered. Now, what can I do for you?"

Hunter looked at me as if she were disappointed. As if she were figuring what she could sell me for on the open market. Still, there

was respect in her eyes. I guess the saying was true. A friend of mine is a friend of yours. Which meant they thought well of my angel in dark fur around here. That was something to remember. Still, I was wary. Not trusting markets. Looking for Uma Thurman.

“My friend is looking for dragon’s breath.”

“Nothing simpler. That I have. If you would but follow me.”

Which I did reluctantly. Hobbes following quickly after our host into the shop. I suppose I should say a few words of our host. Hunter looked to be another anthropomorphic cat but not like Hobbes. Hunter was far more human in appearance. Like she was a person with only slightly feline features. As if she could pass for normal if she so wished. Draped in a robe that flowed around her. Made of dark silks and bright designs. Unlike Hobbes who definitely looked more cat than man. Unlike Hobbes who wore nothing but the fur on her back.

“And, what shall you give me for this?” Hunter held aloft a flask, looking much like that which had held the water of life. Well, at least I now knew that dragon’s breath was something that could be bottled. I had been expecting more of a balloon looking thing. Here, mister dragon, just breath into this. Hobbes took the flask, cradling it like a fragile beast.

“I would give you the life from my heart.”

“I know that you would, but I cannot indulge in such charity. However, if I gave you this on words alone, I would lose all business. All would expect to pay in words. No exception. I cannot live on such words.”

“I would expect more than words.”

“More than words. Memories. I would expect nothing less than two memories.”

“That is fair. That is reasonable. I am sure we can spare such as two memories. Matthew?”

What?

“You’re going to have to speak up, Matthew. Hunter cannot hear you. She cannot take the memories from your head.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I have brought you here. I have secured you dragon’s breath. I have done more than debt would require. This dragon’s breath is not charity. You must give so that you may receive.”

“You can’t be serious. You really can’t be serious.”

“My debt to you is paid. I have brought you here. Been your guide

in this place. Now, Hunter needs her payment for such as the dragon's breath."

"Memories?"

"Yes, it is not much to ask. Only two memories."

"How am I supposed to give her memories?"

"You need only speak."

"I have no memories!"

Which was true, I could not remember anything. Well, nothing from before the beach. I had been sitting at my desk. I had looked about the office. Realizing all was crap. And, that was when Fahrenheit had looked at me. Told me that my name was Matthew Drake. That was all I could remember. That moment in the office. The bench in front of it. Walking back to my door and having it open upon a beach. I could remember nothing else.

And, I had tried. Running errands for Del Morgan. Wondering what the hell it was that I did between. I had tried to remember who I was. Who I had been before I had been declared Matthew Drake. And, I had come up empty. Nothing. I was blank. Except. Del Morgan had asked me if I was married. Hell, Charlie had asked me what was wrong. And, I had told him. I had told her. I could speak. I just could not remember. Weird.

"Of course, you have memories. Did you ever have a pet?"

"Yes, we had a cat. Orange and black. Named Hobbes after the comic strip." Holy shit! Where the hell did that come from? I was looking at Hobbes, trying not to laugh. Not my Hobbes. I was looking at my angel in dark fur. Also, named Hobbes. After the comic strip? God, I hadn't noticed that before. "Looked. Looked like him, too. Same personality. Only. Only, our neighbor didn't like cats. And, one day I came home, and I couldn't find Hobbes. And, he didn't come home. We looked. We searched. We even checked with the pound and put up those stupid reward signs that people are always putting up. So, I remember I'm putting up one of those signs, and I hear my neighbor laugh. Oh, you're never going to find your cat. There are people who go around stealing people's pets. They sell them to researchers. Have experiments performed on them. Test the latest eye-shadow. That sort of thing. My neighbor. He sold Hobbes to those people. I don't even know if it was true. But, I never saw Hobbes again."

They looked at me. Hunter and Hobbes. Waiting. Not saying anything. Hobbes holding the dragon's breath. And, I realized some-

thing. I couldn't remember Hobbes. My cat. Not my angel in dark fur. She was still standing before me. I couldn't remember my pet cat. It was like the memory had been taken from me. Spoken and forgotten. I know it sounds strange. Hunter had taken my memory. I would never remember. I had paid half my debt. All she needed was one more corner of my life.

"No!"

"Go on. You can do it."

"No, I don't want to remember. You can't have my life."

"You can't go back to Del Morgan. You need the dragon's breath."

"Yes."

"Well?"

"This is stupid. How can I remember that I just forgot something? What did I give you?"

"Memories."

"Yes, stupid memories. What am I without memory? What did I give you?"

"The loss of your cat."

"Damn you!"

"It's not so much to give."

"Why am I doing this?"

They did not answer that. I knew why I was doing this. I had lost so much. I could feel my heart in Del Morgan's hand. I could feel her fingers. Slick. Turning. Sliding over the surface. I could feel my pulse beneath her fingers. I would not surrender.

"I met Hannah Wallace. God, I don't know. When I was thirteen? Fourteen? It was one of those stupid games that kids play. We pulled numbers out of a hat. Hannah and I were shut in a dark closet for five minutes. The closet was so full of coats and jackets that we could barely move. Scrunched and squeezed together. We could hear them laughing. Giggling. Just as we had laughed and giggled as the others had taken their turns in the closet. Hannah put her arms around me. Giggling. There was no room to laugh. Breathing in my face. She smelled like lavender soap and peppermint. No!"

"It is done."

"What have you taken from me?"

"Nothing but the past. Payment for dragon's breath."

"Rich payment," Hunter said. "I thank you."

"No more."

“As you wish, Matthew,” Hobbes said. “No more. Here is dragon’s breath. Now, let me show you home.”

twenty-seven
Falling Toward Center

At last, I had it. What I had been looking for. What I had been searching and striving for. It was within my grasp. Well, not really what I had been looking for. I wanted to be free of Del Morgan. I wanted my life back. I wanted my heart. What I had found was the end of my errand. I now held dragon’s breath in my hands. The very thing that Del Morgan had sent me in search of so very long ago. I could not remember the beginning of it. Only that I had been searching. Seeking. Striving to learn what it was that I now held. Dragon’s breath. In a flask like wineskin. More leather than clay. It sloshed as I held it. I still didn’t know what it was, and all it had cost me was two memories.

I could not remember. Hunter held them like spider’s silk. Gosamer lace so thin and vulnerable that it looked as if even the touch of her breath might destroy it. My forgotten memories. Payment for dragon’s breath. All red and green and gold. Looking for all the world like the graceful fabric of her robe. As if she might weave my memories into her. That I might become part of her. And, I wondered. If she conducted all business by memory? I wondered what life enfolded her. All memory woven together until they were a single dream of sorrow and hope and pain and joy.

That is how I left Hunter. Draped in her memories. Holding mine fresh in her hands. Wondering what it was that I had given her. Not knowing if I would ever remember. I left Hunter and followed Hobbes through the simple street of the town. If you could call it that. Give it such a name as town. There were but two streets. Marked out because that is how the buildings rested. Supporting the illusion of roads. This community. This little gathering in the wilderness. It was nothing compared to the city. Would not even fit into one short block. The city would swallow it whole and not even notice.

As we walked, Hobbes stopped. The little town in the wilderness all around us growing quiet. And, Hobbes pulled me from the street.

Stopping between two shops. Their wares on the street for all to see. And, we waited half-hidden by shadow. Watching the street. I did not talk. I could not talk. Ask questions. I did not want to break the silence. All around us was quiet for a purpose. Watching with baited breath what the future might hold.

I saw him. With his sack over his shoulder. Walking the street. Looking from shop to stall with only half an eye as if he were window-shopping. Seeking something that was not there. Looking for something other than where his eye might wander. I would learn that his name was Halle. One of the Faire Folk. Not then. Not now. I knew nothing of him. Only later would I learn. His name. One of the Faire Folk. He carried a sack of children's souls. You could see them. Through the dark fabric. Little children. With round and innocent faces. Barely more than babies. Peering out of the sack. Watching the world flow by. You could watch them push at the sack with little hands. Trying to be free. Every now and again, he might take one of the souls from his sack and play with it. Once in a great while, he would eat one. Halle never went hungry. There were always fresh souls to be found.

And, that was it. Halle was gone. Leaving the twin streets behind him. And, slowly, life returned to the small town. Like sunlight drifting through smoke after a great forest fire. And, Hobbes emerged from the shadows. I followed after, walking slowly. Looking to where Halle had disappeared leaving the town behind him.

"He was looking for you, I think," Hobbes said. "Because of what you had found and what you had cast aside."

"What? You mean the-"

"Hush."

There really wasn't much of anything I wanted to say after that. Not much of anything I wanted to think, either. Didn't know if this was the kind of situation where the guy could hear what we were saying just because we were talking about him. Watch him saunter back into town because I said the wrong word. Swinging his sack over his shoulder. Hey, watch those thoughts. He'll hear you. Wait, am I thinking this then or telling it now? God, this place makes my head hurt.

That was it, really. Not much else to say. Nothing much else to do. Wasn't going to say much. Holding my flask of dragon's breath. The very stuff I had first ventured into the underground for. Why I had listened to a perfect stranger standing in Old Man Whetstone's

shop was something I hadn't even begun to consider. Still, I had it. Don't know how long it took. Didn't know if Del Morgan was looking for me. If she considered me a complete failure. What her reaction would be when I finally did return. I must say I was perversely curious to find out what her reaction would be.

In the meantime, I had Hobbes to keep me company. She seemed to be determined to walk me back to the city. Part of that whole guilt/debt thing she said she owed me. Whatever. She was good company. Didn't say much. Which was fine since I didn't say much either. I did notice one thing. Her staff. She just carried it around everywhere. Never walked with it. Never leaned against it. Just kind of held it slung over her shoulder as she walked. Did I mention she had a staff? I must have at some point. Can't remember describing it. It was kind of cool really. It looked like three old and polished branches all wrapped and entwined together. Like they had been woven into a single whole. Three branches from three very different trees had been joined together to make something greater than they ever could have been separate.

It was a long walk. Not much to do. Holding dragon's breath in my hand. Still didn't know what it was. I was seriously tempted to open the bottle. Find out. Don't know what held me back. Guess I had been through so much I just wanted to get the damn stuff to Del Morgan. Maybe throw it into her pretty little face. I don't know. Something. I can be stubborn. I had been through too damn much to get this stuff to let it go. Still, it was a long walk.

"Do you believe in God?"

"What kind of damn fool question is that?" Hobbes said. "Do I believe in God? No."

"Then, I don't understand. You said never trust an angel. It didn't sound like pocket philosophy. Like you really believed in what you were saying."

"Damn straight. Let me tell you a little something about angels. They are conniving, deceitful and bloodthirsty. It's like they know what is best for you, but they don't care. All that matters is that they are right. If you should lose a limb, who cares? There are a thousand more just like you."

"So, you believe in angels?"

"What? I don't have to believe in angels. They are there. Can't get rid of the fuckers."

"But, you don't believe in God?"

“Which one?”

“Which one what?”

“God. You don’t have to believe in them. They are there whether you want them or not. Gods by the bushel and by the pound. Gods of the hearth and fire. Home and family. Gods of famine, war and love. This one sick bastard of a god made a whole world for torturing souls. Can you believe it? I mean, what kind of depraved and sadistic freak would go and do something like that?”

“You know? I can never figure out if you’re being serious or not.”

“That’s because I think you’re confusing a couple different things. Faith. Belief and existence. You asked if I believed and tied it to whether or not gods exist. Faith is not the same thing as existing. You’re going to have to figure that out.”

“Now, I know you’re talking crazy. God exists or does not. If He does, then my faith is justified.”

“No, you’ve got it horribly mixed up. Faith and existence. Gods exist whether you want them to or not. To have faith in one is to draw strength from it in exchange for your soul.”

“You make it sound like a deal with the Devil.”

“Who?”

“The Devil. You know. Pitchfork and horns. Cloven hooves and a tail. Some call him Lucifer, the fallen angel.”

“Never heard of him.”

“You just made fun of Hell, and now you’re saying you’ve never heard of Lucifer?”

“You mean that sadistic god I’ve heard of is called Lucifer? Look, I don’t care for gods, and I don’t try to keep track of them. You’ve got your whole concept of faith tangled up with gods. You’re going to have to separate the two before you ever hope to find your faith again.”

“There’s no talking to you. You just said I have to abandon my faith in order to find God.”

“Ooh, missed it by that much. Faith. That which gives you strength to get up in the morning. If you want to tie that into whether or not a god is going to stick its tongue in your ear, you go right ahead.”

Well, that was a total washout. I really didn’t know what to say after that. Hobbes said I had to separate faith from God. That made no sense. What is faith? The belief in God, right? The things we believe in. Like death and taxes. The fact that gasoline prices only

go up and never down. That someone is watching over us. Looking after us. Has a plan and loves us. That is faith, right?

What the hell did I know? Del Morgan was right. I had lost my faith. I don't know what I believe in anymore. Hobbes had talked about angels, and I don't know. I just don't know. I wanted to ask. I wanted to believe. In all of this, I wanted something to make sense.

So, we walked for a time, saying nothing. We were following a track. Like a dirt road. Wheel ruts to mark the passage of a million million wagons. The city was above us, and that was really weird. I mean, when was the last time I had walked its streets? Stood among people. Even though I could not talk to them. I could only answer questions, and nobody was going to ask. It all seemed so normal. So ordinary. I really had been underground too long. Del Morgan was waiting.

Eventually, I realized that the dirt track was more defined. Like I was walking along a train track. And, that was when I realized that I was following a train track. The underground. People ride trains through the underground. God, it had been so long. I had forgotten. I turned to Hobbes and realized that she wasn't there. She had left me at some point, I guess. I had to finish the journey on my own.

Oh, well, I kept walking, wondering what time it was. Day or night. Summer or Fall. You know? I didn't know. At some point, I started to wonder if I might run into a train. That didn't happen. Then, I could see a light at the end of the tunnel. Well, not really the end of the tunnel. Just the station. The platform. Where I had climbed onto the track and begun walking into darkness so long ago.

There were people about. They paid no attention to me as I climbed onto the platform. I thought about punching someone just to see if they would notice. Nah, I still wanted to get the dragon's breath home. It really was kind of freaky. Walking through the city after being under it for so long. Trading dark passages and forgotten caverns for city streets and tall skyscrapers. Weird.

Anyway, I found my way back to the apartment building. Door was still sitting behind his desk. Place still smelled like piss. Took the elevator. Opened the door. I would leave the dragon's breath in the kitchen. The dragon was there. Holy shit! What the fuck was he doing there? My dragon! Not the giant cross between a snake and a lizard that had guarded the water of life! My dragon! In his old man's skin! Checkmate in eleven fucking moves!

I couldn't move. I wanted to scream. I wanted to claw his eyes out. He just looked at me with his dark eyes and didn't say anything. Del Morgan was there. They looked to have been talking.

"There's just one thing I don't understand," the dragon said, looking directly at me. "What possessed him to look for dragon's breath in the underground?"

With that, the dragon left. He took Del Morgan's hand. Shook it gracefully. Turned to the door and left. Leaving Del Morgan and me standing there. Looking at each other. She didn't say anything, and I knew it. Knew it all in an instant. Del Morgan and the dragon knew each other. They were old friends. Had probably been friends since Del Morgan had been young. If she had ever been young. They got together every so often to talk. Swap stories. Probably even played chess. Hell, I'm more than half-convinced that the dragon had been at the party I told you about.

Del Morgan didn't say anything. She just looked at me. Looked at me and quietly shook her head. As if I was being scolded. As if I was being punished. Like a child. Someone who simply did not know any better and no amount of screaming was going to make the slightest difference. Well, what did she expect? Given no direction. Had to learn everything on my own. I still didn't know what the fuck dragon's breath was. And, she knew a dragon. So, what was the big deal? Why did she force me through all of that just to get something she could have gotten much more easily? Maybe it had all been part of some absurd plan to get the water of life. What do I know?

She held out her hand. I knew what she wanted. Didn't even have to guess. I gave her the dragon's breath. Not knowing what it was. And, that was it. Job done. I turned and left. Not expecting a thank you. Not receiving one. I went straight to my room. Flopped on the bed. Intended to sleep for at least a week. Which I did.

***Flailing
Rebellion***

twenty-eight
Jumping at Shadows

Things could have carried on like that forever, I suppose. Going for this. Going for that. Sleep it off. More crocodile eggs. Wheat. Honey. A rock hammer. More rest. Stare at the walls. Listen to music. Wander the halls. Magic Box of Psalm and Prophecy. Fetch the water of life. No, wait. Del Morgan didn't ask me to get that one. It was the dragon who wanted the water. Not Del Morgan. She had only asked for dragon's breath. The dragon had wanted something for his trouble. Strange. Maybe she wanted the water of life. Sent me to the dragon to send me for the real prize. Maybe that was the only way to go after it. Indirectly. Too many people notice when you chase after what you want. Send the fool after the wrong thing. Nobody pays any attention. Not knowing this, of course, I failed to get the water of life. She was stuck with dragon's breath.

None of which I could say for certain. Only imagine it. Believe that I had actually done something. Poked Del Morgan in the eye, as it were. Failed to get what she didn't tell me she wanted. And, thereby, defied her. Ha! Laugh it off. Sweet dreams are made of these. Del Morgan had asked for dragon's breath, and I had delivered. Anything else was just a misunderstanding on my part. Wishful thinking. Ooh, I denied her the water of life. Which she did not want.

It's like the bit with the chains. I couldn't break the chains until the dragon told me to. At which point, it was no longer an act of defiance. It was submission. Doing what I was told. He robbed me of my freedom by giving me my freedom. Which somehow falls into the same category as failing to get the water of life for Del Morgan. Which she had never asked for. So by not getting it, I was defying her. And, bringing her what she wanted. Dragon's breath. Was an act of rebellion. Spitting in her eye, as it were. By giving her what she wanted. Damn, this all sounded so much better a couple minutes ago.

The dragon was ticked. Yeah, I'm sure of that. He held me prisoner and then let me go because I said I wasn't his prisoner. Promised to get him the water of life. But, I didn't do that. Didn't even go back for dragon's breath. Which is what I said I was going to do. Now, that was a slap in the face. Yeah, that'll teach him for leaving me chained to a wall until my arms fell off. Okay, they didn't literally fall off, but it sure felt like they did. Beside the point, anyway. The point is that I didn't go back. I didn't give the fucker what he wanted. Just cling to that. Remember it forever.

And, that is how things could have gone on forever, I suppose. Petty victories. Little squabbles. Screwing up the errands in little ways until Del Morgan cracked. Killed me. Sold me. Tortured me for three thousand years. A wasted investment. I win. Lost face. Lost faith. Lost money. If Del Morgan cracks, I win. If she beats me, I win. Turns me into a toad. A sloth. South African swallow. I win. I win. I win. And, what a depressing way to run a railroad, I must say. The glass is half-full, my ass.

I didn't want to live like this. Little monsters. Pathetic creatures. Living for the moment where I could misunderstand a direction. Oh, you wanted fries with that? Watch Del Morgan piss and fume. Hoping that she kills me. Hannah and Romana watching from the wings. Waiting for the moment when Del Morgan cracks. Smiles on their faces as their mistress removes my bones one by one. Hell, I bet I could enlist their aid. That was actually a reason to do good. So, Hannah and Romana wouldn't get the satisfaction of watching me burn. Life is compromise, I guess. Or, maybe Del Morgan had told them to hate me so that I wouldn't enlist their aid. So I wouldn't fight Del Morgan to defy Hannah and Romana. Argh! My brain is going to explode.

So, what was I going to do? Lie around? Do nothing? Wait for the next errand? Hoping I could screw it up? What a waste of life that would be. All I had to do was get up, right? Get off my ass. Stop staring at the wall. You can do it. Don't have to lie there like yesterday's corpse. There's a world waiting. Things to do. Places to see.

All I had to do was leave. Walk out the door. Never look back. Wait for the moment when Del Morgan squashed my heart. She would do it, too. When she knew I wasn't coming back. When I had found my own little corner of the world. That would be it. The end. Would I know? Would I feel it? Her fingers on my heart. Slipping around the pulsing, beating heart. Squeezing. Until flesh ruptured.

Muscle burst like an overripe tomato. Dripping old juice and dry seeds.

Of course, maybe things weren't so dire. I had reason to believe that if I really wanted my freedom all I had to do was ask. Just walk up to Del Morgan and say enough is enough. I want to be released from service. I want no more errands. I want to be free. And, that's all it would take. She could not resist. Honor or something like that. I would be free to go. Walk out the door and never look back. I might try it. I might. Just because nobody has ever tried it before doesn't mean it won't work. There was just one little thing. Did freedom include my heart? No, really. It was possible that I could ask for my freedom. I understood that. Didn't know if it was true. But, I knew it was possible to try. I don't think freedom included my heart. And, that was the real reason I kept my big mouth shut.

I had to find my heart. And, that was all there was to it. But, first things first. I had to get off my ass. I had to do something. I couldn't spend all my time waiting for the next errand. What did I do between jobs? I don't know. I never thought about it between jobs. What was I doing right now? At that very moment? A good question. I never bothered with such stuff before. Maybe I had done enough errands that it was starting to leak through. Had thought such thoughts while waiting for the bus. Wondering long enough that it was still sloshing around when I made it back.

So, I had to do something. I had to get out. Just get out. Walk out the front door. Stare at the sun. The moon. The passing sky. Look at all the people walking the streets. Make fun of their jobs. I don't know. Anything. First, I had to get up. So, get up already. Walk out the door. Find the front door. I think I left it in the kitchen. No, that was a long time ago. You know where the door is. Walk to the elevator. Wait, a second. Am I really at the elevator or just thinking about it? God, I hate this place!

Okay, really get up this time. On your feet. Walk to the door. Wait, am I wearing clothes? Quick check. Okay, keep going. Find the door. The elevator. Push the button. Look at the wall. Not the door. Don't look back to Del Morgan's door. Study the elevator. Knowing that at any moment, the doors will open. Split down the middle. Reveal a tiny chamber. Okay, ride that thing to the lobby. The place where Door sits. Not the front door. Door, the guy who sits behind the desk. The really helpful guy. That is who sits in Hell's lobby. That guy.

“Where are you going?”

I pause. My hand on the door. I can see daylight. I can see the world beyond. The way out. At least, for a while. Clear my head. Breath air. Wander streets where I used to live. It’s the world out there. The real world. With real people and places and things. Talking. Laughing. Arguing politics. Someplace where nobody knows your name. I can see it. I’ve got my hand on the gate.

I turn. I look. Door is sitting behind his desk. His paper-maché desk. Watching me. Looking at me. Wondering what I want. What I am doing. What am I doing? Where am I going?

“Out.”

twenty-nine
A Brief History of Life

I was feeling much better. I had even found the strength to crawl onto the bench. No reason to be lying face down on the cold concrete. Lying in my own vomit, spit and piss. I could sit half-sprawled on the bench and wait for Charlie. He had run off. Screaming something about emergency. All I had to do was wait for him. They would come. They would rescue me. No more dreams. No more fantasies. No more confusion. I wouldn’t have to worry anymore.

Everything was just so confusing. Like a demented dream or nightmare. Someone had stood in the door of my office. As if he had suddenly appeared there. Which was impossible. I must have been so lost and confused in my own thoughts that I hadn’t noticed him step into the door. That kind of thing can happen when you start to wonder after your life like I had done. Lose all track and sense of time. Don’t realize someone is standing there until they’re basically shouting at you. Which is not what happened here. This guy. This weird-ass freak had pointed his finger at me. No, wait, that bit never happened. Why am I always convinced that he pointed his finger? Sometimes, I remember that he did. Sometimes, that he did not.

Everything is just so confusing. Then, to get thrown out of my office. I mean, how weird is that? And, everything else. The beach. The market. The apartment. Let’s start with the beach. How do you fit an entire beach into the lobby of an office building? Huh? How do you do that? So, I must simply be delusional. Like getting kicked

out of my office building. That couldn't have happened. I must have gotten really lost and confused. I mean, really. People recognizing me? Not recognizing me? Not able to remember my own name? Thinking I've got multiple personality disorder? That's just silly.

I am Matthew Drake, and that is all there is to it. I've simply been going through a bad patch. Not all there in the head. Having a little touch of trouble telling dreams from the waking world. Like walking down a subway tunnel and having it turn into an underground cavern. That's crazy. What's that called? Schizophrenia? I've heard of that one. Lots of people catch it. You can catch it in degrees.

Schizophrenia? That's the one where you can't tell the difference between things that have happened and things you only think have happened. It's where all the people who believe the NSA has planted transmitters in their heads come from. They get anally probed by aliens. They see dead people. The dog talks to them, telling them to kill people. I think that's all covered under schizophrenia. I don't know. I never studied.

It's not all that bad. No, it doesn't have to be that way. I figure it can be simple stuff, too. Like you remember something that happened to you. As time passes, you sort of edit the memory in your head. Think about what you should have done or said. The problem is where you start to lose track of what really happened and only remember the edited version. Remember what you should have done or said as if it is what you actually said or did. Yeah, that's schizophrenia, too. I think.

I had it bad. I had really lost track of things. I mean, how long could I have been sitting on that bench? Really? Half an hour? If that long? Charlie would be back any minute now. He had run for help. Left me lying there. Having an episode. Shaking like a son of a bitch. It couldn't have been that long. And, in that time, I had convinced myself that I was living in a city in a box. Nothing was real. I was sitting in a box. Looking like a city. Sitting in a box on the beach. I had imagined all this other stuff. You can do that. When you are really far gone. Imagine that years have passed while it's really only been half an hour.

Charlie would be back at any second. Help would arrive. They would take me to the hospital. Probably give me some anti-psychotic medication. Talk to a doctor. A headshrinker. Figure out what had totally fucked with my life. Figure out why I was seeing giant spiders living between the buildings in the warehouse district. All

that other stuff? Probably a collection of half-remembered dreams and nightmares from over the years all crashing together in my head at once.

All I had to do was sit there and wait. Someone would find me. Notice me. Wonder what was wrong. Charlie would be back. Well, it was nice to believe, anyway. Sit there on that old wood bench and pretend that none of it had happened. Del Morgan never did rip out my heart. I still had it. Going thump-thump in my chest. Playing chess with a dragon. Cannibal frogs. Struggling with the water of life.

It really was nice to sit on a bench in front of my old office building and pretend that none of it had happened. Pretend that it was still my office. That all I had to do was walk through that door. Take the elevator and my job would be waiting. My petty, meaningless, bullshit job would just be waiting for me. That's all I wanted. To be able to go back. Tell that freak to stick his bloody finger where the sun don't shine.

If I sat on that bench long enough, would Charlie come out? What would he say? Would he recognize me? *Hey, Matt, where have you been? It's been ages. You disappeared.* Strange that I wanted my office back. I hated my job. I really did. That was no bullshit. Why did I want to go back? Anything was better than being eaten by mutant frogs, I suppose.

I didn't have to wait for someone to recognize me. I could walk into the building. Take the elevator. Go back to the office. Look for Jack- I mean Charlie. I was so close to the real world. It's hard to explain. I was in the world. Del Morgan was in the world. You could see her apartment from the street. But, there was something off about it. Like you couldn't find it if you tried. But, it was there. So, it wasn't entirely real. Not like this office building. It was real. I could reach out and touch it. Taste it. Lick it with my tongue. I could.

It was nice to sit among real people. If any had been walking by, anyway. Not knowing about the strange person sitting on the bench. The one who could turn into a ten foot disciple of Cthulhu if he wished. Start busting heads open. But, I didn't like to think like that. I would rather remember the things as they were. Pretend I still fit in. The world was still the place where I lived, right? I could climb off the bench. Walk to the industrial district and find the music shop. The place where I had found the Magic Box of Psalm and Prophecy. It wasn't in some off-kilter dimension. It was right here.

In the city. In the real city. With spiders that nobody else could see crawling over the landscape.

At least, my office building didn't have any spiders spinning webs all over it. That was a relief. It helped me remember how things used to be. Before I began to notice all the things that most people simply don't notice. Of course, my grasp was tenuous. It was trying to open the door to my very normal looking office building that had left me on the beach.

Maybe that was what I was doing. Sitting on that bench. Pretending I was waiting for Charlie. I was sitting there hoping to find a way back to the beach. Maybe if I believed it enough. Really convinced myself that everything that had happened had happened in less than half an hour. That the door to the beach was still there. That I was really still sitting in a little wood box on the beach. I wanted the peace and quite of the ocean back. Was that so much to ask?

Which is when I realized how quiet it was. Which is when I realized that nobody else was around. Nobody walking down the street. Sitting on the bench. Going in and out of the building. No traffic noise. No noise of any kind. Okay, this was getting weird. You at least get birds flapping and chirping around, right? Okay, I was starting to freak. It was like that moment. Before I stood. Walked to the door. Tried to open it. Couldn't. Then found myself with a mouthful of sand.

The beach. The ocean. Waves slowly waxing and waning. Nothing but miles of deep blue sea. Not a feather. Not a bird. Not a single solitary seagull. Nothing but ocean and beach and an island that had no end. With a wood box twenty feet on a side. A box that contained the whole wide world and everything in it. Including dragons and giant spiders. Del Morgan and the common market.

Which is how I found myself running. Not really running. More stumbling. Lurching. Falling forever forward. Like I was tripping over my own two feet and simply never hitting the ground. I realized I was running. Struggling. Straining to be away from the office. To put as much distance between myself and the door to the ocean as possible. I was shivering. Skin crawling. Heart racing. Well, blood pounding. I would need a heart before it could race.

And, I realized I didn't want the beach. I didn't want the ocean. I didn't want to wander back into the box and be taken to market. It was more than that. The ocean was unreal. As nightmarish as anything you could possibly imagine. I had done impossible things

on that beach. I had made fire. Molded wood with thought. I had swum in the ocean as a fish. How do you do that? Turn into a fish? It's unnatural. It's inhuman. It's unreal. And, yet, I had done it. Like it was a dream. A lucid dream. As far away from reality as you could possibly get.

How had I gotten like that? I had gone from being some schlub in an office to tossing fireballs and flying with great gossamer wings over an island. How does such a thing happen? I had accepted it. I didn't care. That divine madness crap I was talking about. Nothing had mattered. I didn't care. Want to change the world? Sure, why not. This kind of shit just doesn't happen. You don't suddenly start shaping wind and rain and sun. It's just unnatural.

I didn't want to live in that kind of world. A place where fire could flow from between my fingertips. A world where I could scorch giant frogs with flame gushing from my outstretched hand. It had happened just like that. Didn't even think about it. I needed fire? Whoosh! Fire, I get. Why did I do shit like that? Accept it? I didn't want it. I didn't like it. It was so far gone from reality that there was no turning back. And, yet. And, yet, I wanted to turn back. I wanted my heart back. I wanted my life. Even the sucky parts.

I stumbled. Staggering. Slid into a parked car. God, I didn't even know I was still moving. Breathing hard. Leaning against the car. People all around me. Walking up and down the street. Cars moving. Driving past. Making that racket that cars make. Just like that, it was over. I was in the world. Of course, the world also contained Del Morgan. Which is when it started to rain. And, I didn't have anywhere else to go.

thirty ***Path of Resistance***

I went home. There really wasn't that much else I could do. I couldn't go to work. That path was definitely closed to me. Learned the hard way. What would I find? Would they know me? Would my office be there? Whatever happened to Matthew Drake? No, I could not bring myself to enter the building. Learn. For all I knew, I would find the beach. The ocean would be waiting for me. And, then what? Would I return to the box one day? Tired? Bored? Lonely? That

would be the one. I would miss people. I would return to the box. Who would be waiting for me? Beowulf Drake? Ready to take me to market? No, I could not go.

So, I went home. Or, I tried to go home. I didn't know what I was going to find. Would it be an empty apartment? I could just see it. Climbing the steps. Opening the door. Finding nothing. Empty floor. Dirty carpet. An old black and white TV sitting all by itself. And, in the bedroom, there would be a tired old mattress. Not even a real bed mattress. Just one of those futon things. Minus the frame. Wrapped in a sheet. Wrapped in an old sleeping bag. Not even a blanket to call my own.

That is what I would find if I was lucky. More likely, I would find a family living there. Like I never existed. Or, had moved away. New people jumping at the chance to take my place. And, nobody had to die. Simply disappear. Forget his job. Abandon his life. Leave his home. Or, to be more precise, have it forcefully taken away. By one man standing in my doorway. Speaking my name. Giving it to me as if I had not existed until that moment.

I could not go back so I went home. Door was waiting for me in Hell's lobby. Like he always did. Like he never did anything. Just sat there. Watching the world go by. Took the elevator. It smelled like piss and vomit. The doors opened, and I was home. The opulence and majesty of the place subduing me. I found my rooms. Crawled into the bed. Or, watched TV. It did not matter. I was home.

I always went home. There was nowhere else for me to go. Even when I escaped. Left without an errand. Just had to step out. Shouting over my shoulder at Door so someone would know. I would wander the streets then. No purpose. No direction. Not even an errand. Simply to preserve the illusion of freedom if only for a little while. I would sit by the water. Watch it flow. Watch it sweep. What did it matter? I would always go home. I could visit the museums. Go to the zoo. Catch a flick. No money. But, that never stopped me. I discovered I could move among people and they would never notice me. It wasn't quite like turning invisible, but I'm not going to try and explain any better. So, I didn't go to many movies. Kind of spoiled it. If I could walk past them without being noticed, I wasn't really doing normal stuff. I couldn't escape from the fact that the world wasn't what I always thought it had been.

I wanted a place to live. A home. A house. An apartment. Anything. Anywhere that wasn't under Del Morgan's roof. But, I couldn't

bring myself to try my own front door. The place that used to be my home. Besides, I didn't have the key anymore. I would have had to walk through the door or something. If anyone lived there now, what would they think? How would they react to someone suddenly being in their living room? Huh? I ask you? So, I couldn't go back. I had to find something new. Which raised a small problem. Money. I didn't have any.

The money problem was easier to fix than you might think. You see there are these things called ATMs. You walk up to one. Flash your card. Punch your code. And, you've got access to your money. Which means that if you've got the talent. You can rip one of those tin cans wide open. Find yourself a stack of twenties. Okay, first, you've got to remember to kill the electric. Smash the security camera. Easy. I could do that from a mile away.

The only problem was that there are not too many apartment buildings that take cash. And, they definitely do not take stacks of twenty dollar bills. So, I found myself in some rat infested fifty dollar a night hotel. They say they change the sheets once a week. That worked for about an hour. Sitting in my little room. Away from home. Watching the scrawny little TV that the management provides. The adult stations are extra. I think the room was cheaper at the hourly rate, but I wasn't going to argue.

It wasn't home. That's what the problem was. Who cared that it was mine? Well, that was the other problem. It wasn't mine. Wasn't even my money. I couldn't do it. I couldn't destroy another ATM. Gather more stacks of cash. It wasn't even the stealing that bothered me. And, it did. The stealing did bother me. No, the problem was that I had to rip open the ATM, which is something I simply could not do under normal circumstances.

That's what I wanted. Normal circumstances. Somewhere where I didn't have to wonder if the spiders were on the move. Where I would never find frogs that munch skin. And, the only low flying elephant I wanted to see was in a cartoon. Somewhere where Del Morgan and Hobbes didn't exist. I would miss Hobbes.

So, I went home. There simply was nowhere else for me to go. Which is where Del Morgan found me. In the billiard room shooting pool. I ignored her. She watched. I was getting better. I wasn't in Del Morgan's league for landing shots, but I was improving. Someday, I would be able to sink some of that trick shit that Del Morgan could pull. She never even hexed a shot. It was simple skill. I had

seen her make balls play leapfrog. It was simply amazing to watch. I wasn't that good. Didn't let it bother me.

"What's on your mind, Drake?"

I watched my last shot find a hole. Drifting like a gentle breeze. Teetering. Wobbling. Standing at the edge of forever. Then down. Toppling into the dark. I didn't say anything. Not right then. I only looked at her. Holding the pool cue like Hobbes held her staff.

"Do you believe in God?"

"I won't answer that."

"Why?"

"Because you are not interested in my belief. You want my permission. You're looking to shortcut faith. Hang it on my words. There's a problem with that. Your faith will only be as strong as my voice. Faith is a personal and private thing. You must find your own or else you are nothing. I will not take that away from you."

"Then explain something to me. This place. Who you are. You owe me that much."

"No."

"You took me from my world. My life gone in an instant. You owe me something."

"Find your way, Drake. I will not explain myself to you."

"You know? That's almost funny. When I was searching for dragon's breath, I was held captive by someone. He said he owned me. That I belonged to him. And, I proved him wrong. I was never his slave, and all I had to do was ask--"

I never finished the thought. That was because I was in too much pain. My stomach hurting like it was on fire. Doubled-over. Clutching at my gut. I thought I was going to burst. Spilling pulp and intestines all over the billiard room floor. I couldn't breathe for the fire in my gut. Because Del Morgan had punched me. She had leapt the corner of the pool table so fast I never even saw her move. Fist connecting with stomach. Didn't even have time to flinch. Finish my thought. Just double over. Feeling like I was going to explode. Gasping for air that would not come. Her fist hovering before me. She grabbed my hair. Jerked me upright. That made me cry out. Felt the tears in my eyes.

"Do not suggest such a thing ever again," she said and released me.

I crumbled to the floor. Curled around my stomach. Trying to keep my insides from spilling onto the floor. I wanted to speak.

Damn her. Demand my freedom. But, I couldn't. My throat seized up. My tongue spasmed. And, I assure you. If you've ever had a muscle cramp. In your arm. In your leg. Elsewhere. Know that it is nothing compared to the pain of your tongue. I clutched at my jaw, trying to scream. Unable to because my mouth was seized shut by the shuddering behind my lips. I never even noticed when Del Morgan left me there. On the floor of the billiard room. Curled around my pain.

And, I knew it was true. What Windermere had told me so long ago. That I could be free of Del Morgan. And, all I had to do was ask. And, it looked as if the asking would be much harder than one might think. And, I knew she would kill me. Del Morgan would strike me dead the second I demanded my freedom. Perchance it was her choice as to how to give me my freedom.

And, I realized that it was the coward's way out. For her to kill me. I would be free. I would be nothing. I would win by surrendering my life. And, I realized that this was not what I wanted. I did not want the easy way out. I would escape. I would survive. I would find a way to make Del Morgan suffer. More than anything else, I wanted my heart back, and I would have it if it took me to the end of time.

thirty-one

Serendipity's Plan

It was time to try something drastic. Something I wouldn't necessarily have attempted before. Didn't even know why. I had no reason to hate them. Just a vague feeling that they didn't like me. Okay, it was more than a feeling. It was the way they looked at me. As if they wanted me to die. As if they were just looking for the opportunity to cut my hair with an axe. Mail the pieces to different countries all around the world. That sort of thing. I know why they hated me. I mean I didn't know why at the time. Knowledge would come later. At the time, I only saw the way they glared at me when I was in the room, and I knew. They wanted me gone. Now, I was going to try to speak with them.

Who am I talking about? Oh, that shouldn't be too hard to figure out. Who hated me with a passion and did most of the household

chores around Del Morgan's place? That's right. The evil twins. Hannah and Romana. Those two children of Darraghman who saw me as a threat to their way of life. What if Del Morgan took an interest in me? Maybe extended her patronage to us? The children of Earth. Like we really want her patronage. But, that is beside the point. If Del Morgan took an interest in us, where did that leave Darraghman? Hannah and Romana would have submitted themselves to her service for nothing. That's how they saw it, anyway.

So, I was going to talk with them. Crazy, I know. Foolhardy as one can get. When a snapdragon is snapping at you, the last thing you do is stick your finger in its mouth. I told you it was time to try something desperate. Try to understand why they hated me. I didn't know about the whole fabric of Darraghman society coming apart at the seams because of me. I exaggerate, but they sure made it seem that way.

The first thing I had to do was find them. All sounds really easy. I had been dodging them for most of my stay in this place. They always seemed to get underfoot somehow. Now, I wanted them. I really wasn't at all sure what would happen when I went looking for them. Would it be like the door? Couldn't find the damn thing until I applied a little reverse psychology. By looking for them, would they hide from me? Only one way to find out.

I started looking. And, realized. I had never looked for them before. How to go about it? That was the first part. Wasn't the hardest part. But, it was first. After wandering aimlessly through a few rooms, I knew I had to change tactics. I wasn't worried. I wasn't lost. I just didn't want to spend all day looking for them. There was something I could try. Didn't know if it would work.

Over time, I had developed a sense of where they were. Well, not really where they were. More of a sense of when they were drawing closer. So I could avoid them. I had to make that sense of imminent arrival work to my advantage. Turn it into an offensive weapon. Passive to aggressive. And, I had no idea how to go about it.

So, I sat in a room to think and realized that that was the best idea I had had all day. Pick a room. Find something to do. Wait for the sense of their approach. Jump at it. Surprise the crap out of them. Yeah, that was the way. Let them find me.

So, I snuggled up in a chair. Found a book. Magazine. Whatever. So, I got all comfy. Flipped pages. I think it was a study on sixteenth century basket weaving but don't quote me on that. I started to nod

off. Next was an article on swords and plowshares. So, I flipped more pages. Trying to stay with it. King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table was a decadent court. Who writes this stuff? Okay, time to move on.

Which is when I felt it. Half out of my chair. The words already discarded on the table. I was moving by automation. Reflex to their appearance. Which is what happens when you get really good at something. You don't even realize that you are doing it. I was avoiding the evil twins. But, I didn't want to do that. I had to beat the engine with a stick. Half-stagger half-lunge to keep away from the exit. I really wasn't certain where they were. So, I picked a direction, knowing they would find me. Opened a door and there she was. Hannah. Doing whatever the hell it was that she did. Cleaning. Tidying up the place. Whatever. She didn't even look at me.

Which presented an interesting problem. I couldn't say anything. I cursed all the fates I could think of without speaking a word. A whisper. Any utterance of sound. Why? Because the bitch hadn't given me permission. I couldn't talk. I couldn't speak. I couldn't reach out to her. Shit. The things that slip through the cracks in one's mind while contemplating other things. Which led to another round of silent cursing as I should have anticipated this. Of course, I wouldn't be able to start the conversation. I had to get her to speak to me first.

Which is even more complicated than it sounds. No, really, what was I supposed to do? I couldn't say shit and fuck until she gave me her consent. It wouldn't do any good to write something down. How could I convince her to read it? Oh, Holy God in Heaven, here's a thought to fuck the brain. Could I write something down with the intention of communicating with another person? Oh, that one is going to keep me up nights. At least, it was something I could try. Not at the moment. I would lose Hannah. Who was still ignoring me.

She knew I was there. No doubt about that. She was deliberately not looking at me as she worked. Didn't know what to do. I didn't want to get in her face. Grab her by the shoulders. Shake her until her voice fell out. No, what good would that do? I was trying to communicate. Working on developing some understanding. Become friends. How do you do that by slapping the person around? No, I couldn't get in her way. Force her to speak with me. This wasn't like

Del Morgan. I didn't want Hannah to slug me in the gut. I wanted her to like me.

So, I stood there. Watching her. She said nothing. Didn't even look at me. Many times I've had people look at me in silence. Never had I had someone not even look. Then something really bizarre happened. Her skin shifted. Rippled like a curtain in the wind. Changed color. She put on weight. Shoulders thickened. Her neck disappeared. Now, remember, I said their form was fluid, right? You never knew what someone was going to look like. Never looking the same way twice. Not even once.

Hannah changed shape before my eyes, and I almost threw up. I knew then that she knew I was there. She had become a giant frog. A slimy. Smelly. Disgusting frog. Looking for all the world like one of those things. That had touched me. Bashed my skull with a rock. Ripped me limb from bloody limb. Leaving a pile of half digested bones for me to find. It made me sick. And, to think that she knew. I didn't have to guess. Wonder. Anything. She knew. She didn't say anything. Look to me. Anything. She knew.

I didn't kill her. I could feel the fires of hell welling up inside of me. The rage of flame. Disgust. Humiliation and despair. But, I didn't. I didn't toast the room. Ruin the carpet. Crap on the floor. Nothing. Didn't even run. Wasn't about to give her the satisfaction.

I watched her work. Not knowing what to do. Watching this giant frog work the room. Move on to the next. Not that there was much to do, I guess. Make sure everything was clean. Straighten up. Dust. Whatnot. So, I pitched in. What the hell else was I supposed to do? I wanted her attention. I wanted her to recognize me. Acknowledge me. And, I don't mean by turning into a big smelly frog going slurp slurp all over the place.

I started working. Started cleaning. Side by side with this monstrosity. I would make her notice me. Say something. Speak. She did nothing. Only continued with her work. Accepted my help without comment. I wasn't even sure what we were doing. I just did it. Without thought or reason. Tidy. Clean. Wash. Dust. Something. Nothing. Anything. She didn't stay a frog. She changed as we worked. I won't bother with them all. At one point, she had six arms and eight breasts. No, wait, maybe that was the other way around. Eight arms and six breasts. I don't know. I wasn't paying attention. I was working. Hoping she would- Something. I don't know. Accept me. Identify me. Acknowledge my help. Something. Anything.

She turned. Stopped. Looked at me. Looked at the room. Taking it in. Like she just realized where we were.

“No,” she said.

I tried to laugh. I wanted to scream. The words gushing forth. Smashing against the back of my teeth. To speak with her. Finally! At last! She had given me permission. Only I could not speak. She had not given me permission. Only commanded me to quit work. Not enough! I wanted words. I wanted freedom to talk to her. I looked at her, dying. Feeling I would explode. Everything pushing at my insides. Lungs fit to burst. Nothing. No voice. No words. I wanted to grab her. Shake her by the shoulders. Make her recognize me. The look in her eye made me stop. There was anger there. Surprise. Confusion. I did nothing but look at her. Impotent. My voice was lost to me.

“You must leave,” she said. “Now.”

Sounded like an idea to me. I wanted nothing more than to be free of this place. To have my heart back. My old bullshit job. At least we were agreed on something even if she would not let me talk.

“You cannot be here. Go! Now!”

And, then I knew. I knew. Like a shock of ice to the face. Diving into the frozen ocean. I knew what had pissed her, and I almost pissed myself. I was somewhere I wasn’t supposed to be. As we worked, she had ignored me. Simply went about her duty. Flown on automatic so she didn’t have to think about the dumb shit following her around. Not thinking about where she was. What she was doing. Where she was leading me. Into the forbidden. Into the unknown.

I knew there were places I had not been. I knew there were parts of the house that I could not reach. That I could not see. Hear or touch. And, Hannah had just let me into one. I could see it in her eyes. The realization. The knowledge that she had screwed up.

“Go!”

And, I wanted to laugh. I couldn’t answer her and that was defiance. Even if I could, I would have held to my silence. I was somewhere I did not belong, and Hannah was in big trouble. I wondered where we were. There were two basic parts of the apartment that Del Morgan probably would not want me snooping around in. Hannah and Romana’s rooms. Del Morgan’s private study. And, that is where she would keep my heart.

thirty-two
Forbidden Discoveries

I was a kid in a candy store. Heart pounding fit to burst. Well, only in a manner of speaking. I had lost my heart. It wasn't there to beat. Pump blood. It had been removed. Ripped forcibly from my chest. It had hurt. Del Morgan sinking fingers into my skin. Grasping my heart. Pull. She had my heart. For safe keeping. Without it, I could not be killed. As I had so horribly discovered. Food for frogs. So, I felt a phantom heart beating in the hollow in my chest. Like a man who's lost his arm or leg feeling phantom pain. The foot that wants itching where there is no foot. Such was how my heart turned fury. Racing blood to burst my veins. Bring fire to my lungs.

Why was I on fire? Because I was somewhere I was not supposed to be. Standing with Hannah. Knowing that she had lead me unaware into this place. A piece of the apartment I was not supposed to see. A place where I was not supposed to set foot. Soil the carpet. A blank spot in my mind like the absent heart. But, unaware, I had been let into the darkness. And, I had found it. The forbidden room. And, I knew that I could find it again. Now that the ground had been laid bare before me. I could find such rooms again. Just like the door. At last, I had found it.

Hannah was a tree in the wind. The forest fire roaring all around her. Shaking, she could not move. Watching me. Wanting me to leave. But, she would not touch me. Only speak. Words to deny me where we stood. It was like she was afraid to touch me. I don't know. It must be one of those *he kicked me first* kind of things. Could not act until I crossed the line. So, she stood. Voice lost as mine was silent. But, she had freedom to speak. And, I was sure I would hear many more words of fit and warning before I gave up the room. She could not deny me. I could not speak, and I was free.

Free to explore. Free to look. Free to marvel. I did not know where I was. I could not even begin to guess. But, I knew where I wanted to be. And, I hoped that this was enough. By wishing. By hunting. By looking. I hoped to find the one thing in all the world that I wanted. My heart. I wanted my heart. Del Morgan had taken it from me. So, I could not be killed. I wanted it back. An obsession with no equal in my mind. I would search every room. Scour every

floor. I did not know where it was. Did not know if it was hidden. Or, in some vault. Or, kept somewhere on her person. I did not know.

What I did know was that I could look. I could explore. I could take the room apart brick by brick and block by block. I went to the shelves. I went to the drawers. Continuing to clean. Dust. Wash. As I had been doing. As I had followed Hannah throughout the apartment. Now, I was cleaning with a purpose. Checking under every knick and knock. Trinket and strange invention. For somewhere amidst all that was around me, there I might find my heart. I did not know what to look for. And, yet, I looked.

“No, you must go,” Hannah said, lurching forward as if she would touch me, stopping herself, standing still as if touching me would be a shock to strike her dead. Stamping her foot. Wringing her hands. She watched me. Breathing through her teeth.

I said nothing. Heart hammering. My own breath running ragged in my lungs. As if the confines of my chest might take flame. Saying nothing? That’s a laugh. Not through choice. Although, I would choose silence. No, I could not speak. Another gift from Del Morgan. I could not speak unless spoken to first. No, it went beyond that. I could not speak unless given permission. Asked a question. Something. Anything. A word. A gesture. Direct permission. And, Hannah had given me nothing of the kind. So, I said nothing.

Where were we? I did not know. Did not recognize the room. And, I don’t mean because I had never seen it before. I mean it was a strange mix of furniture and cabinets. Pictures and blank walls. Do rich people have rooms like this? I don’t know. A couch. Chairs. A desk. All were in attendance. I found nothing so I quit the room. Not knowing where to go. Where to look. So, I chose a direction and started walking. An exit presenting itself to me.

Hannah moved as if she might try to block my path, but I had the door before she could reach me. I crossed into the next room. Looking even stranger than the last. More furniture. No desk. An old-fashioned pinball machine. So old it looked as if it did not need electric to work. Simply cock the ball and fire it off. Watch it spin and bump and chime. Whack the ball. Watch it fly. No, I did not touch it. Hannah stood before it. Arms spread wide. I looked over her shoulder. It gave me no more interest. So, I moved on.

And, I began to wonder yet again how big the apartment was. I could find no end to it. And, yet, I knew that it obeyed most of the laws of physics. Maybe even all of them. Except the ones I broke.

Placing the front door standing free in the middle of the kitchen. Hiding doors and windows from me. Except for that. The place followed rules. Things you could depend on. So, where was I?

I don't know. I kept looking. Kept exploring. Sticking my nose into places where it did not belong. Rooms that had always been hidden from me until that moment. Places I was not supposed to go. Things I was not supposed to see. There wasn't that much. Really, I had only explored three rooms. I was casing them carefully. I did not know I would find my heart, but I looked all the more carefully for it.

"What are you doing!"

That was Romana. Not questioning me. Still could not talk. Her shout was for Hannah's ears. And, Hannah said things I could not understand. Speaking words of some forbidden language. Probably Darraghmanese or something equally arcane. They argued. I watched. It was amusing. It probably pissed them to watch me stop my exploration to listen to them piss and fume.

"No, you must go!" That was Romana, again. "You do not belong here! This place is not for you!"

I turned. A smile on my lips. Saying nothing. Watching her stamp her foot as if it was the only voice either one of them had left. Not enough. She thrust her arms at the sky. I did not even know where I was. Forbidden rooms, sure. But, whose forbidden rooms? Did they belong to Del Morgan or the twins? That I did not know. It didn't even matter. I was where I should not have been.

I found something that caught my attention. Held my interest. In a box. In a desk drawer. A small sack of brown leather. Lumpy. It clicked and clacked as I hefted it as if there were marbles inside. I undid the cinch. Pulled loose the cord. Felt around inside. I felt disks. Round as half-dollars. Cold. Feeling like glass. I pulled free a handful and held them before my eye. They looked like crystal lenses. All turquoise, emerald and burgundy. Saffron and gold. Not all at once. This one was a dark sapphire. That one was like the heart of the sun.

I heard Romana gasp as if she had been shocked from a nightmare just shy of screaming, and I looked to her. She was pale as snow, looking to the dark crystal in my hand. A jewel as dark and lush as the sea. And, I looked at the one in my hand, returning all the rest to the bag. The crystal was the size of a half-dollar and as

thick as three held flat together. Looking through it was a dream the color of the sea.

Romana stumbled forward, saying nothing, struggling to breathe, and I knew. I knew what I held in my hand. Hannah and Romana had volunteered. They had been chosen from among many others too numerous to name. To serve Del Morgan on behalf of the people of Darraghman. It was a great honor. They did their people proud. They would never leave Del Morgan. They would never willingly betray her. They would stand between her and the death of a thousand years. Anything less would shame their people. Disgrace their families for generations to come. And, yet, Del Morgan still took their hearts.

I held Romana's heart in my head. Taken by force from out her chest. I wondered at the shape of it. The form it had taken. I wondered if this was what Darraghman had for a heart or if this was the disguise Del Morgan had given it. After all, a heart of flesh and blood even out of the body does leak. I wondered what shape my own heart had been given or taken. Was it in the sack? I do not think so. The gem in my hand was calling to Romana. I could see the longing in her eyes. I felt no such call. Neither did Hannah who stood like a statue watching Romana. Romana was trembling so fierce I thought she might collapse.

So, I did the only thing I could think of. I held the jewel out to her. Offering Romana her heart. Hannah drew breath as if she might cough blood. Romana was locked on my hand. She stretched with trembling fingers, reaching for her heart. And, I wondered how it had been. Feeling Del Morgan's hand in her chest. Fingers probing. Slipping. Sliding. Grasping her heart. Pulling it free with a wet sucking sound. Like lifting a rock from out of the mud. Romana hovered. Her fingers darting. Reaching. Pulling back. Her eyes locked on the stone in my hand.

"Put it away," she said, crumbling into herself. "Please. Just put them back. Let them rest in peace."

I didn't think about it. I just did as she asked, returning her heart to the bag, placing all of them back where I had pulled them from the desk. I left the rooms then. Hannah and Romana walking behind me. Following me. Saying nothing. I returned to the places that I knew. The parts of the apartment where I was supposed to go. Knowing that I would be able to find the forbidden rooms again. When they were not watching me. Closing the door, Hannah and

Romana watching me, I did wonder. There had been many such stones in the sack. Were the rest a decoy? Hiding a stone among stones? Or, did they all have names? The hearts of people I had never met. I did not know. I did not want to know. Like Halle's sack. Only that one collected children's souls. Del Morgan only kept the hearts of people who worked for her. I hope that's all she did.

thirty-three
The Wheel of Time

I told you about Hell's Lobby. Dank. Squalid. Bare walls. One plant dying off in the corner as is the fate of all such attempts to add a touch of green to the sterile world. I don't think the lobby had been painted. Only whitewashed. And, I don't even know what white-wash is. Something Tom Sawyer was always getting everyone to do for him. The place smelled like piss, too. The theory behind Hell's Lobby was that you wouldn't want to set foot in the place. Homeless people would take one look at the dump and move on. The only reason you never saw rats or roaches was because they had abandoned it for better squalor years ago. Dreams went there to die. It was the kind of place where you didn't want to know what was living in the walls. And, that was the whole idea. Get past the door. Hold your nose. Make your way to the elevator. Pray you don't drop ten stories to your death. Wait for the doors to open. Stand in awe of the splendor before you. The people who live here don't want to be disturbed.

And, then, of course, there is Door. Big as a professional wrestler. Voice like three tons of wet gravel. Never left his post. I figured he would be sitting there behind his matchstick desk until the end of time. He was the building, I swear. He was also the man in the know. If you need something, ask Door. If you want something, ask Door. He would set you up. Help you out. Take very good care of you. I wonder if Hell's Lobby was his idea? I kind of had the feeling he knew it was as stupid as I knew it to be. Just look at the building. Look at the lobby. Now, who are you going to believe? I guess Hell's Lobby was to scare off anyone and everyone who wanted a piece of the splendid apartment building.

"What can I do for you, Drake?"

"I need to find the Wheel of Time."

“Really? That is kind of an unusual request.”

“I wish I had more to go on. Find the Wheel of Time. That’s about it. So, what is it?”

“The Wheel of Time isn’t exactly a what. It is more of a where. About the size of the instep to a baseball diamond.”

“You’ve heard of it? You know where it is?”

“Yes and yes.”

“Then, I wonder why I’m supposed to find it?”

“Can’t help you there. You’ll have to rent a car. Or, go by train. I recommend the train.”

And, what followed was the moment I had been dreading. Door summoned Jack to act as my guide. I really wasn’t sure what to think of Jack but that is a whole other story in and of itself. I didn’t really want him along, but a game of chess had taught me otherwise. Well, Jack put in his appearance, looking sleepy-eyed and badly dressed. I wondered what he did when Door wasn’t hollering for him.

“Drake needs to find the Wheel of Time.”

“You’re joking.”

“Do I look like I’m joking?”

“I want time and a half for this.”

“You’ll take your seven hours and be happy to have them.”

“I’m smiling already. You ready, Drake? Maybe you should pack first.”

There was nothing to pack. I didn’t even know where we were going. I simply trusted to Jack and followed him. How far could it be? Well, it took us three days to get there by train. Somewhere in the backlands of Wyoming. Or, maybe it was South Dakota. I couldn’t keep track. The Wheel of Time was a rock formation. Not exactly. On a mountaintop. The undiscovered country all around us. Sagebrush and low hills. Visitor’s center. Dirt roads. And, rocks. In circles and circles of circles. Slashes and hack-marks. The Wheel of Time was about the size of a little league infield. Spread out all around us. Tourist book said the wheel was older than Christ, and I believed it.

We had to take the train to get there. First, there was a taxi ride to the train station. Find a passenger train heading for the Dakotas. Take three days to watch the country go by. I couldn’t remember the last time I had ventured beyond the city. There are still wild places beyond that edge of concrete. Rolling hills. Vistas. The land is green and gold as far as the eye can see. Except where it is interrupted

by farms. Waterways. Roads. The occasional town. You can leave that all behind you. Watch the world and pretend there is more to life than apartment buildings and skyscrapers and soul sucking day jobs. Leaving the train behind us, we rented a car. Drove for hours and hours. Narrow and winding roads. Forgotten paths without even a lick of paint to tell North from South bound traffic. Not that we saw a single car. Jack drove, of course. The Wheel of Time was waiting.

There were people. And, tourists. A park ranger was talking. He didn't call it the Wheel of Time. Didn't even occur to me to wonder why. I was studying the stone. Looking to the way they had been spread and spaced. People had made this. Long ago, people had a reason to forge such a thing as was before me. Place stone next to stone next to stone until there was something that defied all understanding. Not according to the park ranger. It's a calendar. When you don't have a watch, you use the stars, and you need a way to mark them. You need something that will last. Surviving rain and storm and flood and snow, it must survive. The Wheel of Time is forever.

"So, now what?" I said.

"What?"

"We are here? This is the Wheel of Time? I have found it?"

"Yes."

"So, now what? What am I supposed to do with it?"

"I don't know. Do I look like a job description? All I know is that if you nudge that rock, Winter will come a week early."

"For real? Just like fire and storm and flood? Such a thing. To control time. It should be protected. Where is the guardian to leave it so vulnerable?"

"Gone on holiday, I suppose. So, now what?"

"I don't know. I've found it, I guess. It is very pretty."

"Yes."

It was hard to explain. Standing on the mountain. Looking at rocks. Having no direction other than to find the thing. I looked. I wandered. I explored. There was nothing else to do. And, why not? Should I complain? I was away from the apartment. Away from Del Morgan. I was even on an errand. I just didn't have a clue what kind of errand. So, we went home. Another long car ride. Another train. Watching the world fly.

"You dodged my question before?" I said, tired of the world.

“What?”

“When I asked you where you were from. You said your name wasn’t Jack.”

He was quiet, looking far from the window, saying nothing with words. I wondered who would emerge. There was a nice Jack. A friendly sort. Talked about things like *kaflooie*. Then, there was the bastard Jack. The one who didn’t care. The one who wouldn’t say more than three words to me. And, I didn’t know who I was sharing a cabin with.

“I don’t think that is how the conversation went,” he finally said.

“Not my point. You’re trying to dodge the question again.”

“I don’t exist.”

“You mean I’ve been sitting here talking to thin air?”

“No-”

“My imaginary friend?”

“No-”

“Welcome to my world. Where nothing is what you might expect it to be.”

“No- listen. I don’t exist.”

“Who’s been doing all the driving?”

“You asked. Listen. I am here only because you need me. The people on this train? They can see me. As well as they can see you, anyway. But, I don’t exist. I have no future. And, no past. What were Door and I arguing about?”

“Seven hours.”

“Precious existence.”

“Shit.”

“It’s okay.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know. It’s hard to explain. I’m like a walking, talking fragment of your imagination.”

“And, I am an answer without a question.” He was standing in the door to the cabin, leaning on the rail, looking down at us. He was short and wiry with skin as dark as old oak and hair like a dream of midnight. I couldn’t see his eyes. I didn’t know if he had any.

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t think that I could. The stranger hadn’t given me permission. Jack kept his mouth shut. I don’t think he would have said another word for the rest of the trip. The answer without a question crossed into our cabin. Sat with his feet up. Looked at me, smiling.

“Call me Hart if you must call me anything at all. So, which of you is the dreamer and which of you is the dream? You were talking about it when I walked in. Oh, don’t be shy, we are all family here. My sister would love you. She collects odd moments out of time. A real hunter. It’s not her name, but that is what we call her.”

I had to look at him then, and I could see it. It was there in the turn of his ear and the fire in his eye. I could see it in the curl of his lip and the bluntness of his nose. There was blood between Hart and Hunter. She had taken memory from me in payment for dragon’s breath, and her brother sat before me, trying not to laugh. He looked at us, studying us, watching us, trying not to laugh, and I could not speak. My voice was a memory I could not find.

“We are not for sale,” Jack said.

“I did not think so. You have been let far from home, I think. What have you been about?”

“Why should I need tell you? I thought you were the answer.”

“To a question you have not asked. Do you wonder what it could be?”

“No.”

“Spoilsport. You have no imagination. No curiosity in your soul.”

“Well, you obviously know everything.”

“I know where you have been. The question you did not ask.”

“To which you are the answer?”

“No, I must apologize for that. I am not your answer. I cannot help you. You know what the Wheel of Time is, don’t you?”

“It’s a calendar.”

“It’s a bunch of rocks. Little ones set in patterns. But, why am I telling you this? You were just there. The question is why did they do it? Why place those rocks in those patterns? Small rocks you can lift with both hands. So easy to move. Why do it?”

“So you know when you are.”

“So you can see the future. See your destiny. The edge of time. It’s how you know when. It’s all there. Sun. Moon. Stars. Standing in that circle, you can see eternity. Standing in that circle, you know everything.”

“We have to go back,” I said, startling even me. My breath was in my throat, burning my lungs. I could see it. Standing in the circle of stones. The greatest of them maybe half a foot tall. The smallest was a pebble. Sitting in the railway car. Standing in the Wheel of Time.

I could see the future all around me, and I knew it called out to me. Wanting to tell me something.

So, we left the train. At the next town. The next stop. We left the strange Hart behind us. We waited. Saying little if anything at all. Found a car. Did not bother with the train. Jack drove back to the Wheel of Time, taking days where the train had required only hours. We found it in the dark. Everyone else had gone home. Even the ranger station was dark and empty. We had to walk. The dirt road was blocked for the night. We walked. I don't even know how far. Stumbling across the Wheel of Time in the dark.

It made my skin itch to stand there. Looking at ancient stones in the dark. Knowing there was a message there. Something for me to find. I walked slowly, stepping over stone, feeling the wind all around me, finding the planets, moon and stars. It brought tears to my eyes. My chest raging as if I had forgotten how to breathe. Standing with the universe all around me. Feeling as next to nothing against the cosmos. Not knowing what to look for.

Jack was silent. I would have cursed him if I had found my voice. I looked, turning this way and that. Not knowing what I was looking for or why. Knowing only what Hart had said. That you could see the future by standing among the stones. Then, I saw it. One planet. One star. I do not know. One light out of all the others held me with its flame. And, I could not move. Only look. And, feel the cold night all around me. Somewhere, a wolf called to the night dark sky, receiving no answer. My eyes fell to the edge of the stone. Drawing a line between the pattern and shape of rock and the one star out of the sky.

I could find no pattern. The star did not match any line or shape or stone, but it would. In days or months or years, it would. The star would fit. It would belong to the great wheel. But, not tonight. I was able to turn to Jack. And, I knew that Del Morgan had sent me to the Wheel of Time with a question. Something I could not ask and would never know. Without telling me what to look for or what to ask, she had sent me in search of truth I could not even guess. Jack only looked at me, saying nothing. Blind to what I had found. I stepped from the circle, walking back to the car so we could start the long drive back to the apartment and tell Del Morgan the answer she had been seeking.

“Yes.”

***Lucifer's
Widow***

thirty-four
Irrational Expectations

Things could have gone on like that forever, I suppose. Hunting. Hunting. Hunting. It really didn't matter. Running errands. Going for this. Searching for that. Bringing forth a multitude of giant slugs. Low flying elephants. Dragon's breath. Rest. Sleep. Read a book. No, not even that. Find a keg of Dandelion Beer. Only the darkest keg shall do. Return to the billiard room. Knock little balls into holes. I didn't even know if anything was on TV anymore. It's like it didn't matter what I did between errands. I might as well hump the rug. For all it mattered. For all anyone cared. There was only the job. Fetch.

It was like Jack. I didn't know if I wanted to take what he said literally. It was true. I lived for the errand. For the job. Nothing existed except when I was out and about. Seeking a boy named Charlie Brown. It did not matter. A book on how to cook humans. It did not matter. All I cared was that Del Morgan sent me after it. That was what mattered. That was when I lived. When I was free. When I existed. Which was what Jack said. He didn't exist except when he was helping me. Not quite what he said but close enough. Maybe he was just like me. Another slave. Another servant of the empire. Waiting orders. Nothing to do between jobs. No life. No memory. No friends.

It would explain his surly attitude. After our first meeting, he had turned sour. Jack did. Maybe he was afraid to think he had found something. Someone like him. Lost. Alone. Knowing nothing other than what was thrown at him. Given no direction other than to succeed. You must find all other answers yourself. Maybe that was it. Escorting me. Jack had found the newcomer that he had once been. How do you deal with that?

It's like looking in the mirror and seeing yourself five minutes ago. Wait, that doesn't make sense. Okay, try this. You're watching a videotape of yourself from five years ago. Maybe it's somebody's

wedding. Party. Practical joke. Who cares. Not important. You are watching the video. Watching yourself do something stupid. Something that would make five bucks on that dumbest people video show. And, you pull at your hair, watching yourself. Muttering at the television. Trying not to shout at yourself five years removed. Don't do that stupid thing you are about to do. If only you knew. If only I could warn you off. So you wouldn't embarrass yourself. So I wouldn't have to watch myself five years in the future. Groaning with memory. Unable to do anything about the time I made a pass at my boss not knowing the camera was rolling.

Does that make sense? Maybe that is what Jack saw when he looked at me? Saw the him that had been. What could he tell me to protect me? Maybe the him before him had tried. Maybe he remembered how words had helped him not at all. Knowing what would happen to me. How do you react to that? That would explain the two Jacks. An answer to his lack of existence. I was the me on video looking out of the television screen blind to the me wishing I would zig instead of zag.

My life was the job. The errand. Searching for this. Seeking that. Nothing else mattered. Nothing lived between. Not even thought. So, I thought. When I thought. Waiting. Watching. Thinking. Wondering when something would happen. I would be free. Oh, yes, I had not changed. I still sought. I still looked for the key. The way. I had not given up hope on my heart. It was still mine to find; even though, Del Morgan had hidden it quite well. I would find it. I would have my life back. Memory. Existence. My very name would be mine again.

I could wander the apartment. When I wanted. Where I wanted. I had no way to know if parts were hidden from me. I suspected they were. I knew that they were. Some places, I had found. Others, I could but search for. All were places to find. Explore. Looking for my heart. Wondering where Del Morgan had placed it. Perhaps she had hidden it inside of Romana's heart. That would explain why I had not sensed it. Consumed by Romana's need. Her own muted yearning for what had once been hers. Gone so long she had forgotten it. Could not even remember it. Touch it. Take it. Only beg me to return her life to its hiding place. Far away and hidden from her among stone and polished glass.

I could wander the city if I so wished. Rent an apartment with stolen cash. Trying to trick people into talking to me. I still had that

whole problem with not being able to speak first. I could ride the bus. I had not returned to the train. No reason. Simply had not done so. For the same reason, I had not touched a car. I could drive. I knew I could. I simply had not done so in a long time. So, I wandered the city. Looking at things. People. Places. Cars. Trucks. Motorcycles. And, more people. Saying nothing.

That was between errands. One day, I would simply wander into the city. Leave it far behind me. Never return. Find a spot of rock. Small town. Fountain pen. It mattered not. And, I would stay there. Saying nothing. Speaking with no one. Not even the sky. I would look to the sky. Study the fields. The clouds. The stars. One day, I would visit the ocean. Maybe try to find a little stretch of beach before the great open sea. And, one day soon after that, I would feel a pain in my chest. Like someone had her fingers wrapped around my heart. In my sleep, I would feel nothing. Fingers constrict. Driving inward. Slimy. A ring on one finger. Until muscle gave way. And, nothing else would matter after that.

That was someday. Today, I stood with Del Morgan. In the billiard room. If I lost the game, she would give me something interesting to do.

"I don't recall James Joyce ever writing a book called *Lucifer's Widow*."

"That's true," Del Morgan said. Not even looking at me. Sizing up her first shot.

"So, it's a biography? A book about Joyce? Not written by him?"

"No, you heard me right the first time. It's a book by him."

"*Lucifer's Widow*?"

"Yes."

"I've never heard of it."

"Nobody has."

"So, how do you know he wrote it?"

"I never said that he did."

"Then, who did?"

"James Joyce. Look. James Joyce never wrote it. *Lucifer's Widow* is a book that James Joyce never wrote."

"And, you want me to find it?"

"Yes."

"A book that James Joyce never wrote?"

"Yes."

"*Lucifer's Widow*?"

“Yes.”

“A book he never wrote. Not written by someone else. Not written in the style of James Joyce. You want me to find a book that James Joyce never wrote. Impossible. It doesn’t exist.”

“Well, I never said it would be easy.”

“How am I supposed to find it?”

“There is a limit to my patience, Drake.”

“And, I appreciate the questions you have answered. It’s not like you to field so many. You must be off your feed. Or, the task is especially hard.”

“I would say invigorating.”

“Invigorating. Absurd. Impossible. What’s the difference?”

“Life and death. That’s the difference. Would you rather spend your whole life saying everything is impossible or would you rather just go out and do it?”

“We’re talking about a book that doesn’t exist, remember? Seize the day just doesn’t have quite the right ring to it. Why do you want it, anyway?”

She just looked at me. Leaning over the pool table. Not saying anything. Her next shot lined-up. Waiting. Del Morgan looked at me as if I had just asked if sunrise was in the morning. Right, stupid question. I never did get a shot at the table. She just sank all the balls. One by one by one. Never said another word. And, that was it. Game over. Just like that I had to find a book that didn’t exist.

thirty-five
Memories of a Market

I suppose you could say that everything started at the common market. It’s where I first met Del Morgan. Introductions by one Beowulf Drake. No relation. From that moment on, I had belonged to Del Morgan. I wonder how. No, really. By what right had Del Morgan purchased me? Paid good money. Something like five million dollars, if memory serves. I had been somewhat distracted at the time. What with the blood and all. I don’t know if I got the amount right. Not that I care. All I want to know is who got the money? It should have been me. I should have been paid five million. I mean, what exactly did Beowulf Drake do to earn his reward? I was the one who

had stumbled onto that beach. I was the one who went off his nut. Started throwing fireballs around. Levitation. Shape-slipping. All that stuff I still can't believe I did. Think about it. One day, the world is nice and normal. The next day, you can build castles of sand using only your mind. I mean. How? The Grand Canyon stands between those two. All it took was a little stretch of beach by the ocean. Suddenly, I can do all kinds of strange and impossible shit.

Another thing. The whole reason I stumbled across that little stretch of beach was because that freak, Fahrenheit, had pointed his finger at me. He had stood in the door to my office and told me that my name was Matthew Drake. So, I suppose you could say that everything started with him. He did it. He pointed his finger. The rest, as they say, is history. So, why didn't he get the money? Why did it go to that other freak? Beowulf Drake. Why did he deserve it?

Now, that I think about it. I have no reason to believe he got the money. Del Morgan only said that she paid good money for me. She never said who she paid. Maybe it was that Fahrenheit guy who got the money. He was the one who named me, after all. Changed my life forever. Took away everything I had ever been. Everything I had ever known or cared about. One moment, I was happy. Not a care in the world. Next, the world sucks. The world is piss and vinegar. The world has this weird-ass dude standing in it. Looking at me. Giving me a name. Taking all that ever was. It's as if I didn't exist before that moment. It's true. I have no memory. Only answers to questions. Answers I cannot even remember when I am not being asked.

In that moment. Sitting at my desk. Looking up. Realizing that the world was meaningless. Realizing that the world was piss and shit. The world had begun. It had never existed. Until that moment. Until I had looked up from that stack of papers. Wanting to use it to wipe my ass. There had been nothing. Until then. Until I looked up. Fahrenheit standing in my door. One moment. Nothing. One moment. He was there. Looking at me. Yielding me a name. Memories for the asking. Memories for the taking. Payment for dragon's breath. Having no other use or function or existence. That is who deserved the five million dollars. Fahrenheit.

Anyway, I had mixed feelings about the common market. On the one hand, it is a really cool place. Just think about it. A place where all people can come together. A place where everything is for sale. If you need it, someone will have it. And, for a small price, it can be yours. That's not even counting the price the Faire Folk charge.

I told you about that. The rules of fair trade. The rules of society and civilization. We all have to play by the rules. If not, what is left? Anarchy? Some might like that. Not the Faire Folk. Everything fair. Just. Rules and order. Hey, I just noticed. Faire and fair. Different spellings. But, you say them the same. Fair is faire is fair. And, the “fair” folk are nothing if they are not “faire.”

The common market is good. A place where all people can gather. Exchange goods. Exchange ideas. Wife-swapping. You name it. You could do it at market. As long as you abided by the rules of fair trade. I suppose that means some things were against the rules. It’s just a pity that slavery wasn’t one of them. Would have made my life a whole lot simpler. But, we can’t have everything in life, I suppose.

Which was my problem with the common market. Why I didn’t like it. I had been sold there. I had been taken to market by Beowulf Drake. No word to me. Just off to market. No explanation. No desire. No opinion. I didn’t have a say in the matter. Everything had been settled. I had been taken to market and sold to Del Morgan. That bothered me. It was enough to make me distrust the market. Make me not want to go back. Get anywhere near the place. Even the little market where I had finally found dragon’s breath had bothered me.

So, imagine my distrust. My disgust. My horror when Door suggested I go to market.

“A book that was never written is a rare thing indeed,” Door said.

Wait a sec. I want to back up just a little farther. I had left the elevator. Walking toward Door. He was behind his desk. He was always behind his desk in Hell’s Lobby. I don’t think he ever moved. I wonder how he went to the bathroom?

I was walking slow. Not sure what to do. What to say.

“What can I do for you, Drake?” Door said. This was before he said anything about the book. I should say something about the book by way of explanation. Oh, right, I’m about to fill you in.

“I need to find a book that James Joyce never wrote,” I said. “*Lucifer’s Widow*. Have you heard of it?”

“Not as such. No. A book by James Joyce? That he never wrote? That’s a puzzler that one is.”

“Del Morgan told me that it wouldn’t be easy. But, she wants it. *Lucifer’s Widow*. By James Joyce. I can’t even imagine where to begin.”

“A book that was never written is a rare thing indeed. We must

find you a bookshop of even more rare things. Jack! This may even require a trip to the common market. Jack! Where are you hiding!”

“Are you serious? The common market? I’ve only ever been there once.”

“Jack!”

“I heard that you can get anything at the common market. But, an imaginary book?”

“Oh, I don’t even think you’ll be able to purchase it at market. No, the best you can hope for is information. There is a library of forgotten things. That might be your best bet.”

“What? There are some things that are too rare even for the common market? I do not believe it. If I want this library, why am I bothering with the market?”

“Information. The one thing that can always always always be purchased at market is information. The shortest distance between two points is usually the market.”

“And, the library?”

“The library is dangerous. The patrons of this library are not necessarily on the best of speaking terms with Del Morgan. At market, you might learn how best to approach them.”

“You mean that Del Morgan is sending me after something that doesn’t exist and will require me to go somewhere I am not welcome?”

“You say that as if she has never sent you after something dangerous before.”

“A mere technicality.”

“Jack!”

And, that is how I found myself returning to the common market.

thirty-six

The Unforgiven Familiar

I told you about the common market. I know I did. Some things I won’t shut up about. Repeating them over and over and over again. Bitching and moaning. The end of days. The forgotten life before my naming day. The one who stood in my door. All of it. I won’t shut up about it. Or, Del Morgan taking my heart. How many times have you heard me mention that one? You must be tired of it. Sick. I told

the story once already. You have not forgotten. Wishing I would stop. And, on top of all of that, I am sure I have forgotten things. Things I should have told you. Things that would have been helpful for you to know. Useful even. I can't keep track. I don't know what I've told you. Just try to keep up.

I told you about the common market. I know that one. The Faire Folk made it. Well, not exactly created it. Not in the sense that they waved a magic wand or something and suddenly the land appeared. They put the market together. They arranged for all people to be able to reach the market. Or, to be more precise, for the people they want to be able to reach the market. Remember, they established those rules of fair trade. If you won't abide by those rules, you can't come to market. That kind of control. That kind of making. They created a place that people wanted. It's the only kind of creation that matters.

Try to picture the place. A city of shops. Buildings and walls. Three walls support a roof. Inventory inside. A place to sit. The fourth wall is open. All goods spilling out into the courtyard. Where you can watch. Where you can admire. As you pass down the street. As you watch. As you shop. Everything within very easy reach. I don't even think the Faire Folk have any shops. That's not what they want. They want you to set up your shop. Sell what nobody else can sell. Buy the unquestionably unique from other sellers. All you need do is agree to the Faire Folk's rules. Not my point. Can you picture the market?

Try to imagine a farmers market, county fair, and tourist trap all kind of smudged together. Now, you have an idea of what the common market is like. The noise alone is enough to kill you. Drive you far from your mind with ecstasy. Sensory overload. You can't take it all in. You can only hope to survive it. Walking your one path through the market. Hoping to find what you are looking for. My only hope was that Jack knew what he was doing.

We had taken the train. Entering the underground. Climbed aboard a subway car just like everyone else. Looking just like everyone else. Rode our train until everyone else got off. End of the line, I guess. Nothing for the real people to see. The normal people. I had once been one of them. The train doesn't stop. It passes from the last station. Emerging from darkness into the heart of the bizarre. Dropping you off at the station. Climbing from the train. Looking around for the first time. Remembering the only time you

had ever been there. Being lead around by Beowulf Drake. What did you know? What did you care? You were among people again.

Now, it is Jack who leads you- I mean- me. Walking one street. Passing among giant shops. Many people. Window shopping. Grazing. Looking. Selling. Buying. Dickering over price. Not that it matters. What does price matter? We were looking for a rare bookshop. That is what Jack had told me, anyway. I would follow him anywhere that lead me closer to *Lucifer's Widow*. It was only a book that James Joyce never wrote. How hard could it be to find? So, Jack was dragging me to a shop of very rare books. Very rare. We were looking for a book that didn't exist, after all. Because Del Morgan wanted it. A book that James Joyce never wrote. Therefore, it did not exist, but we would find it.

At the first shop, the proprietor looked at us as if we were big-assed monkeys. Never heard of such a thing. A book that James Joyce had never written. Out of his store. His shop. His life. His home. Out. Out. Out. We were a pestilence on the world. Asking. Wanting things that did not exist. Standing in the street. The proprietor still raging at us from his door. Jack and I looked at each other. Looked. And, laughed. We couldn't help it. With the world raging all around us. People on all sides. Moving. Walking. Window shopping. We stood there and laughed. What else could we do? Our destination was absurdity itself.

We had slightly better luck at our second stop. In all things, the common market has more than one kind of shop. You need rare books? Chose from among thirty different stores. Styles. Types of print from electronic books to charcoal on dry leaves. You could find it at the market. Locating a book that didn't exist was posing a bit of a problem.

"*Lucifer's Widow*? This book is not known to me," said a funny old man with a wood hat on his head. He stored his librarian's assistant there. Birds that flew among the shelves seeking the books that intrigued customers. They sat, watching us from the wood hat.

"It is as rare as blood," Jack said. "A book that James Joyce never wrote."

"Yes, rare indeed." The birds took wing, rising like a cloud, racing from shelf to shelf, looking, flying, searching, returning to whisper words in the bookseller's ear. "Not here? No, not here. You might search best at the Library of Forgotten Dreams."

"I have heard of it."

“Yes, there you might find what you seek. Or else, the path to your ethereal book.”

The birds returned with an ancient work. Little more than a bundle of loose pages. Slipping them gently between the bookman’s waiting fingers.

“It is here,” he said, turning pages as if they might slip away forever into the depths and mists of time. “You might search for a year for whispers of this book James Joyce forgot. I cannot guess what the library will ask of you for your trouble.”

We left the bookman surrounded by his birds as they tended to the works in his shop.

“We should keep looking here,” Jack said. “I don’t like the sound of this library. If we run out of bookstores, there are always liars and scribes to ask. We might fare better with a diviner or augury.”

I said nothing, following after my guide, wondering why I was even here. I had done nothing. I was along for the ride. Jack was doing everything. He had lead me to the market. I do not think I could find the place again by myself. I know I could not find my way among the cycles of the common market. This was Jack’s ride, and he was loving every minute of it.

I wonder how long I would have continued to follow him? Until we found *Lucifer’s Widow*? I like to think so. I would never find out.

Have you ever stood in a great place? People all around you? Standing. Walking. Talking. Noise to drown the world. An inconstant blur of voices and faces. No words to be understood. No faces to be recognized. Suddenly, you remember something. A face that had struck you out of the crowd as it went by. Only now do you remember that you even saw it at all. One thing out of all things had found its path from the blur and into your mind. Lodging in the back of your eye to be discovered like a forgotten eyelash.

I had seen Beowulf Drake. Passing like a shadow. Not even. Passing like any other man in the crowd. About his own business. Noticing me less than I had noticed him. I do not know how I recognized him. The Faire Folk look how they want to look. Not what they once looked. Not how you might remember them. They choose their own face. Their own voice. You could know nothing. And, yet, you could learn to recognize them. Not by face. Not by manner. Not by anything. But, you could know them. And, I knew Beowulf Drake. And, he was at market.

I turned, looking, standing still, searching the world as it flowed

around me. Walking. Not knowing. Simply following a direction. Knowing that it would take me. Somewhere, there was Beowulf Drake, and I would find him. I would find the one who had taken me to market. Who had sold me to Del Morgan. He was here. At the market. And, I would know. I would face him and look in his eye. And, I would know him. And, he would know me.

Stumbling among people, I would not give up the chase. Until at last, I found him. In a court. Tables. Benches. Chairs. And, I saw he was not alone. He was guiding two children to the table. Not children. No. Although, they looked to be children. How could I know in this place? They looked young. More than ten for they had begun to grow. Less than twenty for they were yet thin and awkward on their feet.

And, I remembered words that had been whispered in my ear. That there were others like me. People who had returned from the lands beyond. People who had found their way into the strange places beyond the world, and they had touched the divine. They had danced with the bizarre. They had turned wind into fire and had left skin and bone behind. They were like me. They were slaves. For all who returned from such lands beyond were made slaves. That is what Beowulf Drake did. He made slaves of free men. And, the anger burned in me such that I thought I would die of it. A flame bursting into the sky. No, I would hold. I would face the Drake before me. Find his eye and spit. There was nothing else.

At the table, he was gone. Disappeared into the throng as he had left me. Licking my fingers and lost to the world. They looked to me. The children did. One boy and one girl. Looking no more than twelve. And, I held out a hand, saying nothing for they had not yielded me my voice. And, they took hold of me. The boy standing at my left, and the daughter taking my right. And, we turned and left the table. Saying nothing. Looking only forward. Never looking back. Beowulf's voice rising like a roar of tide crashing somewhere behind us. The three of us only walking forward. Never looking back.

thirty-seven

The Shadow Behind You

Don't run. Never run. It only draws their attention. You must walk. Slow as your heart will let you. Walking through a crowd. Don't push. Never shove. It's the only way. Anything else and they will notice you. The crowds of people will turn into an impregnable wall. They would take an interest in why three people were in such a hurry. Walking hand-in-hand. One man and two children. Leaving the past behind them. If you run, they know. We are running from something.

Beowulf Drake was behind us somewhere. Following. His voice was lost in a rush of fire that threatened to consume us. Behind us. Somewhere. Don't look. Never look. He will see us. He will know. The world will part. The crowds will give way. And, a path will form like the red sea giving way before one man. Then, he will have us. Defilers of the market. He will have us.

We must walk. Hand-in-hand. Never running. Never turning. Never looking back. Knowing that he is behind us. Somewhere. Breathing down our necks. Chasing. Until we are caught. If he could track me, knowing when I would return to the city in the box, he will follow us forever. Our only hope is the disinterest of the crowd. As long as they don't care. As long as we are simply three finding our way through the common market. We can run. Don't run! Never run! We can escape. We can be three steps ahead of him. Beowulf Drake. That's all we need. That's all we want. That is all the universe that matters.

If we should push. If we should drift. Stumble. Fall. Clinging hand to hand to arm. Walking too fast. Running. Anything to scream that we flee our fate. The crowd will notice. They will care. They will know that someone has violated the common market. Cast aside the rules of fair commerce and trade. Abandoned the guidelines of civilization. The market will turn on us. The crowd will become a mob. We will die. Smothered. Crushed. Destroyed by the unholy will of the common market.

So, we walk. Stumbling. Trying not to breath. Holding the heart in check. Walking. Always walking. Around people. Among them. Never pushing. Never shoving. Moving as people might walk through a crowd. We move. We walk. Forever forward. No purpose.

No destination. Only a direction. Away. To leave the jailer behind us. The one who had made slaves of us all. Beowulf Drake.

I remember him. Looking into the box on the beach. Remembering that there had once been a city. And, a house. And, a home. Looking into the box that contained the whole wide world. Beowulf Drake had found me. He had taken me. Confused. Disorientated. Innocent. He had taken me to the common market. And, he had sold me to Del Morgan. Now, I was her prisoner. Her slave. She could kill me. She held me in her hand. And, there was nothing I could do about it.

These two children. Holding my hands. Walking through the crowd. Beowulf Drake had them. He had brought them to market. He would sell them. They would belong to someone. Who? One of the Faire Folk, no doubt. Together? Separate would be worse. And, the Faire Folk would rip their hearts from out of their chests as Del Morgan had defiled me. As she had made me her slave. Holding all power over me.

No, I would not have it. I would not let these two children come to such an end. Children? They looked to be no more than ten. Maybe twelve. They were not yet teenagers. They were so young. They would be free.

Beowulf Drake was behind us. Somewhere. Nowhere. I could not look. I could not turn. He was back there. Chasing us. Searching. Seeking. Looking. He would have us. He would find us. And, that would be the end. He would shout. The others would notice. The world would close around us. We would be their prisoners. We would never see another sunrise.

I did not know where we were going. I was simply moving. With a hand holding the boy's hand. With my fingers locked with the girl's fingers. No words spoken. Not a single solitary voice. I could not speak without permission. I wondered if they were bound the same. No voice unless spoken to first. That we could not test without giving ourselves away. And, Beowulf Drake would have us.

So, we moved. We walked. Slipping between people. Listening to their voices as one might listen to the roar of a waterfall. I did not know what was before us. Where we might be going. I did not know the common market. Beowulf Drake was behind us. I could hear him. That was all that mattered. That the Drake was behind us. Not before us. Never blocking our path. Nothing else mattered.

I wondered where Jack was. The old prisoner. The non-existent

man. The one who lived only for the moment when he was given a task. A burden. A duty to perform. I had lost him. The second I had seen Beowulf Drake. Jack had ceased to exist. As if he had not brought me to the common market to look for a book that did not exist. A book? That's right. I was here for a book. Forgotten. It did not matter. It would never matter. In that moment, seeing the Drake, Jack had vanished from my world. I had abandoned him for the Drake. The slave-master. The one who had sold me to Alicia Firelight Del Morgan. Now, the Drake chased me. Because I had taken his prize from him.

Beowulf Drake was behind us. Somewhere. Unknown. Unseen. But, I could hear him. His voice. His breath. The brush of wind as people parted before him. Sounding like the crash of thunder in his wake. He was behind us. The Drake would have us. So, we walked. Away. Always and forever. No destination. Only a direction.

I did not know where to go. Which way to turn. We were lost. We would lose. The common market would consume us. And, then the crowds parted. Slipping away like the tide. And, I could see him. The Drake. For I had turned. Looking. As the people fell away. I had slipped over my shoulder and looked to the past. And, I had found a Drake looking back at me.

There was no voice. No word. No command. As one, we began to run. Knowing what was behind us. Knowing that the Drake had begun to run. That he was behind us. The distance slipping away like the last frail touch of life from an old man's hand. He would have us. We ran. People gave way. Buildings standing closed and empty. A wall against us. I heard someone laugh. The crowd was watching. As we passed. As we ran. We were sport to their amusement.

The crowd shifted. A foot appeared. The girl tripped and fell. I pulled at her. Our fingers still linked together. The boy helping. Laughter all around us. Beowulf Drake upon us. The crowd shifted. Becoming a wall between us. A barrier that the Drake could not pass. And, then we were running again. Racing a maze as the crowd moved. Shifting. Driving us. I did not know where. There was no turn. No going back. Only onward. Forever onward. As the crowd shifted and laughed and jeered and drove us.

We could not escape. Not the crowd. Not the market. There was nothing to be done. Nothing to do. We were prisoners of the Faire Folk. Bound by their inscrutable rules and law. Slaves to a covenant that they would not share with us. Because we had survived the

lands beyond. Slipped from this world into the place that did not exist. The place that only a few survived. That changed all who went there. Made them into Drakes and Grendels. Made them shapers of worlds.

And, I knew what to do. Not knowing. Looking to the children as they looked back to me. Holding their eyes. Fresh from the lands beyond. They knew. As I knew. As I had found a door to an island and a tiny stretch of beach where an office building stood. As I had once made a door in the middle of Del Morgan's kitchen. We would make our own way from the common market.

Standing together. Hand-in-hand. Arm-in-arm. Beowulf Drake spinning the maze the crowd made for him. Falling upon us. I closed my eyes, turning in a circle, and walked into a tree. Falling back. Landing on my ass. The children falling over me. I looked. Expecting the Drake to be upon us. We were in a forest. The common market was gone. Beowulf Drake forgotten. We had escaped. We were free.

thirty-eight
The Gift of Freedom

Scrambling to my feet. Still shaken by the fall. Being hit by a tree. Managing to stand. Stumbling. Reaching for the children. Looking at the forest. Noticing it for the first time as we start to move. Trying to run. Almost falling. The children dragging at my arms. Wanting to be still. They did not understand that the common market was all around us. Hidden maybe. But, around us. You couldn't see them, but they were still there. As they couldn't see us, we couldn't see them. Could they see us? At any second, I expected someone to reach for us. Out of the world. From the trees. The common market was still there. I could feel it. Surrounding us. I wanted to move. To be far from where we had been in the market; even though, it was only trees. I wanted that space. That distance. They were looking for us. I knew it. Searching for the three who had slipped from their fingers. We had to move. Away from the common market. Escape from Beowulf Drake.

Did I say that we had escaped? That we were free? That was both true and false. We had escaped the market. Left Beowulf Drake far

behind us. He could not see us. He could not make slaves of the two children. But, he would follow us. He would chase us. He would catch us if he could. Where were we? Away from the common market? How far away? Could he follow us? Could he catch us? I did not want to stand still and find out.

Beowulf Drake had found me. When I had returned from the lands beyond, he had been waiting. He had known when I would return. When I would grow bored of that little stretch of beach before the ocean. I do not think he had sat there waiting all the time I had been resting on the beach. He had known when I would return. He had known where I would be. He had tracked me. Somehow. Someway known only to him. Perhaps that was why Del Morgan paid him. Because he knew how to capture the Grendels and Drakes as they returned to the world.

That meant he could track us. He could follow us here. Even to this place. This forest we had stumbled upon. As we had fled from Beowulf Drake. As the crowds had driven us. As they had forced us this way and that. We were sport to their amusement. I still do not know how we had escaped. Perchance the crowd had wished to continue their games and sent us to this place. Perhaps we had forged our own way. Three Grendels running for their very lives.

That is what we are. Grendels. Drakes. Other names I do not know. Only what Windermere had called us. What the dragon had named me. A shaper of worlds. That is what they called us. Because we had survived the lands beyond. Returned to the world. Been sold into slavery. Because we were shapers of worlds.

What had it gained me? Pain? Suffering? The loss of my life? The loss of my heart? Food for a hungry frog? Sport for the crowds? I would not suffer so. I would not let others follow as I had been forced to go. Seeing the children with him. Watching Beowulf Drake lead them through the common market. I would act. I had acted. Taking the children. One boy. One girl. Of an age. Maybe twelve. Maybe older. Maybe younger. I was no judge of such things. They had come willingly. They had taken my hand. We had left Beowulf Drake behind us. We had abandoned the market. Cast their world aside. It did not serve us.

We had stopped running. I did not remember. The children falling. Watching me. They did not speak. Not then. They never spoke. I could not. I discovered that Del Morgan's curse still held. I could say nothing until they gave me my voice. They had to give me per-

mission to speak, and they did nothing of the kind. They could not talk. Not like me. They were not under such a curse. They did not speak. They only made sounds like bird calls. Almost in song. Only trills and whistles and hoots and screeches. Nothing to string words along.

I could not speak. I could not speak, and it almost drove me mad. They were there. Watching me. Speaking in their sing-song voices. They obviously understood each other. To me there were no words. Only sound lacking speech. There was nothing to be done. They were watching me. I could do nothing. I sat beneath a tree. Resting against it. Searching for my breath.

The forest was hard to describe. The trees were beautiful. Spaced evenly. Like an orchard. They were identical. As if one tree had been planted between mirrors. Stretching an umbrella of branches to block the sky. We were in a room with no walls. Only pillars to hold the roof of leaves forever above ours heads. Unnatural. The place reminded me of the garden. Where the dragon had lived. Where I had found the water of life. Sitting beneath my tree, I waited for the gardener to find us. Wondering what he would look like.

The gardener did not come. Perchance he was invisible. What is the difference between a gardener you can not see or perceive in any way and no gardener at all? I give up. So, I do not know if we would be discovered. If a unicorn with eyes of flame would come whispering through the wild wood and ask us stay for supper.

We stayed beneath our tree until it grew dark. It never grew dark. There was no night. As if the sky beyond the labyrinth of branches was an electric light. Forever hiding the dark. I do not know. I do not care to know. Remembering that I had wandered underground places with light to equal the sun. Never knowing the source or destination of such light. I could not question the lack of dark beneath the trees. Only to wonder if day had turned to night beyond Del Morgan's apartment.

What to do about Del Morgan? That was a question to rot the brain. How long before I felt her fingers around my heart. Felt her fist tighten. Fingers digging into flesh. Would I know anything after that? Would she feed my heart to Hannah and Romana? Now, there is a thought. I sat beneath that tree, trying not to think about teeth sinking into my still beating heart. I did not wish to know how long before word of our escape reached Del Morgan. Was the death of

my heart too simple? Would she track me down? Torture me at her leisure? Let Hannah and Romana be creative with my bones?

What would Beowulf Drake do? We had violated the common market. The Faire Folk would be after us. They would not rest until we had been discovered. They would hunt us. Burning torches. Destroying the forest. Driving us. Until we were dead on our feet. Dropping. Whipped until we stood. Until we ran. Our feet bleeding. Worn down to stumps. Would they be satisfied? I had violated the common market. I had kidnapped that which had belonged to Beowulf Drake. The two children who spoke no words I could understand.

Were they happy? Were they free? Did they know what had happened? I had known nothing returning from the lands beyond. These two were lost. Confused. Scared. Why had they given themselves to me? They would have been better off with Beowulf Drake. Even as slaves, they would have been fed. I had nothing to offer. They would not have starved.

It is something to say. I did not need food. Sometimes, I grew hungry. Other times, I did not. In the dark, I had gone long without eating. Sitting on the beach, I had gone even longer. It may have had something to do with Del Morgan taking my heart. I do not know. That does not explain the lands beyond. I do not know. All I know is that the children were hungry.

I do not know if they were starving. They grew weak. I had nothing to give them. I searched for food. They searched with me. We found nothing beyond the wood. Nothing but trees planted in row upon row upon row. No stream flowed. No rain fell. The branches and the leaves were inedible. They made the children retch. Vomiting until they stained the grass with bile. Dry-heaving until they spat blood. There was nothing I could do. Could I not create food from out of the very air? Try it sometime. It was very much like eating air. They could not stomach it. I do not understand this place. There was nothing else I could do.

We wandered the forest. Looking for food. Looking for water. Life. Shelter. Anything. Nothing. A bear to eat us. Anything was better than the empty, silent forest. I almost wished that the Faire Folk would find us. Beowulf Drake looking down at us. Dragging us back to market. If only he would care for the children. Feed them. As I could do nothing. Only whisper to them with my thoughts. Knowing they heard nothing. Knowing they would not understand even

if they could hear me. Whispering that everything would work out. We would survive. We would find food. There was nothing else I could do except hold the girl as she died in my arms.

She was so weak. So tired. Holding her. Struggling to breathe. I felt her body give. The breath rush from between her lips. Her eyes looking forever for the sky. We sat there. The boy and I. Saying nothing. No strength. No wish for tears. Only leaning against a tree. Cradling her body. What else was there?

We slept. I slept. There was no schedule. No day. Never night. No rhyme or reason. I slept when I was tired. Opening my eyes, I was alone. The boy was gone. The girl was gone. I looked, struggling to my feet. Not knowing which way to turn. Where to go. There was nothing to be done. The boy was gone. The girl's body, too. He must have taken her. Left me in the wood. I searched. Running this way and that as if I might find them. Not knowing which way to turn. Every way looking the same. I ran. This way. That way. Calling to him without a voice.

I never found the boy. Never even knew his name. I had given them freedom from slavery. Beowulf Drake would not have them. I could give them nothing. I had offered them their freedom. I had given them death. It was the only gift I could give.

thirty-nine

Dimensions of the Cage

I wanted to scream. Rail against the dark. Cry for the forgotten children. But, I could not. I had no voice. I could not scream. I could not cry. I could do nothing but beat my chest. Rip at my throat. Feeling that I would burst. My jaw explode. A torrent of flesh and blood and bone to stain the land. There was nothing but to damn the dark. For the children I had freed from Beowulf Drake were gone. They were dead. The girl had died in my arms. Why? I did not know why. I did not understand. We need not food. I could provide food. We need it not. They could not stomach it. It was the world. It was the sky. It was the moon and the stars. I do not know. I do not know what had killed them. I had killed them. Freedom had killed them. They would have been better off slaves.

How could I allow that? How could this be a better world for

slavery? Are you listening, God? Are you watching? Are you laughing? God? There is no God. He kills children. They would have been better off as slaves? No! That could not be true. Just as I could not believe that the suffering of others makes us stronger. I spit on your grave, God. Do you hear me? You are dead to me. No faith. No belief to answer children's blood. No more. I would have nothing. I did not even know their names. I would have no faith. I would not listen to Del Morgan. There was no good in God. Nothing to be gained by faith. She wished that I would find it? No more. Never. I would believe in nothing.

What fate had cast me here? Deprived me of my life. Left me without a heart? A hearth? A home? What sick and twisted creature had allowed this to happen? No God. No benevolent father had done this. There was no fate. There was no answer. There was no Heaven. No God or angels to watch over us. There were only monsters to allow such things to happen.

The Faire Folk had done this to me. They had taken my world away. In an instant, that one named Fahrenheit had taken my life. He had deprived me of my name. He had cast me out of the world. I had found myself on that beach. They had forced me there. Beowulf Drake had taken me to their market. He had sold me to Del Morgan. These were the truth. They were the monsters. The only power in the world. There was nothing good or kind or fair. There was no God. Only the monsters that drove us. Controlled us. Made us wish for the market. Gave us rules to guide us. Held us in bondage and slavery. Took my heart.

There was nothing else. No rhyme. No reason. No great plan. Only the lying and scheming of the Faire Folk. Only the power that creatures such as they took and possessed. The dragons were no better. Only another face to monstrous power. There were others. There must be others. But, there was no source. No greater good. Nothing and nobody to watch over us. To care for us. Reward the faithful? On that charge, I stand with Hobbes. What kind of sick, demented freak would punish the dissident so? Would force his own flock to suffer for that matter? We deserved it? We asked for it? We are wicked creatures? No, it is the world that is wicked. It is life that is cruel. We are nothing.

They were gone. The children were gone. The boy had still been alive when last I laid eyes on him. Weak. But, alive. He had taken his sister. His dead sister. How far could he go? I did not know. I did

not know. I could not find them. I searched. And, I searched. And, I searched. I would have hollered their names if I had but had a voice. I would have called to them if they had names other than birdsong.

I stopped looking. There was nothing else I could do. There was nothing. I sat under a tree. Looking like all the rest. No way to tell one from another. What was this place? There was no end to it. One moment, we had been racing through the common market, trying to escape from Beowulf Drake. The crowd had pushed at us. It had shoved us this way and that, driving us for its own amusement. I had turned, fleeing, and walked into a tree. The market? Gone. I had walked into a tree in the forest. A perfect forest of identical trees and grass that might as well have been manicured for all it looked.

No, I was wrong. The trees were not perfect copies. They were different. In little ways. This one was taller. That one was thicker. They were not perfectly spaced. Evenly aligned. There was some force of natural chaos at work here. There was no end to the place. No beginning. And, no end. We had wandered for days, searching for food. Finding nothing beyond the wood. There was no edge to it. No boundary. No barrier. No way in. And, no way out. We had found it without looking for it. Only seeking escape from the market.

Shit! The common market! That was something to think about. They would look for me. They would search. They would find me. Sooner or later, my life was over. I had escaped. I had fled from life. Del Morgan had my heart. When she learned what had happened, she would end it. I did not have freedom. I did not have my revenge. I had an ending. On her terms. At her discretion. She could kill me. She could let me live. She could let them torture me to death over and over and over again. Because she still had my heart.

Freedom? Freedom from life? Victory? Over what? Did I control anything? What could I do? By defying Del Morgan. By screwing the Faire Folk. They would kill me? I did not know. If forcing them to kill me was the only power I had. The only thing I could make them do. What was the worst punishment they could inflict upon me? They could keep me alive. They would refuse to punish me. Just as the dragon had held my freedom hostage by telling me to brake the chains that held me, there was no disobedience in defiance if there was no punishment.

This could be my punishment. This forest. This wood with no be-

ginning and no end. If they left me here, what had I won? What had I gained? My freedom? No, I did not have my heart. I was nothing without my heart. They still held that prize over me. That power. That control. I would do anything for it. I would not rest until I had it back. I must slip this bondage. This cage the Faire Folk had placed me inside for violating the common market. No, I must be free.

I would have to find a way. They would keep me alive. I understood that now. My life was the only punishment they could inflict. It was the only way to hurt me. I had to slip my chains. Find a way to fight Del Morgan. Regain my heart. There had to be a way. Windermere? She had offered me freedom from Del Morgan. Could I turn to her? I did not know. I did not know where to find the enemies of Del Morgan.

I remembered something Door had said before I had left for the common market. The patrons of the library did not like Del Morgan. I was searching for the Library of Forgotten Dreams. I would continue to search. I would find a way. I would find those who did not like or agree with Del Morgan. She would not kill me for such defiance. Life was the only punishment she could offer. What need I fear that?

No, I would search for the library. I would find the enemy of my enemy. I was a shaper of worlds. What I sought would find me. The very dragon's words. My allies would find me. The enemy of my enemy. They would search me out because I was looking for them. I would find them. I would reach the library. I would have *Lucifer's Widow*, and I would bargain with Del Morgan for my heart.

forty **A Whispering of Voices**

The first thing I had to do was escape from this prison. This dung heap. Domain of wood and green leaves. This cage without walls or a door that the Faire Folk had tossed me into. Because I had defied them. Because I had stood in the market and stole property. I had freed the slaves. Two slaves. A boy and a girl. Destined for a life of service. And, their only crime had been to return from the lands beyond. A crime for which they would have their lives removed. Except I had gone to them and offered them a choice without words. I

had offered them a risk of freedom. The only freedom I could offer was death. I did not know. I did not know. I could not have known. I suspected but did nothing. Death should have been my punishment. Not theirs. I was the one who sought it. The freedom. The release. The end of suffering. The coward's end. And, I had thought myself more than a coward.

They would not kill me. It was the only punishment that would kill me. Figuratively speaking. My soul would die in my skin, and they would win. By denying me my right of death. That is how they punished me for breaking the covenant of fair trade and practice. They banished me to this prison without walls or a door. Lacking both a beginning and an end. This cage was kind of like the door to Del Morgan's apartment. No, really, in its own way. Think about it. How do you block a door? How do you make a way impregnable? A place unreachable? You hide the door. You make secrets of the walls. You hide the bars from the prisoner so that he does not know he is caged. Does not know to rail against the dark. Because there is no dark. Only light. Endless daylight that will never end.

That is how you make a thing unattainable. You make sure that the prisoner does not know the thing exists. Without knowledge, there is no focus. Nothing to strive for. Nothing to long for. Nothing to bend ones will against. I could not rattle the cage if I could not find the wall. There was only this endless forest. This place of light without a sun lacking only shadows. Shrouded in trees and mystery. Thus was my prison formed. All because I had violated the common market. Defied all convention and reason. The rules of fair trade meant nothing to me. And so, I found myself here. In a forest. In this prison without walls or a door.

Watching the children die was my punishment. The forest was my punishment. Trapped. Unable to do anything but watch as those I had sought only to rescue had died. That was punishment. They had faded. They had died. Starved in this cage of forest and leaves. The forest is punishment. Watching the girl die is punishment. The boy was gone. Seeing the error of defiance he had gone back to them. To be someone's slave. Given a second chance because he had watched his sister die? Had the girl reached for my hand first? As I had offered it to them. Beowulf Drake had vanished in the crowd. As he had left me alone in the crowd. As he had returned with Del Morgan. So, I had held out my hand. The girl had returned my touch. The boy following because he did not want to be separated from

his sister. Knowing nothing. As I had understood nothing returning from the lands beyond. Innocent, the boy had been forced to watch his sister die. That was why the Faire Folk had taken him back. He had not known what wrong he did. Only followed after his sister. Or, he had been the first to reach for my fingers. I do not know. Being the first, his sister had only followed after him. Not wanting to be separated. For his transgression, he had been forced to watch his sister die. Knowing the price of defiance, he would never question the Faire Folk again. He would be a good little slave forevermore.

So, I was punished. Held in this cage without doors or a wall. I could not find the exit. I could not be free. I would have to find a way. Make them want to release me. If only I had something that they wanted. If only I had *Lucifer's Widow*. That would be my freedom. That would be my release from this prison. Del Morgan would take me back, and I could continue the search for my heart. If only I found the book, I would be free. If only I was free, I could search for the book. Wait a second. I must be free to seek the book? I needed the book to be free? Okay, I need to think this through a little more.

But, perchance it would work? I need but seek the thing for it to find me. If I sought the book *Lucifer's Widow*, I would find it. Even in this prison, I would find it. A book that James Joyce never wrote. If I found such a book, I could continue the search for my heart. That was something to live for. Something to strive for. Anything that brought me closer to finding my heart was a good thing. So, I would search for this book. This travesty. This imaginary thing that James Joyce never wrote.

I knew where to look. I knew where to search. I had an idea anyway. A clue. Somewhere to begin. I must find the Library of Forgotten Dreams. Or, was that Lost Dreams? I cannot remember. All I know is that I must find it. This library shall have such clues as to the book that I can make use of. I shall seek it out. Not knowing what to expect. Not knowing what I shall find. Rumors and lies. Who guards the library? I must remember that. Something Door said. Something that bothered the non-existent Jack. The patrons of the library do not like Del Morgan. I must remember that. I must be wary. If they do not like Del Morgan, then they might not like me. I was her emissary. Her voyager into the world. They would not like me. I must remember the enemy of my enemy is sometimes my friend.

The patrons of the Library of Forgotten Dreams might help me

because they did not like Del Morgan. I must remember that. They might give me aid and comfort. They might give me ways to challenge her. They might give me *Lucifer's Widow* to bargain with. So, I would seek the patrons of this library. And, seeking them, they would find me. It was as the dragon said. That which I sought I would find. That which I looked for, I would discover. That which I needed. I needed. Because it needed me. Or, something like that. I've been in this place too long. It's starting to make sense.

So, I must seek the book. Trapped in my cage. I must seek *Lucifer's Widow*. Hobbes. My angel in dark fur. She had told me that I could search for something even in a cage. If only I knew what I was searching for. If only I wanted it. As long as I wandered blind. Not caring what I might find. I would find nothing. If I truly sought something. Even if I was but standing still. I would find it.

I knew things. Without knowing how I knew, I knew things. It was part of having survived the lands beyond. It was what made me so valuable to Del Morgan. I knew things. I could find them. I had knowledge that I had no knowledge of. Such things as a garden guarded by the great dragon. I had not known of such a place until I had told Hobbes about it. So, I must know of the library if only I could talk about it. No memory. Only a voice of a place I had never been. Descriptions of a place I did not know existed. That was my power. What made me a shaper of worlds.

I knew where my heart was hidden. I knew how to free myself from Del Morgan. If only I could talk. If only I could say the words. But, I could not. I was silent. I could only answer questions. That was my curse. That was how Del Morgan held me. I could not know freedom without my voice, and Del Morgan had taken all of my words. I could not speak. I could not know the book. That was Del Morgan's power over me.

I must speak the language of the book. Describe where *Lucifer's Widow* may be found. Only then would I know. Only then could I find it. With my voice, I would know how to free myself from this cage of trees where the Faire Folk had banished me. I could do nothing until someone asked me a question. I could not speak until given permission. Then, I could wonder. Then, I could muse. Then, I would know the final resting place of a book that James Joyce never wrote.

Hobbes had taught me this. Wanting me to find the water of life. Wanting to take it from me. She had helped me. Hobbes had shown

me without words how to search with them. How to find things I did not know. Where to locate them. Where to find them. Hobbes would help me. If only I had something she wanted. If only I sought a book that she might read. She would help me. She would ask the right questions. If it would but amuse her, she would ask me how I might free myself from Del Morgan, and I would answer.

“I give you permission.”

“What?”

I was on my feet. Searching. Staggering. Looking from tree to blind tree. Looking for voices. Hobbes had spoken. It was her voice. She had spoken. I was shaking. Blood pounding so hard I could not breath. I fell. Stumbling. Staggering. Crawling to my feet. Looking for Hobbes. But, it was not her voice that shook me. That left me fit to burst. Unable to speak. It was my voice. I had spoken. I had answered. Hobbes had given me permission to voice words, and I had answered.

Where was she to give me permission? I do not know. I could not find her. In this cage, Hobbes had spoken to me. As I had needed her. As I had wanted her. She had been there. Had she been there? No sign. No voice. No flicker of gray fur. She had found her way to this cage? She had spoken? I do not know. I could not believe it. Her voice was gone. I had wanted to hear her so much. I did not know. I could have imagined her words. I could have dreamed my answer.

I was mad. To hear voices in the wilderness where none stood. To answer them. I had answered them. With words? I do not know. I could have imagined it. Hobbes speaking to me. My answering her. It could have all been in my head. I could not find Hobbes. Staggering, slipping, searching, seeking from tree to tree. I could not find her. I could not believe her voice, and I could not believe my own.

I could not speak. One word was all that had passed from me. One word that may or may not have been spoken. A question shot like a bark of laughter. Wait, I'm mixing metaphors. Oh, I don't care. They are for herding cows. This was just grand. I was starting to doubt my own mind. I mean, seriously doubt my own mind. I did not know if Hobbes had spoken to me. I could not prove that I had answered. If I had answered, it had been in defiance of Del Morgan's curse. I could beat Del Morgan's curse. So, I was struck dumb. I could not speak. I could not stand. Trembling. Shaking. Curled on the ground. I thought I might die.

I must go. Find an exit. Before I lost all will and sense. I must rail

against the light. The all pervading brilliance that filled this forest and never yielded the dark. It would consume me. This forest. This cage. This trap. Punishment for freeing two slaves. I would be free.

And, all I had to do was stagger to my feet. Well, go on. Get up. Crawl. Pull yourself up by a tree. That's the spirit. Get my legs beneath me. Walk one step at a time. I would find *Lucifer's Widow*. I would find the Library of Forgotten Dreams. I would find a way from out this prison. The booksmith had shown us the way, me and Jack. He had told the two of us about the library. It wasn't a grand thing like a castle in the clouds. It wasn't exactly a place where old dreams went to die. Gathered slowly by gray men. Gathered from broken wills and shattered dreams.

Maybe they were gray. I do not know. The library was many things. It was many places. The great homes in the valley. Each one had a piece of the library. There were many landowners in the valley. Many great homes like little kingdoms each one onto its own. Many pieces of the great library.

That was how I must find *Lucifer's Widow*. By searching each library in turn. Going to each mansion in the valley. Speaking with the landowners and the librarians. Asking for rumors and stories of a book that James Joyce never wrote. Maybe they would help me. Maybe they would drive me away. Maybe they would recognize that I sought to free myself from Del Morgan.

All I had to do was find them. All I had to do was reach them. Prove myself to each landowner and master. All I had to do was free myself from this prison. This pestilent swamp. This cage of wood lacking both windows and a door. Having no beginning. Lacking an end. I would be free. I walked, seeking the Valley of Lost Hopes and Forgotten Dreams. I would be free. I was free.

forty-one ***Seeking Forgotten Stories***

I had to be careful. I was a fugitive. I had escaped from the cage. I was half-surprised that nobody had been waiting for me. Standing where I would emerge from the wood. As Beowulf Drake had waited for me on the bench. I had been expecting him. Because I had defied the common market. I had stolen from the Drake. As he had taken

slaves to market as he had taken me. I had freed the slaves. Or, tried to free the slaves. My punishment had been to watch the girl die. Perhaps Beowulf Drake already had the boy and cared nothing more for what happened to me? Someone would care. Someone would notice that I had slipped the cage. The prison lacking only walls or a door had held an exit. I had found the edge because I went looking for it. Because I had survived the lands beyond, no trap could hold me. They would look for me. I must be cautious.

It was simple really. I had to find *Lucifer's Widow*. With that book that James Joyce never wrote, I could bargain for my life. I could extend my luck. Continue looking for my heart. Until Del Morgan grew tired of me. For defying the common market, I would be punished. By finding *Lucifer's Widow*, I might lessen my punishment. Perchance what I had endured in the wilderness would be the end of it.

I knew I was free of my prison when I reached the edge of the forest. I could see the sun for the first time in I could not remember how long. As I watched, the sun set, and I was engulfed in darkness. Have you ever longed for the dark? Have you ever wished for the absence of light? This night, I welcomed it. I longed for it. I wished it. I embraced the cold and the dark, sleeping by the path. I had been trapped in that cage of light without an end for far too long. The dark was welcome, and the night was a blessing. Everyone should sleep as well as I did that night.

With the rising of the morning sun, I followed the road, knowing it would bring me to the library. I had to be careful. Watch and listen. I did not know what to expect. I did not know who owned this land. How they would react to the one who had spoiled the market. They might not know. I would learn soon enough. As soon as I reached the first puzzle piece of the library.

I would need rumors. I would need stories. I would need to listen to the whispering voices in the dark and the night if I was to find my prize. A book that James Joyce never wrote. I could but hope that the Library of Forgotten Dreams would yield me secrets of the work I sought. Personally, I did not even know where to begin. Jack had been my guide. He had done all the work. He knew everything. Except that I would betray him. Hard to say what he thought of me now. I knew I needed to reach the library. Ask the librarian for help. Search for something that had never been written. I did not know where to begin.

The library was in the clearing at the edge of the woods. Not my woods. I had left that cage far behind me. This land I found myself walking through. This place of misplaced hopes and forgotten dreams without a name. It was full of woods. Gentle hills. Rolling countryside. Once upon a time, this place must have been nothing but forest. The trees had been cut. Taken away. Used to build the library. I do not know. The wood was thick and thin. Great patches of dark wood and wide expanses open to the sky. The library was in one such clearing. It was big. Hard to describe. Have you ever been to the Winchester Mystery House? Then, you get the idea.

It didn't look like a library. It looked like a house. A mansion. A forgotten castle in the wilderness. Which was what I had been expecting. The library is not one place. It is many. There were many librarians. Many patrons and guardians. This was but the first of many places I must search. There was one surprise. I had expected more of a town or village to be built up around the library. But, there was nothing of the kind. There was only the library. Everyone who worked there. Lived there. Tended to the books and the grounds and the stories and the lies. They all lived within the walls.

I must be cautious. I must be foolhardy. Only in this way could I approach the library. No, really, think about it. What could I expect? I knew these lands belonged to the Faire Folk. I knew the Faire Folk would not take kindly to what I had done to the common market. I did not know who was home. I did not know how they would react. I would learn.

I would not call the Library of Forgotten Dreams inviting. It was foreboding. Monstrous in its way. Huge as a castle. Terrible as a dungeon. Fierce as the storm. Beautiful as the sunrise. Strange looking place to live. There was no door. There was a courtyard. But, there was no door. I walked through the gate if you can call it that. Walked under the arch of the place into the courtyard. Which is when I realized something. I had not seen anyone. Nobody about. No one around. The library could not be empty. That did not follow what the booksmith had told me.

The library would be guarded. The patrons would not let anyone take from the library without paying the price. That was when they appeared. Dogs. Big ones. Like rottweilers on steroids. Or, the kind of bulldog that only exists in cartoons. Just like that, I was surrounded. Just like that, I could not move. The key here would have

been to remain calm. Standing still. No sudden moves. The rotts had voices dark as growls and thick as distant thunder.

“Why are you here?”

I could not tell who had spoken. I knew it had been one of the dogs. I just knew it. They were the guardians. The librarians and keepers and patrons of this library. And, I knew. I just knew that searching for *Lucifer’s Widow* was not the answer they wanted. Unfortunately, I could not think of anything else.

“I am looking for something. A forgotten book. One that has never been written. I was hoping to seek clues of it here.”

They watched me. Saying nothing. I sensed a pattern. The same one I had faced down so many times before. Nobody ever spoke to me. They watched me. They studied me. They laughed at me. But, they never spoke to me. Never directly. Never giving me a straight answer. I expected nothing better from these mongrels.

“I learned of this place,” I said. “Hoping to learn more. This is a place of all stories. All visions. All dreams and all words. I would listen. I would wander. I would seek. And, seeking. Discover.”

“Lucifer’s Widow?”

“Yes.”

“James Joyce never wrote such a book. It is not here.”

“Then, where?” I saw no point in wondering how they knew what I was looking for. There was even less point in worrying about what else they knew of me. “I would search for it. I would seek it. I would listen to the wind slipping past the walls of your home for the trace of a rumor about it.”

“This is a place of rhyme and reason. A place of great old dreams that have no end. You seek the irrational and unexpected. Symbolism born not of dreams but of someone trying desperately to imitate them.”

“That’s rather a harsh criticism of Joyce, don’t you think?”

“The less one knows of a subject. The more qualified one is to judge it. I’m paraphrasing Mark Twain, of course.”

“Of course.”

“What you seek is not here.”

So, ended my audience with the librarians of rhyme and reason and stories that have no end. They left me, wandering back into the mansion. There was no door. I could see into the chambers and halls and passes of the library. I could follow them. I could look. I could seek. I could search, and I would find nothing. The librarians

had been right. I would find nothing useful in this place. The walls were cold. They were silent. They whispered not at all in my ear.

All in all, I think things went rather better than I could have hoped for. They did not kill me. That was good. They did not banish me back to the cage I had so recently escaped from. If they knew what had happened at the market, they cared not at all. The problem was that I still knew nothing of the Library of Forgotten Dreams. I was no closer to finding *Lucifer's Widow* than when I had left Del Morgan's apartment. And, I had no choice but to continue searching. Maybe that was my punishment. To search until the end of time for a book that James Joyce never wrote. Lucky me.

forty-two **Halle's Driving Service**

Things went about as well as could be expected. Considering they didn't go at all as I expected. Which isn't saying much in this place. I was starting to understand the scenery? I said that? I must have been out of my mind. I had been to the library. And, what could I say? It was run by dogs. No, really. Literally. The place was run by dogs. Big ones. About the size of small horses. And, I couldn't get my mind around it. The dogs. They were librarians? It just didn't seem right. I mean. I know. What am I complaining about in this place? Something is right? Something is wrong? I am one to judge these things? I just couldn't get my mind around the idea of dogs as librarians.

Think about it. What should a librarian look like? Especially in such a place as the Library of Forgotten Dreams. The librarian should be tall. He should be lanky. Wearing flowing robes and no hair and have long skinny fingers for holding books and turning pages. And, what am I talking about? Why is the librarian a man? Androgynous. What does it matter? The librarian needs to fit the character of a librarian. Sure, you can have dogs to patrol the grounds and maybe even be the gardeners or who cares what else. But, the librarian? The main dude? The guy who runs the show? He has an image to protect.

Besides, it is the whole visual of the thing. Dogs as librarians. Think about it. What quality does a dog lack as a viable librarian?

Oh, I don't know. How about opposable thumbs? Those traits might come in handy in library work. You need to be able to move those books around somehow. I could just see it. One of those great big monster dogs. Trotting through the isles and shelves. Book in his mouth. Slobbering all over it. Just picture the patron. The person requesting the tome in question. Oh, thank you, mister librarian, oh, yck- did I say that? I mean, thank you. Here, can I have a towel? No, wait, don't hand it to me. Oh, why thank you. Yes, it is nice and moist. Just what I always wanted. Do you smell something? What did I just step in?

But, you get the idea. That was my first experience with the Library of Forgotten Dreams. I mean, not the part with the drool. I made that part up. Had to keep it interesting somehow. I had gone to the library. Seeking information about a book. A little something that James Joyce never wrote. A work that nobody had ever heard of until Del Morgan spoke its name. So, the dogs didn't have *Lucifer's Widow*. Why was I surprised? Nobody had that book. I would just have to keep searching for it. There were many more pieces of the Library of Forgotten Dreams to explore. And, all I had to do was find them.

That is how I found myself back on the path. On the road, really. It had stopped being a path some time back. More of a fire road, really. But, even that had ended. I think it was even paved at this point. Which is when a car pulled up, of course.

Now, remember something. I was on the lamb. No, not really. Get your mind out of the stinking gutter. The thoughts of some people. What? Oh, you weren't thinking about sheep? You knew what I was talking about? Oh, well, okay, so do I. And, it had nothing to do with lambskin. Let us continue.

When last we left our intrepid adventurer, he had just escaped from a prison that was so fiendishly clever that it wasn't even a prison. No normal cage could hold our hero. This one had been entirely devoid of walls or a door. In fact, all our hero had needed to do was walk until he was beyond the boundary of his cage. That is one fiendish prison. The only evidence our hero had that he had been in prison was the complete lack of time. It had always been light. He never saw the sky. Day for night. The place was wondrous strange. And, then. Surprise. Surprise. He had walked to the edge of it and found the night. That is how you know you are free of the

cage. When day should cross night once more. Time had found once more its path through the world.

And, why had he been in a cage? Well, that is simple enough. He had defied the Faire Folk. He had desecrated the common market. He had attempted to free the slaves. All on the spur of the moment. He never would have planned anything so foolhardy. I can assure you of that. So, our hero had escaped from his prison. The jailers would look for him. They would seek him out. And, if he was not careful, they would find him. So, strange cars just kind of skidding to a halt not five feet from my ass were to be viewed with great suspicion.

“Need a lift?” This from the man who rolled down his window. He was tall. Skinny. Sitting behind the wheel of the car. Okay, so there was no way to tell if he was tall. He was sitting down. What did I know?

“Where are you headed?” That was me. Standing at the side of the road. Watching this guy carefully.

“Dayside. Come on. It’s not far from here. I’ll give you a lift. You look like you’ve been on your feet all day.”

What could I say? I didn’t think a quick turn and then running back into the wood would really help improve my situation. I mean I needed to interact with the local wildlife if I was going to get anywhere. About the car. There wasn’t much to say. I don’t know diddle or squat about them. It was green. It had four wheels. Two doors. Nice big and comfy seats. Windshield wipers that went swish swish swish in the rain. Not that it was raining. But, that is beside the point.

“You can call me Bryan, by the way,” the guy said after we had been two whole seconds on the road. “You’re not from around here. I can tell. Tourist? Taking a shortcut between hither and yon? What brings you to our little corner of never land?”

Careful. Play it close to the chest. You never know when one of these guys is really one of the Faire Folk just playing you along before he guts you like a fish. I couldn’t help but think of Door’s words about the locals not liking Del Morgan. Here I was. Sent by that very same Del Morgan to find a book that James Joyce never wrote. What would they think of me?

“Oh, I’m exploring. Wouldn’t call myself a tourist. Don’t take as many pictures. I’m seeking information. I’m seeking rumors and stories. Anything that strikes my fancy.”

“Well, you have come to the right place. Stories soak here becoming legends. I figure you for a taste of the wild poetry. Gather, you children! Listen! Seek you a touch of nectar and sunshine for your lips? Ha! But, I digress.”

“Hey, if it’s got a beat and I can dance to it. What else is there? I would gorge myself on such poetic mustering.”

“Is that a word? I swear you just made that up. Hey, you have a name or should I just keep calling you Sanjuro?”

“That sounds good. But, no, my name is Jim. James to my friends.”

“You know you’re shit at this subterfuge business. I hope you realize that.”

“What?”

“Oh, yeah, never- and, I mean- never- tell anyone your name. Not if it is Bob, Fred or even Godzilla. It’s too much. It’s a giveaway. I don’t care if it is your name or not. You won’t last, Matt. And, it is Matthew, isn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say that it is mine.” I swear at this point I was ready to leap out the window.

“That’s more like it. Listen, you must be here because of the library. Now, don’t try to deny it. You looking for something?”

“My employer has sent me in search of something that doesn’t exist. I figured the library for a good place to start. Don’t know what to expect. But, it is a start.”

“And, your employer-“

“Would be someone who doesn’t necessarily get along with the local wildlife. So, I have been warned.”

“That’s not as big a surprise as you might think. Look, all this place. The lands as far as the eye can see. Some you can’t even imagine. They all belong to a fair one who tends to call himself Halle. He is. Well. Let’s just say that he is one of the big ones.”

And, I tell you that my blood ran cold at the sound of that name. I wasn’t sitting in a car anymore. I was in a market. Cold and damp and dark. Hobbes was holding me down. Hand over my mouth to keep my quiet. As we watched this one. This one of the Faire Folk. Sack slung carelessly over his shoulder. He had been strolling through the market. Window shopping. But, he wasn’t shopping. Nobody had to tell me. I just knew. He was looking for me. He was looking for me because I had found the water of life. I knew nothing about him. Not then. Not now. But, I knew. In that instant, I knew.

The name went with the fair one. That one was named Halle. And, he was trouble.

“I think I understand.”

“Well, that is good. Listen, he doesn’t spend a lot of time in these lands. I wouldn’t worry. He’s not a bad one. He cares for this place in his own way. Listen, want to hear a story? That one never travels this place openly. Always in disguise. Why, I could be him. But, what am I saying? You could be him in disguise.”

“Hell, why stop there. We could both be him.”

“Now, that is a trick I would pay money to see.”

“Listen, when we get to Dayside.”

“Oh, yeah, no problem. The library isn’t really in town. You’ll have to walk the rest of the way. I’ll give you an ounce of tour.”

“Thank you. Should I ever find a way, I’ll repay you. Should I ever find a way. I don’t take requests.”

“And, he had me faked to a novice for subterfuge.”

And, that is how I met Bract Graiwold, poetry hunter. What? Yeah, I know he said his name was Bryan. I’ll explain later.

forty-three **Misdirected Thoughts**

If anything, this piece of the Library of Forgotten Dreams was even stranger than the first one. This piece of the library looked more like a cross between a mansion and a castle. The place looked to be made up of many small rooms and chambers. No space for a great hall or a long chamber. There was no great archway or open courtyard like the last piece of the library. On the plus side, there were no dogs to meet me at the door. Not like the kind I had faced, anyway. There were dogs. Oh, yes, there were dogs. They just didn’t move. Not while I was watching them, anyway. And, they didn’t exactly look like dogs. They were more a strange kind of charcoal outline like a statue. I mean they were statues. But, hollow. Solid. But, not all there. They seemed to be semitransparent in the same way that you can tell a Chocolate Easter Bunny is hollow. If that doesn’t make sense, then just forget about it, okay? I give up.

I was pleased to find a real librarian. He was tall, spindly and thin. Long fingers. Toothpick arms. Hair that flowed to below his

shoulder blades. Tattered clothes. Okay, maybe he wasn't the perfect image of a librarian, but he sure beat the hell out of those dogs. I still get chills. Running around on all fours. Sniffing. Growling. Voices coming from nowhere. It was all very strange. At least with this gentleman, you knew he didn't always carry the books around in his teeth. At least, I hope that he didn't. I had enough of dog drool at the last place.

It was clear that no two pieces of this library were going to be the same. And, why does that surprise me? The first piece had been out in the middle of nowhere. Nothing around it. There had been the library proper and nothing. Clearly, everything and anything that dealt with the library lived on its grounds. Which isn't so hard to imagine if you think about everyone working at that library being dogs. They didn't need anything more complicated than a doghouse.

But, this place. This place was in a town. Okay, it wasn't a grand metropolis of a rampaging city. I'll grant you that. There were probably no more than two or three real streets in the whole place. The rest were semi-paved, dust and gravel ways. There were quite a few buildings. Houses and homes. Town hall. Barber shop. Local watering hole. Internet café. You name it. Okay, maybe not the café. I must admit I made that last one up. They did have cars, but they didn't look to be wired for telephones. Unless those phone lines were all underground. Which wasn't that big a stretch of the old imagination. No more than the librarian.

"I'm looking for stories and rumors about something that doesn't exist," I said to the tall thin one after he had asked if he could help.

"Well, you have come to a place of seeking. A place of looking. Listening. Finding things? I don't know if I can help you. This is a place where lost souls come to read. Things are not found here. They remain secret. Hidden. They come here to die, thinking they are living forever."

"With the luck I have had, I don't know what to expect, but I thank you."

Well, I was off to a better start than with the dogs. They wouldn't even let me cross the grounds. Stopped me at the door, they did. Oh, turn around. Go away. There is nothing for you here. What you seek is not here. Which had raised a bit of a stumbling block for approaching this second piece of the library.

I had been disturbed by how quickly the dogs had known exactly what I was looking for. How quickly they had read my mind. Here I

was. On the run. Hiding from the Faire Folk for having desecrated the common market. Stolen valuable property only to have the kids die on me. This was information I didn't want spread around. And, the first thing that happens is those dogs knew what I was looking for. Took it right out of my head. Had they discovered my little escape from the imaginary cage? I did not know.

Then, the guy in the car. Bryan. He had known my name. Even though I had told him some total bullshit name. It was as if simply saying the false name as if it was my name had been as dumb a thing to do as giving him my real name. I don't know why but there you are. I had given him a piece of me, and he had read the rest. Taken it straight from the heart of my brain as if I wasn't even there. He had known my name.

So, how could I face the librarian? He would know me. He would know everything about me. Everything I had done. Who was looking for me. He would know it. He would know it all. And, it didn't help that these guys didn't like Del Morgan. I didn't like Del Morgan, but that is beside the point. In this place, I was flacking for Del Morgan. That is all that would matter. The librarian would know who had sent me, and I would enter a world of pain. Hell, maybe that was why the dogs had been so quick to throw me out of their little corner of the library.

So, I had to speak obliquely and guard my thoughts. I couldn't come right out and say anything. I had to sort of talk around it. Name the thing without really naming the thing. And, worst of all, I couldn't say my own name as it was a dead giveaway. It was the same as opening up my head and letting crows pick at my thoughts.

None of which really made sense. I mean the dragon hadn't been able to read my mind. He had kept asking me why I was there. Why was I there? Why was I there? He had been a broken record. It seems strange that something so powerful had been unable to rip the thoughts from out of my head. Instead, he had sent me after the water of life. Which may have been the whole point. The dragon could have known everything. Del Morgan and the dragon could have been in on the game from the beginning. Those two, wanting the water of life, could not send someone after the water of life. That would get them noticed. Just look at the way I had been followed simply for having held the stuff in my hands for even just a little while.

So, they had to sneak around it. The dragon had known every-

thing. He had only chained me to a wall and tortured me so as not to raise my suspensions of what I was really up to. That might also explain all the torture. The constant repetitions of why was I there. He wasn't trying to figure out why I was there. The dragon had been making sure that I didn't know the real reason Del Morgan had sent me to him. He wanted to make sure I didn't know I was searching for the water of life.

Which raised another interesting question. Why was I really searching for a book that didn't exist? I mean it all seems kind of stupid. James Joyce never wrote a book called *Lucifer's Widow*. So, what was I doing? I was searching for a book called *Lucifer's Widow* that was never written by James Joyce. I was in the right place. Even Door had told me to search for the Library of Forgotten Dreams. He just told me to do so by going to the common market. So, I was seeking a book that didn't exist as misdirection? Then what was my real purpose? That's a vexing question.

I had really screwed things up at the common market. So, maybe that had been my purpose. Look for a book that didn't exist so I would run into Beowulf Drake and separate him from those two kids. I don't really like to consider that one. After all, the kids had wound up dead. I mean. Yuck. I had been sent in search of a book so that I would run into Beowulf Drake at the common market and disrupt his cash inflow. So, the kids had to die. What did Del Morgan care?

No, I didn't want to consider that one. Besides, there were too many holes in it. Sending me after a book, Del Morgan couldn't have known I would go to the common market. And, it was a fairly long gambit that I would manage to run into Beowulf Drake. She would have to hope that I recognized him and that I would have the appropriate reaction to seeing him leading two kids around. Then again, it had been the non-existent Jack who had been leading me around the market. So, maybe the encounter had not been a mistake.

If my mission had been to disrupt the common market, then what was I still doing searching for a book that didn't exist? Was Del Morgan waiting for the heat to clear before she called me home? How the hell should I know? She probably set me up, hoping that they would kill me. Oh, wait, they couldn't kill me. Just torture me a lot.

Which left the other possibility. I was in the Land of Misplaced Hopes and Forgotten Dreams to do something. Something, I know

not what. Throw a wrench into the best laid plans of mice and men. I don't know. All I knew was that the patrons of the library did not like Del Morgan. I could only imagine that the feeling was mutual. So, I was here to cause trouble. To inflict pain and emotional embarrassment on the patrons of the library. By searching for a book that didn't exist. Oh, yeah, this was all kinds of sound reasoning.

Which left me pretty far from trying to shield my thoughts and intentions from the librarian. He didn't seem to mind. I was free to look around. Stop. Listen. Learn. Only one problem. I couldn't get into the library. No, really, he said it was okay for me to snoop around. But, I couldn't enter the library. Which was just a fine pickle. How could I search for a book that didn't exist if I couldn't enter the library?

I had to settle for wandering around. Listening to the walls. The doors. The twice forgotten echoes of footsteps as they crossed into the library. I learned nothing. This was getting old. How many more pieces of the library would I be denied access to? I did not know. There was no way to know. He had said it was because this was a place where dreams went to die.

"What you are seeking yet lives," he had said. "It is a beating, thriving thing. People still talk about the work that was not written. They dream of what they do not know. You want the great library in far Whitetrash."

So, that was it. As close as I was going to get. At least, it was better than the last place. There, I had learned nothing resembling a clue. I did not know how far I had to go so I thanked the librarian and intended to start right away. Which raised another interesting little problem. It was getting dark, and I had no money. I didn't know what to do. I was in town. I saw no way to reach Whitetrash before the day was done. I figured it was best to stay in Dayside until morning.

But, I had nowhere to stay. I had no money. I didn't know anyone. Besides the guy who had given me a lift into town. I just didn't feel right showing up on his doorstep looking for a place to crash. Besides, I didn't know where he lived. That isn't to say I couldn't employ my little trick of finding exactly what was seeking me. I mean, seeking me what I was looking for. I mean, seek and it shall find you. I mean, thank you, mister dragon.

There was a simple solution. Dayside was kind of butt-up against the woods. Not my woods. Not the place I had escaped from. Not

even any old woods in particular. There was just a great forest next to town. Well, I had grown used to sleeping out of doors. I would just wander into and among all of those old trees and hunker down for the night. Nothing interesting had happened any night before this one. I wasn't expecting anything out of the ordinary to happen this night. Which is exactly the kind of attitude I should have known would invoke Murphy's Law.

I woke screaming, filling the world with voices. The forest swimming all around me. I was not alone. Flowing, moving, tearing at the roots of the world, they were all around me. I was cold. Chilled in every direction. Torn without purpose like a rag doll in a dog's grip. I floundered, spinning. Reaching for branches and teardrops. Trying to escape the wood as it twisted and curled around me.

I could not breathe in the wind. Reaching for a branch. Falling in the dark. Words echoing all around me. Dragging at my skin. Tasting my flesh. Deciding if I was fool or food or stone. The voices flowed past me. Pausing at the touch. Listening to the dark. Turning. Looking. Moving. The great world turned. The little voices laughed their silent laughter, fearing the dark. I was alone. Breathing through cracked lips. Tasting blood. Not wanting to move. I could feel the shadow slipping past. Rushing with the wind.

There was light and sparkling voices. Somewhere. I only needed to look for them. I should not have. I should have turned and run screaming into the dark. I could not move. I could but drink of the wash of color that had flooded me. Flowed across me like a river. I could not understand. Never hope to describe.

So, I followed the sound of voices. Followed the trail of smashed trees and broken branches even as they healed before my eyes. I was following the call of voices. The flicker of a distant candle. The bellowing of elephants. The cry of the wild.

To the edge of the wood, I saw men. With great torches and giant sticks that flickered by moonlight. There were monstrous and beautiful things there. Fluttering raindrops and twists of honey in the wind. Midnight rainbows and the flames of hell. A rose by any other name had just as many thorns. Striking at the men. Screaming. Wavering. Flowing without sound. They tossed light and brandished sticks.

There, a song was captured on the tail of a great silver stick brandishing moonlight. The men surrounded it, bringing it down. Others moved. Others wavered and sparkled. Here, a great volume of

words fought with men. Slipping past them. Trailed by cries and screams for the one that got away. There, another flickering of forgotten dreamwork was impaled on a lantern light brand. The men had their work. They captured. They fought. They sang.

Another old barnscrape leapt from the circle. Before I could think, it was on my hiding place. It was over and around me. Flowing through me. Pulling at my bones. Leaving me drenched in fire. Caring only to be free, the turn of winter midnight left me floundering on the rock and the stone. Seeking only to escape is probably what saved my life. Just like that, it was gone. Just like that, I was left on the old dirt between trees at the edge of the wood.

I could not breathe. Trying to move brought shocks of pain to every bone and muscle and joint. All I could do was stare at the sky and try not to scream. And then, the people were there. Standing all around me. Speaking words I could not understand. Touching me. Turning me over. Making me sit against the tree. A flask was touched to my lips, and I tasted something as foul as molasses and as sweet as chilled wine. Then, the most beautiful woman I had ever seen was looking at me. Noses almost touching as she checked my eyes. Then, she told me that this was all just a bad dream, and I believed her.

forty-four ***Small Town Secrets***

That had been one serious wild-bitch of a dream. I still couldn't get my mind around it. The details slipping away as all such whispers of dream stuff do. I was numb. My bones ached. This had been a full-on body dream. Left the sweat frozen to my skin. I hobbled to my feet, trying to think. Remember anything. There had been things in the wilderness. Marauding through the trees. Knocking them all to shit. They didn't care. They had been running. Fleeing from men. But, that wasn't important. The fact that men had chased something to catch and kill. What was strange about that? Okay, maybe if they were chasing human babies or I don't even want to think about what. But, what had been in the forest? What had they been chasing? I don't know. Where does my subconscious dredge up this stuff?

What they had been chasing. Wasn't real. The kind of thing that only exist in dreaming. Like being chased by El Niño. Or, civil disobedience. Or, math. Anything that cannot exist in life. Which really isn't saying much in this place. But, I'm serious. What they had been chasing. What I had watched. What had attacked me in the woods. It had not had form or substance. Not animal or vegetable or mineral. It had been more of an idea. A force that did not wish to be conquered or caged. Something untamed. Something wild.

That is what they had been after. The men in my dream had been hunting a concept. Maybe even an ideal. I don't know. I don't understand these things. But, it had been so real. And, I dream so seldom. It had all been so wild. So strange. When that thing had attacked me, it had been the force of all God's creation tearing at my skin. Why would I dream such a thing? It had all been so real. Like it had actually happened.

I had wandered into the woods. I didn't have anywhere else to go. Nowhere to stay. No money. What was I supposed to do? Beg? It had been late. I had wanted to wait until morning before trying to find Whitetrash. Yea, gods, what a name for a town. So far, the Land of Forgotten Dreams had yielded me a place called Dayside and a town called Whitetrash. Who comes up with this stuff? Get a name-your-baby book, you freak! Whitetrash. What a name.

I had found nothing in Dayside. The librarian had been helpful without actually telling me anything useful. It was like they were all trying to get rid of me. What you seek is not here. Try just down the road. Over there. Keep going. Just a little farther. You've almost found it. If this kept up, I would explore every foot and inch of this place without learning anything.

Maybe that was what was behind the dream. Strange and faceless men chasing things that could not exist through the forest. Strange and imaginary things with no form or substance. Only will and the fires of life to drive them. That was appropriate. A strange and acting out dream. In the woods as I slept. I could do nothing so I ran with the faceless men. Brought down monstrous and beautiful things without form or body.

Only, I had not been running with them. I had been chasing them. Well, not really chasing them. I had gone to figure out what the hell was going on. Then, one of those things had attacked me, trying to escape. It had only been trying to escape. Then, the men found me. They had helped me. They had told me that it had all been a dream.

That was weird. You don't often get a dream telling you that you are dreaming. No, more than that. The dream had been trying to convince me that it was all a dream. How often does that happen?

Which raised an interesting question. Had it been a dream. I was sore. I ached. I felt as if something had mauled me. The details were too strong and fresh in my mind to be totally imaginary. And, most telling of all, I was indoors. Looking in the bathroom mirror. Splashing water over my face. That little detail finally sank into my skin. I was in a hotel or something. A little one room apartment with its own private bath. Which was totally strange as I had wandered out into the wilderness to rest. I had no money. How could I afford a room? Why would I forget taking a room but remember a dream in which I went into the wood and people tried to convince me I was dreaming? That kind of thing just doesn't happen.

So, the people who had found me. They had brought me to this place. They had put me in bed, hoping I would forget. I could tell. I could feel it against my skin. The what'sname that I would forget the wood and remember only the room. That awful smelling stuff they had forced down my throat wasn't to make me feel better. They had forced that stuff down my throat so I would be open to suggestion. So they could hypnotize me. Bedazzle and control me. Convince me that I had always been in this room. I could feel the false memory, slipping, trying to hold, finding no purchase in my mind. They did not know they were dealing with someone who had survived the lands beyond. I had seen shit that would drive a sane person from his mind. What did they think a little drugging and suggestion would do?

Which raised an interesting question? What had they been trying to hide from me? Those things they had been chasing through the woods. I wonder what they could have been. Maybe the men had been the gray men I had been going on about and imagining. Catching all the forgotten dreams and drawing them to the library. Yes, that was it. That could very easily. In fact, very likely be the case. I had come across the gray men at their work in the wild woods.

That was interesting. That was very interesting. The library was not something that simply existed. Imaginary books did not simply grow on the shelves. They had to be captured. They had to be brought into the library. So, maybe I was going about it all wrong? The library could be entirely the wrong place to look. The wrong place to search for a book that James Joyce never wrote. It might

not even be on the shelves. Not if it was still wild. Not if these gray men had not captured it.

That was it then. It was too soon to leave Dayside. I had been looking in the wrong place. The librarians would not help me. I had to search for *Lucifer's Widow* in the wild. Learn if it had been captured. I had to find the gray men.

That left only one horrible question. Where to look for them? I didn't even know what a gray man was or if he wished to be found. I didn't know where to begin. The library would help me not at all, I figure. I would have to go into town. I would have to search. To look. To listen. I would learn what secrets the town held. Maybe they were all of the gray.

The first trick then was to listen to this room I had found myself in. Discover if it was truly a hotel room. I mean the subterfuge would not last if there was no explanation for how I had found the room. It wasn't as if I could afford it. So, listen to the room. That was the first order of business. That was not hard. As I had discovered. As Hobbes had taught me without words, I listened without ears to the voices of the room. Listening to the passage of footfalls and many voices. The walls had ears and whispered one to another if only you knew what to listen for. The bedclothes knew much and the bathroom knew everything. There are no secrets there if only one knows what to listen for.

I could do more than listen. I could pick at the false memories clinging desperately to my skin. They wanted me to remember taking the room. I had money. In fact, I checked my bags and found money. Didn't even know I had bags. Not before that moment. They had been provided for me. A change of clothes. Hairbrush. Toothbrush. It would appear I was an encyclopedia salesman. They did have a sense of humor. These gray men. How long did they expect that to last? Encyclopedia salesman, indeed. It was to last until I was far from here. That was clear. When I remembered. If I remembered. I would remember never to return. Do not cross the gray, again.

But, the room knew. I had been carried into the room. By five of the gray. Four to carry. One to direct. Leaving the luggage behind. Why an encyclopedia salesman? Then, they had left. Saying little. That I would remember nothing. They had said that. She had said that. Standing over the bed. Watching me. While the others lowered

me into the sheets and wrapped me in blankets. He does not belong. Then, they were gone, and I learned nothing.

First thing then was to broaden the scope of my search. But, where to begin? That was a good question. I must learn if the town was gray or if only some members of the town held that honor or none. The gray ones could live in the wild. There was that possibility. I would search, and I would learn. It was early. I must find people. Listen to them. Without drawing attention to myself. That would be a trick. It had never worked with Del Morgan. She had never lead me all unknowing into places I would learn secrets from. There was no hiding from her. Hannah had only slipped that one time. The hired help were forever more on their toes.

So, would it work? I would learn. Not knowing where to begin. I began. I tried to follow the memory of footfalls beyond the room. Trace gray men from my false memory and resting place. The walls did sing to me. Little but they did yield secrets. That I had been carried to the room. That they had left me there. They were not trying to hide. Obviously, they did not reckon with what they were dealing with. I must be something wholly new to them.

Where do people keep their secrets? That was the question. I figured the local establishment. The watering hole. That is where they would gather. Try to guard. Surrender to drink. I would learn much in such a place. But, it was early. I would find them at breakfast. So, where to go? A diner? International House of something or other? That was the place to start. This small town. They would gather in such places. Drink their coffee. Munch on pancakes and waffles. Steak and eggs.

That is where I went. The place was not yet crowded. I got strange looks from the man behind the counter. Lucky, the gray had left me a change of clothes. The shower in the hotel had done wonders for my disposition. I no longer looked like the monster that time forgot to bathe. So, the waiter behind the counter saw me for the stranger that I appeared to be. Seeing nothing of the fugitive that I was. Saw nothing of the crimes I had committed against the Faire Folk.

The place was small as befits a small town without tourists. One long counter. One row of booths. I could not be so bold as to take one of those. The end of the counter would have to do. I chose my spot and was provided coffee. The place was not empty, but they were quiet because of me. So, I sat there, and I listened, hoping for anything. A stray thought. A passing word. Anything that would tell

me what the secret of this town was. Anything I could learn of the library. Of the wild dreams that roamed the wood at night. Of the gray men who hunted them.

The voices were guarded. The town was not gray. The voices were sober, reflecting on the world as befits a place where dreams come to die. I learned nothing and everything. I think I was wrong about the gray. In the way I figured it, anyway. They did not chase shadow, dreams or nightmare. They did not chase the wild dreams of the wilderness. Books and plays and novels and stories. Movies and TV shows. No, that was not the way of things.

Dreams did not come tame to the library. That much was clear. But, they were not brought. Not as I had seen in the dark. No, that had been something specific. There were hunters in this town. But, they were not gray. They did not hunt all things. All reasons and all dreams. Nightmares and dreams and shadows were different. Each to its own. Each to its own rhyme and reason. Capture and escape and release.

There were hunters. They did search for one thing and one thing only. Something dangerous. Something wild and untamed. That much I could gather from the whispers of the world. From the shape of the town and the coffee house I found myself in.

Someone had spoken to me. Not a whisper. Not a forgotten dream lingering in the grain of the countertop. A voice. A question. Spoken to me. The waiter was watching me, and I realized that he wanted to take my order. I had been sitting there, nursing my coffee for a very long time. And, I realized something. I had left the money in the room.

"I am sorry," I said for the waiter had given his permission for me to talk without knowing I had needed it. "I have nothing to give you. Everything is back at the hotel. I will pay for the coffee."

"This is a respectable establishment," he said. "Hours you have sat here. Drinking my coffee. Stranger, we do not hold with your kind here. Vagabond. Troublemaker."

"If this is a respectable establishment, then you must give me the chance to repay my debt. I would do dishes. Wash tables. Most anything that you could ask of me."

"Most anything? Then, the wish is not freely given. You know something of guarding secrets. You sit here. Wanting something of my customers. Wanting something of me."

"No."

“Or, hiding? It’s in your eyes. You’re on the run. You would rain trouble down around my ears.”

“No, I wish only to learn.”

“I will have none of it. No secrets. No lies. These are good people. I will not have you destroy us!”

Well, so much for keeping a low profile. Everyone watching me. What else could I do? I left the coffee shop. Tail between my legs, so to speak. Not looking back. I did not even want to return to the hotel. Collect the things that were not mine. I would leave them. Let the hunters- the not-gray men take back what was theirs.

I had learned much. They were not gray. I don’t know where I had gotten that idea. They were not the seekers of all things lost. Dreams that would never live. But, they hunted something. Something wild. Something dangerous. Something that could be captured and could be tamed. The library was getting me nowhere. I must find the hunters. Show them that I could not be deceived. Learn. I must find them. I would return to the wood. Spend one more night. And, perchance I would be witness to the hunt once more.

forty-five

Conversations of the Hunt

I had all the time in the world to think. There wasn’t that much else to do. I was waiting for the dark. I was waiting for the night. I was waiting for the wild things that only came out after the light has gone to bed. The hunters. The wild things would be hunted. I wanted to meet the hunters. Face them without having goop poured down my throat. Speak with them without being told that I was dreaming. Wake with the morning. Feeling strange and imaginary memories drift against my skin. Pretending to be real. I was waiting for the hunt.

Which meant that I had nothing but time on my hands. Leaving the coffee shop, I had found myself in a small town. Few people on the streets. They all had jobs. The people all had places to be and things to do. They did not really seem to have time to stand around and chat with strangers. I wandered, trying to listen to the town. I could hear the people watching me. No, really, the shop owners and

people. Looking at the stranger. Watching him. This was not a place that had many tourists.

They were not unpleasant. The townsfolk and people. Hospitality was still to be found. After all, they had tried to make me comfortable in that hotel room. They had also planted fake memories in my brain, but they can't be faulted for everything. But, I knew I was a stranger prying into their lives. They knew I was seeking something of them now. It was not simply a book I was after. I was after them. It did not matter that I sought them so I might find my book. That was unimportant.

Maybe they knew I worked for Del Morgan. The patrons, guardians and keepers of the Library of Forgotten Dreams do not like Del Morgan. I had been told that. I had been told that more than once. I must be wary. I did not know how they would react to someone sent by Del Morgan. Maybe they did distrust me because of that.

It wasn't as if I wanted to work for Del Morgan. Or, that I had any kind of choice. Work for her or die. Those were my choices. I suppose the self-righteous man would have chosen death. Give me liberty or give me ice cream. All that non-sense. I wanted my life back. I was ready to do what it took to get my life back. My old as hell and twice as boring life. I have no idea why I wanted it back. Some things you simply do not think about. Under the circumstances, death was the coward's end. The easy exit. Don't ask me why. It just was.

I learned nothing more from the city. It was time to turn my sights on the forest and wait for the show to start. Which is why I had a whole bunch of time on my hands. Time to think. Time to contemplate my navel. It really is boring. There really is nothing to do while you are waiting for midnight and it is only 3 p.m.

I tried to find where I had been. Where I had settled down to rest the night before. I don't think I found the place. Didn't even come close. On the other hand, I think I found the killing ground. Where the wild things had been slaughtered. I think I found where I had stood when the bristle-boar of bright light and shadow had attacked me. That was my next step. To listen to the killing ground. To try and understand what they had been hunting.

In the hotel, it had been easy. The knowing had simply flowed around me like studying a picture of multiple exposures. The drifting memory of the hunters carrying me into the hotel room had been strong. Hell, I don't know. I don't know if I had watched them.

Felt their presence. Or, if the knowledge had simply bounced into my head. The word you are looking for is *spontaneous cognition*. Remember it? Okay, good, because I didn't know it yet.

They had tried to make me forget, which was damn silly. They couldn't make me forget. They couldn't force false memories down my throat. I couldn't remember anything. It was part of Del Morgan's curse. Like the fact I couldn't talk. I had no memories to speak of other than when I spoke of them and answered direct questions. Ha! Take that you hunters of strange and mysterious things. The curse was actually doing something to help me.

I still didn't understand why they had wanted me to forget. I really didn't understand why they had wanted me to become an encyclopedia salesman. That one just boggles the mind.

I couldn't learn anything from the killing ground. It would not speak to me, revealing all of its secrets. The hunters, I could see. Not very well. But, their presence was there. It was strange. I could get no sense of what they hunted. Of what they struggled against. Captured and killed. It really was as if the wild things had no form or substance. As if they really were concepts or ideas. Dreams on the hoof. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder really did stalk the woods at night.

So, I really was no closer to understanding what they had hunted. Had they been dreams or nightmare? Stories, poetry, art or music? I do not know. I could not put an understanding to it. I could not tell if my book was among them. *Lucifer's Widow* could be one of the wild things that ran through the forest when the lights were out. I would have to find the hunters and ask them. They were all I could see. But, faint as whispered light.

So, I rested in the wood with nothing to keep me company but my own sorry excuse for an imagination, and I wondered after why I was there. Seeking things that did not exist. Searching for people who wished me to be an encyclopedia salesman. I would wait for them. I would search for them. I would find them.

I was in for a long wait. The night was quiet. There was no excitement. No dreams running rampant through the wood, crushing trees. Hunters did not call one to another, herding, driving, killing the wild things. The dark was boring as hell. Well, that turned out to be a colossal waste of time. Maybe, the hunt only happened on the first night of the full moon. Maybe, they migrated. Maybe, they

knew I was watching. Waiting. Hoping to grab them by the neck and ask after a book that James Joyce never wrote.

Well, I didn't know where else to go. I was not ready to leave Day-side. I returned to the librarian. He met me before the high walls and doors. Almost as if he had been expecting me. He probably had been waiting for me since the dawn of yesterday. Wondering why it had taken me so long to seek him out to ask after the hunt. The librarian certainly was a nice enough fellow. He gave me permission to speak without even knowing I needed it.

"I had a dream of the woods," I said to him. "In the woods and of the woods. There were people and great things I cannot describe. What lives there?"

The librarian looked at me, saying nothing for a very long time. He was watching me as if he were trying to figure out what I was thinking. Wondering how much I said was truth and how much was bullshit.

"You know where you stand?" he finally said. I could think of a million different ways to interpret his question.

"Yes."

"You stand where dreams come to die. They come here. Both real and imagined. Sought after and wholly unknown. You know the old joke? The title of this book is the wonderful story that everybody loves and makes you a rich and famous author."

"I hadn't thought about it quite like that. You really have that book here?"

"After a fashion. That one has already been spoken for."

"Are you saying that such things do not come full-born to the library? They grow, festering in the wilderness and in the wild?"

"Not all. Some are already broken. Limping here. Lost. Bewildered and alone. Knowing nothing of what they once had been or never were."

"Such things live in the world?"

"Such things? What were you before you were here? Did you never want for something? Wish for it? Did you get it? Did you forget it? Was it denied to you?"

"Yes."

"Maybe it is here."

"What?"

"What did you want to be when you grew up? A fireman? Policeman? Painter? Lover? Dreamer? I know the answer. It is here."

“No, there is more than one kind of dream.”

“Perhaps, yes, but not here. What you seek is not here. That you seek for it is.”

That one left me without words. I wanted my life back, and for one fleeting and self-contradictory moment, I believed that my life was in that library. Forget James Joyce. Forget *Lucifer's Widow*. Del Morgan. The passage of the sun and the moon and the stars. Everything I had ever been. Everything I could have become. Everything that had been taken from me when Del Morgan sank her fingers into my chest. Those things were in the library. Because I had lost them. Because I had forgotten them. They had joined the Library of Forgotten Dreams.

“Let me in.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because if you go in there, you will not find what you seek. What is this place? You cannot find what you have lost here. If you found it—”

“It would not be lost. That is just stupid.”

“I cannot help you. You must seek elsewhere.”

It really was stupid. The kind of thing you only find in logic puzzles and pulp fiction. Let us be clever for the audience. Remember, don't wave at the crowd. It spoils the effect. Oh, don't mind me, I was just weirded out by my own loss of identity. I was in the library. What a thought. Which reminded me.

“There is one thing I don't understand,” I said, turning back to the librarian. Yes, I had started to walk away. “Why an encyclopedia salesman?”

“Like you, I can only guess. They may have been laying a deliberate false trail so you would not draw close to what had really been done. Maybe they ravaged your mind seeking your name? The encyclopedia salesman was simply so you would not notice if they had succeeded.”

“Now, that is a thought that is going to fester.”

Which is true. I had not considered it. The hunters may have held me, treating me in much the same way that the dragon had. I mean they hadn't chained me to a wall, but they had sought after who and what I was. They had wanted to know who had sent me and why. To cover their tracks, they had placed false memory over false memory. I was looking for people who did not want me

to know what they knew of me. I must remember everything Door had told me about the opinion of the locals toward Del Morgan. I would seek those who might not like me. I also wanted to be as far as possible from the me that I had been and could not touch. The library mocked me with the secrets it held. My forgotten secrets and misplaced memory. I could not touch them. So close. I was denied them. Not allowed to think of them. Suddenly, I held no desire to be anywhere near them. I would go to Whitetrash. Learn hunters and library. I would go and be cautious.

forty-six

A Nightmare Lacking Only Words

I was two days on the road. Two days with nothing but my own thoughts. Trying to remember. Understand what I was doing and why I was doing it. My past was behind me. That still gave me pause. That still made me laugh. It was the reason I was denied access to the Library of Forgotten Dreams. Forget *Lucifer's Widow*. Never mind Del Morgan. Nobody loved her, but nobody hated her. The reason the librarians turned me away was because I was in the library.

Think about that for just a second. It will take some doing. This was a place of lost hopes and forgotten dreams. This was a land where hope came to die. Had you ever longed for something that was beyond you? Felt it ache in your heart? It was here. That ache. That wish. That pain found its way to this place. It was taken to the library and held with all the other innocent souls. In chains. Behind bars. Fingers bleeding. Numb from clawing at old rock and ancient steel.

I hated my job. Remember that much. I remember. It had been taken from me. By one who stood in my doorway and gave me a name. I had once had a name. Before that one had stood in my door. Before Del Morgan had reached into my chest and pulled out my heart. If I closed my eyes, I could still see it. In her hand. With my eyes closed, I could still feel it. Pulsing against her palm. Pushing against her fingers. As long as Del Morgan held my heart, I was Matthew Drake, and I would do as she asked. Until I found my heart.

I found my heart. It was in the library. Of all the crazy places. Of

course, it was in the library. Lost. Forgotten. A dream that had died still-born. My heart was in the library. My life was in the library. My name was in there. And, the librarians held the door against me. They would not let me look. They would not let me see. They would not let me know my own name. It was in the library because it was forgotten. Because my heart was a dream that had been crushed. It had wandered to this place. Crippled. Crawling. Nothing but the fragile shell of a dream. It had come here to die.

And, what did they tell me? What was the librarian's excuse for turning me away? If I found my heart in the library, then it would not be in the library. If it were not in the library, then I would not find it. If I did not find my heart, it would be in the library. If my heart were in the library, I would find it. If I found my heart in the library, then you get the idea.

So, I ran. There was nothing else I could do. I could not force the library. I could not break the door. Smash the lock. Oh, I tried. Don't get me wrong. Standing before the librarian. Turning away from him. Walking. Losing myself in thought. I had turned. Watching the library. Knowing only that what I sought was not what I sought. I mean, fuck *Lucifer's Widow*. We're talking about my heart.

So, I turned. Marched up the steps. Forced the door. The librarian doing nothing. And, I could do nothing. The door would not bend. It would not yield. I could hammer. I could screech. I could scream. Fall to the sand. Leaning against the gate. Smash my fist into black iron for there was nothing else I could do. The librarian watching. Listening to my sobs. Finally, reaching out to me.

"I am sorry," he said. "As long as you seek your heart, you cannot pass."

Nor could he bring it out to me. So he said, anyway. I had no reason to believe him. Only the strength to turn and walk away. The knowledge that a book James Joyce never wrote was out there somewhere. If I looked for this book, it would find me. I could take it back to Del Morgan. Continue to search for my heart.

Yeah, I know I just said it was in the library. But, see, understand. It was in the library because it was lost. If I found it hidden somewhere in Del Morgan's apartment, then it wouldn't be in the library anymore. And, if you don't follow that, don't worry. I'm the one who should worry. That almost made sense. The whole bit about it being in the library only as long as I did not have it. Just goes to show that I had been here too long. Gideon was starting to make sense.

What else could I do? Search for the hunters in the wood. Search for *Lucifer's Widow*. And, by looking for these things, they would find me. Okay, I know. There is one grand flaw in what the dragon had told me. I was searching for my heart. It had not found me. So, you do the math. Never listen to strange dragons that like to keep you chained to the wall and play checkers. Oh, you don't know how to place chess.

Besides, the road called to me. Well, not really. I didn't care for it, myself. Nowhere to go but look for a place called Whitetrash. What a name. It's enough to make you wonder who comes up with this stuff. Whitetrash, indeed. I just wanted to put as much distance between me and that damn library as possible. That's all I could manage. Who cared about where I was going? I would walk away until I figured out how to rip the place apart one brick at a time.

Which is how I found myself following the road. Which is why I would find myself sleeping in the wood. Nothing happened. Nothing ever happened. Until something happened.

I was pulled from sleep. Tossed about like a rag. Thrown to the ground. What did the land care? Nothing but another victim of fire. The wild things were there. The hunted. In the dark. In the night. Lacking all form and substance. Existing only in your head. In your dreams. Where the wild things sleep. That is where you will find them.

Around me. Swirling. Sweeping. Moving. Driving me forever. I was on my feet. Not knowing how I had got there. Walking. Staggering. Trying to run before forces I could not understand. They were wild dreams and forgotten fantasies. Voices of silence. Cries of the wilderness. They existed only in my head. Filling the space between my ears. They were before me. Around me. Pushing me. Like great titans of sound. Hurricane and whirlwind.

I fell. Leaning against a tree. Holding to it so it would not fly away. I could hear voices. Screams in the darkness. I found the road. Wandering beneath the sky. Dust and maggots and trash would not let me be. A river of diamonds and emeralds flooded my heart. Drained my lungs of breath. Would tear the flesh from my bones. I could feel them like towers of destiny all around me. Or, death knocking at the door.

I would stand. I would have light and know what I faced. Name it. Raising my hands, I drew sparks from out the star-shine. Created a havoc of blazing wind above my fingertips. They were there. Be-

neath my light. Like black riders in the rain. Sweeping over me like the roar of the ocean before a tidal wave.

“No!”

They broke before me. Eddies and currents wavering before the stone. Wandering. Sloshing. Lost. It or they stood before me. Unable to move beneath my touch. Dark things. Wild things. Midnight sun and forgotten moon. How to describe? They were words. No form. No existence. But, they were there. The wild night. The forgotten nightmare. How do you describe it? Put into words? I faced a dream. Moon stuff and winter night. They fade with the light. Only a dream. How do you see something that exists only when your eyes are closed? How do you describe the sound and the fury? A nightmare without words?

It was a stalemate. A standoff. I did not know what to do with them. Before me, they quivered beneath my touch. Not understanding what they faced. This Drake. This Grendel. Shaper of worlds.

Just like that, they were gone. As if they felt something approach. They faded back into the dark. Into the wood. Into the night. Leaving me on the path. Leaving me to collapse. Shaken. Not by the encounter. By my own audacity. Not that I had held them back. No, I had spoken. I had shouted. I had let loose my voice. That had held them. Unasked for and unwanted. Without permission, I had spoken. I had commanded. That left me shaken. That left me quivering on the road. Of course, I could not know if I had really shouted my command or simply believed that I had. There is more to words than what you hear. The ear plays tricks to fool the mind. That or the wild dreaming could free me from my lack of words.

Just like that, they were there. The hunters were standing at the edge of the wood. Looking at me. Watching. Knowing that their prey had just escaped them.

“Never have I seen such a thing,” one hunter said, stepping toward me, searching my face with his eyes. “You held them. The wild poetry. They could not harm you. I had heard the story out of Day-side, but I did not believe it. A stranger had been mauled by a poem and lived. None of us believed it.”

He sat before me, and I saw for the first time how young he looked. Just out of college. That was the look. Dark hair. Plain face. Too dark to see his eyes at night. Dressed in hunter’s leather and strong coat. Holding a short staff like a spear that did not make any sense.

“My name is Morgan Graiwold, and I have no manners,” he said. “Are you hurt? Do you need anything? What is your name?”

I looked at him, seeing youth, knowing that he had just named himself. In that instant, I could touch him. Know that he spoke truth. He hunted the wild poetry in the wood like all his people. Just like that, I knew what had faced me. What I had held. The wild poetry of the Land of Forgotten Dreams.

“Drake.”

“Well, Drake,” he said. “We have been hunting this verse for some time. It has been most harmful and destructive. Many hurt. More killed. Houses shattered. Crops burned. This poem must be stopped. I welcome you to the hunt. Would you join us?”

And, that is how I met Morgan Graiwold. Nephew to Bract Graiwold. You may remember him. Bract gave me a lift in his car.

forty-seven

Touch of Infinity

We were hunting the wild poetry. Dangerous verse. Savage as the hurricane. Nightmare wind. The Devil’s own lightning. This was not poetry simply to charm the soul or fill the heart with passion. It has been said that the purpose of great art is to affect all those who experience it. To change them forever. Making of them something greater than they had ever been. This is not what we sought. What we followed. We were searching for wild poetry. Poems to destroy the mind and ravage the soul. We were stalking poetry that killed.

The poetry hunters had found me as they chased their quarry. A particularly reckless poem that had defiled the land. It had killed. It had maimed. Destroyed homes. Ripped trees from the ground. Leaving their shattered and splintered husks to dot the landscape. Chasing this poem, they had found me. The poem had found me. They thought they were too late. That the poem would kill me if I was very lucky. They expected to find the twisted husk of a man. Bereft of all sanity and sense. Nothing left even to beg for death.

What they found was one who could face the wild poetry. Someone who could stand before this thing without form or substance. This monstrous beauty of wind and wild nightmare. The poem had turned, leaving me. Only the poetry hunters had ever stood against

such a thing and lived. Only the hunters shielded by their nets and masks and armor could hope to stand. Only the hunter with his staff looking for all the world like a cross between a spear and a Gothic lightning rod could turn such a poem away.

They did not know the poem could not kill me because it was the only way Del Morgan could punish me. Del Morgan had taken my heart, and I could not die. The poetry hunters did not know the poem could not drive me from my mind because there was nothing for it to take. Another gift from Del Morgan. I had no life. I had no memory to speak of. Nothing prior to the moment when that one among the Faire Folk had stood in the door to my office and given me a name. That was the beginning and the end of my life. That moment. That one standing in the doorway. Saying my name. Everything else? Anything else? Gone. As if it did not exist. As if it did not happen. What Del Morgan had left me, Hunter had taken in payment for dragon's breath.

I was nothing. The poem could do nothing to me. The poetry hunters did not know that. Did not understand it. I saw no reason to enlighten them. It explains why the others had drugged me. Why they had planted false memories. Trying to convince me that I was an insurance salesman. No, wait, encyclopedia salesman. It doesn't matter. They thought they were protecting me. Shielding me from the chaotic swirl of sound and fury that was the wild poetry.

I don't know if I believe that, but it is as good as any other explanation I have heard. It was that or believe they were simply malicious. Trying to spread confusion and trouble. Or, more likely, they had raided my mind. Trying to learn who or what I was. The false memories were simply there to confuse me. So I would not know they had been raping me.

It did not matter. There was nothing for them to find. Del Morgan had seen to that. Maybe that was why she took my heart. Why she stripped me of all that I had been. To protect me from her enemies. To save me from those who would destroy me because I worked for her. Use my mind against me. My life. Use my very soul to destroy me. Don't laugh. It had worked. The poem could not touch me. It could not harm me.

I don't buy that for one second. Del Morgan had not taken my heart to save me. She had not stripped me of my life and memory so that I could not be hurt. She had done it to control me. To own me. I could do nothing because I was nothing. I did not know what

I had been. I did not have my memory. My life. My existence. My heart. I was nothing without my heart. I would have it. I would find it. I would not rest until I had retrieved my heart. Such was Del Morgan's control. I would not leave her service until I had found my heart.

So, the wild poetry held no power over me. Morgan Graiwold did not know that as he watched the poem leave me in peace. I'm sure he did not even suspect it as he asked me to join him in the hunt. They gave me a nightmare wand. Something like a cross between a spear and a lightning rod and a TV antenna. There were words in languages I could never hope to survive written all around and through it. It was laced with a spider's work of silken thread almost as if it had been forgotten in somebody's attic. Found covered in dust and cotton candy.

I was not expected to fight. Not in this hunt. The others were armored and warded against the ravages of unknowable voices. I was there to experience. To learn. To become one of the great hunters of errant verse. So, we traveled, seeking the one wild poem.

We followed in its wake, finding the wreckage of its passage. Comforting those who had encountered it. Bringing peace to those it had destroyed. We chased it for a week or ten days. I do not know. Hell, maybe it was only three hours. Time blurs in the hunt.

Morgan told me of the great poems as we continued the hunt. They hunted the wild and chaotic poetry, giving it form and trapping it in words. Only then could the poetry be survived. Bound to words and voice and page. It could not kill. It could not drive sanity from one's mind. All poetry is dangerous, of course. It's just that some poetry is more dangerous than others. It just happens that the wild, unknown and unspoken verse is the most dangerous of all.

So, we followed the poem, and I learned why it must be tamed. Looking at destruction. Studying the devastation that it left in its wake. The twisted bodies and forgotten minds. I knew that we had to stop it.

I do not know if we chased it for hours or weeks or days. All I know is that it found us. Pulling at the trees. Surrounding us in the dark. Tired from the long hunt, we were not ready. The nets were ill-prepared. Binding sticks held loose in slipping fingers. The thing surrounded us. Driving us in upon ourselves. We tried to hold. Pushing out with our sticks. Lightning crackling all around us as poetry glanced against our staffs.

It was a monster of frightful chaos and wild verse. There were no words. No voice to speak them. No ear to hear them. It was the unfinished symphony. The work that drove the poet mad. Sheet upon sheet of paper covered with scribbles. Lines and scratches and traces of words so thick upon the page that they wore straight through the paper. That is what faced us. What surrounded us. The unbound poem. It would have no master. No title. Words or a name. None would know it or speak its praise. Such a verse as this was never meant for the ear of mortal man.

Such an elegant beast as this is what we faced. Driving us in. Pushing us one against the other. Ripping weapons from our hands. Shredding nets from between our fingers. Pulling at armor until it fell away in decay. All light and laughter and sound were its playthings. Pushing at us like the roar of the universe until we were ground into the dirt.

The circle broke, and the poetry hunters began to fall toward the hole, seeking escape from the thing that had bested them. Like the river finding the break in the levy, they fell away, crawling, stumbling against the earth. Filling the void of their passage, the poem took the center of the ring it had formed. The poetry hunters fell, seeking escape. All save one.

I stood in the center with the poem flowing against me. And, just like that, the poem paused. I held it as I had held it once before. Confused, the poem froze as if it had turned to ice. Confused, it could not smother us. In that moment, I knew that the poem could be bested. It could be bound with words, given form and substance. And, I knew that the poetry hunters had not been involved in a blind retreat. They had forced an opening, spilling through the gap to create a vacuum. The poem had been falling into a trap. It would no longer surround us. The poetry hunters would engulf it.

I would not wait. I would not yield or fall back even to spring a trap. I would stand against the poem on its own terms. The poetry hunters were still, watching with quiet awe the one who stood against it.

“What are you waiting for?”

Just like that, the poetry hunters surged forward. They surrounded the half-circle that was the errant poem. With grounding and binding sticks that looked so much like a cross between a lightning rod and a TV antenna, they forced the poem down and back. They wrapped it in a ball and ground it with their sticks. Lashing

out, it could do nothing. It had lost. It would be bound. It would be tamed. A wicker and wood cube was brought forth, and what little remained of the wild verse was forced into the box.

Their plan would have worked. The poem had forced them back. Yes. Surrounding them. But, they had not resisted as much as they might for they knew they could break away from its hold. So, the smothering force would find itself pushing against empty air and fall into its own void. The poetry hunters would have shifted suddenly from victim to victor. Surrounding the poem that had so recently surrounded them. Smothering it into the dust.

I had to stand against the wild poem. I had to show the poetry hunters that I would not bend. That I would not yield. They had to see that I could not be patronized or ignored. I knew that I would be asking many things of them. I knew I would need them to help me in my search for a book that James Joyce never wrote. By showing them I could face the wild poetry, they would help me. They would follow me. Most important of all, they would listen when I told them to turn on the Faire Folk. I was a fugitive, after all. But, I'm getting slightly ahead of myself.

***Fragile
Creations***

forty-eight
The Hunter's Voice

"We are poetry hunters. It is who we are. It is what we are. We hunt the wild verse in the deep wood and dark forest where nothing else travels. We drive them. Surround them. Claim them. It is our birth-right. I have stood in the root of the forest where poems are born. They seep out of the musty earth. They drift half-formed out of the dark sky. Slipping between leaves and branches. Rare delicacies are these fresh born cries. Dangerous to find. You leave a piece of your soul behind, taking them. Never to return. No, it is best to let them grow. Let the wood grow thick with them. And, then pluck them from the forest. Drive them into the meadow. Blind them with moonlight."

"What do you do with them?"

"What?"

"It is not all trophy hunting. It is not simply to protect your people. Are they food? Are you trappers? Traders?"

"The poetry is everything. But, you are right. It is not simply to protect ourselves. Few are the rampaging monstrosities such as we have fought. If that were all we were, we would not survive. There are too many of us for that. We must live. We must eat. We must thrive."

"You traffic in them? Like fur traders or ivory hunters?"

"We must survive, Drake."

"I do not mean."

"No, please, listen. I want you to understand. This is a land of lost souls and forgotten dreams. This is a place where darkness falls as thick as snow. The despair gathers, and it grows. The wild poetry is only one aspect of this. It is a more virulent part. A more forceful and destructive part of the whole. You can touch it. You can taste it. You can feel it on your tongue. Do not look around and tell me that you are blind."

"I know. I do not claim to understand, but I know."

“Left unchecked the poetry would grow as thick as the trees. It would overwhelm the wood. It would destroy the land. What we do. We do because we have to. We do because it is what we are. The traffic, as you put it, allows us to focus on the hunt.”

“Do you take them to market?”

“The common market? No, we do not need to rely on something as chaotic as that. We have a select and reliable clientele. They are a fair group. A kind people. I would never have an ill word to say of any of them. How to describe? They are-“

“Patrons?”

“If you will. I would not call them such, but I see you know of whom I speak.”

“I would not say I know your patrons by name, and I would not recognize them at sight. But, I will admit that I have had my fair share of dealings with them.”

“I would say you know them much better than you admit. What is your name, Drake? Tell me your story.”

“No, I think not. I am sorry. I risk offending you with silence, but I risk offending even more by breaking it.”

“Such is always the way of things. Can you tell me nothing? Why you are here?”

“Curiosity. I was looking for you. No, seriously. Maybe not you. But another you. Someone who might help me in my search. I am looking for something. If I do not find it, I do not find it. The problem is that it does not exist.”

“Which is why you seek those who hunt that which does not exist. No, not us. You went to the Library of Forgotten Dreams.”

“And, was turned away.”

“Really? The library belongs to them. Our patrons. They turned you away?”

“I did not speak with them. Only the librarian. He said- what did he say? Oh, I remember. He said that what I sought was still fresh in the minds of people. It is still out there.”

“So, you turn to those who hunt the wood. After the aid you have rendered me, I would do much for you. But, I must know more of what you seek.”

“I am sorry for being so obtuse. I do not know if I can trust you.”

“Why?”

“Because there is one thing I do not understand. Why an encyclopedia salesman?”

“What’s an encyclopedia salesman?”

“What do you mean, what’s an encyclopedia salesman? How could you not know? You placed the thoughts in my head. Gave me memories that did not exist. Well, not you. But, others like you. The poetry hunters that found me in the wood beyond Dayside. They tried to make me something other than what I am.”

“No, I am sorry. I heard of this. They were not trying to hurt you. They were trying to save you. They thought you were a victim of the hunt. That a poem had ravaged you. Left you a mockery and shell of a man. What they did they did to salvage your sanity. Then, you disappeared before they could speak with you. This encyclopedia salesman? It is a product of your own- I see from your look that you do not believe me.”

“Deep in my heart I am an encyclopedia salesman? Is that what you are saying?”

“No, it was a way to protect you from chaos. They sought something stable and boring in your mind.”

“To shield me from ecstasy?”

“After a fashion. Come with us back to Dayside. You can ask them yourself.”

“They will answer me?”

“You are a natural born poetry hunter, Drake. They will answer you anything if you would but stay with us. Let go the ghosts that haunt and chase you. Join us in the hunt.”

forty-nine

The Fugitive’s Thoughts

They accepted me. I was one of them. A poetry hunter. They did not know that I was a lie. A fraud in cheap clothing. Stolen clothing. I was still wearing what they had left in that hotel room. They believed I was a natural born poetry hunter. No experience. No training. But, mine was the experience by rite of birth or something. It did not matter. They did not know the truth. The poetry hunters believed what they wanted. What they saw was not the truth.

Yes, I could stand before wild poems. Poetry did not touch me. Harm me. Kill me. Leave me a mindless beast of the nameless forest. The poets called this natural talent. Innate and inherent abil-

ities I did not even know I had. What I knew was that I could not be killed. Not by them. Not by monsters. Giant frogs or monstrous verse. But, I wasn't going to tell them that. I saw no reason to inform them that Del Morgan held the secret of my life in her hands. I would live or die by her wish and whim.

Del Morgan had my heart. She held it in the palm of her hand. Dripping blood. Still pulsing. Beating. Yielding me life even held in her hand. As long as she held my heart, I would live. It did not matter what was done to me. I would live. I had been killed. My body ravaged. Burned. Mutilated. Eaten. It did not matter. They did not touch my heart. So, I survived.

The wild poetry could not kill me nor could they drive me insane. Del Morgan had seen to that as well. She had taken from me all the secrets of my mind. I don't know how, and I don't know when. Which is part of the beauty of it. All I knew was that I had no memory. I remembered nothing of life before Del Morgan had claimed me. I knew little of what happened after.

Let me rephrase that. I did not think about what happened after. It was as if my brain simply switched off. Selective denial. I knew things, but I did not think about them. I did not think about not thinking about them. I did not know what I knew. Sometimes, things crept through the cracks. Usually when asked a question. I could answer questions, wondering how I had known the answer. I would forget just as quickly. Simply stop wondering what I was thinking about. Forget that I was trying so desperately to remember something.

The wild poetry could not touch me, and the poetry hunters loved me for it. This bothered me. Aside from every thought I ever had about not being able to trust them, there was the larger issue. I worked for Del Morgan. The patrons of the Library and Lands of Forgotten Dreams did not like Del Morgan. If they noticed the link to her, I do not know what would happen. It would hurt. I figured that much.

I was also a fugitive. Forget about Del Morgan. She is unimportant at this point. There was an even larger issue than the patrons discovering that I worked for Del Morgan. No, I had to worry what would happen if they discovered that I had defied and defiled the common market. Let us not forget that. They had trapped me in a cage without bars or a door for that. A cage from which I had escaped.

When the Faire Folk discovered what had happened to the one who had tried to free the slaves, I don't even like to think about what would happen. Okay, it had only been two slaves. Okay, I don't rightfully know that they had even been slaves. But, they had been. Beowulf Drake had taken them to market. He was going to sell them. Rip out their hearts and their souls. Just as it had been done to me. So, I had saved them. So, I had rescued them. So, they had died.

Stranger than fiction, I tell you. Who comes up with this stuff, anyway?

So, there I was. Looking for a book that James Joyce never wrote. I don't even know why I was searching for it anymore. When Del Morgan learned what I had done, she would kill me. Crush my heart and hope I die. The only reason I was still alive was because the punishment of life was worse than death. If I took her *Lucifer's Widow*, what did I expect to happen? She would probably kill me. Never let me on another errand. I would never find my heart. I was certain of that.

The poetry hunters had offered me a choice, and it was one that I had heard before, which made it all the more disturbing. Windermere had once told me that I could be free of Del Morgan and all I had to do was ask. She had told me that I need but confront Del Morgan and tell her that I was leaving. That I no longer wanted to be her slave. I would belong to Windermere.

Morgan Graiwold had told me more or less the same thing. He hadn't used the same words, but their meaning was the same. I could leave the past behind me. That is what he said. I could forget all that I had been and everything that I ever was. I could join the poetry hunters as something entirely new. I would be free of Del Morgan. I would be a slave no more. It was appealing. I did not know what I was going to do.

The poetry hunters were wonderful. They hid nothing from me. We returned to Dayside. Masters of the hunt. We had tracked. Fought. Hunted. Defeated one very nasty poem. There was feasting. There was celebration. There was rejoicing. It was one glorious party. Not all at once. That was the interesting part. There was no grand celebration; even though, all celebrated. The hunters went back to their wives and their families. They returned to their husbands and their daughters. Mothers and sons. They rejoiced as fam-

ilies and celebrated in groups of neighbors. I do not think I ever saw more than a dozen at any one party.

Everywhere I went I was accepted. There was no doubt. There was no question. There was no reason. I was that, and that was all that mattered. I learned nothing more of *Lucifer's Widow*, and I did not care. It was wonderful. I was accepted, and I did not have a thought or a care in the world. For the first time in my very short and meaningless life, I was accepted.

We went on another hunt. That goes without question. And, this time we were not after such game as the monstrosity that we had brought down. No, this hunt was for food. Or, to be more exact, it was to sell to the Faire Folk so we could buy food. We were kind of like fur traders. We would hunt it. Catch it. Skin it. Kill it. And, we would take the remains to the Faire Folk for a fair price.

I do not know how long we hunted. There were a lot of us, and we were in no hurry. It was hours. It may have even been days. We traveled the roads and then entered the forest. Moving between trees that were dark and green and as old as time. We were searching for the deep woods where poetry grows. Where the wind grows thick with verse. And, the branches rustle with their passage.

I took one more cautious step and found myself among them. The poems drifted around me like sleeping clouds before the storm breaks. I looked up, admiring drifting willow and sapphire jewels. There was the edge of mercy and the quiet lightning.

The wind rose in a swirl to steal the breath from my lungs. My arms twisted upward in that caress, and I almost dropped my grounding stick. Cross between a lightning rod and a weathervane. The trees surged, clinging desperately to the earth beneath a wind that would smash the sky. I was alone. Blinking tears from my eyes. The forest was empty. The others were gone.

Hearing voices, I ran. They were ahead of me. Escaping. Trying to flee. The poetry hunters following. Chasing. Herding. Hunting. We raced the wind. The wood flowing all around us. The poems before us rushing forever onward.

My lungs burned. My feet ached. Arms were numb. I do not know if I still held my grounding stick. The forest was a rush. Branches and twigs and leaves and sticks snapping at me. Smashing me in the face.

I was among them. Running with the poetry hunters. Driving the wild poetry. We would force them from the wood. We would sur-

round them. We would taunt them. Taste them. Capture them. Kill them. The prize would be ours to take back to the Faire Folk.

We were the river. The flood of all nations. We were the tide. The waves. The might of the ocean. And, we ran into a mountain. Pushing into it. Turning. Squandered. Floundering. The poems slipping like so many leaves from the trees. I stood face to face with another man. Our grounding sticks were locked together. Hopelessly entangled together. I did not recognize him. He was not one of the poetry hunters.

“Ambush!”

He was not alone. Just like that, we were matched one-to-one. As if two great waves had smashed into each other. All the tides mingling together. Morgan Graiwold stood beside me. His binding stick forgotten. Lost somewhere in the dust and the earth. In his hand, he held a gun. I had not seen a gun since before- hell, I don't know if I had ever seen one before outside of movies. Morgan pointed the gun at the stranger with our grounding sticks tangled together. He pointed it at the stranger's head and pulled the trigger.

fifty **Fallen Verse**

I've never had a gun pointed at me before. Well, it wasn't really pointed at me, but it was so close to my face that it may as well have been. I've never even seen a gun before. Outside of movies. I lived in the city for years and never saw a gun. Is that weird? I know lots of people who have lived in the city all of their lives and never been within spitting distance of one. That's not entirely true. Have you ever seen a police officer? In person? TV shows don't count. If you've ever seen a police officer, then you've seen a gun. It's right there on his hip. Doesn't count. Not what I meant. Have you ever seen a drawn weapon? Had it pointed at someone? Watched them die?

Just lucky, I guess. Guns are loud, did you know that? I mean you see all kinds of movies and TV shows, and you never think about it. Oh, sure, people running around blasting away at each other. Lots of fake blood to gush across the screen. Cut to the scene at the shooting range. What are they wearing? That's right. Head phones.

Or, whatever you call them. They wear those things so they don't go deaf. Never thought about it. Not really. Never saw a gun before. Police don't count because I've never had a police officer point a gun at me.

Guns in movies are too shinny. They also tend to make these real impressive flashes of light when fired. It's the gunpowder or the blank not surviving the trip down the barrel or something. I don't know. This thing was dull black. Smaller than I expected. Actually, it looked kind of fake. Like it was made out of plastic or something. Guess they use guns on steroids in movies. This was the real deal. A killer. Not what I expected.

I mean, what did I expect? Swords and sorcery? Knights in armor? Riding around on horsies? I had never seen a gun before. Not in somebody's hand. Not outside of movies. I had no idea how loud it would be. It was like getting hit with a brick in the ear. Then silence. Numb. I couldn't hear much of anything. Not out of that ear, anyway.

The effect the gun had on the stranger was instantaneous and horrific. The whole side of his face imploded. No, I'm serious. It just kind of turned into a red pulp. That was the bullet's fault. It's called a talon or claw or ripper or something. They are banned in America, I think. Basically, the bullet is designed to explode on impact. Not exactly explode. The outer casing of the bullet splits out and away as it strikes the guy's face. Suddenly, a cylinder has turned into a starfish. All sharp and jagged edges. Kind of like the barbed tip of an arrow. This monstrous ripping saw-blade of a thing rams the guy's face with the speed of a bullet. What should have bored a hole the size of a quarter has become the size of a silver dollar dragging skin and flesh and bone in after it. There is no exit wound.

The stranger falls. The look on his face locked there forever. Hard to describe. Some sort of mix of surprise, anger and fear. Not anger. Hatred. I know because that look of hatred is mirrored in Morgan's eyes. There is no surprise there. A complete lack of fear. Just blinding hatred. And, I'm suddenly wondering what the fuck I've gotten myself into.

Just like that, the air is filled with screaming. Weapons for trapping wild poems are suddenly turned on the strangers. Gothic TV antennas are dropped. Guns appear from beneath jackets. The world is filled with an explosive thunder that I cannot describe. There is blood everywhere. The screaming stops.

“Anyone hurt!”

“Nothing a stiff drink won’t cure!”

“Over here!”

“Where!”

“Hurry!”

I can’t move. Watching them. It’s like I’ve grown roots. My voice has fled. So have the poems. Escaped in all the confusion. People on the ground. Standing. Running. The place smells like dirty sulfur. I don’t know how else to describe it. Like firecrackers. I guess that is the stench of gunpowder. I see one of the strangers start to move. Kind of roll over on her side. Half-covered in blood. In too much pain to hold still. Several of the poetry hunters run over to her. Three guns point at her. Without a word being said, they shoot her until they run out of bullets. I don’t watch that long. I can’t keep the click-click sound of the empty guns as if they hope to find one more bullet if they just keep pulling the trigger out of my mind.

I kind of look blindly around. Discover that one poem has remained behind. A truly monstrous beauty etched in black light and midnight. Filling half the sky and over shadowing the forest. The others don’t seem to notice it. Lost to the wounded and the dead. They are blind to the horror standing among them. Pulsing. Breathing. Feasting on the scent of gunpowder and blood.

“No,” I whisper. The thing ignores me. I stagger toward it, dragging my binding stick along behind me. “Go.” Like a spider born of shadow it has woven a tapestry of midnight between the forest and the trees. The poetry hunters move through the web, unknowing. The darkness sticks to them. Gets tangled in their hair. They don’t notice. Try to brush it away. “Leave this place. Leave them alone.” I’m a fool. I know I am. I know nothing. I have caste my lot in with people who kill. Destroy with hatred in their hearts and murder in their eyes. They are food for this poem’s pleasure, and I wonder. Do they feed it or does it feed them? All I know is that I want it to stop. All I know is that there is only one thing I can do. “Your name is *Lucifer’s Puppet*, and I banish you.”

The poem envelops me in its arms, caring nothing for the feast around it. It pulls its tendrils and hooks from the trees. The stuff of cobweb and nightmare fades from the wood. I feel the breath burned from my lungs. Legend thick as molasses and sea water fills my mouth. Clogs my throat. Spills out my nose. I chock and gag and piss myself because I cannot throw-up.

“Drake!”

Someone is touching me. I’m curled on the ground, shaking like a wild thing. I cannot breathe, pulling breath past ragged edges of burning wood. I puke, spilling guts and blood and yesterday’s breakfast all over the cold earth.

“Easy. Easy. Just try to breath.”

I look, and the monstrosity is gone. Morgan is leaning over me, trying to help me onto my knees.

“What happened?” I find voice enough to ask.

“Rustlers. We were ambushed. I’m sorry. It happens sometimes. But, we are okay. Everyone is okay.”

“No, what happened to it? *Lucifer’s Puppet*? It was right here. All around us.”

“Lucifer’s what? I don’t know what you are talking about. I thought you were looking for *Lucifer’s Widow*?”

“No- I mean, yes. I am looking for that one. There was something else here. *Lucifer’s Puppet*. It was. It was. Hell, I don’t know. It was here.”

“Another poem?”

“Yes.”

“A bad one?”

“Yes.”

“Shit, we’ve got to get out of here. Regroup. Reorganize.” He stood. “All right, everyone! We are falling back! There is something in this wood, and it is not just the Shaine! It’s time you met Bract Graiworld, Drake. Way past time.”

fifty-one **Subterfuge Unaided**

I still wonder how I got myself into this mess. I mean I know how. I’ve had time to figure things out. That doesn’t mean I still don’t marvel at it all. Everything that had happened. Everything yet to come. Simple, really. I didn’t make decisions. Choose to do anything. I reacted. Followed a course as predictable as a car on train tracks. Turning from thing to thing to thing without thought. Nothing required of the brain. No consideration of consequences.

Doesn't mean there weren't any. Consequences. Just that I gave no thought to them.

Beowulf Drake had taken children to market. To be sold. To become property. As I had become property. As I had had my life removed. I had seen Beowulf Drake leading children to market. No thought taken on my part. None required. Only action. To free the children. Never considering that they might die. Only to take them from the Drake. Free them. Even in death. No thought. Only action.

The same for wandering the wood and looking for *Lucifer's Widow*. Nothing required of me. Simply another reaction. Predictable as a duck on roller-skates. Shooting baseballs out of season. No reason. No rational. Simply following the path of least resistance. It might not look to be the easiest path at first glance, but you'll just have to trust me on that. Or, try to understand. If you take anything from my ramblings, take understanding.

Poetry in the forest must be followed because it is shiny. Wild. Sweet as- okay, you get the idea. Joining the poetry hunters? I don't think I decided to do that. Only reacted. Like everything else. Path of least resistance. Something to do. What do you want to be when you grow up? No, there's no money in poetry. Pick something else. Path of resistance. Least resistance. Whatever. Joining the poetry hunters? Morgan made it sound almost like freedom. At least, I wasn't running errands for Del Morgan. She wasn't about to kill me. It was the only thing that would kill me. Eternal life would kill me. Strange but true.

Poetry hunting wasn't a choice. It just happened. A way to forget I didn't have a heart. Ignore the fact that Del Morgan could end my life any time she wanted to. I could pretend she would keep me alive as the only way to punish me. Believing that. I could get up in the morning. Believing that I wasn't about to die. Maybe that is why so many people would. Die.

Bract Graiworld would have disagreed with me, I am sure. If I had ever asked him. But, I'm getting ahead of myself. It's all because of the book *Lucifer's Widow*. Remember that? I know I said it before. Blame the book. It's easy. Anyway, I know that Bract Graiworld would have disagreed with me. Morgan introduced us.

"Bract Graiworld? You are Bract Graiworld? I'm sorry. I thought your name was something else."

"And, I thought your name was James Joyce."

"Well, yes, but you saw through that."

“And, you did not?”

“No, it’s true. I was pretty much convinced my name wasn’t really James Joyce.”

“Are you sure? What is your name, Drake?”

“Drake.”

“Yes, I know that is what you are. I am asking you who you are. How are you different from all the other Drakes?”

“I don’t understand the question. They call me Drake.”

“Yes, Matthew Drake. I know that. It is your title. Root and genesis. It is not your name. Why are you here?”

“What do you mean, it is not my name? Matthew Drake. That isn’t a title. How can Matthew Drake be a title? He pointed his damn finger. You are Matthew Drake.”

“Who the hell do you think you are?”

“Drake!” That silenced him. “I am Matthew Drake.”

“What am I going to do with you?”

“I don’t care. You’re not making any sense. And, more fun in the car. Why did you lie to me? Take my mind? Try to make me an insurance salesman?”

I told you what Bract Graiwold looks like, right? Tall. Skinny. Your stereotypical librarian. He wasn’t a librarian. But, let’s not go there. Fair hair. Dark eyes. No beard. Old. No, not old. Mature. On in years, let us say. Somewhere between forty and one hundred and two. Reminded me of the dragon. In an odd way. Remember the dragon? Something wild in an old man’s skin? This Bract Graiwold was a quiet giant. Slumbering. Sleepy. Waiting to stand. Waiting to speak. Watching me as if I might pull a gun at any moment and he simply had no opinion about that.

“Do you know where you are, Drake?” he said. “This is the Land of Misplaced Hopes and Forgotten Dreams. Wishes grow old here. Unfulfilled. In ash, they are born. In dust, they die. Why are we here? Not in a meaning of life kind of way. I am asking a much simpler questions by far. A question of choices made. Life discovered. Why would we choose to live in a place where happiness dies? None die of old age here. Why?”

“The wild poetry.” I’ve given up trying to understand how I can know the answer to questions I know nothing about. “It is too sweet.”

“The wild poetry. If left alone, it would overwhelm this land. Nothing but beasts and monsters. Twisted shapes and forgotten

shadows. That is not why we are here. To protect the people? No, the people are here because of poetry. Because of those who want it. Because there are those who would give anything for a taste of errant verse. Almost anything. For the fair folk and kind ones, we harvest the poetry. We live well.”

“You are not alone.”

“That is why we do not trust you. Doubt you. Lie to you. Wondering what it is you are here to take from us. Steal from us. Our very life’s blood? The stench of the fair people is on you, Drake, as it is on all of us. Inescapable. Unforgettable. Unforgiven.”

“Don’t change the subject. Who were they? In the wood. Before you killed them.”

“Rustlers. Bandits. From what Morgan tells me. I am sorry. It happens. I told you the poetry is sweet.”

“They were like you.”

“Yes, I suppose. These things happen. Remember. We are like you, too. Do not read too much into that.”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“You are the one who is changing the subject. Don’t you want to know? Why we made you forget. Don’t you know?”

“To protect yourselves.”

“Who sent you to destroy us? Stranger! Fugitive! Prisoner!”

“You need no help from me. The poems feed on you.”

“I know. You named one, I understand. That is why you are here. So I can understand you. With no training. Experience. Knowledge of any kind. You tame the wild poetry. Name it. That is why I call you Drake. Shaper of worlds. I’ve never met one before.”

“I’ve never met myself, either. I know nothing of the shape of worlds.”

“Yes, I’ve heard rumor of such things. One can learn much from a place such as this. They keep you ignorant, Drake. The lords and masters don’t want you to know yourself. It’s to keep you down or train you. I’ve never understood which.”

“I wouldn’t know. I can only answer questions.”

“Why do they keep you ignorant, Drake?”

“To train me.” That made me pause. Almost fell on my ass. Bract was quiet. “They keep me ignorant and bound to one of their own so I am not overwhelmed. Burning too quickly or before I am ready. Holy shit! How do I know this?”

“You are Matthew Drake.”

Then, I did sit down. On the floor. In a chair. I really don't care.

"I'm being trained to control the common market. Control isn't the right word. The answer is getting fuzzy. Feed? Sustain? Like a candle or a battery. Quick! Ask me another one!"

"Why do the gentle people use Drakes and Grendels to control the common market?"

"Because the market isn't a natural place. The Faire Folk don't control it. They don't even try. They use us. The Grendels and Drakes. And, it isn't a cooperative venture. The more Grendels one of them has sustaining the market the more influence he has in its affairs. That doesn't make sense. I mean it does make sense. I just don't want- she wasn't bullshitting me with all that destiny crap."

"I suspected as such. Heard rumors. It means they will come looking for you. I must know. Before they take you away. How do you control the wild poetry, Drake? Why are you here?"

"No, sorry, I kind of suspect the answer to that one. It's mucking the works. Half-knowing the answer. Looks like I can't feed you any insights."

And, he didn't say anything. Only looked at me funny. Not that I could blame him. There had been rustlers in the wood. Violence and bloodshed. All because of the wild poetry. Which feasted on the violence by the way. Which is why I had thought Morgan had taken me to see Bract. Because *Lucifer's Puppet* had feasted on the blood. But, the interview didn't make any sense. It rambled and twisted. And, I understood. He was trying to keep me off-balance. Lost and confused. Like the dragon had kept me disorientated and in pain. So, he could try to steal the truth from out my heart. Know if I was friend or foe.

All up and down the Pacific Coast there are Native Americans who fish for salmon. They live on it. There are also sport and commercial fishermen who go after the very same salmon. Now, any time the catch is poor, the fishermen always blame the Native Americans for taking too much of the catch. That also applies the other way. The Native Americans say the fisherman are taking more than they need of the catch. The environment has got something to do with this too. But, let's not drift too far from my point. All sides want the fish. All sides need it. Maybe some more than others but that's not my point.

That kind of thing was going on here. In the Land of Forgotten Dreams, everybody was poaching the wild poetry, and everybody

was killing everybody else over it. Chances are there were no sides. No right. No wrong. They were all squatters. They were all wrong. Not important. What mattered was that Bract Graiwold didn't trust me. And, if he didn't trust me, I didn't know how the hell I was going to find *Lucifer's Widow*.

fifty-two
Another Style of Hunting

I carry-on a bit about choices and decisions. I wax philosophic about the root and source of all things. Where was the beginning? What was the beginning? Which event set things in motion? I've tried to trace it back. I remember seeing Beowulf Drake at the common market. I remember stealing his prisoners. That was a turning point. I remember Del Morgan sending me after a book that James Joyce never wrote. *Lucifer's Widow* set things in motion. Where does it begin? Or, end for that matter. With dragon's breath or cannibal frogs? A stolen heart? Life on a little stretch of beach with the whole wide world squished inside a wood box twenty feet on a side? I can trace things all the way back to the moment that freak stood in the door to my office and told me my name was Matthew Drake. He didn't point his finger at me. I don't understand why I'm always convinced that he did. That's it. The moment when it all started. The moment I realized that the world was crap. Piss and vinegar. Fahrenheit standing in my door. Telling me my name. Or, title. As Bract Graiwold would have me believe.

In looking for the source of things, I have overlooked something. Hoping no one would notice. The moment when I could have turned back. The last breath before it was too late. When I still could have turned away. Everything would have been so different if only. Find that moment. The one that could have averted catastrophe. You see the slope coming. You're roaring down, but you could still stop. Feel the floor giving way. Stop. Jump. Turn. The point just where it is too late. We don't want to see it. We don't want to believe it. We would rather believe that the slope was always too steep. The point of no return was taken from our grasp. We had no choice in the matter. Circumstances had already dictated action. Bullshit! There is no reason why I should have stayed with Bract Graiwold. He was

a nice enough fellow. Making the best of the situation. I was going to learn nothing more from him. I should have moved on.

Why did I stay? I didn't need *Lucifer's Widow*. There was no point to it. Del Morgan wasn't going to kill me. That was clear or else she would have killed me for defiling the common market. I could do anything I wanted. I could return to Del Morgan. Look her in the eye. Tell her that there was no such thing as *Lucifer's Widow*. What was she going to do? Send me on another errand? Kill me for my disobedience? No. Nothing. She had done nothing. She would do nothing. I could go to the desert and live on a rock if I wanted to. But, I return to Del Morgan. Without *Lucifer's Widow*. Still wanting my heart back. I don't think I'm giving anything away by telling you that. The secret is in the getting there. That is what I want you to understand. Why I go back to her without the book that James Joyce never wrote. Why I continue to run errands. There is more to the story than that. I don't exactly go back to her. She doesn't come looking for me. Jack is the one who finds me. But, not yet. I'm getting ahead of myself. We are talking about the moment when I knew enough to turn away from the poetry hunters. Follow my own path. But, I didn't.

I stayed with the poetry hunters. Remained a guest of Bract Graiwold. I'm not even sure why. There was no reason for it. I can tell you. They were nice to me. Such secrets could break your heart. No, really, they were nice to me. In spite of everything. The risk. The fear. Never knowing what I wanted or why I was there. Scratch that. Say instead that they never believed what I told them. That I was after a book. Why look for poetry hunters if you are searching for a book? That is what they did not understand. That did not stop them from taking me in. Being nice to me. They wanted my secret for controlling the wild poems. Sure. Who wouldn't want that? I wasn't telling them any secrets. More reason for them to be suspicious. Bract suspected the deal with the common market. Getting those kids killed. He never said anything. I never mentioned it, but he knew.

It did not matter. I was given a room. Invited to dinner. Shown around town. There is the library. There is the school. The orchard. The pond. The local playground. Invited to another dinner. Good food. Good company. These people knew how to cook. They knew how to party. In their own quiet way. They were living in the Land of Broken Promises and Shattered Dreams, after all. I lot of bad things

came to their land to fester and rot. They made good with what they had. There was a lot of social drinking. Dancing. Karaoke. What's the difference between a banjo and an accordion? The accordion burns longer. Dinner at midnight. Dancing until two. Breakfast at noon. Like I said, nice people.

I even learned how they make those pig sticks. Those dream sucker monstrosities they use on the wild poems. Whipping them into submission. Subduing them. Naming them. I practiced with them. Watched and trained. They are a careful people. In a surprisingly reckless way. It is hard to fight chaos with reason. Which is exactly what happens when you go up against wild poetry. I still think the only reason I was there was so they could learn how I fought poetry. How I could stand before the depths of hell and not lose my mind. I don't understand how the wild poetry gets associated with death and despair so much but there it is. I guess the happy poems that got away go to a place other than the Land of Lost Hopes and Forgotten Dreams.

I didn't think about *Lucifer's Widow*. Didn't wonder after a book that James Joyce never wrote. I was in no hurry to move on. I should have. Left them. Gone anywhere but stayed with the poetry hunters.

"We are going on another hunt," Bract Graiwold told me one day. "Interested?"

"Yes."

It was a huge undertaking. Morgan and Thomas and Sandra Graiwold as well as many others I did not know were all going. Even Bract Graiwold was taking part in this hunt. The pig stickers were unbounded and wrapped in tinfoil and ivory. Looking for all the world like Gothic lightning rods or television antennas wrapped in cheap Christmas tinsel. Plastic icicle and tree lights. It was like a giant party we took on the road. No, really. There was laughter and dancing. Drinking, carousing and general naughtiness.

We traveled the woods. Sometimes staying to the road. Sometimes drifting far from it as we searched for our pray. The wild poetry is not so easily found. Not when it wants to be secret. I had floundered upon them. Sure, that was true. But, such things do not happen every night, as I also discovered. When you are a shaper of worlds, the thing you seek finds you, as the dragon would say. And, a good coincidence is a great way to keep the story moving, as the hack writer would agree.

I kept wondering after our purpose, as we never seemed to find

any poetry. We never traveled deep into the forest where the poems grow. We would camp in the trees or in the clearings or on the road. It did not seem to matter. One clump of dirt seemed to be just as good as any other. One thing was clear. We were hunting something. I could tell from the people around me. Keeping secrets. Leaving out some detail or other.

“What are we hunting?”

“You will see, Drake. You will see.”

I knew when the attack came. Let me rephrase that. I could tell when they were ready. Weapons and pig stickers made ready. Dusted and polished and gleaming by dark moonlight. There were swords and axes and great torches in metal boxes dipped in flame. And, there were guns. Shotguns and hand guns and rifles with bayonets.

This was the moment when I should have turned and ran. You don't tame wild poems with primitive flame-throwers. I was talking about the moment. It's easy to see it now. The last chance. The final turn before the end. Sure, I know. It would not have been pretty. Try explaining it to them in the morning. Sounding really stupid. They probably wouldn't bother with questions. Just ignore me or try to shoot me on sight. Not a chance in hell of finding *Lucifer's Widow* then. What if I had? Given up on the poetry hunters never looking back. I don't know. Would it have made a difference? Would I still have met the Shaine? Trusted them? It does not matter. I like to think I would have gone back to Del Morgan and told her to shove it. Asked for my freedom even if it meant another beating.

Not that it matters. Something far stranger happened. As I sat there. Half-awake. No light but the sliver of moonlight in the dark. I remembered something the dragon had said. No, wait, he never said it. I only thought about it. That Del Morgan had never wanted dragon's breath. She had only sent me after dragon's breath so I would be redirected toward the water of life. One cannot find the water of life if you are looking for it, see? Not quite true. Looking for the water of life draws people's attention. If Del Morgan had sent me after it, then Halle would have gone straight to her demanding it. Or, would have known exactly where to look for me when I still had it.

This matters not. The only thing that does is the possibility that Del Morgan sent me after one thing hoping I would do something else. Maybe she wanted me to do something about the poetry hunt-

ers as I watched them ready for war. The fact that the patrons of the poetry hunters did not like Del Morgan was starting to sound more like a compliment. Maybe I was there by a roundabout course to put an end to the blood. I wasn't ready and that is all that matters.

fifty-three
Tracing the Void

He found me vomiting. Returning my meal of the previous evening to the world. The forest all around us in flames. I could not look at him. Try to turn away. Gasping for breath. Retching on air. Seeing only the bodies of the children. He does not say anything, and I cannot answer. There is nothing I want to say. Trees on fire. The splinters of gutted homes all around us. Not even proper houses. More like log cabins and tent homes. Ruptured. Burned. Scarred by gunfire. Stained with blood. I do not want to look at him, and there is nothing I can say. I do not need to ask. I know why I am here.

They used me to protect them from the wild poetry. The poetry hunters did. They used me. It makes perfect sense. Finding me in the forest having survived an encounter with an errant verse. They search me. Prep me. Raid my mind. Leave me in such a state that I don't leave town. The poetry hunters want me, but they set me up to want them. Seek them out. They test me. Chasing a poem through the forest. Did they drive that monstrous verse to me? Did we follow something that they had set loose to test me? I do not know. On my knees. Hugging my ribs. Unable to speak. I know that they found a use for me, and this massacre is my fault.

They never would have attempted something like this without me. The encounter in the wood with the other poetry hunters is proof of that. Turning upon each other had drawn the attention of the wild verse. Dark poems had feasted and fed, and the poetry hunters had done nothing. They did not know. They did not care. It matters not. They were used to it. Doing what they could. Surviving as best they could. But, I had changed all of that. I had driven the evil poem away. The poetry hunters could do something they had never done before. They could attack the other poetry hunters.

They had found someone who could protect them from the ravages of their bloody work and keep the vampire verse away. So,

they kept me around. Tested me. Showed me how to hunt the wild poems. Took me on hunts to strengthen my skills. Once they were ready. Once they were confident I could protect them from the poetics of war. They took the fight to their enemies. Finding them in their beds. Killing them as they slept. Showing no mercy for women or children. Because I was there to protect them. I tasted blood in my mouth as the dry heavens shook me to my very core. What am I doing here? Looking for a book that James Joyce never wrote?

He does not say anything, and I cannot answer. I do not want to say anything. Ask questions I already know the answers to. I do not want to ask him why. I know why. I saw it in his eyes. I saw the hatred that is older than memory and burned into his soul. Maybe someone once knew. Lost long ago in the depths of time. It does not matter. Nobody ever asks why. The Montagues and the Capulets wage war, and that is all that matters. Two houses both alike in rank and name or however it goes. Nobody has to ask why. It just is. Fighting over who gets to hunt the wild poetry. Nobody has to ask.

I want him to apologize. Sitting next to me. As I wipe my lips. Tasting bile. Saying nothing. I want him to say that he is sorry. I imagine it. I pretend to hear his voice in my ear so that I can snap at him. Cut him off mid-word. I imagine myself telling him where he can stick his apology. Where he can stuff his explanations and justifications. Ask him why. Without words. Only in my head. As he looks at me. I already know the answer but what the hell. I want to ask him anyway. He seems like such a nice guy. How could he do what he does? Lead his people to murder. To kill. Burn homes. Set fire to children as they sleep. The men. I can almost understand killing the men. They would kill you just as quick. But, the women and children? Raping little boys and young girls? Laughing as their mothers cry? The village in flames.

No, I will never understand Bract Graiworld. I leave him. Standing. Feeling every joint and muscle creak and burn. Walking on bones that might turn to powder at any moment. Feeling the heat on my face from the flames. Saying nothing. Bract doesn't try to stop me. Doesn't say anything. I don't even know if he watched me go. Leaving the flames. Leaving the ruins stained with blood. The poetry hunters cheering. Celebrating their victory. Shooting guns into the air. Having a second go with the women they didn't kill the first time. Even Graiworld's daughters join in. With sticks and

knives and broken bottles. Safe from poem and shadow. They will celebrate forever.

I cannot stay, wandering away. Into the forest beyond the flames. I'm kind of surprised that it is still dark. Maybe that is just the smoke from the flames. I do not know, and I do not care. I will be away from them. I will continue my search for *Lucifer's Widow*. Fuck *Lucifer's Widow*. I'm going home. I'll return to Del Morgan empty handed. And, if I'm very lucky, maybe she will kill me.

Which is not what I wanted. I remember that as I wander the wood. If I return to Del Morgan with nothing, what will she have done with me? Kill me? I think not. She will let me be. Ask nothing more of me. I will have nothing. I will be nothing. As empty as that Jack I left in the common market. I would have my heart. I would have my life. I cannot do that sitting on Del Morgan's couch. Watching TV. Eating her food. I will be free of Del Morgan. And, I remember looking for dragon's breath. How it had turned into a quest for the water of life. And, I remember thinking that dragon's breath had been misdirection for the water of life. One cannot seek life. It draws too much attention. Seek dragon's breath and be tricked into finding the water of life. That is how things work.

So, again, I wonder why Del Morgan has sent me after a book that James Joyce never wrote. By what strange path have I found myself among poetry hunters? And, I know I am not wandering blind through the wood. I am looking for survivors. People who fled the massacre. I do not know what I will do. Not yet. Would I protect them? Stop the Graiworld poetry hunters from slaughtering the Shaine? Yes, I would learn their name was Shaine. Not yet but I'm tired of trying to distinguish between two groups both called poetry hunter. One is Graiworld. The other is Shaine. I'll learn that eventually. Get used to it, now.

The problem is that I don't know how to stop the fighting. Bring the sides together. That is impossible. Watching Graiworld. I know. There are no words between Graiworld and Shaine. Only violence. Only bloodshed and death. Horrible torture and death. The only way to protect the Shaine is to turn on the Graiworld. That makes as much sense as protecting a frog by sticking your hand in the blender. I will stop death by killing.

Yes, that is the way of things. What Del Morgan wants me to do. I want to laugh. There must be another way. I cannot imagine it. There is another way. After a fashion. It still means turning on the

Graiworld. Blood for blood. We shall all be blind and toothless. But, it is the only thing we can do. We must bite the hand that protects us. I must convince the Shaine to rise up against their patrons, the Faire Folk. Which is exactly what Del Morgan wants. The patrons of the Library of Forgotten Dreams do not like Del Morgan. She doesn't like them. What would be better than someone upsetting their apple cart? Depriving them of the wild poetry. That is the way of things.

Which is when I found them. It was too soon. I did not want to find them. Shaine poetry hunters. Lost in the wood. Wounded. Scared. Trying to protect themselves with sticks and stones. Those poetry grounding sticks that look something like a television antenna. Maybe half-a-dozen people. Having escaped the carnage. Trying to hide. I had not been looking for them. I did not want to find them. I was being followed. I did not know. I was sure. The Graiworld poetry hunters would follow me, thinking I would seek out the Shaine. They knew I could find anything. I would find those who had escaped from them.

So, I turned, looking into the dark. Ignoring the Shaine. They did not attack me. Only stood threateningly. Protective of the injured and the children. I said nothing. I could not say anything. I was looking to the forest. Looking for followers. They found me. Morgan Graiworld had followed me. Not so I could lead him to more Shaine. He had followed me because he was worried. Wanted to see if I was okay.

The Shaine changed everything. The moment I saw Morgan's face I watched it change. Seeing me, he was concerned. Seeing who I was with, his thoughts turned to anger. The gun in his hand was suddenly pointed at them. The hunters with Morgan were moving in for the kill.

"No!" I would have none of it.

I pulled the wind against them. I don't know how. I've stopped trying to understand these things. The same way I juggled fire and lightning so long ago on the beach. The way I burned cannibal frogs in the dark. I turned the world against Morgan and his family. Pulling at the fabric of the trees. Like a great maelstrom. They fell. Guns lost to the dark and the night. Blinding light fractured the night where a gash was torn in space and time. There were screams. Cries of fear. The hot blast of the whirlwind surrounding us all. I pulled at the fire, trying to hold it in. Remembering the firestorm that had

swept around me in the tunnels beneath the world. Remembering how it had almost consumed me. And, I felt the night slipping from my grasp.

All the pain and all the blood and all the death of the night screaming from my lips. Poetry hunters killing poetry hunters. With guns and knives and fire and bare hands. And, I had watched. Saying nothing. Doing nothing. Watching men and women torture sister and brother. There had been no chance of surrender. Only destruction. And, it had all been my fault.

I cried, screaming. Pulling at the chaos storm. Drenching it in apathy. Controlling it as I might tame a rogue poem. Leaving silence. Empty as the dark. And, the poetry hunters fell. On both sides. Fearing me and the world I had opened before them. It took me a moment to realize. There was a gap in the trees. An empty space where nothing existed as if someone had poured whiteout over a painting. I looked at it. The empty spot of nothingness. Reached for it. Falling short of touching it. And, I knew that it was my fault. As if I had unmade a piece of the world.

That was when I noticed Morgan Graiwold. Who had been so nice to me. Lying in the dirt. Clutching at his arm. The gun was gone. Nobody held guns. His arm was gone. Part of it anyway. He was clutching at the stump in too much pain to scream. The others did not move. Not the Graiwold. Not the Shaine. They simply looked at me. The one who had destroyed their world forever. They looked at me and did nothing. There was nothing for them to do. There was nothing I could do. I left them. Ignoring both sides. I had much to think about.

fifty-four

The Source of All Troubles

I didn't have a plan. Not yet. I was still shaken by the void in the forest. That had unnerved me. More than the killing. Blood and death and gunfire, I could adapt to. It wasn't pretty. I hadn't taken it very well, but I would recover. After having discovered a pile of bones. My bones. Everything else seems easy. Cannibal frogs, remember? The killing had shaken me. I will admit that. It was my fault. I wasn't happy about that. It is what convinced me I must do

something. Stop the bloodshed. I don't know if it is what Del Morgan wanted. I really didn't care. On most occasions, I actually try to do the opposite of anything Del Morgan wants, but in this case, I was prepared to make an exception.

I didn't know how to stop the killing. The only thing I could think to do was find the Shaine. Talk to them. Learn their side. Work with them. Help them. Maybe that would mean fighting Bract Graiwold. Overthrowing his family. If the Graiwold poetry hunters were made weak, then the Shaine would be safe. I didn't know how to do it. Without fighting. Without killing. The end of violence was violence. I didn't know any other way.

All of which required a plan, which I didn't have. I couldn't think of anything. All I could see was Morgan Graiwold writhing in the dirt at my feet. Biting his tongue. Trying not to scream. His arm was gone. Not even any blood. It simply was not there any more. Which was my fault. I had tried to stop them from killing the Shaine. All I had wanted to do was stop them. Keep them apart. Separate them from their guns. Instead I had separated Morgan from his arm. He had been nice to me. I had liked him. Sure, he violated and murdered the Shaine as freely as did the rest of his family, but he had been kind to me. I had not wanted to hurt him, and for all I knew, he was dead. From the shock. From the pain. From the loss of blood. I did not know, and it did not matter.

I had ripped a hunk out of the forest as if I had stolen a piece from the center of a jigsaw puzzle. Because I had wanted to separate the Graiwold poetry hunters from the surviving Shaine. That act had ripped a hole in the universe. A blank spot. A void of nothingness. There was no color to it. Not black. Not white. It was kind of an absence of gray. If that makes any sense at all. I don't know how it happened. I had lost control or something. But, it didn't make any sense. In the dark. Surrounded by cannibal frogs. I had turned stone to fire. I had lost control. Confused. Hurt. Alone. No clue what I was doing. I had lost my hold on the fire, and it had almost consumed me. That I could understand. The void? I don't know.

There was only one thing to be done. I didn't have a plan, but I knew one thing. I had to find the Shaine. I didn't know if this was a good idea. I didn't know if Bract Graiwold was following me. If I would lead his family right to the Shaine's last hiding place. It was the only thing I could think of. Help the Shaine. I had to find them first. I had to show them I could help. That did not sound easy. But,

I had the beginnings of an idea. I could control the wild poetry. The void in the forest was the beginnings of an idea.

Finding the Shaine was easy. It was the only thing I could think of. I asked a librarian.

“You can’t speak, can you?”

That was true. I couldn’t speak. Del Morgan’s gift to me. It was the first thing the librarian in Whitetrash said to me. Taking one look at me as I walked up to him. I’m not even going to describe what he looked like. Not a dog. Nor human looking. None of Hobbes’ relatives. What can I say? He looked about as much like a kangaroo looks like an oyster. But, a little more human. Just a little.

It seemed strange. Finding myself in Whitetrash. I had been looking for this place. Not very seriously. I was going to get around to it. The Library of Forgotten Dreams in Whitetrash was my best chance at finding *Lucifer’s Widow*. That stupid book that James Joyce never wrote. That non-existent volume that held Del Morgan’s attention. It seemed strange. Being so close to my goal. Not caring. I wasn’t looking for books that did not exist. I was looking to end the feud between the Capulets and the Montagues.

The librarian just looked at me. Eyelashes thick as a bristle brush. Eyes as dark as midnight thunder. It was as if he was waiting for me to speak. Which seemed kind of funny since he had asked if I could not. What? Was I expected to answer? Was this a trick question? Can you speak? Well, no- Aha! You can speak! You just denied it! No, I never- Aha! You just spoke again! Stop trying to deny your voice with your voice. It kind of defeats the purpose.

“Can I help you?”

I swear I thought he was never going to give me permission to talk. Just leave me standing there. Dumb as a post. One of those catch twenty-two questions. Have you stopped beating your wife? It’s all the rage these days. People looking at me. Sizing me up. Never giving me a chance or permission to speak. It was time for the direct approach.

“I’m looking for them. Don’t play dumb. You know who I mean. Bract Graiwold may have his finger on the lid around here, but he isn’t the undisputed champion. Where are they?”

“They hide in plain sight. Like you.”

Well, that was easy. A straightforward answer from a librarian. Maybe it was because I wasn’t even vaguely looking for *Lucifer’s Widow*. I wasn’t trying to manhandle my way into his precious li-

brary so I could steal my soul or whatever it is they say I have lost in the library. I didn't say anything. The librarian was watching me as if he were trying to figure out who I was. His answer was starting to sound less and less obvious. How do you hide in plain sight, anyway?

"Whatever do you plan to do when you find them?" he finally said.

"I haven't figured that part yet. Things can't continue as they are. That's all I know."

"What makes you think the Shaine will be any better than the Graiworld?"

"Is that their name? The Shaine? I did not know. What I know is if they kill half as many of the Graiworld as has been done to them. I mean if they kill fewer people that is a good thing."

"You want to believe that. I can tell. That you are fighting the good fight. For the good cause. How do you know what is right?"

"That question requires you to be an unbiased judge, which you are not."

"I am not above the fray? Having no part other than to keep the living history?"

"You work for them. The patrons of the library. Nobody who belongs to them is pure."

"You belong to them."

"I never claimed to be unbiased."

"They are looking for you."

"Cleaver change of subject. Okay, I'll bite. Who is looking for me?"

"Everybody."

"Why haven't they found me?"

"Because they don't know where you have disappeared to. You did quite a job of vanishing from the common market."

"That wasn't my idea."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really. Just ran into a tree is all. Now, my problem is I want to be found. Not by them, of course. I want to find the Shaine."

"If you do what you are planning, they will find you. Everybody will find you."

"Really? What am I planning?"

"Something dangerous. I would advice you against it."

"Advice taken. And, that is all of it? The piss and the vinegar?"

Don't stab yourself in the heart; even thought, it is the only way to find them? You are full of contradictions, you know that? I hadn't even decided on my plan, but I think you just made the decision for me. I wanted to send a message."

"The message will destroy you."

"At least, it will be something worth dying for."

That silenced him. Gave me time to catch my breath. Try to piece together the flow of our little discussion. Figure if I had actually learned anything or if we had simply been jousting. But, it was true. He was goading me. I knew how to get their attention. I knew how to make the fighting stop. All I had to do was take away what they were fighting for. Strange but true. And, easier said than done. The strangest part? I knew I could do it. This bothered the librarian no end.

"And, that is all that matters, is it?" he finally said. I didn't bother to answer. Didn't want to give him the satisfaction. "A reason to die? You don't want a reason to live or something worth fighting for. You are looking for an excuse to die."

"What? You think I'm looking for a reason to die because it is easier than finding a reason to live? I don't think I've ever heard that outside of a cliché."

"They speak in cliché to hide the truth. Speak the words again and again and again so that they lose all meaning. Nobody has to understand a cliché. It is a cliché. Unrealistic and unreal. It doesn't really apply to you because it is a cliché."

"Well, yeah, but I think that is another one."

"You are a broken record seeking the end. A walking shit-pile of fractured hopes and forgotten dreams. It would be a shame to lose you. Why don't you join me in the library?"

"What?"

"You belong with me."

I swear he started beckoning at me like a guy in a cloak from a cheap melodrama pretending to be death or fate or the future or whatever. Beckoning for me to accept my fate or destiny or whatever. Made my hair stand on end.

"I don't understand."

"You are already in the library, Matthew Drake. It is time to be complete. To be whole."

Definitely starting to creep me out. I think he was asking me to be a permanent fixture of the library. Strange. Most of the librarians

wouldn't let me anywhere near the place. This one wanted me to never leave.

"No, I think I'll be moving on now."

"They will find you. Hunt you and capture you. You will be safe in the library."

"From everybody? What kind of life is that? But, you've got my curiosity. What did I do to get everybody's attention? I haven't sent my message yet. The wild poetry still roams as it will."

"Because of what you have done."

I turned and left him. Without saying anything. Standing before the library. I knew what he was talking about, but I didn't want to hear it from out his lips. I had rescued the children, and they had died. For my crimes. For defiling the common market, I knew that they would hunt me. I knew they would not stop until they had found me. Tortured me. Killed me again and again and again because Del Morgan would not let me die.

I knew in kind of an abstract way that the Faire Folk were looking for me. I had taken steps to protect myself. I had been cautious. Even paranoid. But, in a subtly abstract way. It was real but not so. I could think about the Faire Folk looking for me without giving it any real thought. It wasn't real. Only an idea. The behavior of the people around here had kind of reinforced that. The Graiwold poetry hunters had been so nice. They had not cared that anyone was looking for me. They did not worry that children had died because of me.

They were looking for me, and I knew they would find me. It was true. I wanted to draw their attention. Stop the killing of the Shaine. And, the only way I could think to do that would be to stop the flow of poetry. Without the wild poems, the poetry hunters would be lost. No source of income. Stopping the flow would be the best way to get their attention. I would finally meet the Shaine. Remembering the void in the forest. Remembering *Lucifer's Puppet*, I knew that I could stop the flow of poetry. That would be sure to get everyone's attention. With any luck, I would get the poetry hunters to defy the Faire Folk. Which was definitely something worth dying for.

fifty-five
End of the Line

My plan needed work. Oh, it did. I shouldn't try to deny it. I was looking for the Shaine. I wanted to stop the killing. The only way I could think to do that was to cut the Graiwold poetry hunters off from the source of their income. No, seriously, I was going to debase their resource heap. Give them something to worry about that was more important than killing the Shaine. I was going to take away the wild poetry. And, I figured that the Shaine's help would go a long way toward accomplishing that. Now, it looked like the only way to contact the Shaine was to strangle the poetry. That is what the librarian in Whitetrash had told me to do. Not in so many words. Actually, now that I think of it. The librarian had been trying to stop me from interfering with the wild poetry. It would probably cut off the flow of verse to the library or something like that.

Which didn't make sense because I had not said anything about my little plan when the librarian told me not to do it. So, he had goaded me into seeking the end of poetry. I didn't really want to be the death of poetry. I just wanted to send the poetry hunters a message. I wanted to weaken the Graiwold poetry hunters. Stop the killing. The librarian had talked me into it. Maybe he was tired of the killing, too? Maybe he believed my plan would work? That I just needed a little encouragement. Reverse psychology. It's not like the conversation had made a whole lot of sense.

I was starting to notice that. People don't talk. Not around here, anyway. They spin little stories and lies. They try to out think each other. Prove how witty they are. Live on cleverness. So, I really don't know if I had actually accomplished anything by talking to the librarian. Except I had learned how to summon the Shaine.

Which was why I was standing in the heart of the forest where the wild poetry are born. It had taken me some time to find. Lots of walking. Hitchhiking. Wandering forgotten streets and back roads. But, I had found it. I had been there once before. With Morgan Graiwold as we had hunted the wild poetry. Finding them where they are born. Growing from out the very earth and the air. Twisting in the wild. Dangling from the trees like so many monarch butterflies.

I knew I could stop them. Squash them. Strangle them. Yield them all names. Never to return. That would draw the poetry hunt-

ers' attention. Even the great and mighty Halle would have to take notice.

I let the thought go. The end of violence. It was a great idea. Felt it drift into the trees. Seep among the branches. I felt the poems flutter. Unsettled in their slumber. Feeling the edge of nightmare creep into the dark at my touch. I had yielded the void. I had spread fire, feeling it rush from between my fingertips. I had escape from the Faire Folk's prison. Defied and defiled the common market. Compared to all of that, speaking to poems that did not exist was easy.

That is not entirely true. The poetry did exist. If not, how could they cause such trouble? It is almost impossible to describe the wild poetry. They exist outside of words and beyond language. I'll try to explain. Have you ever gone to the kitchen and forgotten why you were there? Had no idea what had been so important just a moment ago? Spent the following hour pulling at your hair trying to remember?

The wild poetry is like that. The idea that got away. The words that filled entire notebooks with scribbling because no combination of syllables actually seemed to work. Written words that were then erased. Recopied and erased. Pressed so hard against the page that the pencil broke. You have an idea. A thought. A dream. Unable to find the words. How do you describe the scent of sunshine? Impossible to remember a word. Another word for rhapsody. That is all you need. But, what is it? That word. It rhymes with biscotti. The wild poetry is like that.

Imagine what I was trying to accomplish. The words that had driven the poet mad. Impossible to find. Define. Express in any way imaginable. And, I was trying to stop it. Put an end to the madness. Poems without words. Verse lacking only voice. In short, the wild poetry. I was trying to subdue what could not be defined.

I must have been crazy. Completely out of my mind. I realized I had no clue how to go about my task. So, I felt nothing. The poems rustled on the vine, but they did not flutter. They did not wake. Shake themselves free. Swirl through the sky on the breath of the wind. Leap into my pocket so that none might partake of them. I simply left them, wondering what to do next.

My goal remained the same. To stop the slaughter. I wanted the Graiworld poetry hunters to stop. Leave the Shaine alone. The world was big enough for the both of them. But, I could not harness the

wild poetry. Make it bow to my will. Use it as a bargaining chip with Bract Graiwold. I did not know what to do so I wandered the wood as if I did not have a purpose.

And, found a clearing. And, found a great hart watching me. Looking up from my toes. From my study of the grass beneath my feet. All thoughts of lost and forgotten poetry banished from my mind. Before me was a great hart. Beautiful as the sunrise. Graceful as the wind. The color of autumn wheat. You know the movie where all the deer stand still? And, just for that one moment, they nix the soundtrack. No music. No nothing. As the one buck walks peacefully through the shot. Fawn turns to his mother. Asking who the majestic one is. Told that one is the prince of the forest. And, the music swells. And, the scene carries on like that for a while. But, that is unimportant. Just remember the moment. All is silence. As it watches you. As you cannot breathe.

The hart is standing there, and the world is silence. No wind. No poetry rustling in the brush. No nothing. As if I've suddenly gone deaf. And, I realize that I've stumbled into a clearing. An open space in the forest where only two things live in the whole entire universe. Me. And, the hart.

He speaks to me. Well, I don't really know if he spoke. I mean, how does an animal speak? I saw no lips move. Turn of breath. Twitch of an ear or anything. There was simply a voice in my head. I'm sure I imagined it. It doesn't matter.

I'm convinced the hart asked me what I thought I was doing.

I answered. There was no reason not to. I mean I didn't really answer. I couldn't. Could not talk. I had not been given permission. And, imaginary animals found while wandering through forests where the wild poetry grows are not allowed to give me permission to speak. But, I digress. I told the hart that I was looking for a spark of sunshine so that I might burn the wild poetry out of the forest.

This was where the hart was supposed to ask me why. But, did nothing of the kind. That was enough to tick me off. The hart wasn't holding up his end of the conversation. Definitely not following convention. I accused the hart of being Halle in disguise. Well, I didn't really say Halle. That would have been stupid. Tipped my hand and all of that. I just accused the hart of being him. The one who runs the show. Always goes about disguised. Here to stop me from messing with his lands and poetry.

That got a laugh out of the hart. Nope, he wasn't Halle. He didn't

actually say he wasn't Halle. We were still referring to him without a name and all that jazz. See, this place just wasn't important enough to draw his attention. Which meant that I only had to deal with Halle's agent. His voice in these parts. The hart.

I wondered what voice he had for me. That I should leave well enough alone? Stop bothering the wild poetry. Give up on reforming the poetry hunters? And, let us not forget a book that James Joyce never wrote.

The hart did its strange little falsetto laugh thing, again. Turns out that it was rooting for me. Not exactly cheerleading. More like it was just curious to see what I would do next. Nobody had tried to shut off the wild poetry at the source before. Halle was curious to see if I succeeded. Had money riding on it or something.

Well, I didn't find anything amusing. It was clear to me that Halle runs a pretty low-class operation. Letting the locals and hired help murder each other. Promoting bloodlust and wanton destruction. These are not good things. Sure, this was the land of misplaced hopes and forgotten dreams. But, damn it all. They didn't have to be so overtly cruel. I was just about to tell the hart so when I realized that it wasn't there.

This left me vaguely unsettled. Made me wonder after my sanity. I mean I could not prove that the hart had been there at all. It could have all been a figment of my subconscious attacking my conscious with a very large axe.

None of which helped my disposition. I mean I didn't know what I was going to do. My whole plan had been to reach or control the wild poetry or something. That had gone down in flames. I had accomplished nothing. Touched nothing. Reached nothing. Been laughed at by an imaginary animal

I hadn't given up hope. I just wasn't sure what to do. The direct approach had accomplished nothing with the wild poetry. They hadn't even noticed me. So, simply walking up to them and ripping them off the vine was not the answer. There had to be a way to defuse them. I simply needed time to think about it.

So, I wandered the wood. Thinking. Wondering if anyone else had noticed my experiment with the wild poetry. I was trying to contact the Shaine poetry hunters, after all. Maybe they noticed. That imaginary hart had noticed. Problem was that the Graiworld poetry hunters might have noticed. Which they did. And, I had completely forgotten they have cars.

No, really, we had spent so much time walking I had forgotten completely about the cars. I figured I had a good couple of days before anyone might find me. I was wrong. I had barely reached the edge of the wood. Standing against the road. More dirt and gravel than paved. Watching the sun laze about in the sky. When the first car screeched to a halt in front of me. Followed by another. And, another.

Oh, shit. I was like a deer caught in headlights. Didn't move. Didn't know what to do. Only watched as Bract Graiwold flew out of his car. Moving so fast I swear he didn't bother with the door. Climbed straight through the open window. Tore round the car as if he expected it to explode. I swear he was out of breath. That he must have been beating on the steering wheel the whole way here as if he thought he could goad the car into going faster.

He stopped before me. Breathing hard. Eyes wide as a crazy person. Stopped like he didn't know what to do. As if I had knocked-up his daughter and he just couldn't decide if he wanted to make his daughter a widow. Shotgun wedding or just the shotgun? You decide. Funny I should mention guns. That was the last thing he did. Point a gun at me.

fifty-six ***Friend of My Enemy***

“What are you doing?”

That was Bract Graiwold giving me permission to speak. Holding a gun, too. Hand shaking. Finger just above the trigger. If he twitched, the fucker was going to go off. Probably clip me right above the ear. He had just given me permission to speak. Not knowing that I needed his permission. Still, I wasn't much for speaking right about then. He was pointing a gun at me, after all. I figured it would sting if he shot me. Especially if he got me in the head. Tore a chunk out of my skull. Blood whooshing down the side of my face. Over my shoulder. Down my arm. It would probably hurt a hell of a lot. So, I didn't say anything. I just stood there wondering how much it would hurt and how long it would take to heal.

I wasn't afraid of the gun. Not really. It would hurt. Like I said. But, it wasn't as if he could kill me. Shoot me, sure. I had never

been hit. It would probably burn like hell. Although, I must say I've heard it feels no worse than a bee sting. Of course, bees don't sting you with a couple of hundred pounds of force. That's something to imagine. A bee lands on you. Go to swat it away or something. It stings. You fly across the room with the force of the blow. Every bone in your shoulder crushed. That's something I would pay money to see.

So, I wasn't afraid of the gun. Bract wasn't about to kill me. The problem was he didn't know that. So, he might shoot me. That would hurt. And, would complicate the situation dramatically. He would quickly catch on to the fact that I could not be killed. This would lead to them getting creative with my body. Try to figure out just how indestructible I was. Chop me up. Burn bits. Feed bits to the dog. Take bits to different towns all over creation. Which is damn painful and takes hours to recover from. No, I did not want him getting creative with my bones.

"We took you in." That was Bract again. "Fed you. Gave you clothes. Accepted you. And, this is how you repay us? We taught you everything you know. Showed you where to find them. All so you could do this?"

"I want the killing to stop."

"Who sent you?" The gun stopped wavering. Dead center right between the eyes.

"Nobody."

"So, you just look for books that don't exist for your own amusement? Something that James Joyce never wrote, wasn't it?" Shit! He had me there. "You belong to somebody, Drake. The only question is who."

"I thought I was an open book."

"You are so good at this. On the run. Doesn't know anything. Can only answer questions he doesn't know. Had us all fooled!" Gun in my face. Tip of the barrel brushing against my cheek. Don't flinch. "The wild poetry, Drake! Somebody sent you to take it away from us. Who owns you, Drake? Is it Windermere? Cerberus? Calvin? Locke? Hobbes?"

What?

He pulls the trigger. Like a sledgehammer to the side of my face. Blast so loud I swear he's burst an eardrum. God only knows how long that will take to heal. But, he's fired it over my shoulder. It actually takes a minute for that little tidbit to sink in. Because of the

screaming in my head. The ringing in my ear. Hand against my ear is getting sticky. Must have burst the eardrum. Damn! I flinched. So much for looking invulnerable to his face. He knows I don't want to get shot.

"So, you know her?"

His voice is muffled. Like he's speaking through a dozen mattresses. And, I realize it's because of the ringing in my head. The damn blast of the gun next to my ear. I wonder how long it'll take to heal? If it happens too fast, he'll catch on.

"Leave her alone. Hobbes had nothing to do with this. She isn't even one of the Faire Folk. What would she want with the wild poetry?"

"She trades in memories." The flicker of a smile touching his lips. "Or, have you forgotten?"

"Which is not the same thing-"

"As forgotten dreams?"

"I haven't even spoken to her since-"

Since she saved me from Halle. Shut-up, Drake! Halle owns the land of lost hopes and forgotten dreams, remember? With his sack on his back. Slung over his shoulder. Faces of the children peering out of the dark. Billowing like drifts of wind beneath the surface. When he is hungry, he eats their souls. Halle was wandering the market that day. Looking for me. Quiet as dust. Nobody spoke. Hobbes holding me down. Protecting me because I had thrown away the water of life.

Bract doesn't say anything. The others standing there. Leaning against their cars. Looking for signs of trouble. For Hunter, Hart and Hobbes to jump out of the wilderness and save me.

"Look, I care nothing for the wild poetry. I just want the killing to stop."

Bract laughs. Waves his arms like he is taking in the whole wide world. Or, ready to buy the Brooklyn bridge.

"The rustlers? You want us to spare the thieves and cutthroats? Rapists? You want us to go easy on those who rape our land? They kill us, Drake! They take what is ours! This land. Do you see this land? We built it. Claimed it. Tamed it. This land belongs to us. I accepted it from my father as he accepted it from his. As his father from his father. Do I need to name them?"

"No."

"There was nothing before us. Just wilderness. Chaos. The pri-

mordial jungle. We took it. Feasting on the wild poetry even as it feasted on us. Our blood is this soil. Our life is this land. The poetry is our life and song. These upstarts, ruffians and vandals would take it all away. These carpetbaggers would steal it now that the land is tame. And, you would have us lie on our bellies. Spreading our legs for them. They are not the first we have driven away.”

“You raped them. In the dark. In the night. Burning their homes. Their families. Their children.”

He slapped me across the face with the gun. I think it went off. I’m not sure. Don’t know if anyone was hit. It wasn’t me.

“They would do the same.”

“So, you say.”

He looked at me as if he wanted to die. As if I had just said that I had elephant balls and would he like to see them. It only took him a moment to compose himself. One deep breath that lifted his shoulders and filled his chest. Raising his arms into the air. Then, the gun was pointed at me.

“Who sent you, Drake?”

It should have been raining. Everyone soaked to the skin. A goon holding me up by each arm. Blood trickling from my lip. Unable to stand. Been used for a punching bag. The guy explaining how they were all reasonable people. All I had to do was cooperate.

“I want you to let them be. There is more than enough land. You don’t even need the poetry. You just sell it.”

“Grab him!”

Made me jump. I swear nobody was expecting him to scream. The guys leaning against the cars all jerking to attention. Nobody really wanting to move. Everybody looking at Bract Graiwold. One or two people hiccuping forward as if they might think about moving but really weren’t too sure about the whole thing. After all, this was the guy who killed Morgan. Bract’s nephew. Took his arm clean off. Nobody wanted to touch me.

I didn’t say anything. Didn’t do anything. Just stood there. Looking at Bract. Daring him to shoot me with my silence. The gun was still staring me right between the eyes. Never wavering. I didn’t even blink.

Bract sort of looks around. Like it has just occurred to him that nobody has moved. And, I realize something. I don’t recognize anyone. Aside from Bract. I don’t know where he found any of these guys. For that matter, I don’t know how they reached me so fast.

Cars or no cars. I was expecting to have a good couple of days before they found me.

“Get him!” Bract is really screaming. Turning blue or purple or something. Holding the gun so hard I’m sure it would have stuck straight through me if we had been standing close enough.

Anyway, the shout seems to break the spell, and the goons go into action. They grab me. Drag me toward a car. Punch me in the stomach to make sure I know they mean business. I double up like I’m supposed to. Moaning and groaning in pain. No joke. It really hurt. I don’t resist. I’m thinking about Morgan Graiwold, too. I really liked him. I didn’t mean to kill him. I should mention that I don’t really know if he is dead, but I figure he is. I’m trying to stop the killing. I’m not in the mood to slaughter the people I’m trying to convince to stop.

They throw me in a car. Everybody starts to drive off. Which is just a fine mess. I was trying to stop the flow of poetry. Failed to do that. I was trying to make them listen to reason. Stop the killing. End the bloodshed. There was no reason for it. Looks like I would fail at that, too. So, I’m looking out the window. Not thinking much. No clue what to do. When the guy riding shotgun leans over the seat and tells me to escape.

“Why did you let yourself be captured?”

It takes me a moment to realize he is talking to me. That he wants an answer. Takes me another minute to think of one.

“What was I supposed to do? Run? Find the other poetry hunters? You would just follow me. I couldn’t escape from you. I would probably just lead you to them like the night I ripped off Morgan’s arm. Why should I do what you want?”

“Listen to me. If we let you go, the others won’t be able to follow you. But, it can’t look like we let you go. You have to escape. Wreck the car. Total it. I know you can. I was with Morgan Graiwold when you defeated that poem.”

“Why in the hell do you want me to escape?”

“Listen to me. There isn’t much time. The only reason you are still alive is because we can’t figure out who your patron is. You have to escape now. Bract doesn’t know what to do with you. He is going to give you to the librarians.”

“Stop changing the subject. Why do you care?”

“Because you are trying to help us. So we want to help you. Remember what the librarian said? We hide in plain sight.”

“We are the Shaine,” the driver said, never looking back.

fifty-seven
The Other Side

“Bract Graiwold doesn’t know what he is talking about. The Shaine have as much right to the land as the Graiwold do. We are not parasites or rustlers or whatever else it was he called us. We have been here as long as they have. We are as much a part of the land as the earth and the sea and the sky. There was nothing before us. We have always been here. We only hunted what we needed, taking no more and no less. There was balance and harmony. The wild poetry did not ravage the land. That all changed when the librarians arrived. Organizing and categorizing everything. They put the lost dreams on display like so many dead butterflies pinned under glass. After the librarians came the fair people with their grand visions and designs. They sought to impose their beliefs, orders and moralities on this place. They taught us to build cities around the libraries so that we could live like decent civilized folk. We were agrarian. They wanted us to have trade and industry so they began to buy the wild poetry from us. They have no use for the poems. They just want us to have something for export and trade. Some of us liked what the Faire Folk offered. The increase in wealth and luxury through trade was simply too much to resist. Some of us wanted to maintain the balance. Guess who won.”

I didn’t have to guess. I didn’t bother to answer. Only waited for the poetry hunter riding shotgun to continue. The Faire Folk would have provided the Graiwold poetry hunters with weapons and training. Anything to put the Shaine subversives down. Anything to make the poetry hunters just like everybody else. Anything to impose the rules of fair trade and civilization on another people. I didn’t say anything. Only waited for my guide to continue.

“Do you understand? If Bract Graiwold gives you to the librarians, you cannot help us. You’ll be no good to us.”

“So, you want me to wreck the car?”

“Yes, you must escape. Listen. You made Graiwold strong. You made him daring. With your control of the wild poetry, he was willing to attack Faith openly. Sack the town because of you. Now? I

don't know. You betrayed him. Because he used you? I don't care. He doesn't trust you. Is going to give you to the librarians. Then, what will he do? He will grow cautious but may continue to take chances. He may hunt us down. Search for our places of hiding. If such things are allowed to go unanswered, he may turn on Hope. We cannot allow that. If you help us, Graiwold won't dare attack us."

"By wrecking the car? By running? That accomplishes nothing. He'll just follow me. Running is worthless. And, I can't stop the wild poetry. I tried."

"You don't have to stop the wild poetry. You don't even need to control it. We just need Graiwold to believe you will turn the poetry against him if he tries to hurt us."

"Cold war standoff."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Listen. You have to escape. Wreck the car. Run. They won't chase you. They'll be too busy trying to help us. So, run. Go to Whitetrash. Find Freeman. Ask around for the Information Superhighway. They'll take you to Anon Freeman."

"The Information Superhighway? You can't be serious. Is it an upgrade to the Underground Railroad?"

"Just do it! We don't have time for stupid questions!"

"Questions like where am I supposed to start looking? Ask anybody for the Information Superhighway and Anonymous Freeman? Can't you tell me where to start looking? A person? A place? Something less obvious than an upgrade to the Underground Railroad?"

"Just go! Ask a librarian!"

"The librarians work for Halle!" My guide, riding shotgun, flinched as if I had struck him with the name. Looking wild all about as if he expected that one among the Faire Folk to materialize at the very sound of his name. The driver didn't fare much better, but at least he kept the car on the round. "Did you think I had forgotten? The Information Superhighway. Where do I start? At a bar? A diner? Back ally? Somebody's home? You don't know, do you? Could it be that you are not really Shaine? Oh, Bract Graiwold will be too busy to follow you. You won't lead us straight to the Shaine?"

"Stupid! Stupid man!"

"Betrayed once! Betrayed twice! Why should I listen to you?"

Won't be able to follow me! How long did it take for you to find me? Wandering out of the wilderness! Hours? Was it even that long?"

"The librarians told Graiwold that you were tampering with the wild poetry three days ago. They told him where to find you."

"Then, they will tell him again!"

My guide did not speak. Only fought for breath. Trying to think. They had not considered I would think it a trick, and it was true. I did not know what to think. I had lead them to the Shaine. The killing had happened because of me. I would have no more.

"Listen to me, Drake," he finally said, having found his voice somewhere between his stomach and his feet. "Bract Graiwold is going to give you to the librarians. They will give you to the kindly ones. You must know them. These fair people will be anything but kind to you. You must flee while you still have the chance."

I looked to him, crossing my arms, taking time to muster my thoughts.

"I'm tired of running," I said.

He hit me.

"Stupid!"

He hit me again.

"Stupid!"

Flailing, trying to smash me upside the head, his hand was half a fist with no purpose or direction.

"Stupid man!"

I had my hands up, trying to protect my face. Cover my head. Dodge his caterwauling fist. This was insane. I blocked his fist. Shattered his wrist. Devoured every bone in his hand. I heard him scream. The driver screamed. Slammed the breaks. Screeching, skidding across the road. The third car slugged us. Spinning around. Almost flipping over. Everything tumbling to a stop.

Standing still. Both cars never moving. Voices raised in anger. Shotgun wouldn't stop screaming. The driver was shaking me. My head hurt. I must have hit something. He slapped me. Shotgun wouldn't shut up.

"Now is your chance! Now is your chance," the driver was saying, trying to whisper, but I swear he was screaming at the top of his lungs.

Then, Bract was there. Opening the driver's door. The others were pulling at shotgun's door. Dragging it open. Shotgun fell out, clutching his arm.

“What is this!” Bract said.

“He attacked us!” the driver said, pushing me away, trying to shove me through the backseat.

“Get out,” Bract said. The driver did nothing. “Get out!” He grabbed the driver by the collar. Pulling him out of the car. Dragging him across the dirt. Then, Bract got behind the wheel. Slamming the door. “Shut him up!” he said, pointing at shotgun who had started to holler like something out of a bad slasher flick. Then, he slammed the passenger door. “Just try that shit with me,” he said not even looking back.

Then, we were gone. Leaving the others behind us. The car still worked. Even with the shit kicked out of it. I didn’t try anything. Just let time slip away. Tried not to think about the bones ripped from that man’s hand.

I don’t remember stopping. I simply realized that Bract had my door open.

“Out,” he said.

I looked around. We were back in Dayside. In front of the library. I crawled out of the car. Standing shaky on my feet. The librarian was there. He took me without a word. Took me to a cell. A dark chamber beneath the library with barely enough space for me to pace or lie down.

I didn’t think much of it. As if I had switched off after attacking that man. Maiming him. I had not intended to. I could not get his voice out of my head. And, I saw Morgan Graiwold without his arm. Because of me. Morgan had been kind to me. The man in the car could have been one of the Shaine. He was only trying to help me.

Now, it was over. I had failed to stop the killing. I had failed to find the Shaine. I had failed to influence the wild poetry. All that remained was for the Faire Folk to come for me. Del Morgan would be disappointed in me. I didn’t even know if I was doing what she wanted. Trying to stop the killing or simply trying to find a book. I would never know. Speaking of the book, I didn’t even wonder if I was technically in the library or simply beneath it. Del Morgan would be pissed. Which was about when I realized that Jack was sitting next to me in the cell.

fifty-eight
Forgotten Machinations

I jumped like I had been struck by lightning. Turning. Pacing three steps. Looking to the non-existent Jack. He had not been there a moment ago. I hate it when that happens. One moment, you are alone. Next, the scenery starts talking to you. The dragon pulled that trick on me. Made my heart race. At least I didn't scream. Nor did my heart race. Game over. Jack had found me. I had not seen him since I ditched him in the common market. Forsaken him for two children. Saving them from slavery. Saving them for death. Oh, yes, I wanted to see Jack again. He would take me home. Back to Del Morgan. Where I would face my punishment for defiling the common market. For failing to find a book that James Joyce never wrote. I was dead. There was nothing to be done but wait for Jack to speak.

"Let's go," he said, standing.

"Where? We are prisoners of the librarian."

"Who do you think told me where to find you?"

"So, this is it?" I felt the room pull at me. Wanting to sit down. Never move again. I could already feel Del Morgan's fingers touching my heart. "This room without a door? You will lead me from this place no questions asked?"

"Yes, that about sums it up. The librarians want you far from here. Trying to disrupt the wild poetry, they say. That- is just really amazing."

"I wanted to stop the killing. I figure it is what Del Morgan wanted."

"Are you mad?" Jack said, standing still, holding a gap in the darkness open like a door. "Del Morgan sent you to the common market for *Lucifer's Widow*. A book that James Joyce never wrote. She didn't send you to the Land of Lost Hopes and Forgotten Dreams. She didn't direct you to involve yourself with the poetry hunters. She most certainly did not tell you to disrupt Halle's business, lands and property. You are interfering with the flow of commerce and trade. Remember that. I last saw you in the common market. Nobody told you to do any of this."

I was right. This is how the game is played. Del Morgan and Halle do not like each other. They disagree on the best ways to conduct

business. And, how to treat the hired help. She couldn't send me to stop the killings, but every road had pointed to the Library of Forgotten Dreams.

"You forgot kidnapping," I said.

"What kidnapping? It's news to me."

"Not know about the kidnapping? It's only how I got here. Chased halfway across the common market? Trapped in a cell without doors or a wall? Everybody searching for me. Where do you think I've been for weeks and weeks and weeks?"

"Everybody is searching for you. That is true. Beowulf Drake was very cross. You disrupted some delicate negotiations. Then vanished. Nobody knew what happened. You slipped out of the common market while quite a few people were watching. Nobody can figure out how you did it. You were trapped? Describe this cell, please."

"Well, it is kind of hard to explain. One minute, I was helping those children escape from Beowulf Drake."

"Hold it! Children? What children? Beowulf Drake was negotiating with Tristan and Isadore Dal Martin. You were last seen with them. They may have looked like children. That is why Beowulf was so cross. He thought that Alicia Del Morgan had skunked his deal."

"Are you saying- what are you saying? Those children?" I saw their faces. The boy and the girl. They took my hand. Freedom from slavery. "They were fair?"

"Yes, they are kin through marriage to Alicia Firelight Del Morgan."

"I thought- I don't know what I thought- they were like me. They are dead."

"What?"

"She died in my arms. The boy? I don't know. He disappeared."

"How? Who held you prisoner? Describe your prison."

"I thought the Faire Folk held me prisoner for defiling the common market. I thought they punished the children to punish me. I don't know if I can describe our jail. It was a forest. Not like here. More of a garden. Manicured lawn. All the trees in perfect rows. There was no end to it. No day and no night. It just went on forever. They starved."

Jack sat down. He took his time about it, too. Leaving the door he had opened. Wandering back to the cot or the seat or whatever the hell it was that we had been sitting on.

“You just described the lands beyond.”

“No, the lands are an island.”

“There’s more than one- it’s complicated. You found your way back to the lands beyond? I didn’t know such a thing was possible. No wonder nobody could find you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“How did you get there?”

“I’m not sure. I just wanted to get away. I thought I had been banished. I clicked my heals. Spun in a circle and wished I was someplace else.”

“From the common market, you stepped into the lands beyond. I’ll try to explain. Think of everywhere you have ever been and every place you could ever imagine going. Think of places that don’t exist. Marshmallow trees. Chocolate rivers. Diamonds in the sky. Just imagine every place that could exist and everything you couldn’t possibly imagine. Now, understand that where you were is beyond all of that.” He raised his hands like he was holding a globe. “This is everything real and fake. Possible and improbable. You went beyond that. It’s how Drakes and Grendels are born- made- whatever. The Faire Folk cannot go there.” He jumped to his feet. “You took Tristram and Isodore Dal Martin into the lands beyond?”

“It wasn’t my idea.”

“Well, that hardly matters. Nobody will care they are dead. We must go home. Tell Del Morgan.”

“No.”

“I beg your pardon.”

“Kill me.”

“Del Morgan would be very cross if I did that.”

“Then kill me. I have work to do. Del Morgan has been without me for weeks and weeks and weeks. She can last a little longer.”

“What work?”

“Stop the killing.”

“Of all the stupid shit, Drake, you can’t be serious!”

“No, I can do it. If I side with the Shaine, Bract can’t touch them. We’ll disrupt the hunts. Destabilize his position with the Faire Folk. It’ll work.”

“And, how exactly do you plan to do that?”

“I have a lead. Anon Freeman in Whitetrash. They’ll listen to me. I protected them from Morgan Graiwold.”

“Drake, we have to go.”

“No, why do we have to go? All I’ve done since I returned from the lands beyond is sit on my ass and do whatever Del Morgan told me to do. Why? Because I didn’t know any better? We can be prisoners or we can be jailers. I’m not a jailer! Who are you?”

He made a strange sound like a gurgling hiccup of a laugh.

“Don’t you remember who I am? I don’t exist.”

“You’re just like me.”

“You are a shaper of worlds! Do you know what that means?”

“I can shape reality to fit my thoughts. I can tame the wild poetry. With practice, I can control the common market.” Damn, it felt like only half an answer to his question.

“I am- I was a straw man. I didn’t exist. No life. No soul. Created only to serve. You’ve made me flesh and blood without even realizing it. I don’t even think Door has figured it out yet.”

“I don’t know what that means so answer my question. Are you a prisoner or a jailer?”

I swear I thought he wasn’t going to answer. I’m not even sure what he was talking about. I think he had been unreal. A thing like a golem only not made of clay. But, I had imagined that he was a prisoner like me. That he had found himself on a little stretch of beach by the ocean. That he had been made Del Morgan’s slave. Believing it, I had made it so because I was a shaper of worlds. I didn’t know how he was going to answer. Then again, maybe this little show was to cover Del Morgan’s ass.

“I’m a prisoner,” he said, sounding like all the life had rushed from his body. “Let’s go find this Anonymous Freeman.”

fifty-nine ***Test of Faith***

Turned out to be much easier to find Anon Freeman than I would have thought. There is more than one way to hide in plain sight and all of that. The Shaine lived in the towns. Clustered in one neighborhood or another. Very closed off. Everybody ignoring them. Like social pariahs or something. They didn’t all live in the towns. They had their own communities, villages, towns, whatever. Including Faith and Hope. We all know what happened to Faith. It was sacked. Because of me. Because I made Bract Graiwoold brave enough to strike.

It was only a matter of time before he turned his eyes on Hope. Anon Freeman lived in Whitetrash. He was part of the Information Superhighway. Not what you think. The Information Superhighway was a password. Go figure.

I didn't know all of this. Didn't even spew it out when somebody asked me the right question. Jack knew it. Turns out he knew a lot about the poetry hunters and the land of lost hopes and forgotten dreams. He told me about it as we traveled to Whitetrash. I thought it was interesting that he knew so much. I also thought it was interesting how little effort it took on my part to convince him to help me. I am convinced Del Morgan was behind it.

Del Morgan did not like how Halle mistreated the poetry hunters. The problem was that she could not move directly against Halle or Bract Graiworld. She would leave herself vulnerable to retaliation. It would cause great shame for her family. The other kids would laugh at her. I don't know. Pick one of those. So, she had to move discreetly. Indirectly. Me. She had to send me. Without telling me what I was doing. Without even sending me to parley with Halle, Bract Graiworld or Anon Freeman. The only thing she could do was send me on an errand that might through a wild array of coincidences result in me meeting Bract Graiworld or Anon Freeman. Which is exactly what happened. A hack writer's trick.

Backing up a stitch, Jack and I had no trouble escaping from Dayside's librarian. We walked right out the door. The librarian was glad to be rid of me. I was now in Jack's possession. Good riddance. None of the Graiworld watched us leave. They didn't know or didn't care. Take your pick. Jack was supposed to take me directly back to Del Morgan. That's what the librarian thought was going to happen anyway. We were going back to Del Morgan. We were just going to take the scenic route.

Anyway, Jack had a car waiting. Took us about three days to reach Whitetrash. On the drive, I learned a lot about the poetry hunters. I told him about everything that would go wrong every time I tried to help the Shaine. Killing Morgan Graiworld. Destroying his arm, anyway. Mutilating that other guy's hand. I don't even know why it bothered me so much. The guy's hand. What about Morgan's arm? There's just something about the way he held his hand. Flopping around. And, the screaming. Gives me chills just to think about it. Jack tried to give me a few pointers.

"You're shitting me," I said.

"I kid you not," he said. "I've been around the Faire Folk enough to know this is how it works."

"No, that's not my problem. You said magic. Magic powers. You're shitting me. I don't have magic powers."

"Well, what do you think you've been doing?"

Okay, enough dialogue. I know this is going to sound like the silliest thing you have ever heard, but until that moment, it had not occurred to me that what I was doing was magic. No, seriously, you can stop laughing. I simply had not thought about it. I did stuff. Some of it was wild and wondrous strange stuff. Some of it was ugly. Some of it was bloody, gory and gross. I guess I never thought too hard about how I was doing it. Kind of a leftover of that whole divine madness non-sense. I don't know.

Anyway, we found Anon Freeman. Jack found him. Seemed to know everything. Where to go. Who to ask. When to use the secret password. Information Superhighway, just in case you had forgotten. So, we found Anon Freeman at work. He's a bookbinder. Kind of related to a booksmith. I don't know. We watched him wrestling with pages. Not really wrestling. More like grabbing them out of the air and thrusting them together. That kind of wrestling. The pages would sweep and swirl. He would grab at one. Snag it in flight. Watch it flash. Watch it flutter. A flurry of white light dancing this way and that. He would thrust it against the page. I mean he would thrust the page against all the others. All fluttering. All struggling. All trying to break free. Then, he would bind them together. Strap them down. Sow them together with needles and silk and great strips of leather. Wrap the leather around their edge and pull. Watch them flutter. Watch them sway. Try to be free. He would hold on for dear life. Pulling with all his might. Holding the edge of the pages together where the silk thread was but new. After a while, they would stop. The pages would lie still. Then, he could bind them to the hard cover. Encased in leather and hard wood. That is what a bookbinder does in the land of lost hopes and forgotten dreams.

"What do you want?" he said, finally noticing us.

I didn't know what to say. Not at first. Really, I was caught off guard. Expecting Jack to do all the talking. He had done so much through town, bringing us to this spot. Now, he was mute, looking to me. Giving me that *you got us into this mess* look. Freeman was tall. Not like the librarians. Anon Freeman was built like a blacksmith. Had to be to wrestle books and tame poetry, I guess.

“Well?”

Shit! I had best say something.

“I want to stop the killing.”

“Really? And, what killing might that be?”

“I was there when they destroyed Faith. I couldn’t stop them. I want no more to die. I would do anything.”

“Careful what you say. I could hold you to those words. The Graiwold hate the Shaine. We feel about the same way. That will only end when one paints the land in the other’s blood. How would you stop the killing?”

“By taking away the wild poetry.”

He didn’t say anything. Not right away. Like he was thinking it over. Nobody had ever said anything so rash to him before. Or, stupid.

“Come back after midnight.”

That’s all he said. Left me and Jack just standing there. Okay, we’ll just let ourselves out, I guess. We’ll remember to come back.

“That was rather more abrupt than I expected,” I said once we were out of doors again.

“What did you expect?” Jack said. “It’s the middle of the afternoon, and he’s got work to do. Clandestine stuff happens after dark. I think it was a good sign.”

“You think?”

“Yes, Anon has already decided we are legit.”

So, there was nothing else to do but wander the town for the rest of the day. Hold up in a local diner. Drink coffee. Much food. Wait. Wait. Wait. Try not to grow roots of boredom. Remember what Anon Freeman had been doing. Binding books. Take the pages and words and poetry from out of the sky. Binding them. Making them one with the page. Taming the pages. Creating books and literature and great art. Who knows? It was fascinating. Like watching a magician in reverse. The wild pages like pigeons slipping back into his sleeve.

Anyway, we found our way back to his door. Were lead into a half-dark room. There were maybe a dozen of the Shaine there.

“You can do what you say,” Anon Freeman said. “The wild poetry will listen to you. But, I do not know if I can trust you. We must test your sincerity.”

Right on cue, they brought out a woman. Hands tied. Blindfold-

ed. Something in her mouth. Probably choking her. So she could not scream.

“This is Thistle Graiwold,” Anon said. “Granddaughter to Bract Graiwold.”

Oh, shit, what were they doing? They bound her to a chair. Not unkind. But, not gently. She fought the whole way down. Kicking. Trying to scream. It was a test. My heart stopped. My blood froze. Wait a minute. I don’t have a heart.

“What you propose,” Anon said, “will lead to much suffering. Bract Graiwold will be very angry when he learns what you have done. He will hunt us. He will kill us. We must defend ourselves.”

I was going to throw up.

“Are you prepared to do what is necessary?” Anon was looking at me. “Are you serious? Are you prepared to kill? Are you prepared to die? Show me the strength of your conviction.”

That was when he handed me a gun. I almost dropped it. Big ugly monster of a gun. Hell, I almost puked all over Anon Freeman. What was I supposed to do? Kill her? So they would trust me? Because I had helped Bract Graiwold?

It was true. Could I do what was necessary? I know I wanted to stop the killing, but I understood this could mean killing. Destroy the village to save the village and all of that. All I had to do was shoot the girl. Squirming. Crying. Done nothing wrong. Pissed herself girl. And, maybe nobody else would die.

I looked to Jack. Nothing. Ignoring me. Staring off into space. Bastard. No help at all.

So, why didn’t I do it? Why did I put the gun down? Try to give it back to Anon Freeman? Simple.

“This is unnecessary,” I said. “I want to stop the killing. Not add to it. Yes, I know. Things will get ugly. Yes, I know. We will have to kill. But, only when necessary. This is not necessary.”

Jack looked up from his toes.

“How can you be so sure?” Anon said.

“I’m not.”

“Neither are we,” he said, taking the gun. “Let her go.” The others unbound her hands and feet. The blindfold fell from her eyes. The girl said nothing. Only ran. Nobody stopped her. “We had to know. How fanatical you were. Kill all Graiwold serves us not at all.”

“What?”

“If you had shot her, we would have killed you. Now, let us get to work.”

sixty
Falling Toward Destiny

Things started happening really fast after that. Much faster than I had anticipated. By morning, the Shaine had abandoned the cities. They were gone from their homes in Whitetrash and Dayside and I don't even know where else. I should have expected it. Kidnapping Bract Graiwold's granddaughter was going to have serious repercussions. Abandoning Whitetrash and Dayside was the Shaine's way of knowing that some serious shit was about to go down. Did I say I should have expected it? Never even crossed my mind. Nothing happened the way I expected it. Nothing happened the way I had planned. No, really, check my notes. This wasn't supposed to happen. Anon Freeman wasn't supposed to have plans of his own. He was supposed to do what I suggested. Follow my great plan. Follow my notes like the script of a book. Simply connect the dots. It was like he had a mind of his own. I didn't plan it. He just swept into the story and took the fucking controls right out of my hands.

Now, I had to deal with a kidnapping. Or, the aftermath of a kidnapping, anyway. I had expected him to test me. Yes, I had not expected Anon Freeman to trust me. Figured there would be some kind of test. Show my strength. Bend the wild poetry to my will for a quick demonstration. Doubt myself. Encouraged by the non-existent Jack. Face down some monstrous beast of a poem. Almost lose control. Almost kill everyone with my flailing attempts to control my power. I would tame the beast, of course. Demonstrate my skill and mastery of the magical forces that were mine to command.

After proving I wasn't going to kill them. Having barely saved everybody from the poem sent to test me. We would intercept a Graiwold hunting party. Send everyone packing. Demonstrate that the poems were doing whatever the hell I wanted them to do. That was when things were supposed to get interesting. The Graiwold getting organized. Maybe Bract leading a group against Hope. Maybe some Shaine in Whitetrash or Dayside would get lynched. Maybe not.

But, nobody was supposed to get kidnapped. Anon Freeman then

let Bract's granddaughter go. He took her just to let her go. Which is how the Graiwold found out she had been kidnapped. Don't ask me why this is the way of things. They didn't notice she was gone until after she was returned. Sounds strange to me. Not important. What matters is that it drove the Graiwold into a rage. By morning, the Shaine neighborhoods in both Whitetrash and Dayside were in flames.

Anon Freeman had his own plans. He wanted the rage, and he wanted the flames. The Shaine had been planning this for a long time. I was simply the catalyst. The one who made it all possible. Who would keep the wild poetry off their back. As Bract Graiwold had used me, Anon Freeman welcomed my arrival. All of which seemed to make the non-existent Jack very happy. With Anon Freeman in charge, it wasn't my plan anymore. Nobody was following the word of Del Morgan's agent. Nobody would think she was behind the whole thing.

I didn't mind. Anonymous Freeman was different than Bract Graiwold. He didn't want to kill the rival poetry hunters. Not like Bract and Morgan Graiwold. Freeman didn't want everybody dead, which is all I cared about. We were trying to stop the killing by stopping the killing. Not by slaughtering everybody. Which is how Bract and his family wanted things to end.

So, the Shaine left the towns. Such was their plan. They were ready. Only needed the word. Only needed to hear a young girl crying in the night. Running from the men who had said they were going to kill her. The Shaine knew what to do. They abandoned Dayside. They left Whitetrash. They entered the forest. We entered the forest. The cities behind us already in flames.

This was my part to plan. In the wood. In the forest. In the damp and dark places where only the wild poetry were born. I had to protect the Shaine. Save them from the Graiwold. Everybody was watching me. Counting on me. And, I didn't know if I could do it. No, really, the last time I had tried to contact the wild poetry I had been rebuffed. I had gotten absolutely nowhere. What did I hope to accomplish now?

This is that doubt I was telling you about. Only it didn't happen the way I had expected it. The test I had known would come did not. Anonymous Freeman had no need to test me. There would be no trial. I would simply perform or get everybody killed. No pressure. I eat wild poems for breakfast.

I only wished I shared such confidence. We were in the wood. All of us. Hell, I don't know how many. The poetry all around us. Watching us. Waiting. Wondering what we were about. Scenting us. Tasting our nerves. Savoring our hopelessness. And, the poetry knew what would follow. If they ignored us. If they simply waited for daylight. Bract Graiwold would find us, and then there would be slaughter. And, the poems would feast. They would drink hot blood. They would taste steal and iron, and they would breathe deep the smell of sulfur and gunpowder. The rank stench of wet blood and burning flesh would taint the air.

It wasn't that the Shaine were so few or weak. They were neither few nor weak. Their families filled the great wood, standing almost as thick as the trees. No, the problem was that Bract Graiwold had the full support of the Faire Folk. Bract Graiwold and his people had bigger guns. The Shaine would die. Simple as that. If I could not protect them.

Standing in the cold and the dark. Shivering in the heart of the forest with the wild poetry all around us. Shaking so much I thought I might piss myself. Poems watching us bemusedly. Drowsily. Waiting for the dawn. We were no threat to them. If I did nothing. I had only to reach out. Touch them. Become one with the verse as I had failed to reach them before.

Which is when everything changed. Which is when I understood. Standing in the forest. Alone in the wood. Surrounded by poetry hunters and the wild poetry. The non-existent Jack saying nothing. I understood for the simple reason that the author wanted to keep the story moving. We were so close to the end. I think they call it an epiphany. But, in this place? Just more of that divine madness crap and spontaneous cognition I was talking about.

I didn't have to understand the wild poetry. I simply had to name it. So, I did. Giving names to the poems that surrounded us. There was *Morning by moonlight* and *the Gift of a friend* and *an autumn fable* and my favorite *Armageddon fantasy*. Just like that. They were named. Just like that. They were mine. Anonymous Freeman was stunned to awe and silence.

The wild poetry were tamed. They would do as I wanted. They would do as I asked. The poems would stop the killing or leave the wild forever. Which was a good thing and didn't leave us much time. As I said. As I learned. As word traveled from ear to ear. The towns were in flames. The Shaine neighborhoods destroyed. Those

who had not or could not escape the Graiwold poetry hunters were now dead.

It was a good thing that the poetry was on my side. In only one night, Bract Graiwold had mustered an army, and they were coming for us. The cities were in flames. The forest would soon follow. The Graiwold poetry hunters wanted Shaine blood, and I was the only one who stood a chance of doing something about it.

sixty-one
Blood in the Water

They were ready for us. Bract Graiwold and his poetry hunters were expecting to do battle with the wild poetry. They came prepared with pig sticks and lightning rods. Those crazy things that looked like a cross between a Christmas tree and a television antenna. Bract Graiwold was ready. In all the confusion and all the rage. While the cities of Dayside and Whitetrash burned around his ears, Bract Graiwold assembled his men. He made sure they were armed with both guns and divining rods. Guns and flame-throwers for the Shaine. Pig sticks and lightning rods for the wild poetry. I was not ready, which is starting to sound so old that I'm going to stop talking about it.

They didn't even try to sneak up on us. Bract Graiwold announced his presence with a whoosh of flame to light the trees with fire. The Shaine fell before him, tumbling into the depths of the wood. Stumbling. Running. With the flames licking at their heels. With bullets whizzing past their ears. The world was a jumble of black smoke and seared flesh. Ripe with sulfur and gunpowder and charcoal. Screams and buzz saws. The Shaine shrank into the wood. Contracting like a flower tossed into the abyss.

It was supposed to be a trap. The Shaine leading the Graiwold into the jaws of the beast. Fleeing through the wood. Beneath tall branches and dark trees where the wild poetry waited. Such wild and errant verse should have fed on the Shaine. On their fear and blood and death. They would have egged on the wild Graiwold. In days long past. In yesterday's nights, they would have reveled in the pain. Not tonight. The wild poetry answered to me.

Poems of great light and dark design. Poems of eagerness and

love. Of passion and greed and the torments of jealousy of the soul. Such voices as this. Such sounds and verse and fury. Waiting. Watching. Patient as the night. As the Shaine fled. As the Graiworld drew blood. Burning flesh and scarring bone. Making widows and orphans of us all.

Now! Strike now!

The poems fell upon Bract Graiworld and his family. For the first and last time that night, the Graiworld poetry hunters paused in their soul searing rage and revelry. The wild poetry swept into them with sound and fury. Forgotten storm and forever night. The Graiworld died. In that instant, they fell beneath the touch of the divine. But, Bract Graiworld would not be silenced. Throwing down his machine pistol, he took up his pig stick and stood against the shade of forgotten colors that blocked his path.

Wild poems could not stand against such poetry hunters. The battle was joined. No more victory. One side or the other. The Graiworld fell. Shaine screamed. Poetry were silenced forever more. The forest was thick with smoke both black and brown and white and red. Wait, that is four things. Oh, fuck it, who cares? I ran. Pushing the line. Reaching for the edge where Shaine and Graiworld met. Where wild poems struck and protected and fought and fell.

They were not enough. The poems were not made for such work. To protect one and harm the other. To strike at my enemy while defending themselves from stagnate ends the Graiworld poetry hunters brought. *Morning by moonlight* and *Armageddon fantasy* were bound to word and paper and bone. Lost to me. I felt them fall. Pages flapping like a bird's wings desperate to be free of the net. Falling. Desperate. Flailing. Alone. Silenced.

The line was before me. A nightmare of dark light and black smoke. Flickering by flame and moonlight. The stench of gunpowder and blood and charred flesh was everywhere. Before me was the tapestry of dreams. The soul of chaos that was the wild poetry. There were the Graiworld poetry hunters. Striking against the dark. Against the chaos. Against the night. They held pig sticks and automatic rifles. Some weaved a river of fire to consume the sky. The trees were light and smoke and flame. Ash and cinders falling around me like so many dead and dying fireflies. It was as if the stars had forsaken the night's dark sky. Flinging themselves from heaven to die upon the earth. What can I say? The world was a page ripped straight from the depths of hell.

For whatever reason, I remembered a place beneath the earth. Not hell, no, but it might as well have been. Where frogs had fallen. Where frogs had died. Twisting. Writhing. Bursting like overripe fruit. Skin slipping from flesh and bone. I remembered the fire and raised my hands. Let the flames twist between my fingers. Grow comfortable with my touch.

I gave the flames a taste for man meat. A desire to touch human flesh. Consume rage and anger and lust and pain. Cleansing all with fire. Melodramatic? Sure, why not. Fire and lightning and errant verse fell once more upon the Graiwold poetry hunters at my touch. Man screamed. Voices fell. Guns were silenced or fired blind.

It hurt. I don't know how it happened. I looked down and there was blood. Sticky. Sweet. That's a lie. Blood tastes like shit. Makes you want to puke. It was my blood. Trickling down my arm. My shoulder was a mess. Must have been shot. I don't know. Nothing to worry about. They could not kill me. Which is when I realized who had shot me.

Bract Graiwold stood with his men. In the inferno. Ash and chaos and smoke and flame flowing all around them. He had a gun. Clipped me in the shoulder with it. He would try for a head shot next. Bullet right between the eyes.

I lunged for him, tripping over burnt wood and dark corpses that once were men. Stumbling. Keeping my feet. I reached for him. The hammer fell. Gun clicked. Nothing happened as the world roared around us. He was out of ammo. Throwing the gun at me. For all the good it did. He grabbed a lightning rod. Looking for all the world like a cross between a television antenna and a Christmas tree.

He swung for me, twisting the great stick that he held. Skipping backwards. Sideways. I don't care. Away. I found something. A stick. A branch. It may have been a severed limb. Brandishing it like a weapon. Lightning stick met branch. Connected. Stuck. Held. Pulled free. Another swing. Stumbling. Twisting. Staggering. Reaching for me.

I struck with my branch. He countered. Fading back. Parrying. Striking again. There was another poetry hunter. Pointing a gun. No, a flame thrower. That would hurt. Consumed by flame. It would take hours and hours to heal. I turned, throwing the branch. Flames lashed into the dark into the night.

The lightning rod lashed across my stomach, digging deep, pulling at intestine, flesh and blood. Whatever. That hurt. I felt the

world fade. I felt the wild poetry grow bold. They knew their master was faltering. If I fell, they could claim all. Bract Graiwold grinned. Unaware of how close he was to getting everybody killed.

He was blind. Bract Graiwold could see nothing past the end of his nose. Cared only for what served his family. Damn the consequences. The Graiwold would be great. They would tame the wild poetry. Giving all to the librarians. Trading all with the Faire Folk. Indulging in luxury while all else suffered. If the Shaine or other poetry hunters stood against him, they would suffer. They would fall.

That was it. That was all. Bract Graiwold would not rest until he had hunted the wild poetry to extinction. Like the whales or the buffalo or anything else that has been hunted to the end. I showed this vision to the wild poetry, and they understood or did not care. I never figured out which. It did not matter.

The wild poetry took him. With my hands on his pig stick, Bract Graiwold could not defend himself from the wild verse. He shriveled like an old man before my eyes, growing thin and gaunt. Losing all his hair. He faltered. Grown frail. Unable to hold his pig stick. The wild poems consumed him. As he lived. So he died. A poetry hunter who shared no mercy with anything past the end of his nose.

He was a good man. I still thought so. Strange but true. He cared for his people, wanting the best for them. The Faire Folk provided that. Everything he could ever hope for. Anything he could ever want. His people were well looked after. They were cared for. None dared hurt them. Nothing would stand against them. If you were a danger to his family, you were dead.

He was dead, and the Graiwold poetry hunters were broken. Like a pebble striking the ocean. They knew he was gone. His people. His poetry hunters. His men. They fell back. Confused. Without a leader. Defeated. The Shaine knew it, too, and they fell upon the Graiwold. As his people had tortured them, the Shine now devoured the Graiwold in the wood. It was not what I wanted. This was not an end to killing. But, I let it happen. The Shaine had earned this. Blood for blood. An eye for an eye. With my help, the Graiwold had raped and maimed and killed. I owed the Shaine this night of bloodshed. I let them to their vengeance.

There would be time enough for grief and regret in the morning.

Wandering back into the forest, I found him. First the non-existent Jack and then Anonymous Freeman. He was not participating in the wilding.

"You look like hell," Anon Freeman said.

"I will feel like hell in the morning."

"It is done. It is over. The Graiwold are broken. The forest belongs to us as it should be. We need fear them no more. Tomorrow, we shall march on Dayside and claim the city for our own."

"What is left of it, anyway."

He was silent.

"I know," he finally said. "We knew this would be hard. We must remember that it is not over. The Graiwold will be forever trying to reclaim what they had. Just as we have fought for what was rightfully ours."

"A vicious cycle."

"It will never end."

"Unless."

"Yes?"

"The Faire Folk. They started this. They gave Bract Graiwold greed and training and bloodlust and guns. They will not stop."

"No, they will not."

"We must stop them."

"You are mad!"

"No, maybe. I do not know. It is the night. It is the scent of death in the air. You will march on Dayside? Yes, do so. But, do not turn your wrath on the people of Dayside. They have done nothing. It is the Faire Folk who drive them. It is the librarians they have brought."

"You would have us attack the very storm?"

"Yes, you know it is the way. As I have helped you, help me. Listen to me. Do as I say. Leave the Graiwold poetry hunters be. Join with them against your enemy. Attack the Library of Lost Hopes and Forgotten Dreams."

sixty-two

The Shape of Worlds

It should have been the hour past midnight. The dark pit of the night when no stars shine and the moon has fled to her rest. Afraid of the dark. That is when things happened in this place. Not by light. Not by morning's bright fire. Things happened in the dark.

In the pitch. Things happened in the depths of wood and moss and overhanging branch where the sun could not reach. Where the wild things grew and unforgiven poetry was born. Not in the morning. Never with the first light of dawn striking the sky and driving fear and nightmare from the minds of children. Sending dementia to sulk and hide at the edge of eyelids waiting for the dark to return. Again, the monsters would call, and the nightmares would scream. Children would scream, and parents would shudder. No, not this time. It was not the dark. It was not the night.

It was morning, and Bract Graiwold had been defeated. The Shaine were marching on Dayside to lay claim to what belonged to them. I could not wait for nightfall. I had to ride the momentum. Drive the Shaine forever on. Anon Freeman wanted nothing more than to occupy the town. That was all that was required. The Graiwold were broken. Bract was dead. The Shaine need but squat in the street. Set up shop as it were. Lay claim to the town.

The Graiwold would know, looking from their windows, seeing the Shaine. Dayside belonged to the Anonymous Freeman. That is all that was necessary. The Shaine would control the town. But, the Graiwold would not rest. They would not leave well enough alone. Thus would begin a guerrilla war. Lasting months or years. It mattered not. There would be random murders in the street. Cars and buildings would suddenly burst into flame. The other side always taking credit for these assassinations. There would be no end. Nothing gained. Only fear and death and hatred.

I wanted to avoid that. To stop the killing at the root. I wanted to drive the Faire Folk from Dayside. They were the source of the conflict. Always wanting more wild poetry. Paying anything for the rare delicacy. It wasn't as if the Faire Folk need it or even wanted it for that matter. The Faire Folk wanted the wild poetry because it was there. As long as the desire was there. For as long as the Faire Folk had the need for errant verse to slip across the tongue. The Shaine and the Graiwold would wage war one upon the other until there was nothing left but smoke and ash.

That is why I needed the Shaine. To drive them into Dayside. To smash them against the Library of Lost Hopes and Forgotten Dreams. To smother the Faire Folk in their beds. That is what happened that morning. The inferno of the forest was a half-remembered nightmare behind us. Bract Graiwold's bones smoldering and rotting in the damp moss and ash of the wood.

The Shaine could be lead. Their bloodlust undiminished. Still smoldering from a night of chaos and wild fires, Dayside never knew what hit it. A wave of wild verse struck the town by the morning light. While the town rested. While people both guilty and innocent were still dreaming of coffee. The wild poetry turned buildings black with age and decay. Walls crumbled and roofs collapsed. People screamed, stumbling, fumbling with robes and dressing gowns.

The Shaine followed, bringing torches and flame throwers salvaged from the night. Remembering what had been done to them, the Shaine burned wood and town and bone. I did not care. I pushed on, leading my sonnets and shadows and free verse. The Shaine trailing behind us. The non-existent Jack tracing my shoulder. Forever at my side. Saying nothing but watching everything.

I cared nothing for the town. I did not even notice what the Shaine did to Graiwold women and children as I passed. I was hell bent for the library and nothing would stand in my way. The librarian was prepared, standing before his home. Surrounded by monsters and earthquakes and demons. He was ready for my best non-rational verse. Picked special just for him. The library had guardians, and the librarian used them well. Stone dogs and elephants and uncommon dinosaurs made of muscle and bone lacking only skin.

We crashed into the library, smashing ourselves against the rock and wood and stone. Elementals and trolls ripped at wild poetry and forgotten verse. Screams from the dying. Pages ripped like great trees toppling to the ground. Hacking and slashing and biting. And, the world smeared with black ink like blood. My poems smashed against the library like the surf into rock. The stone held and the ocean receded. Striking and slashing and gouging as we fell.

It was not enough. I would not turn back. So close to the library. My poems roared like the tidal wave and crashed into the rock once again. Beanstalks trembled, drowning in the wake. Fireflies fluttered in the spray. It was not enough. It would never be enough. The library would hold, and I did not care.

Sputtering, gasping, the librarian fell. Slipping in seaweed and salt water taffy. My poetry attacked, splitting the library, cracking the walls and bursting the door. I was in. Just like that, I had entered the library. My poems all about me. This place I had been denied so long was mine. Wandering from town to town and from library to library. Turned away. Always turned aside by this librarian or that. Never knowing what I sought. Never wondering why I was

there. Never an answer. The enemy of my enemy was not my friend. The librarians cared nothing for my trouble with Del Morgan. They wanted only to deny me what was mine.

“Lucifer’s Widow,” Jack said. “This way.”

I followed him. I don’t know why. Somewhere to go. Something to do. And, then I stopped, turning another way. Jack looked back to me as the wild verse paused, gathering all around us. I turned, seeking the depths of the library, looking for things once lost that could yet be found.

If it was lost. If it was forgotten. It was here. Among records and dreams and long lost nightmare. I sought memory and forgotten song. Verse forgotten. Poetry was but a memory. What I was looking for could not be found. Only looked for. But, here it was. All it took was will and desire and an army of raging chaos to command.

One last door out of all the others in the depths of the library. Feeling it pulse. Feeling it burn. Feeling fingers tighten around my heart. A strange man never pointing his finger at me and taking away my name. Giving me this strange title of Mathew Drake, which was not a name. I only assumed it was because nobody in their right mind gives titles like Mathew Drake. Long ago and far away, a door had opened upon a little stretch of beach and the ocean. This door lead to memory and a heart that had not been used in years.

“No!”

That was the librarian. Looking not even vaguely human. Like a walrus. Like a carpenter. Like a twelve foot lion. Hell, I don’t know. Jack was there, watching me, knowing what I searched, standing between the library and me. The librarian struck as I struck. As the librarian fell. Shrinking in defeat and ruin. Fading back into the stone and the books and the walls from which the Faire Folk had born him.

Then, there was Jack. On the floor. Clutching at his side. Or, what was left of it. Fingers slipping over the tattered edge of straw and mud. And, I remembered something he had once said. About being made of something other than flesh. No, I’m remembering it wrong. He had said that he did not exist. That I had taken the thing he had been and made him something wholly new. For no other reason than I was too stupid to know it wasn’t the truth.

“I told you.” Jack gurgled and spat and blood seeped between splinters of straw.

This was strange. The strangest moment of all. Looking down at

something that was clearly not alive. That was made of straw and bailing wire and mud. That was somehow made of flesh and blood and bone. I had made of him something more and less than he had ever been. I had offered him freedom, and it had killed him. Where had I heard that line before?

I fell. I almost fell. Standing over the non-existent Jack. Resting my knees against him. Watching the blood seep over the floor. Dirty straw. Black mud. Slurping. Sliding. Squishing between my fingers and toes. Like a statue, he fell. Coming apart between my fingers. Slipping into his component parts. His face dissolved like dirt washed off a stone.

I really have no idea how long I stayed like that, and I don't think it matters. I stood. The world forgotten. Knowing nothing of what happened in the streets of Dayside around me. There was only the library. What was left of Jack's corpse. And, the door. I pushed. Nothing. I pushed, again. Expecting the door to give. Expecting whiffs of sand to seep around the edges. Expecting that taste of salt wind on my tongue. Nothing. I pushed, again.

The door gave. I stumbled forward, looking for Heaven. For memory. For my name. For my heart. All I found was Beowulf Drake.

"There you are," he said.

"No!"

I rushed him, never reaching him. All the weight of the world fell upon my shoulders. My wild poetry stripped from me. I could not remember any of their names. All because that one who had taken me to market had found me.

"I've been looking for you everywhere," he said. "Never thought to find you here."

I stumbled, falling. Unable to think. Unable to stand. Everything growing dim. Growing dark. The librarian had been right. My forgotten life was only in the library until I looked for it there. With Beowulf Drake waiting, I found nothing. Not my name. Not my memory. Not my heart or my life. I had failed. Still a slave. Jack was gone. Not even a book that was never written by James Joyce for all my troubles.

"You have caused Del Morgan so much trouble. I suppose it's time to take you home."

sixty-three

Home

There really isn't much left to tell. The Shaine took possession of Dayside. There was no resistance. The Graiwold poetry hunters were too distraught and confused to do anything about it. There was no more killing. For now, anyway. Which is what Anon Freeman wanted. Bract Graiwold was gone. His poetry hunters would not go armed for battle with the Shaine. I do not know how long it will last. The killing frenzy was passed, and the guns were gone. But, the anger was still there. The rage and blistering hatred could not be so easily forgotten. It was only a matter of time before the Faire Folk provided them with new toys with which to drink the other's blood.

None of which I knew. I had to learn about it later. Beowulf Drake told Alicia Firelight Del Morgan. I just happened to be there. He returned me to Del Morgan. Before he left, he told her everything I had done and all the trouble I had caused.

It was strange. Listening to these events. As if they had happened somewhere else to someone else. Much of what Beowulf said, I was learning for the first time. In the end, I had abandoned the Shaine. I had lead them to Dayside to fight, which is not what Anon Freeman had wanted. He had known what was necessary, and he had known what was right. I had tricked him. In the end, I had seen my goal and my prize without even realizing I was striving for it. The Shaine had become a means to my end.

The librarian of Dayside had told me that my memory, life and heart were within the walls. He had even warned me that they could exist in the library only so long as I did not enter and look for my heart. The Library of Forgotten Dreams could only contain something lost as long as it was lost. I did not care. I had played my gamble, reaching for my life.

It had not been there. Strange, really. To have nothing. No memory of what had come before. It was almost as if I had been born in that instant with that one among all the Faire Folk standing in the door. No, memory had been taken from me slowly. In fits and pieces so I would not notice it slipping away. Del Morgan had asked me questions of my past, I remember. Then, it was gone. Like Hobbes' friend Hunter. She had taken fragments from my memory as pay-

ment for dragon's breath. All I had to do was speak and they were gone. That is what Del Morgan did when she asked me about my past. In telling her about my life, she had taken it away from me.

I still remembered strange things. Ghosts and shards and fragments. If I thought about my past, I could remember that I had been married. I remember that I hated my job. I had been. Something. What? Liked to draw? A graphic designer? But, the job had become more and more managerial? More and more political? Requiring less and less drawing? I think that was it. I don't remember.

So, occasionally there were slivers and fragments. Lost pieces of memory. Everything that mattered had been taken away from me by that one standing in my door. But, Alicia Firelight Del Morgan had taken my heart. I wanted it back. I would not be free until I had it.

I had learned something. All the time I was a slave to Del Morgan, I had lived in fear. That she would not need me. That she would not want me. That she would see no further need for me. Crush my heart. Watch me die. The touch of her fingers on my heart had held me, but I had learned something. Or, believed something.

Del Morgan would not kill me. She would not punish me so for disobeying her. I wanted to defy her. Forcing her to kill me would cause her much inconvenience and loss of good money on her investment. So, she could not punish me by killing me. In fact, the only way she could punish me was to force me to live.

This gave me a strange sense of satisfaction. I could defy her. I could botch errands. I could disappear for weeks or months, and she would do nothing. I was free. I belonged to her, but I was free. Yes, I felt a great sense of satisfaction. I could walk right out the front door and never return, and she would do nothing. She had not even searched for me when I had not returned with *Lucifer's Widow*. Jack had taken that task upon himself. Beowulf had returned me. She had not sought me out.

"So, you see," Beowulf Drake was saying. Standing in Del Morgan's living room. Facing Alicia Firelight Del Morgan herself. "He has caused much trouble."

"Are you suggesting he is defective?" Del Morgan said. "That I was overcharged?"

"No, nothing of the kind. With all due respect, a Drake must be trained."

“Oh, he will be trained. You can tell the one who sent you that after you leave.”

“Nobody sent me.”

“Of course.”

With nothing more to be said, Beowulf Drake departed, leaving me in the door. Standing quiet and subdued. Del Morgan did nothing but look at me as the elevator disappeared. Hannah and Romana were lost somewhere behind her in the room. Whispering to each other. Trying not to be overheard.

“You have caused much trouble, Drake. I shall be forced to offer Halle some sort of reparation. Not that I care. I never liked the state he kept the poetry hunters in. No, that is not what bothers me. I sent you after *Lucifer’s Widow*. A very simple task. And, yet, you cause all this trouble, and you do not return with my book?”

It escaped me. In that moment. The bark of a laugh exploding from between my teeth.

“James Joyce never wrote it,” I said. “You want *Lucifer’s Widow*? Here.”

I held up my hand as if I was holding a book between my fingers. I imagined it to be a hardbound work of at least a thousand pages. The whispering of voices stopped, and Del Morgan looked at me as if I had just found a coin behind her ear. She did not laugh. She did not even crack a smile, but she took the book from between my fingers. It didn’t exist. It wasn’t there. James Joyce never wrote it, but she acted as if I held something. She moved as if she had taken *Lucifer’s Widow* from me.

“Thank you,” she said and turned, leaving me standing in the doorway.

I could have left at any time, never looking back. Why did I stay? Because sometimes people send us after dragon’s breath when they want us to fetch the water of life, but more importantly, I was not going to leave without my heart. Oh, and there was one other thing that would hit me later. She had not given me permission to speak.

Also by Keith D. Jones

Tourist Hunter (2016)

Pyrrhic Kingdom (2013)

The Etymology of Fire (2004)

The Magic Flute (1999)