

The Ritual

PROLOGUE

At the western edge of the known world, a sheer cliff plunged five hundred feet into a tireless and unexplored ocean. White waves pounded at the cliff, coming a few feet from the top, and then dropping down so fast that the back draft would suck down with it the largest of men, and did. The ocean had a greedy mind of its own. It was the largest beast known, and it held its title with pride and hatred. The ground shook with its gargantuan waves, as though infuriated that the rock had imprisoned it.

The skies were almost always dark with clouds and rain fell from every direction. As far north and south as anyone could see, plains of tall green grass swayed in the wind as though a massive army were preparing a covert attack. The plains were divided in two by a black, hard-packed road that ended abruptly at the cliff making one wonder if the world had been cut in half by a giant sword.

At the eastern edge of the plains, on either side of the Black Road, two statues rested. Their age and creator were unknown. They stood over a hundred feet tall and were shaped like cloaked monks, except unnaturally tall and skinny. Their cloaks flowed sheerly off their shoulders to the ground. They had no faces, only a smooth spherical surface where one should have been. One of them was pure white; so pure that it was difficult to look at whenever the sun was shining. To those who dared touch it, the stone was smooth and cool regardless of the weather. It was immaculately clean. Not a drop of rain could be found on its surface, even during a storm. The other statue was pure black and rested on the other side of the road. It appeared not so much as a statue, but rather a complete void of light in one's vision. No one dared go close to it or look at it any longer than a glance. Nothing grew in its shadow. Little else was known about it.

The power of the statues was unquestioned. Neither could be harmed, moved, marked, or even covered. In earlier times, societies would punish their worst criminals by tying them up at the foot of the black statue. After some time, the criminal would become uncomfortable and beg to be let free. Eventually he would panic and thrash about violently. Finally, he would just stop and stare blankly. No one subjected to that torture ever recovered, nor did they ever commit a violent crime again. Even though the practice had been abolished, a criminal would always choose imprisonment or death to the threat of the black statue.

Crow stood on the Black Road, three hours to the east of the Western Ocean and under the gaze of the two statues. He looked up at the black statue and shivered. Every hair on his body stood up and every emotion in his mind turned to dread. He turned away quickly, thankful that his punishment was not to be tied up next to the statue. Instead, he was given the next worst alternative; execution in the Western Ocean. To facilitate this, he held on his back a wooden plank, wide enough for two feet, and long enough for someone to stand on one end while the condemned stood on the other and eventually fell. The ocean claimed the condemned by either

wind or wave, sometimes even before plank was set in place. Once a man was claimed by the ocean, it was unknown what became of his soul. The only certainty was that it could never return; not for redemption, nor for evil.

Crow was to be executed. It was an execution reserved for the worst criminals, for whom redemption was impossible. The high court judge stood behind him. On one side of the judge stood Crow's King and Queen, on the other were three persons in hoods. Behind them and to the north, Crow's former home, the Kingdom of Calina, lay sprawled among hills and forests. To the south of the road, there was nothing but farms and farmland spread across hills amongst thickets of trees. Standing adjacent to Crow, two guards kept spears trained on him. The judge then yelled into the wind.

"Crow Whitetalon!"

Crow turned around to stare at his judges. His face held no expression.

"You have been sentenced to death for treason."

The judge stopped, wanting to add more, but didn't know how to say it. Crow was guilty of something that had not heretofore been committed. The judge omitted the remaining convictions and continued.

"You will be executed by banishment, body and soul, into the Western Ocean. Do you have a final statement?"

"No."

Crow turned to the West.

That was the last word to leave his mouth. Now the three hour march to the edge of the world would begin. It always took three hours. Crow could *feel* the disappointment behind him and he was ready to walk away from it. A cold gust of wind hit his back at that moment and he took a step forward. He was poorly dressed and now thoroughly cold. He had no shoes either. All he had left was his broken body and a heavy plank of wood. He was not a threat to anyone, especially not to the robust guards who happened to be deaf. Crow wondered when it was that he would be eternally judged. After being claimed by the ocean? While standing at the edge? Did it already happen in front of the statues? Or did it all start when he walked into the cave as a boy and came out as... something else.

Crow felt a sharp pain in his side. One of the guards was prodding him forward with a spear. They had begun. He started to walk. He was ready for this, but he had no idea what the outcome would be. There would be no chance for ritualistic redemption so he wanted to be sure of where he was headed. And if he was to be damned for eternity, should he not fight it? No, that was impossible. There was no chance he could escape this. So all he had left to do for three hours was figure out what might happen to him at the end. And if he could do that and embrace any sort of hope that he was not evil, then he would dive into the ocean and let God sort it out. But if he had no light left in him, then maybe he'd try to take a guard out with him.

But how far back did he have to go? To the creation of the statues? Or the prophecy? To his grandfather? To the cave? Or did it start with his boyhood brother? Betrayal seemed to always beget a worse betrayal. So here he was, walking to his death. This was his fate, but he could at

least ask why. And what fate would it be? No one knew. Would he cease to exist? Or would it all start over again?

He couldn't answer the last few questions, but he had three hours to ponder the others. He picked a beginning and let his mind wander back to the last day of his innocence, back when he was a boy named Corvan....

* * *

THE JOINING

Corvan stood in front of a dark hole in the side of the mountain. He had walked and climbed all the daylight hours of the past two days at a mad pace. The summer days were long and the weather had favored him. Even the wind had favored him. He had been able to sleep in that morning and have a proper breakfast before beginning the final climb up the steep loose grey rocks. He needed the extra energy for the last part since every step forward was nearly reversed by the rocks sliding back. There were no trees up here and there hadn't been since camp, nor anything else to provide comfort. There was nowhere to sit and standing anywhere but in the mouth of the cave was precarious. Still, Corvan preferred to not stand at the mouth of the cave.

The mountain was one of many that looked exactly the same. He could count a dozen from his vantage point; green hills with grey caps, except vastly larger and steeper than any normal hill. These were the Silvertop Mountains; a vast area. It was a week's travel from the center to edge in any direction; or so it was believed because no one had been to the center. No one had even seen the center because the mountains there stretched high up into the clouds. It was said to be the highest point unknown to man and it had no name. Corvan had not climbed half that height to arrive where he now found himself, but this was the highest he had ever been. This mountain also remained unnamed for no one cared to dwell upon it again after they had left it.

By all outward appearances, the Silvertops were peaceful but no civilization had cared to inhabit them to any great extent. There were few flat spaces of any reasonable size to allow building a town except at great expense to excavate up an into the mountainside. Additionally, as one traveled any further than a day into the mountains, there were other entities that made living there undesirable. Corvan was here seeking those entities. His brothers were here for the same. There was no wind today and Corvan could hear the metallic clink of rocks sliding from a great distance as his brothers climbed toward him. But other than that small disturbance the stillness made it seem as though the mountain had frozen in a state of heightened alert, preparing for an assailant sneaking toward it in the dark. Corvan and his brothers all felt the same apprehension as they slowly navigated the mountain. Despite the appearance of serenity, there was none here.

Then Corvan felt it, just barely, but he knew the feeling when it came upon him unexpectedly. It was a mix of loss, sadness, and frustration. It emanated from the cave. What he had felt most

up until this point was fear, not his own, but fear left by others. That is what guided him here, a trail of fear left behind by thousands of boys. But he could look back upon the route he took as well, see how it carefully descended through the cliffs, and understand why he had arrived so much earlier while the others followed the trail. They would eventually see this better route and each of them would descend the way Corvan had come up, likely leaving behind another trail of fear.

Of course any woman would have taken the same path as him. They could all sense better than he, fear and other disembodied emotions. Corvan couldn't admit to having the ability so he claimed only that he desired to visit his grandfather's grave. The man had been dead for a century, but no one had been there since the burial. Corvan felt like he was the only one who owed respect to his grandfather, so he put some effort into finding it along the way. It was nothing but a pile of rocks that might easily be missed as part of the landscape. He considered not visiting, but he suspected the path was shorter and he needed an excuse to avoid letting others know that he was different.

Corvan's grandfather had no songs about him, no poems, no stories. Corvan couldn't even think of a single reference to any group or army that his grandfather had been in. He probably hadn't ever been in any group or army. He had been sensitive like Corvan, but that was known. Consequently, his grandfather had served in the stables all his life. He never gave Corvan anything valuable, neither reputation nor credentials. He did not belong in his time. His kind earned no respect, inspired no envy. Corvan knew he had barely escaped the same stigma. Corvan's father, on the other hand, was already legend. He rose up like the phoenix from his father's legacy of booze and horse manure. Corvan had his father's reputation to keep wind in the sails of his destiny and keep suspicion at bay. His father's name was never unknown, Hawk Whitetalon. He was the epitome of all great hero stories and Corvan never felt comfortable with that, but he respected his father.

Corvan's father had risen to greatness in his younger days and earned the respect and trust of the king. He had retired from a high ranking position in the military to become the king's right hand, which was a retirement that afforded very little time for leisure. Corvan truly did have any path he wanted open to him, but no career known to him fit the enormous drive he felt at times. He felt like society hadn't yet created his profession. Or that perhaps there would be no profession to fit with what he was meant to become. Worse yet, he seldom felt hope of finding his purpose. He had contemplated so many options, even explored some in depth, only to find that they would not fulfill him. Priesthood seemed viable for a long time, but he rebelled at the thought of telling people how to live or sitting in meditation for hours. He wanted nothing to do with the unseen world either. It was best left to priests and children as far as he was concerned, even though he was generally fascinated by the stories.

At the grave, Corvan had stared down for a few minutes at the grey pile of rocks. They barely appeared to be a grave and bones were visible between the stones. Whoever had been tasked to give last rights had cared very little to perform the ceremony in the proper form. Most likely some younger priest begrudgingly took on the duty and gave it as little time as Corvan's

grandfather deserved. The decision to do the ceremony at all was probably debated. It was a suicide, a result of the ritual from which he had been forbidden. The burial wouldn't have been considered if not for the growing reputation of Corvan's father. Corvan felt guilty for thinking of his grandfather in the way that his culture told him to. He felt it was all backwards. He knew his cursed gift was an asset to him, yet it remained a dark secret. He felt no shame at having it, only a slight paranoia that he might be discovered. He knew that time would one day change the ways of men and his kind would be revered as it was rumored they were many thousands of years ago. But today, Corvan's kind, though there were maybe only a few in the known world, worked the stables and other meaningless jobs. But they received a decent burial, whereas Corvan's grandfather was only a pile of bones by the time that young priest had come to throw some rocks on them.

Corvan stood at the cave growing cold and more uneasy as his brothers approached. What he sensed from the mountain was slowly growing as he waited. His brothers' presence did not go unnoticed by the entities there. He could feel their energy, even hear faint conversation at this point, but from whom he was not sure. He could feel now more evil than he had ever before, more than when he had witnessed a priest exorcise the demon from his sister's dead body nearly a decade ago. He was terrified, but he turned back to face the black hole so as not to be betrayed by emotion. It was about to start, the right of passage, the Ritual.

Vespin was the first brother to reach Corvan. He was breathing hard and making a lot of noise. He finally came to a stop as a big rock slid out from under him and he landed on the ground. He sat panting for a moment.

"Hey, you got any water?"

Corvan was startled out of his focus on the cave. He turned, now capable of appearing something other than terrified. He answered meekly,

"Oh hey, Vespin! It's over there." he said and gestured toward his water bag.

Vespin didn't move. Instead he sat a few moments, recovering from the final sprint up the mountain. Corvan relaxed a little. It comforted him greatly to not be alone in the cave. Eventually Vespin got to his feet and went over to Corvan's bag. Corvan knew Vespin had pushed himself hard the last hour of the trip so that he could be the first one up. He was also the only one of the brothers who would shamelessly ask for someone else's water. But this journey wasn't a competition. It was intended to push the brothers hard, to distract them from frivolous concerns and let them begin the ritual with a clear mind. But Corvan had arrived with extra time and his mind had wandered into the mess of his imagined possible futures.

Vespin had undoubtedly continued chattering along the remainder of the journey after Corvan had parted. Ursin had probably told him to shut up countless times, but he'd be silent for only so long. Ursin, the eldest by a few weeks but many years by his demeanor, was the next brother to arrive. He walked right into the mouth of the cave and stared into it alongside Corvan. He remained silent and eventually sat down with his back against the wall to watch the others come up. He was always in charge and had guided the rest of them along for two days, deciding when to stop and where to camp.

Elaph followed soon after, nimbly climbing around making his own route, carefully stepping on larger stones that did not give under his weight. He seemed at ease in his surroundings. His eyes almost always seemed to smile. He perched himself on a rock above Corvan and cheerfully asked,

“So how long have you been waiting?”

“A little while.”

“Did you go in yet?”

“Of course not.”

Elaph curiously wandered into the mouth of the cave, purposefully looking while his eyes adjusted. He seemed ready to keep moving, but three more brothers were still making their way up the mountain.

Corvan noticed that everyone else was either too tired, or in the case of Ursin, simply unconcerned to care about where they were and what they were about to do. Vespun had been excited about the ritual, speculating constantly about what he would find, his new name, what songs he would learn. Would he learn sword fighting or archery? Ursin assured him he would never be proficient in archery and his swordplay wouldn't be mastered overnight. But Vespun rambled on about winning tournaments and joining the king's private security. Corvan thought Vespun should consider himself lucky to get knighted at all, but he would be knighted if he wanted to be. For once though, Corvan expected to get a real and believable story out of Vespun after the ritual was over.

Tam, Ceter, and Felin, the remaining brothers, arrived and everyone sat down in the mouth of the cave to rest. Corvan had grown up with these six boys. They played together, had all their lessons together, and they went on adventures. Corvan was his father's only son, but he was closer to these six boys than he was with his sisters or parents. They were a privileged group of boys, each one the son of a distinguished father. They were well educated by the best instructors. They were afforded privileges and connections that guaranteed a place of importance in the Kingdom, or great power from the wealth they would inherit. They could pursue whatever life they wanted, their father's permitting of course. All of this kept them somewhat isolated from other boys and the normal way of life and they were also heavily scrutinized by authority.

Corvan knew their days together would become fewer. Except for Vespun who wanted to pursue all careers, they all had plans and goals. Corvan did not. Ursin's father was the king's military commander, so Ursin had already started elective education for military leadership and strategy. Corvan didn't think Ursin had ever considered that other options were available to him, but he already played the part expertly. He was always calm, authoritative, unquestionable when he made a decision, and he was the last brother that Corvan would go to if he wanted to talk about something personal or emotional.

Elaph had great interest in the elements, clockwork, and tinkering. He was also very practical. The patch on Corvan's water bag was evidence to that. He also wore an odd-looking utility belt wrapped around his waist, crossed over his back, and down his shoulders. Attached to it were

various useful items. His long flat blonde hair also told you that he didn't care a lot about his appearance. Elaph would go on to some fascinating career, but Corvan did not know exactly what that work would entail other than involving fire, potions, and very strange gadgets.

The other three brothers, Tam, Ceter, and Felin, would choose careers in business, the culinary arts, and the priesthood. Corvan felt a special, although precarious, closeness to Felin. They had equally strong feelings toward the unseen inhabitants of the world. But Felin's curiosity about it far exceeded his fear, if he even had any. Felin's ideal adventure always involved some forgotten place, ruins, or places where you would never find any women. He was perhaps too devoted to care about women anyway. Felin was ready for this day more than his brothers, and you could tell he was excited despite his contemplative silence on the journey.

Despite dreading what he would endure today, Corvan's hope had been rekindled. The right of passage was perhaps his last opportunity to discover where he belonged. Generations of boys had journeyed through these mountains. Most came back changed, stronger, or more determined. It was almost guaranteed that there was something to be gained from the experience. While there were exceptions for those who emerged homicidal, suicidal or insane, all societies held sacred this right of passage. It enriched cultures and improved prosperity. It made men who respected the nature of life and death and who understood their place in the world. It renewed the memory of the past which was a man's most cherished possession. And of course, there would be a celebration to welcome the new men back into the community.

Corvan wasn't ready to think about celebrating. The celebration wouldn't happen for at least another week. After the mountain would be the second journey. It was this transformation period that boys often feared more than entering the cave. The celebration always centered around the story of how each boy became a man during the second journey. No doubt, Vespian would tell the best story of all, even if some of it were embellished. For now, none of them except Felin could feel anything but anxiety about what road lay ahead. As brothers, they always had someone to watch their backs; but the second journey would force them to rely on their own abilities. While Corvan had little concern for his own survival, he worried about some of his brothers and how well they would endure the trial. They would all endure of course. They were the sons of the kingdom, the only boys going through the ritual that everyone would ask or know about. Corvan's father told him the king had asked about the date of the naming ceremony a while ago, but perhaps that was not out of interest rather than annoyance at having to attend. The king didn't have a reputation for being friendly.

Ursin stood up authoritatively. The Ritual was about to begin. He walked to one side of the cave and removed a small pouch full of white sand from his belt. The sand came from the field south of the Black Road and adjacent to the Western Ocean. Corvan stood up and pulled out his pouch full of black sand obtained from the other field. Ursin turned toward the other five who had also stood up and formed a line along the entrance. He began to speak the words of the ritual spoken in a thousand different languages by millions of boys over thousands of years. "Today we honor the dead. As our fathers gave life to us, we give it back to their fathers. We must humbly accept their guidance, knowledge, and wisdom so that we may become men

worthy of the gift they gave us. But we also take on this responsibility as it is the greatest gift from God, a promise of redemption. We accept this task wholeheartedly knowing that we may one day need the ritual for the redemption of our own souls.”

Crow continued his part in the ritual.

“We alone are responsible for the balance of good and evil. So that our women and children may live and prosper, we devote ourselves to this task and He who bestowed it upon us. We enter sacred ground with pure hearts lest evil should attach itself to us and again take reign over the world. It is better that you should die as a boy than remain here for eternity or be cast into the ocean.”

Ursin lifted his bag of white sand and started to pour a line from one wall of the cave to the other. Corvan did the same with the black sand. It was believed that the sand held spirits, good or evil, in place in the fields. In this case, it kept them from following the boys out of the cave and back into the world where they'd be lost and disturb the living, which they were known to do. Of course they could cross if joined to a person.

Ursin stepped over the line and into the darkness of the cave. The brothers followed. Corvan stepped over the lines last. He felt something change as the darkness closed around him. He felt sick with anxiety as his every thought told him that something was about to go wrong.

It was believed that the Silvertop Mountains were a holding place for the souls of men waiting for redemption. When most men died, their spirits were free to wander the earth without purpose, reason, or understanding. Eventually, some force would draw them toward the Silvertop Mountains. They seemed to be guided or awakened most on full moon nights or in the presence of other astrological events. On such nights, girls and women would avoid being outside or anywhere near burial sites. It was a favorite pastime for young boys to venture outside to exactly these places in contradiction to their mothers' demands. It was a childhood pastime for most boys, even Corvan's brothers, to wait outside and try to spot or even entrap these lost spirits. Nothing ever happened, but Corvan did his best to avoid his brothers' taunting to go out with them.

All cultures present and past considered the Silvertops as sacred, although it was known that inhuman entities also made the mountains their home. It may have been by design that they were all forced to inhabit the same mountains, each making the other suffer. Whether the spirits knew where they were, or why, was unknown; but only there, in the cave, did they have a chance to leave the Silvertops. Via the ritual, a tradition upheld for all recorded history, boys entered the mountains with the expectation of becoming adults in return for the promise to redeem one of those souls. It was only in the dark claustrophobic caves that a boy could invite in one of these suffering spirits to accompany the boy into manhood and begin a process of cleansing the spirit through the boy/man's good deeds. The man and spirit would try to live as one in harmony and often, once the bond was strong, the man would benefit in some way.

The joining was often a horribly unsettling experience. The spirit, who had once been a man himself, would have to adjust to the confinement in, and to the will, of his host. The host had to

cope with an enraged, scared, or insane spirit rattling around in his mind. The process of peaceful coexistence could take many days, sometimes weeks, and sometimes didn't happen at all. The host would have to fight his new symbiont, commonly referred to as a sym, for control over his thoughts and feelings. He would have to become stronger or the sym would make life very difficult and sometimes overthrow the host's will entirely. The outcome was generally always good; However some boys, often well known to history, would be changed into men who sought money or power without regard to morals.

Typically in the process, the symbiont would want to know what was left of his old life, his family, friends, king or kingdom. The host would agree to appease him and help the settling process. The two would journey out of the Silvertops and try to find something the sym was familiar with or find answers to his past. The boy/man would learn something of the past, glean wisdom from his sym, and occasionally pick up some new skills if the sym was strong. The boy/man would almost always become a more valuable participant in his community and the stories and history obtained from the joining were incredibly valuable to society. Every town had historians that recorded these stories and placed them in the community's library.

This is what all boys were taught about the ritual. Corvan and his brothers believed it with as much hope as a growing boy could have about the future. But the benefits, in reality, were commonly more subtle. Boys romanticised the stories of the more remarkable joinings where men went on to become famous, or infamous, but many of the stories told at ritual celebrations were vague in detail and unclear about times and places, perhaps because much of history had been lost and the times and ways of the past had been so very different, often incomprehensible. There were stories about strange inventions and contraptions that were so bizarre as to not be believable if it weren't for the frequent accounts of these things from many men. Elaph was fascinated by these stories and kept a book with descriptions of each invention with the goal of recreating them someday.

The mouth of the cave was wide enough for five boys to stand side by side, but the ceiling of the cave soon descended so that one could not stand up straight. There was no marked path and the walls disappeared into the dark leaving space to wander in any direction. The cave was a massive horizontal fissure in the mountain that led down further than anyone had bothered to travel. To help the boys navigate, each had a set of glow rocks that would make light indefinitely, but required both hands to operate. The light was dim since anything brighter was believed to repel spirits.

A glow rock was a rechargeable, naturally occurring mineral. They had been used since before history, but they were a crude tool. They worked a lot like magnets, but their magnetic force faded as they emitted light. To recharge them, one would push them together against the force of their opposing magnetic fields. You could store a charge when you let them snap together with the poles aligned. Their use as a light source was ideal for the ritual because the boys would have to stop to recharge them and meditate. They would all sit together and try to prepare for the joining.

Another design of the ritual was to force the participant to conquer his fears by making it nearly impossible to back out of the ritual after traveling any significant distance into the cave. Navigating the cave was time consuming, requiring that one use both his hands and contortions of the body to navigate through obstacles. A boy could not simply get scared and run away. He would have to calmly make his way out to keep from losing his glow rocks. After the second meditation, the boys would venture off on their own. Assuming no two boys lost their nerve at the same moment and tried to leave together, leaving the second meditation was a point of no return. Whether or not a boy tried to escape, he would find himself alone in the dark, charging his glow rocks, and having no choice but to deal with his fear. The joining would be completed.

The brothers talked very little as they moved along further into the mountain. The cave wasn't particularly dangerous as far as sudden drop-offs and jagged rocks at the end of a steep chute, but it was uncomfortably claustrophobic. Ceter was having a particularly difficult time and a gap was forming between him and the next brother. Ursin occasionally called out for Elaph who had wandered on ahead some distance. Elaph had mounted his glow rocks into a hand-held device and was moving along nimbly. Felin had vocally disapproved of the device. Elaph appeared to Corvan to be a drunken firefly, glowing in one spot at one moment, then glowing a few feet over and down the next. Corvan thought it might be possible for Elaph to "run" out of the cave, except none of the brothers believed that he would. He wanted this badly; they all did.

Corvan, however, no longer felt any desire to continue. He was not feeling any better as time passed. His dread was growing as was the unintelligible whispering that only he heard. He felt constantly and from every direction spirits. He felt sadness, fear, and pain. He could feel them wailing in despair. He heard every stone move and carefully listened to the heavy breathing of his brothers. He occasionally bumped into Felin trying to stay as close as possible. The thought, *I'm not ready*, repeated over and over in his head. His secret overwhelmed him. He was forbidden from the Ritual.

"I'm not ready" became his mantra as he climbed over rocks, held out his glow rocks, and located his next step. He went on like this for what felt like hours. Cold sweat was dripping into his eyes and mouth. A slow pain was forming in his stomach and he felt flushed and trembling. Suddenly he realized that the voices were gone; the spirits were gone. He heard the steps of his brothers as far off and muffled. Then he heard a very distinct and quiet whisper right behind his ear, a sweet female voice.

"I am."

Corvan stopped breathing, stopped moving, and felt a chill come over his whole body. He eventually gasped slightly, then breathed, but stood motionless. He was the last of the brothers, and he'd fallen far behind. He wanted to run, to be invisible, and most of all to not be in this horrible evil place. He was not ready, but a spirit that had chosen him was. She... but how could it be female?!... *SHE* had chosen him. She did not fear the group or the glow. He sensed nothing of her but no part of him doubted that she was right at his back. He felt her breath on his neck. Corvan stood still, frozen, as his brothers slowly moved further away.

Then suddenly loud and clear, "Corvan!"

Felin had whispered loudly when he noticed that Corvan was no longer right behind him. Corvan didn't answer.

"Corvan!" Silence..... "Are you ok?"

Corvan regained some control.

"Yeah, I'm ok."

The words came out remarkably normal. He paused.

"I dropped my glow rock."

He looked around towards the group and realized that Elaph, by the lack of rapid glowing in random places, had stopped. They would join for meditation now. Corvan suddenly started forward quickly, blindly. He tripped. A rock jabbed him sharply in the side as he hit the ground. He lay there motionless. The pain had momentarily relieved him of his fear. He breathed in heavily, gasping at the pain. Then he felt something new, darkness in his extra sense, a void. It felt familiar, perhaps a very early memory. He reached to his side, felt for blood - a little but not serious. He rolled onto his back, breathing heavily. Physically he was ok, but he felt very cold. His eyes were wide open but he saw nothing but blackness. He felt the void hovering over him, growing.

"Get up boy!" She snarled. The void descended upon him, into him.

Corvan said nothing to the boys as he approached them. They had gathered in a circle. A dim glow lit their faces. Elaph was sitting still with his eyes closed. Ursin sat across from him and his brothers sat in a circle between them. Felin was still standing, waiting for him, just a skinny, tall black silhouette.

"Elaph exhausted his glow rocks already. What's taking you so long?" asked Felin.

"Sorry, I fell. I couldn't find my rock."

"I have an extra if you need it."

"No, it's fine. I found it."

Elaph paused a few seconds.

"Then why aren't you using it?"

Corvan did not know the answer to that question. There was some light from the meditation circle, but not enough where he was to see where he was walking. He had just carefully navigated 20 feet or so in the dark.

"I'm all out," he lied.

Corvan sat down next to Felin. His mind was racing trying to figure out what just happened. He looked down at the rocks in his hand. Somehow they had snapped together and gone dark. He pulled them apart to charge them, but they started to glow again. He carefully let them snap back together and go out. He looked around and was relieved to see that no one had noticed.

"We must meditate. No more talking," said Ursin. The circle was dark. Corvan heard his brothers' breathing, then clicking of glow rocks together, but nothing else. He became aware that his fear had greatly diminished, perhaps from the shock. He closed his eyes and his mind went blank.

Corvan came back to consciousness with Felin shaking his shoulder.

“Come on, time to go.”

Corvan’s body felt strange, rested and limber like he had slept all night, but also tingling and warm. He felt his clothes resting on his body, perceiving the rough texture and even the seams. He noticed a hole forming in the sole of his shoe. He rose up fluidly from his crossed leg position. He certainly never woke up feeling so alert before. He didn’t remember anything but sitting down to meditate. Were his rocks charged again? Did it matter? His brothers were looking at him in the now fully charged glow.

“The only person I’ve ever seen meditating like that was the bishop,” said Felin.

Corvan was never good at meditation and he never heard of anyone blacking out during the ritual before. Strangely, he felt calm.

“Ha, they would never let me,” were the sarcastic words that came from Corvan’s mouth, but Corvan did not say them.

“What do you mean by that,” said Felin, surprised and seeming almost offended.

“Nothing... just that you know... I hate going to church and I couldn’t exercise a demon from a barstool, much less convince the drunk on it to go home.”

Corvan felt almost giddy. His odd sense of humor was the last thing he expected in this situation.

Ursin even looked at him with a confused expression. Corvan retook control of his demeanor, reminding himself of the task at hand.

Am I not done here already? he asked himself.

“Sorry, let’s go.”

“Corvan, you’re just weird sometimes,” commented Vespian.

The boys continued their journey deeper into the cave.

Corvan felt disturbed, but not because his surroundings or the nature of the ritual. He felt disturbed that he felt no sense of the seriousness about his surroundings or the ritual any more. He felt like he was just out for a walk. His perception was heightened, more active. He thought about little things that he wouldn’t think to notice before. He could feel the humidity of the cave, even on the rocks. The air was not entirely static and it smelled faintly of dirt or minerals. The temperature was strangely warmer than one would expect. His own odor even surprised and annoyed him. So many sensations that were commonplace and generally unnoticed were suddenly prominent in his perception. It brought him pleasure. He felt alive.

Corvan walked along behind his brothers again, taking his time and contemplating the ritual. He became conscious of the fact that he was now the first boy he’d ever known to be possessed by a female, and what kind of female he couldn’t guess. The way she had felt to him, or rather what he did not feel, was familiar to him on only one occasion, one he would rather forget.

Regardless, these thoughts had no emotional effect on him. He was only curious. He had decided on one thing already; he had to hide this secret just as well as the fact that he was spirit-sensitive.

Corvan’s thoughts were interrupted when he noticed that there were too many figures walking ahead of him. They were larger and taller, adults. A man, or perhaps no longer a man, was

walking alongside Ursin. The man looked as normal as anyone else, yet he was walking effortlessly through the cave. It appeared that he was moving through the rocks instead of navigating over and around them. The man was stout looking from behind, built sturdy as Ursin was.

Soon there were more men mixed in among the boys and others that were not following along, but standing around as the group passed. Corvan avoided looking directly at them. These were the inhabitants of the mountain. They were all solemn faced and pale in the darkness. The final meditation would begin soon enough. The spirits were pairing up with the all boys except Corvan, who was given a wide berth. They seemed to avoid him even though they outwardly didn't indicate knowledge of his presence.

Corvan was suddenly flooded with anger. He was disgusted at these spirits all standing around, pathetic and powerless. Incorporeal or not, they were a waste of space, a never ending annoyance. He started to think that the entire ritual was a pointless game, that there was nothing to be gained by it, at least not here with these lost souls. None of them were half as educated, as skilled, or as experienced as... Corvan realized that his thoughts were no longer his.

^They are mine. Your body is mine.

It was true. Corvan was somehow walking through the cave in the dark, seeing everything as clear as day but still completely dark. His hands were empty, the glow rocks gone, but he hadn't noticed until now. He was walking forward but not actually making the decision to take each step.

Who are you???

^You should be asking who are *you* now.

Corvan begin to panic. He had lost control of his own body. He couldn't stop walking or even control his breathing. He couldn't say anything either. He was a spectator to his own actions.

^I have been waiting for you for so long, preparing for your arrival, becoming stronger than any other. I own you.

That only made Corvan struggle harder. He willed his legs to stop moving with all the effort that he could, but nothing was working. He was along for the ride.

Why me? He thought.

^Because you're special.

How?

^Shut up. You invited me in by coming here and you will deliver me from this wretched place.

What are you?

^The most powerful demon, Ruler of the Silvertop Mountains, and the greatest female warrior to ever live and be forgotten. I am the fulfillment of the last prophecy. I am Maleza.

Maleza sat down with Corvan's brothers for the final meditation. No one remarked anything unusual about Corvan. The brothers were preoccupied with the ritual. Most of them appeared agitated. Vespian had a stupid grin on his face, and Felin was fidgeting with excitement. Corvan yelled in his mind, *Help me, help! It's not me. I'm not me!* But nothing came out. He remarked

that he couldn't even move his eyes. He had no choice of what he was looking at. Then, everything went dark. Maleza was meditating, or at least pretending to. Corvan felt his heart rate slowing in complete contradiction to the panic in his mind. He had also felt the excitement of the demon controlling him, and then felt it begin to diminish. Maleza was meditating. Corvan thought this was surprising at first. But then she had been a warrior. She had been human, and meditation was the cultural mark of the common faith. A demon with faith... of course who didn't have faith?

^You don't have to keep fighting.

What else should I be doing? you took my body.

^Relax, meditate.

I want my body back.

^It's all yours.

Corvan opened his eyes and felt instant relief. Then it occurred to him that he could still see in complete darkness. His brothers were all there, but each had a spirit standing directly behind him. Corvan jumped slightly at the surprise, but remained calm. He looked around at the spirits around them. None of them looked back. They must have been able to see just as well as he could, but he now sensed their fear directed toward him.

Why did you do that?

^I've been waiting a long time to be human again. Of all the things you can't experience as an incorporeal being, what I have longed for most is to be mortal again. I have feared nothing for so long. Besides, first impressions are always important. It's been a while since I scared anyone that much.

No, why did you give me back my body?

^You can answer that yourself.

Corvan thought for a moment, surprised that he was again capable, and realized the answer. Demons could only control a body for so long, less during a new moon, but indefinitely under a full one. Tonight was a full moon though.

As powerful as you say you are, you didn't have to give it back.

^I know you think of yourself to be smart, but you're really not thinking this through very well.

I've had 17 years to prepare for this moment, and it didn't really happen as planned.

^I'm still your symbiont, you're still my host. Besides, all that struggling tires me.

Sorry, I'm not used to being possessed.

^I'm not exactly comfortable being inside your body either.

So you're going to randomly take control whenever you want?

^If I have to.

I'm not just going to let you!

^It's your choice.

I've chosen then.

^Foolish boy, you no longer have unconditional free will.

The first priest I see, I will get rid of you.

^You can't lie to me.

Even if a priest could get the demon from his head, they both knew Corvan would not seek help from the church. He could not. He didn't know what they would do to him if this demon could not be removed, but he imagined it might involve a journey to the Western Ocean.

What do you want from me?

^Just shut up and meditate. Our new life together is just beginning.

Corvan understood. Meleza had made the first gesture of goodwill; she needed his cooperation. She had also demonstrated her power over him. He was terrified to know what she wanted from him or what terrible things she could do to him. He didn't know what the prophecy was either. He'd never even heard of one and he assumed it couldn't be good. What common goal could either of them agree to share? Corvan felt his thoughts begin to cascade in all directions into an unmanageable mess. He couldn't make sense of it all. He began to meditate.

Ursin cleared his throat and began to speak.

"Brothers, we now go separate ways. We will not see each other again until we are men."

Vespin chimed in.

"I just want to say guys, I'm going to miss all of you."

"Shut up Vespin," said Tam with annoyance, "We'll see you in less than a week."

"That sounds like a vacation to me," said Ceter. "Peace and quiet for the first time in years."

"This is serious guys. Let's go," said Felin, also annoyed.

Corvan looked around at all the boys one last time. Each of them turned in a random direction and started walking. Corvan had only one direction in mind, and that was out. Corvan's body was suddenly moving in the opposite direction. Maleza was back in control.

Maleza descended further into the cave. She moved fluidly over and around rocks. Corvan could occasionally perceive random glowing in his peripheral vision for only a minute or two before his brothers were out of sight.

Where are we going?

No answer.

They moved on like this for what seemed like hours. The by-standing spirits began to decrease in number and eventually disappeared altogether. Corvan thought that nothing living had ever been this far down in the cave before. He began to feel apprehensive of what was waiting ahead of him. He didn't think he'd be able to tire out Maleza and regain some control before she could reach her destination.

Their descent ended when the ground in front of them disappeared. They were on the edge of a massive chamber with no floor. Even though Corvan could see in the dark now, he could not see the bottom of this hole in the mountain. He thought there might not be one. Perhaps this was where souls went to die.

Maleza stood there at the edge. Corvan could feel a bitter hatred growing inside of him, but also a greater sorrow than he had ever felt before. He did not know the reasons behind these feelings. He knew that Maleza was directly causing them. They were both suffering immensely. The emotion was so unbearable that Corvan hoped Maleza would throw them both down into

the void. But then hatred started to flow over the other emotions until they disappeared entirely. It precipitated an even stronger drive for vengeance. Against whom, Corvan could not guess. He was sure that she had no intention of walking off the edge. He could only guess that something horrible had happened here, so awful that Maleza still sought revenge. Physically and emotionally, Corvan had lost all control.

Stop, please stop! What are you doing to me?

^This is where I was reborn. This is where he betrayed me.

Why are we here?

^You know nothing about life, death, love or loss.

I know how it feels. Please, take me away from here!

Corvan could do nothing. He endured the mental torture for a period of time before it started to diminish. Left behind was a distorted sense of purpose, the insatiable drive for revenge. She came here to torture herself, to rekindle the hatred that was now the only reason she had to exist. She needed revenge. Corvan needed revenge. They were one.

^We can go.

Corvan regained control of his body, turned quickly away from the void and started back up from where they came. He was too distraught to ask for answers and did not want to evoke any more emotion from his demon. They traveled in silence.

Corvan thought about his brothers and wondered how the ritual was supposed to be. Symbionts were generally confused, disoriented, and therefore mentally incapacitating to their host in the beginning. Maleza had none of those problems. Although Corvan had endured parts of the joining with ease, he was deeply unsettled that his symbiont could, for a period of time, do whatever she wanted with him. Worse yet, he feared that he would be a slave to her emotions, that he wouldn't be able to avoid acting on those emotions. He would be responsible for whatever horrible things he might do and that terrified him.

The trip out of the cave passed without communication. It took less time to leave than it did to travel down on account of Corvan's supernatural sight. His glow rocks were gone but he would never need them again, or their extra weight. He passed through the hordes of lost spirits. None of them paid any attention to him, and Corvan steered away from them as well as possible. Although Corvan was physically better than he'd ever been, he felt his mental health deteriorating.

Corvan finally crossed the border of sand out the mouth of the cave. He saw the full moon hanging ominously in the sky, low on the horizon and unusually large. He sat down at the mouth of the cave not knowing what he should do next or how long he had been in the cave. He must have lost time at the abyss because he knew he spent very little time travelling. In any case, he couldn't go home so soon or no one would believe he was joined. He thought encouraging everyone to believe that lie might be in his best interest, but he didn't want to live with the social consequence for the rest of his life. He would have to hide out for a while, think of a story, and go back home when the time was right.

^We're still doing the ritual.

I don't care about the ritual. This is not how the ritual should be.

^It is exactly as it should be.

You cannot be redeemed. Whatever plan you have to exact your revenge on the dead, I will not be a part of it.

^You are a stubborn unimaginative boy. I am past redemption and revenge is impossible.

Everyone who has ever opposed me, I have found and tortured their lost souls for centuries. It no longer satisfies.

Fine, then tell me what I'm too dull to figure out?

^You will understand, but I must show you. You must at least agree to that.

I will not cooperate with you.

^Then I will kill everyone that is important to you. You will be executed or locked up for the rest of your life. Everyone will think you've gone mad.

If that's what it takes to stop you, then that is what will happen.

^So be it, I will make the rest of your short life hell if you decide to end the ritual.

I have already decided, finally, we are done here. I will turn myself in before I give myself over to evil. You will not have the chance to deceive me.

^You are a stubborn fool!

Corvan heard footsteps coming from the cave. He sensed a living person. He sensed that it was Ceter without even looking behind him. Then he lost control.

"Corvan!! I am so glad to see you. Is it really you?"

"Yes, I am here," said Maleza.

"You have to help me. I don't understand what's happening to me."

"Don't worry, everything will be ok."

Corvan instantly felt sick with dread. He had to take back control. He willed himself against Maleza's control as hard as he could. He tried frantically to say at least a single word, but his lips did not move in the slightest. He watched with horror as his overweight, confused, and distraught friend approached him. He saw the relief in Ceter's face at finding his brother there to comfort him. Then he felt Maleza grab Corvan's knife from his belt and thrust it into Ceter's chest, into his heart. Ceter's face turned into statue of shock and horror. Maleza made Corvan watch as Ceter's body fell back and hit the ground. Ceter clutched at the knife in his chest.

"Corvan. Why?" were the last feeble, pathetic words that came from his mouth before he turned his face away. Maleza did not let Corvan say anything. She forced him to watch as Ceter's breathing became shallow and fade. Then Ceter was dead. Corvan regained control, his legs went limp and he fell to the ground. Corvan had defied Maleza. She had fulfilled her promise. Corvan was at fault for what had happened. He wept bitterly at his brother's feet.

After some mourning, Corvan started to become paranoid. He could not sense that anyone was near, but he didn't want to risk one of his brothers finding Ceter's body at the mouth of the cave. It took a few moments before Corvan gathered the courage to pull his knife from Ceter's chest. This made him feel sick to his stomach. He sat back down for a few minutes and took a moment to wash off his knife with a cloth and some water. He unsheathed Ceter's knife, bloodied it

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