

SKWAAAK!  
SKWAAAK!  
SKWAAAK!  
SKWAAAAAAAAAAK!!!

Taelor looked up from his gardening to peer at the crow who had clearly taken an unnatural interest in him.

“If you’d like to tell me something, you’ll have speak in a language I can understand,” Taelor said.

“SKWAAAK! SKWAAAK!!! AHM! HAK SKWAAAK!! HEH! BLEH! DWAAK DWOO!! DOO DoOo DO you have any idea how hard it is to get a bird to speak the common tongue?” the crow said in a thickly accented crackle punctuated by the clicks of his beak. “You new world magi are all the same. No appreciation for the old languages. You understand so tragically little about the world.”

“Yes, yes and I couldn’t point out Mercantium or Urland on a map either. I’m horribly under cultured, but you’re talking to me and, judging from your horrid accent, your name is Nicath... you want something no doubt”

“Haha, you’re an idiot, but a quick idiot. Yes, it’s your dear friend Nicath, and I’ve sent this beautiful creature to tell you that I’ll soon be paying you a visit. I understand you’ve made a break-thru in the green magics that will be thoroughly useful in my own work. I’ll give you the details when I arrive.”

“Ahhh, so you just assume you can barge into our home?” said Taelor feigning a flabbergasted look. “I suppose you just expect me to give you a room in the tower. You know the other Magi won’t take kindly to this.”

“SKWAAAAAAAAAAK!!! NONSENSE!” said the crow. “Like you, the other magi love me more than they care to admit, see you in two cycles.”

“WAIT,” said Taelor, but the crow had already lost his previous level of consciousness and was spying some corn stalks with great interest.

Taelor snapped his fingers and the corn stalks began dancing in unison causing the crow to alight.

“Well,” thought Taelor with a gleam barely perceptible in his deep green eyes, “I’ll have to get the spare tower room ready and I’ve got to find that spare key.”

Taelor made his way back to the great Magi Tower in good time. Within the tower lived the four greatest Magi of the new world: Archana, the Shawoman, mistress of potions, dark arts, and influence over all living things; Trice, the red mage, commander of fire, known the world over for his quick rage; Alüm the blue mage, overseer of rivers, rain, waves, and weather; and, of course, Taelor, the Green mage, tree whisperer, growth giver, and rejuvenator.

Taelor had dealt with each of the others thousands of times over, and loved each in his own way, but never liked asking them for anything. Their quirks could sometimes be overwhelming. Nonetheless, after searching the whole 20 stories of the tower, Taelor swallowed his pride and knocked on the door of the nearest magi, Archana.

As usual, Archana failed to answer Taelor’s knocks for the first 10 minutes. Taelor, however, would not be dissuaded; he could clearly hear the bubbling of Archana’s potions and

her mindless laughter. Lucky for him, the door to Archana's chambers was wooden. He leaned toward the door, delicately placed a hand upon it and breathed some life into the old, dead wood. With a few words the door was coaxed into obliterating its own locking mechanism and began to creak open.

Archana's shoulder was on the door slamming it shut before Taelor could get even the faintest glimpse into the room, but was soon re-opened a crack by Archana herself.

"What WOULD you liiiiike," she deliriously whispered, yelled, and sighed in turn followed by a little chuckle.

Taelor stared blankly at her for a moment, mesmerized by her pale blue eyes, covered in a glaze that clearly indicated she had been drinking new formulations of potion again, but which made them all the more enchanting.

"Well, Archana," Taelor nervously began, knowing her mood could be a little unpredictable, especially when a few formulations deep, "I was wondering if you knew where the spare tower key was."

"You were wondering, or you are wondering?" sneered Archana.

"I am wondering if you know where the key is" Taelor replied.

"Well, Taelor, I would soooooo love to help you... despite what you've done to my door... HICCUP... BUUUUTTT, I have no idea where the key is." she said letting out a second hiccup. "You know I would never find use for a spare key. Wouldn't want to give any of my guests the chance to stay here more than a night," she added with a wink

Her spell broken by the hiccups, Taelor decided to play along with her banter. "Archana, I don't remember the last time you talked to someone outside this tower, let alone had a guest."

"Why would I need to leave the tower when you are constantly entertaining the whole world here?" jeered Archana.

"The world needs to know how great WE are," remarked Taelor smirking.

Archana put a black-gloved finger to Taelor's lips and said "Dooooon't try to charm me, you know I'm impervious to it. Whom exactly do you need the spare key for anyway?"

Taelor pulled Archana's hand down and said "Heheh... yeah... about that... it's Nicath."

The gleam in Archana's eyes disappeared under a dark shadow as her eyebrows furrowed in anger and she let out an audible snarl. "Ughhhhh, that scoundrel. Don't think I've forgotten how he acted last time he was here. NO ONE should act that way when they've already dedicated themselves regardless of what influences they're under. I should know. Do you have any idea what influences I'm under right noowww?"

"Archana, you know dedication means different things for different people, give it a rest already. You should open your mind a little," said Taelor.

"Me open my mind!?? You should lecture. When was the last time you shared a potion or 2 or 3 or 4 or 5 with me?"

"Excuse me for attempting to advance the state of magic," said Taelor, a little incredulous, "but, you know, with Nicath's help, I could really make some progress. There will definitely be more time for potions then."

"Yeah, yeah, 'Progress'" sneered Archana as she took a swig from a bottle behind the door. "Anyway, I have no idea where the key is, you'll have to ask that asshole Trice," and with

that she slammed the door. Taelor could hear a metal latch sliding into place as he stood staring at the place where the crack between the door and the wall had been.

Taelor closed his eyes feeling a little disappointed that his conversation with Archana was over, but acknowledged that it was only because he had no desire to deal with Trice.

A few flights up the stairs and Taelor was at Trice's door. He was about to give the door a soft knock – he always liked to contrast Trice's aggressive demeanor with a "weaker" stance that Trice would underestimate – when there was a series of loud explosions followed by a shout from behind the door. "HEEEELLLLLLLLLL YEAAAAHHHHHHH!!!!!" Trice exclaimed, "TEN IN A ROW!!!"

Trice had recently taken to throwing black powder-filled pots from his balcony and blowing them apart with fireballs. The explosions were louder than Alüm's bottled hurricanes, tended to disturb Archana in her usually delirious state, and often rained shards of clay pot down upon her balcony. Archana was Trice's provider of black powder... Taelor knew that wouldn't last long, but hoped that argument would come another day.

Once the shouts of joy and self-congratulation were over, Taelor proceeded with his soft knock. "WHO IS IT?" yelled Trice.

"It's just Taelor, I'm wondering if you know where the spare Tower key is" Taelor said trying to get to the point quickly.

"O THANK THE LORDS," said Trice opening the door, "I thought it might be that bitch Archana coming to give me shit about the explosions again. She's so goddamn selfish."

"I dunno," said Taelor, "She does give you black powder."

"Yeah, she just wants a reason to come knock on my door," said Trice smirking.

"Heheh, I'm not sure that's true," said Taelor trying to hide his annoyance. "The key though, have you seen it?"

"The key, yeah, Alüm, took it the other day. He was going on about giving it to someone he's in love with. He never shuts up about his newest guy and there's a new one every week. I'm pretty sure they never actually want him, I mean, he's not me right?!" Trice said with a full-on grin this time.

"That's actually true," Taelor mumbled under his breath.

"What's with you and this true, untrue bullshit," Trice said with an angry look in his eyes. "You know what? Fuck you!"

Trice's door slam nearly knocked the door through its frame, but Taelor couldn't be happier the conversation was over.

Straight to the top of the tower and Taelor was at Alüms door. Before he could even begin to knock, Alüm swung open the door and, with a fluid flourish of his robed arm said, "come in Taelor."

"How did you know I was coming?" queried Taelor with a sideways glance.

"Ohhhhh," said Alüm, "I hear everything that goes on in the chambers below. All the noise floats right on up to my quarters. I've become rather good at filtering the things I care about from the flotsam, and I definitely care about that key."

“Yeah,” said Taelor “Trice mentioned something about the key and something you love? Do you still have it?”

“No, no, no,” said Alüm. “I gave the key to my love.”

“Lords damnit,” said Taelor “Why in the hells did you do that?!?”

“What better way to show my love my devotion than to give him a key to my cabin?” asked Alüm.

“But Alüm, it’s not just your, uh, cabin. Annnnnnd, being that it’s you, I’m betting this guy doesn’t even love you. You’re always letting your love flow full force into the first thing that wets your interest,” said Taelor a little exasperated and clearly getting too into the water puns. “You could use a little control.”

“It’s just my nature,” explained Alüm, “When I feel something for someone, I let those feelings rush out of me and go where they might. At least I’m not like you. You should take the advice you gave to Archana and open your mind to love instead of avoiding your own feelings.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Taelor, “love flows through me as strongly as it does through you. I just direct it like a tree directs water through its branches – only in directions that will really work out in the future – a tree whose branches grow away from the sun are useless.”

“Ugh, there you go,” said Alüm “always thinking you know what will work out best for you. The river’s course is constantly changing, you should be more open to possibility.”

“Don’t misunderstand,” said Taelor, “I throw out new branches as oft as possible and, if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that the sun can hit those branches from many different angles. BUT, unlike you, I will swiftly lop off branches that are destined for failure... Anyway, who is this guy?”

“Why should I tell you, you’ll surely judge?” asked Alüm.

“Because, I happen to need the key,” retorted Taelor, “Besides, why should you care about my judgment if you truly believe you’ve done the right thing anyway?”

“Well, he’s a Hell’s Ward,” snapped Alüm.

“You gave a tower key to a Hell’s Ward!?!?” gasped Taelor, “Do you have any idea what kind of danger you’ve put us in? If it wanted to, the devil itself could walk through our front door and destroy everything we’ve worked for!”

“Oooooo please,” jibbed Alüm, “we both know the devil isn’t all its dreamed up to be. It’s as mortal as you or me.”

“Yeah, but it controls an army of demons, chief among them being the HELLS WARDS! We are supposed to protect the new world from them, not give them the chance to come trampling all over us.”

“Have you not been listening?” pleaded Alüm, “Hells Ward Ren and I are IN LOVE. He would rather be drown in a pool of his own blood at the hands of the Devil itself than betray me.”

“Be that as it may, and I highly doubt that it is,” muttered Taelor, “we have to go get that key back.”

“OH NO!” exclaimed Alüm. “There is no way I’m taking back my token of love. I couldn’t bear to hurt Hells Ward Ren like that. His tears alone would flood all of the new world.”

“ugh... fine...” sighed Taelor, “we’ll just go steal the key back from him.... I assume you’ll at least show me to his Hell’s Gate.”

“OF COURSE,” said Alüm perking up, “I’ll take any chance to catch a glimpse of my love at work. We’ll have to bring Archana though, you know she excels at these sorts of things. I’ll conjure a river to ferry us within walking distance of the gate and-

“O NO YOU WON’T,” interrupted Taelor, “the last time you re-directed a river, you sent it straight through one of my sapling groves. I was working on that grove for 10 years Alüm, 10 years.”

“That’s all water under the bridge,” remarked Alüm, “I’ve gotten so much better since then, lets just make sure we don’t let Trice know what’s happening, you know he’ll ruin any chances we have at secrecy.”

“Alüm,” said Taelor, “That’s the most sense you’ve made this entire conversation.”

And so Taelor and Alüm pleaded with Archana to join them in stealing the spare tower key back. Archana’s help was essential not only because she could convince the demons of the hell’s gate to let them in with any number of potions and spells, but also because she was a master of disguise. Archana, however, was not one to do favors, especially if they required her to leave the tower. Taelor had to pledge to give her first pick of the year’s herb harvest, even before the best herbs were packaged away to be sold at market, to get her to agree to come and provide disguises.

Although Taelor made a big show of giving Archana this priveledge, and Archana an even bigger show of receiving it, Alüm did little more than roll his eyes at the whole ordeal. Taelor had given Archana first pick of the herb harvest every one of the hundred years they’d been in the tower, always in return for one favor or another. This was bound to happen eventually.

The problem with favors from Archana was that they always bit you in some way in the end. Taelor learned of the bite of this favor as soon as his disguise finished growing in.

“So, I really have demon wings now?” asked Taelor staring dumb founded in Archana’s massive body mirror.

“Yes,” said Archana, “I told you, it’s so easy to trick human cells to grow into any number of things with just a few chemicals.”

“Wow!” said Taelor getting a little giddy as he tried a few flaps and jutted into the air, “this is actually quite awesome. Is there a potion or spell to reverse their growth?”

“Well no,” said Archana snidely “that would be a waste of potion and energy. You just have to get them cut off.”

“WHAT?!?!?” yelled Taelor crashing into one of Archana’s many ornate bureaus and sending clothes in all directions.

“LORDS DAMNIT TAEOR” shrieked Archana “Those are my spider’s silk robes. I swear, if you rip any one of them, I’ll have you extracting silk for weeks.”

“Does it feel like it’s getting hot in here?” asked Alüm looking over his own wings in the mirror.

“The floor will be hot with Taelor’s blood if he doesn’t pick up that mess,” said Archana.

“No wait, I feel it too,” said Taelor.

“Fuck...” the three of them mumbled in unison as Trice threw open the door and lumbered in.

“That’s right assholes, I’ve been listening in for a while now,” growled Trice. “I cannot believe you’ve been planning a raid without me. I’ve had an itch to try out a new explosion spell and this would be perfect.”

“The thing is...” began Alüm as he inched around Trice to look him in the eye, “its not a raid at all.”

“We’re stealing,” said Archana, “ We’ll need stealth and finesse... two things you definitely do not have.”

“Psh, I’m ready for a good Plunder any time,” said Trice getting excited.

“O no, nobody is plundering or pillaging anything,” said Taelor, “we’re just getting the spare Tower key back from Alüm’s love at the Hells Gate.”

“A HELL’S GATE!!!” exclaimed Trice, a passion burning in his eyes now, “We haven’t gone up against a hells gate since the great truce! There’s no way I’m not going.”

“NO,” said Alüm “The only one whose going to go up against anything in that Hell’s gate is me. We’re doing this in secret so we don’t hurt my love.”

“Yeah yeah, no big deal, I can do secret” said Trice, “You’ll notice me little more than you notice a flickering candle, but, when you need me, you know I’ll roar into action.”

“Damn it Trice, that won’t be necessary.”

“Well, I’m coming, lemme just get some powder,” said Trice as he left the room.

“Ugh,” said Archana, “I’ll get working on his disguise. You owe me more for this crap.”

After a few hours of mixing, pouring, tasting, dumping, mixing, pouring, trying out some formulations on gnomes from the garden, and finally adding a little spice for flavor, the potion to disguise Trice was ready.

“Will I get some wings like these two?” asked Trice.

“O No,” said Archana, “You’ll get something much better than wings, much more beastly, more powerful.”

“Awww shit! You’re speaking my language!” exclaimed Trice as he grabbed the potion from Archana’s hands and commenced chugging.

“You won’t be speaking any languages in a second,” murmured Archana under her breath.

“What do yo..u...,” but Trice’s speech stopped mid-sentence as his lips projected outward into a snout with the cutest teddy bear nose, hair began sprouting from under all his clothes, and his body tripled in size and girth tearing everything he wore to shreds.

The mindless and rageful bear that now stood where once Trice was chugging seemed hungry for meat and was about to lunge at a shocked Taelor, but it took only a flourish of Archana’s hand and a simple but firm “Sit my pet!” to calm the bear.

“I suppose that’s effective,” said Alum. “Keeps him from ruining everything if he’s under your control.”

“More importantly,” said Archana as she threw a large, fluffy saddle over the bear’s back “I get to ride to the Hell’s gate in comfort.”

“Where did you get that from?” asked Taelor.

“Ha!” laughed Archana, “Do you really think this is the first time, I’ve transformed someone into a bear?”

“Hmmm, makes sense” said Taelor, “How long do we have until he turns back?”

“No idea,” said Archana, “I was rushed, and I’ve certainly never done this to Trice before.”

“Ugh, great,” complained Alum, “let just get going.”

Despite Taelor’s original objections, after a little arguing, and considering the fact that Trice could turn back at any time, he swiftly agreed to allow Alum to summon a river to ferry them near the gate of Hell’s Ward Ren. Taelor even contorted some trees into a makeshift raft. It was in his nature to stand firm against things that weren’t his own ideas, but he generally listened to reason eventually.

Just before they reached their destination, a thought popped into Alum’s head. “You know,” he said, “that isn’t actually Trice you’re riding.”

“Sure it is,” said Archana taking a swig from her ever-present potion bottle, “you saw me transmogrify him yourself,”

“Yeah,” said Alum, “But, everything that made Trice what he was is gone. None of the connections in his brain making up all his memories, his personality, his very Trice-ness are even there anymore... how do you know you’ll get all those connections right when you transform him back?”

“That’s a good point,” said Taelor getting caught up in the argument, “I mean, with these wings, all we gotta do is cut them off and we’re back to normal.”

“After some bleeding,” interrupted Archana.

“Sure,” said Taelor cringing, “but our brains won’t be effected.”

“As far as I know,” said Archana aloofly.

“With Trice it’s different,” said Alum, “Where’s all that info about his brain structure stored?”

“How should I know?” asked Archana.

“Well, you did say you’ve done this before... right?” asked Taelor a little worried.

“O Yeah, plenty of times,” said Archana, “But I never knew the people, so I didn’t really care.”

“Great,” said Alum, “Best case scenario he still thinks he’s a bear when he turns back, worst case, he goes back to being Trice.”

“Look,” said Archana “You guys are being ridiculous. It’s not as if a person is nothing more than a bunch of connections between cells, there’s the spirit and the soul!”

All four of them (even Trice the bear) stared at each other for a full five seconds before they all burst into laughter and agreed to worry about it later.

As the group came upon on a beautiful, but dying grove below a massive, white capped mountain. Alum called out with glee “The Hell’s gate where my love spends his days toiling under that foolish devil lies just at the base of this mountain. It should take us no more than an hour’s walk through the grove to get there!”

“Thaaaank the heavens,” said Archana yawning, “This ride has been so boring, and this bear... I mean Trice, smells.”

“Yeah, I’m ready to get off this boat,” said Taelor jumping to shore, “I think I’ll go talk to the trees and see if any demons are nearby.”

“OH! OH! OH! Ask them about Hell’s Ward Ren!” said Alüm.

Taelor ignored Alüm and slowly rested his hands and forehead on the nearest tree. It was a tall maple with yellowing leaves that was clearly infested with some parasite or another.

The infestation seemed to recoil from Taelor’s touch and the tree itself brightened as he began to converse with it. An on-looker would have thought the scene quite strange; Taelor appeared to be doing little more than caressing a tree and staring longingly at its branches as his bat-like wings fluttered up and down somewhat anxiously.

Archana, not one to let such an interaction go unnoticed, jeered, “Get it Taelor, you know what it wants.”

Her smirking face dropped when Taelor looked up in horror from the tree and choked out “There’s an entire battalion coming this way.”

“O, that’s all” said Archana rolling her eyes. “Here,” she said handing Taelor and Alum the chains to shackles that had manifested around her wrists, “just pretend you’re one of them and I’m your prisoner.”

“But what about the bear?” asked Alüm.

“Eh, we’ll just let him wander into the woods and get him later,” said Archana.

“Sounds splendid,” said a relieved Alüm, “I wouldn’t want him scaring my beautiful Hells ward.”

“Ugh, I hope this works,” said Taelor with a small sigh.

Lucky for Taelor, there was nothing to worry about. Whether Archana meant to or not, the wings she bestowed upon Alüm and Taelor were marks of higher level demons whom everyone in the battalion was all too ready to please. It wasn’t until Alüm and Taelor were throwing Archana into the Hell’s Gate dungeons with just a little too much enthusiasm that things went awry.

“WHERE ARE THEY?” snarled a mountain of a demon just barely small enough to fit around the dungeon halls.

Frightened, but curious, Taelor peaked out the door to Archana’s dungeon cell. At first, all he could make out was a dark hulking mass with mesmerizing blood red eyes, but, as the demon began to walk further down the hall where the ceiling was just a little lower, his horns scrapped against metal beams in the ceiling sending sparks flying and illuminating the entire hallway.

“GOOD GODS!” screamed Taelor, “please don’t tell me that’s coming for us”

“Ooooo, what is it???” asked Alüm, with a coy look in his eye.

“The biggest demon, I’ve ever seen!” said Taelor, “His limbs are thicker and more sinewy than even my most beloved red woods. His horns look to be coated in the most ancient and powerful heaven forged steel. AND THOSE TEETH, they jut out of his red-lipped mouth like butchers knives through freshly cut meat, but WORST OF ALL, THOSE EYES. They horrify and mesmerize at the same time. Like the bloodiest of battles, you want to look away, but you can’t help but be attracted to the carnage and destruction. Why, I’m sure he’s gored thousands as they simply stood staring into his eyes embracing their fate.”

“OOO MY LOOOOOOORRRD” shrieked Alüm, “That’s Hell’s Ward Ren!!! O NO, what if he see’s me, he’ll think I’ve betrayed him! ARCHANA! YOU HAVE TO DO SOMETHING!”



“Sooo, you throw me onto this disgusting dungeon floor after all I’ve ALREADY done so much for you and you have the nerve to ask me for more help.”

“ARCHAAANNNNNNNAAAAAAA!” screamed Alüm even more frantic now. “You know that was all just for show, they needed to know you were our prisoner.”

“I think that was obvious from the damn chains!” sneered Archana shaking her shackles.

All three could hear Hell’s Ward Ren berating the lesser demons outside Archana’s cell.

“THERE ARE NO SCHEDULED VISITS FROM HIGHER DEMONS FOR THE NEXT THREE CYCLES YOU IDIOTS. WHO HAVE YOU LET IN HERE?”

“There must be some mistake sir,” said one of the lesser demons, “they clearly had the wings of even... your... uh... superiors”

“Ohhhhh, did they?” Asked Hell’s Ward Ren. “Why then, do they smell, LIKE HUMANS???”

“I umm, sorry sir, I didn’t notice the smell, but now that you...”

But just as the lesser demon was about to finish speaking, Hell’s Ward Ren grabbed hold of his nose, ripped it clean off his face, and threw the lesser demon to ground saying “seeing as you haven’t been using this properly, I guess you don’t need it”

“Arrrrchaanaaaaaa!!!” hissed Alüm through gritted teeth, tears coming to his eyes.

“Ugh, fine, I’ll help” said Archana, “but only because I don’t want that Hell’s Ward to get blood all over my damn clothes when he spears you with those horns.”

“Finally,” said Alüm, immediately composed, “I thought I was going to have to get some real water works going”

“UGGHH, you’re such a, UGGH” blurted Archana. “HERE, just throw this at him when he comes through the door,” she said shoving a small bag of powder into Alüm’s hand.

“What is it?” asked Taelor.

“It’s suggestion powder” said Archana. “Get someone to breathe the right amount of that stuff in and you’ll be able to get them to believe or do ANYTHING you want.”

“You really make me nervous,” said Taelor.

“Good,” said Archana with a scowl.

“ALRIGHT WHO THE HELL ARE YOU!” yelled Hell’s Ward Ren busting through the door, but as soon as he stepped through, his head twitched and he took a big sniff saying longingly “wait, what is this smell, I know this smell, I know this smell well.”

Before Hell’s Ward Ren could figure it all out, Alüm lobbed powder straight towards his still sniffing nostrils and the Hell’s Ward took in a hefty helping of the powder.

“That’s the familiar smell of dead human,” said Taelor. “The three of us just returned from a fresh pillaging and are on our way back to the Hells with fresh info on the Magi for the Devil itself.”

“Yeah, we killed soooooooo many humans,” said Alüm nervously. “There are now rivulets of blood coursing through the Northern forests.”

“OOO, that sounds wonderful!” exclaimed Hell’s Ward Ren. “I do so miss the days when I could travel away from the Hell’s gate and kill humans where they live. But, you know, Hell’s Ward duties and all.”

“O yes, such a shame,” said Archana in annoyed monotone.

“Yes, yes, terrible,” said Taelor, “You know, you should take some time off, abduct some villagers, that’ll make your work here a bit more bearable”

“YES TAKE TIME OFF!!!” squeaked Alüm.

Both Taelor and Archana shot Alüm dirty looks, but when Taelor looked back toward the Hell’s Ward he noticed the spare Tower key chained at his hip for the first time. The golden key was a treasure to behold.

“You know,” said Taelor, “We could try to convince the Devil to give you some time off.”

“OOO, how’s that?” asked Hell’s Ward Ren.

“Well, you know the Devil loves his gold, we could bring him that key as a gift from you.”

“NO!!!” growled out the Hells Ward, a small flame coming from his nostrils. “I need this key,” he said catching his composure

“Awwwwwwwwwwwwwwww,” swooned Alüm.

“Hold on,” said Archana “lemme throw another idea past my colleague here,” she said pulling Taelor towards her.

“So there’s a little problem,” she whispered to Taelor, “Suggestion powder loses its power when you are suggesting something that goes against true love.”

“Wow,” whispered back Taelor, “that’s really lame”

“No, not really, we just have to give him a higher dose,” said Archana handing Taelor a second bag of suggestion powder

“Well,” said Taelor turning back to the Hell’s ward who was very clearly growing suspicious of Alüm who’d been doing nothing but staring at him and smirking wide eyed. “We can’t think of any other way to get you time off from the Devil. Guarding this Hell’s gate is important work, but, we can cheer you up with some human ash. We were going to give it to the Devil, but here, you should snort it.”

“Ahhhh, I haven’t snorted some good human ash in ages,” said Hell’s Ward Ren as he happily took the bag from Taelor.

“Snort it ALL in at once” said Archana, “That’s the best way to do it.”

“O I know,” said the Hell’s Ward, “It’s been a while, but I’m quite experienced”

“So true!” said Alüm.

And with a snort that nearly took in the whole bag, Hell’s Ward Ren inhaled the last of the suggestion powder, but, true to his lack of practice, he quickly sneezed out a good half of it filling the entire room with fine, black dust.

“fuck...” said Archana under her breath.

“You wanna?” said Taelor already feeling the effects.

“No you idiot, just tell him to give us the key and let’s get out of here.”

“O yeah!” exclaimed Taelor “Hey Ren, give us that key on your hip.”

“Of course, anything for you guys!” said Hell’s Ward Ren, laughing and handing the key to Taelor. “Man this is some good human Ash.”

“Alright, lets get out of here” said Archana. “We’ll have to take on this whole Hell’s gate if some damned demon sees the state we’ve put him in.”

“Haha, all demons are damned,” said Alüm chuckling.

“Haha, that’s so true!” said Taelor. “You know what? We could take on this Hell’s gate, it would be easy?”

“Yeah!” said Alüm “It would be the easiest thing in the world! AND THEN REN COULD COME STAY WITH US”

“YEAH!” said Taelor “He seems like a great guy, and those eyes.”

“O yeah” said Archana sarcastically and forgetting that neither Alüm nor Taelor had ever tried suggestion powder before, “Why don’t you two just walk through the Hell’s gate and take on the Devil himself?”

Before Archana could finish rolling her eyes, Alum and Taelor were running out of the dungeon toward the Hell’s gate yelling, “let’s get the bear, YEAH THE BEAR!” By the time Archana got out of the dungeon, there was an all out war in front of the Hell’s gate. Both Alum and Taelor were astride Trice the bear’s back, Taelor facing front and Alum behind. Taelor somehow found a way to get Trice to cough out fire balls while Alum was conjuring torrents of water to drown the demons that surrounded them.

Their whole strategy was wildly ineffective. Taelor kept directing Trice to set demons on fire, but, whenever a demon began to burn, it would just run into Alüm’s water. Eventually Taelor, apparently channeling some of Trice’s wrath, became overly frustrated by the whole situation, looked to the heavens and screamed. Just as the scream came up from his throat, the ground began screaming in tune, but, instead of sending out sound, hundreds of trees exploded from holes in the ground, sending bloody trunks through many demons and destroying most of the structures surrounding the Hell’s gate.

As the carnage was reaching its height, Archana noticed a shimmer in the Hell’s gate. Hell’s gates, large stone structures with boulder-sized stairs leading up to enormous, pitch black archways, only give off light just before something comes through. The bigger the thing, the more pronounced the shimmer.

“Eh, just one tiny shimmer,” thought Archana, “must be sending reinforcements, but this is too good to break...”

Mid thought, a blinding light gushed through the Hell’s Gate.

“OOO FUCK,” yelled Archana. “Taelor, Alüm, it’s time to go home”

“YEAH!!! HOME!!!” yelled Taelor and Alüm dutifully taking the suggestion.

Taelor had Trice spew out one long breath of flame setting all his trees burning before turning him and galloping toward Archana.

Alüm grabbed Archana on as they rushed by, but they got little more than half way toward the forest before Trice, his paws beginning to turn back into feet, stumbled on the ruins of the dungeon, flinging Alüm, Taelor, and Archana straight on top of a mumbling Hell’s Ward Ren who seemed nearly out of his mind.

“WHAT’S WRONG WITH HIM??!?!?” yelled Alüm, snapped out of his suggestion powder stupor upon seeing his love’s predicament.

“Nothing,” said Archana, “he’s just taken a little too much. Happens to the best of us.”

“We’ll, we can’t leave him here!” exclaimed Alüm. “Whatever’s coming through that Hell’s gate will see that he’s failed and kill him!”

“That’s soooo true,” said Taelor still obviously a little out of it. “But, don’t worry, he’s got some strong arms and wings!”

“WHAT THE HELLS ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT??” screamed Alüm.

“Chilllllll,” said Taelor. “Hey Ren, fly us all over to our tower, it’s just south of here man”

“Huh, o, wha, yeah sure” mumbled Ren scooping up two of them in each arm, including the recently transformed Trice who was both naked and out cold. With no sign of grace, he took to the air and they darted home.

The next day, Trice was the first to wake up. His was leaning with his back to the door to the Magi tower and laying on the front steps in the first light of morning were Archana, Taelor, and Alüm still wrapped in the arms of Hell's Ward Ren.

"WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS!" yelled Trice. "WHY DOES MY THROAT HURT? WHY AM I NAKED? AND WHY THE HELLS DO I WANT HONEY?"

"It's always me, my, I with you," said Archana yawning, "I guess we didn't need to worry about you forgetting yourself."

"OO, you stupid, YOU TURNED ME INTO A BEAR AGAIN DIDN'T YOU!?!?"

"Again?" asked Taelor groggily, "I thought you said you'd never transmogrified Trace before?"

"Well, I lied," said Archana with a smile.

"YOU WERE IN ON THIS TOO?!?!?" yelled Trice turning to Taelor. But, just as it seemed Trice was going to wring Taelor's neck, the door creaked open and bumped into him. "WHO THE HELLS???" yelled Trice.

"O ho ho ho," said Nicath chuckling "Classic you guys. Having way too much fun I see. Forgot I was to be here in two cycles didn't you."

"It's been two cycles?!?" exclaimed Taelor, "wait, more importantly, how did you get into the tower?"

"Me?" said Nicath looking confused, "I just used the key Alüm gave me last time I was here."

"You did what?" asked Taelor and Archana glaring at Alüm in unison.

"I just used the key," said Nicath, "Alüm knew I had it, I spoke to him just after speaking to you Taelor."

"I hate all of you," said Archana jumping up.

"So, I had ulterior motives for going to the Hell's Gate," said Alüm staring deeply into previously Hell's Ward Ren's eyes, "It all worked out in the end."

"I need a nap," said Taelor walking past Nicath and into the tower.

"Yup, don't bother me for a week," said Archana following Taelor's lead.

"Fuck this," said Trice covering himself and walking into the Tower.

"Well, that worked out well," said Alüm smiling.

"Yeah, I'm sure you two won't be sleeping for a while," said Nicath. With a quick wink, he slinked back into the tower and closed the door leaving Alum and no longer Hell's Ward Ren to watch the sun rise over the smoldering mountain of the Hell's gate.