

Chapter 1

Taken

Rupert tossed and turned in his flat above Oblivion, a perfume shop on posh Kensington High Street in London. His curly red-blond hair had come loose of its man bun and his eighteen-year-old lanky limbs were tangled in his bedclothes.

Those making their way home from pubs and late chatty dinners on this freezing autumn night would glimpse only their own distorted reflection in Oblivion's antique diamond windowpanes, not comprehending the shop was there. Shoppers during the day would only notice the door if they had a referral. Prominent women in search of eternity, saints in search of a signature scent, priests in search of incense that would prepare their congregants for what the hereafter might do to their senses; they served all types at Oblivion, mortals and angels and those from the Hidden Universes. Rupert couldn't think of anything more splendid.

Clomping hooves brought on a surge of adrenaline that pulled Rupert to consciousness. He quickly stumbled to the window and peered down at the now empty street. He watched as a mounted guard, Queen Elizabeth II's very own, rounded the corner. They pranced by, warm breath vaporizing into the cold air, just finishing midnight exercises. It was not the terror he feared. His heart rate slowed.

The fading horses' hooves didn't quite mask the sound of breaking glass in the shop downstairs. He pulled on an all-the-rage fitted jacket and secured his hair. Rupert had studied endless films to determine what style to take when he left his angel form behind and assumed his

human form. Never mind that it was now the new millennium, Rupert preferred the Sixties. Not the hippy version, but the sleek uptown mod James Bond version, now making a hopeful return, it being the glamorous year 2000.

Rupert left the warm flat and descended a cold marble staircase with ornate rails. It landed at a dark vestibule that had a door to the street and a private door to Oblivion, where he was an apprentice; or to be precise, was on probation. It irritated him that most other inhabitants of earth just naively blundered along, assuming they had gotten away with, or were forgiven for, their constant transgressions. Did only angels deserve to suffer such oppressive scrutiny?

Never mind, a few more days, and if everything went to plan, he would be legit again, off probation, with a Potions Master License permanently hanging on the wall of Oblivion.

A woman's voice was cursing. He cracked open the door and peeked inside the shop. Anger flushed his core. Doreen, the lumpy young pastry chef from the tea shop across the street, had broken in. Stringy hair slipped out from under her flour dusted head-kerchief. She was rummaging through drawers in the ancient apothecary cabinets. Several of the display shelves above her stooped figure had their glass-paned oak doors left ajar, covered with floury fingerprints. Rupert shoved the door open.

"I already told you no! Get out!" Rupert shouted.

The mousy woman looked hurt. She tried to pocket a vial. He almost felt pity.

"Do you think it would just be sitting on the shelf?" Rupert asked.

"It says Cyryzzma on the label," she replied, holding up the amber vial.

"An early version," he replied, his guts sinking.

Rupert kept silent on the fact that she held the only sample, the one that Ezra, his Potions Master, had promised to test that very evening as soon as they finished with their frantic rush of usual Friday customers. Ezra wanted to see Cyryzzma in action before submitting it to SCOD, the Supreme Council of Dominions, as evidence of Rupert's readiness to receive a license. Of course, suppressing a human's grosser instincts, preventing them from defending themselves, was a big claim for his potion, but Rupert was confident.

Doreen's thumb threatened to flick open the Cyryzzma vial. Ezra's words echoed in his head: *people will believe almost anything you tell them, angels too.*

"It only worked for harpies," he said flatly.

She looked unconvinced. The ladies living above the teashop had been sniffing around for months. Why had he bragged about the name? Rumors about what Cyryzzma did had generated innuendo and offers bordering on criminal. Trading unlicensed potions wasn't allowed by SCOD, the Supreme Council of Dominions. The last thing he needed before his hearing was to be involved in Unholy Commerce. Ezra had told him that Oblivion had its own secret ways of spying built in, of keeping the authorities advised. Not surprising, since every place on earth had its own divine purpose, which could not be violated without penalty. He suspected the addicts that were sent to the side door were the real spies; he and Ezra concocted special lavender for them, to be used with their drug as they detoxed. The lavender later evoked healing or the same effect as the drug, depending on divine will.

The pounding of hooves caused Doreen and Rupert to turn and look towards the street. Was it the Queen's guard again or horses of another nature? She tossed the vial of Cyryzzma at

Rupert as she fled. He caught it neatly and quickly shoved it in the pocket of his jacket. Her hard-soled oxfords crunched on broken glass. She slammed the door behind her.

Rupert hurried to the door and let its blind down. He knew it was a ridiculous defense for what might be coming. He knew he should flee but felt compelled to lift one slat in the blind and watch. A blast of cold air through the broken side pane signaled the arrival of the menace, but Rupert couldn't look away.

He saw Doreen slip behind the teashop door just as the thundering hooves rounded the corner. The sight of tightly braided manes on black horses sent a chill down Rupert's spine. It was the Archangel's fierce right arm, Enforcement Troops cloaked in blood purple. Their hooded faces and silver livery clanked and shimmered in the moonlight.

The Archangel's Troops never charged the streets at dawn, when the sky was growing lighter, but at the darkest dark before the dawn. Humans couldn't hear the drumming on the cobblestones. They couldn't see the iron cage that floated at the end of the formation. But the Troop's mere presence seeped into the mortal's sleep and turned dreams into nightmares.

The nightmare was real for Doreen. It was rumored that she had used her angelic powers for her own selfish purposes, a clear act of Unholy Commerce by the rules of SCOD.

Rupert had seen her many admirers, an unaccountable number for such a dull girl. Her angelic skill to charm more and more of them must have reached its limits. Why else would she want the Cyryzzma, if not to disarm their defenses and draw them in?

Rupert had been warned in his early days: once an angel had a taste of earthly pleasures, they could only crave them in ever increasing portions. Rupert was vigilant in guarding against

this in his passion for earthly scents, though not the cause of his original troubles, it could turn addictive. Admirers must have become just such an obsession for Doreen, or was it something else that caused her to become a criminal?

Across the street, the Archangel's Troops dismounted and broke down the door of the teashop kitchen. Rupert let the slat in the window blind drop. It would be safer to watch from a distance upstairs.

By the time his finger parted the curtain in his flat, the Troops had tied Doreen inside the cage with golden ropes, rumored to be made of martyr's hair.

A broad-shouldered figure with his back to Rupert was giving orders. Could it be the Archangel? Rupert pulled the curtain open farther and strained to see what the Archangel, the defender of earthly order, looked like.

To Rupert's astonishment, he seemed to be wearing a tuxedo with a greatcoat and cape. Was terrifying power horrible or magnificent? Had he taken human form? Rupert wanted to see his face, but The Archangel's glare was firmly fixed on Doreen, his fur-hat ruffled in the cold wind. His head never turned to give Rupert even a glimpse.

Doreen gave away no clues. She didn't cry out. She only stared blankly at a streetlight with eyes that betrayed far away thoughts. The Troops remounted, the cage jerked as they surged forward. Doreen cast her angry eyes towards the windows of Oblivion as they towed her away.

She had something secreted in her hand. A potion bottle? She must have nicked something else from the shop. Her hand was tied but she managed to flick off the cork and pour out the

contents while smirking up at Rupert's window. Wind whistled, snowfall intensified. Rupert felt his heart stop, an open bottle could release a natural disaster.

The Archangel shook his head in the direction of Doreen. The uncorked bottle crackled and froze solid. She dropped it as if it had burned her, it rolled into the street. The storm calmed and so did Rupert's heartbeat. He watched the vial melt and disappear into a storm grate.

The Troop's horses galloped down the street pulling the cage. They lifted into the air and vanished into a thickening fog. The moon's sharp glow dimmed.

The Archangel had stayed behind. A dark SUV pulled away from a taxi station down the street. Had the Archangel stopped the bottle's power with one glance? The SUV collected the Archangel like it would any posh gentleman.

Something dreadfully serious must be afoot on earth if the Archangel, disciplinarian of all supernatural creatures, had taken on a human form. Rupert was sure it wasn't for a mere pastry chef with too many admirers. She may have committed some kind of Unholy Commerce, but the Troops normally could have dealt with that on their own.

Rupert stood frozen at the window until the moon sank. He couldn't help but feel there was a warning for him in Doreen's final stare at Oblivion's windows. In the morning he would take inventory to discover what she had stolen. He assumed pouring out the potion was an immature gesture of retaliation, but the storm her opened vial generated would have had dire consequences if the Archangel hadn't stopped it.

This thought motivated him to go back down the freezing stair and board up the broken side pane against further intruders. He took the only sample of Cyryzzma out of his robe pocket

and set it on the counter. He turned a key in a lock on the back of the counter. A hidden compartment popped open to reveal a red velvet nest. He secured the vial in it, slid the compartment shut, and pocketed the key. He knew he had been careless.

When he slipped back into bed he lay rigid the few remaining hours of the night, listening for the Troops to come back. The clatter of hooves didn't return, but lingered in Rupert's mind. He had plenty to ponder. Doreen had been "Taken." Rupert didn't know what happened to a creature after it was Taken. He wished he had paid more attention to such things in school. He knew there was some kind of 'Reckoning Trial' but Rupert had never heard of anyone returning afterwards to depict the ordeal. Sure, he had been careless about locking up the vials, but he hadn't given Doreen any Cyryzzma. She had attempted to steal a potion designed for those above her class, intended for those on the Archangel's level.

As convinced as he was that Cyryzzma would be accepted, he still felt uneasy. Doreen could render false evidence for spite. Ezra could change his mind.

Lights flashed around the curtains, hit the ceiling. Had the Archangel's SUV returned? Rupert clamored to the window and looked down at the street.

A taxi let out a wisp of a figure and sped off. The moon had disappeared, Rupert couldn't make out any details, just elegant movement. She entered the door to the flats over the teashop. A faint swirl was left behind in the now gently falling snow.

Too lithe to be Doreen, who was unlikely to ever return, it must be another of the young women. Rupert knew that a bevy of them lived there. A territory he was prone to avoid for several reasons. He went to bed and drifted into slumber contemplating the incomprehensibility of women.

Chapter 2

Broken Vial

The next morning things didn't seem as grim as the night before. Steaming tea in hand, Rupert examined the street below; all was quiet. The sky was white with London cold and a sprinkling of new snow-dust obscured any hint of the previous night's visitors.

The toaster popped. He carried his tea mug to the kitchen and slathered a spongy crumpet with fig compote. Rupert breathed in the orange blossom overtone of the jam; it soothed his worry that Doreen would concoct some foul connection with him, inciting the Archangel as her revenge for not obtaining Cyryzzma. Rupert hadn't studied the nuances in school but he was sure giving an uncertified potion to an angel of Doreen's class was forbidden. It might even be considered Unholy Commerce, the exact definition of which was something he had gotten wrong more than once on his school exams.

He finished his breakfast and dressed in a grey flannel suit, crisp white shirt and pink silk tie. Rupert entered the dark stairwell to descend to the vestibule. Before entering the shop, he cracked open the door and peered inside. After three years here on Earth, and as much as he loved mixing potions, he was still quite ill at ease with mortals and some of the other creatures he and Ezra served.

It was suspiciously quiet.

"Ezra?"

No answer.

Hmm. He pushed the door open, strolled behind the counter. From there he could comfortably survey the street. It was still empty; the snow-dust now sparking in a rare appearance of the sun. The perfumery's Open/Shut sign hadn't yet been turned over. Ezra was late? Ezra had never been late before. Perhaps he had seen the broken window and gone to fetch the police or repairmen? Knowing Ezra, that was an unlikely possibility. Maybe he was on a house call. Rupert hoped Ezra hadn't gone far, he wanted to get the demonstration of Cyryzza over with and secure not only Ezra's promise of a blessing, but his promise to recommend him for SCOD's Potions Master License.

Rupert inserted the key in the counter, the compartment popped open revealing the vial of Cyryzza. He sighed, at ease again. Ezra had mentioned colleagues who could provide volunteers for its test. They were to drop by that evening. He eased the Cyryzza onto the counter. He regretted not having pretested it yet as was required. He hoped a willing subject would come into the shop today. Maybe he should have given some to Doreen after all. But he hadn't trusted she was the 'right sort' to test his destiny.

A sunbeam crept over the transom. Rupert's brilliant blue eyes followed the beam's track across the floor and along the back shelves. The shelves were dusty from the break-in or maybe from neglect while Rupert had put all his efforts into Cyryzza. It looked a wreck. Ezra wouldn't approve, they delivered perfection here at Oblivion. Thank God Ezra hadn't arrived yet. Maybe Ezra's tardiness was a blessing in disguise.

With the same care one might give to a vial of nitro, Rupert eased each bright glass bottle off the shelves, into his cupped palm, and onto the counter next to the Cyryzza. Their colors

deepened in the sunbeam: fuchsia, sea green, neon blue. They glinted with flecks of gold, silver, copper. He unfolded a handkerchief of the finest cashmere and wiped the glass shelves in slow circles. Particles swam in the sunbeam like gold dust.

An ominous shadow from the doorway cut across the sunlight. Rupert's stomach sank, Ezra! He had put-to but the mess wasn't nearly set straight. Rupert turned around, begging his panicked brain to come up with excuses for the state of the shop and his delayed pretest. Who he saw peering in the doorway stunned him in mid-thought.

Waves of fawn colored hair fell around her shoulders and flowed to the waist of a pale blue coat. A gossamer scarf wafted around her in the wind. She hugged herself against the cold. Her enormous forlorn eyes studied the Shut sign. When she turned to leave, Rupert's heart seized.

A half-groaned, half-shouted, "Ah!" was all Rupert could manage.

She turned back and cupped her hands against the glass door to peer in. Her raised arms emphasized her tiny cinched waist. She banged a delicate gloved palm on the door.

Rupert couldn't tell if the soft thudding was from her knock or his chest. He forgot the dusty shelves, Ezra, his probation, where he was, and unfortunately the length of the counter in front of him. Eyes fixed on her, he lunged towards the door and smacked his hip into the counter's edge.

Rupert yelped, "Ack!"

The bottles trembled, toppled. Before Rupert could catch it, the amber vial containing Cyryzzma rolled off the counter and crashed to the floor. The neck broke, and a rush of air flew from the bottle. Rupert knew it was too late to do anything about it. A golden cloud of sweet musk

escaped from the bottle and swirled about the room. In one swift gesture he scooped up the empty bottle and jammed the cork back into the broken neck before its vacuum force could activate.

The bell tinkled as she opened the door. Wait a minute, the door wasn't locked? Rupert attempted to think back over the night before. He was positive that he had locked it when the Archangel's Troops had thundered onto the street. That could only mean one thing. She was an angel too. She could open doors with her desire alone. Rupert gasped as a golden cloud of Cyryzzma swept around her and rushed out the open door.

She took in a deep breath, closed the door and clapped her hands like a child.

"I'm so pleased you're here!" she said.

Rupert pleaded silently, *please may Ezra be extraordinarily delayed*. Please may she mean she's pleased it's specifically me, Rupert, here. Although he doubted that was the case. She didn't seem to notice him. She was appreciating what was left of the golden cloud, which was slowly escaping through crevices in the ancient leaded window frames and plywood over the broken pane. He had to pull himself together, he didn't know whether to freak out at the loss of the Cyryzzma or rejoice in the presence of the lovely vision before him. And how would a whiff of Cyryzzma affect her? His need for a pretext mingled with his disorientation over her beauty and fierce desire to protect her.

Rupert heard Ezra's voice from what he hoped was inside his own head. *Treat her like she's any other customer*. This was from Ezra's lectures on what to do if a Helen of Troy or Marilyn Monroe happened into the shop some time.

Even though Ezra's advice on women was somewhat suspect, Ezra being still single and pining over a long-lost love from his youth, the thought still calmed Rupert sufficiently for him to blurt out, "How may I help you?"

"Night Blooming Cereus?" she gestured at the remaining tiny wisp of golden cloud.

Impressed at her recognition of Cyryzzma's active ingredient, Rupert tried a joke to keep the panic out of his voice, "I'm afraid we're all out at the moment."

His mind was shrieking for him to "do something" but he felt paralyzed while she watched the last bit of golden cloud slip over the door transom and float under the nose of a passing man in a business suit. The businessman smiled, promptly dropped his briefcase, took out his wallet and with glee handed out hundred-pound notes to bemused pedestrians. It was working! Were there any harmful effects?

Rupert held his breath as the cloud teased around pedestrians' hair. Until fully tested by SCOD he couldn't be sure how Cyryzzma would affect any creature. The cloud dispersed before it could envelop any other passersby. No one else had inhaled. Rupert exhaled, the renegade Cyryzzma didn't seem like it was going to cause any harm. He could simply make another batch before Ezra's testers appeared that evening.

He turned his full attention to the mysterious creature before him. She seemed a little tipsy but unharmed by the Cyryzzma. Rupert laughed in relief. She giggled and locked eyes with him, laughing until tears brimmed from her amber-spiked eyes. Suddenly, she began to cry in earnest.

Rupert didn't know what to do. She leaned forward and sobbed into his shoulder. He lifted an awkward arm to comfort her but she composed herself and pulled away before he could complete the gesture.

"I'm Lowelle, could you fetch Ezra?" she said.

"Ezra's delayed, I'm Rupert, surely I can help you."

"It's not for me," Lowelle said with a deep sigh.

While Rupert swept up broken glass, Lowelle perched on a stool and went on to describe the man she had been sent to Earth to help, an old Creole in New Orleans. The Creole had learned the old voodoo ways from his grandfather and sent up his first prayer as a man-boy. Lowelle had been assigned by SCOD to answer the prayers of this man-boy, an assignment that had now gone on for eighty years. His voodoo had made him an expert in Bayou herbs and plants, and the Creole had somehow learned of Oblivion's reputation. He had wanted to answer Ezra's recent call for volunteers but had fallen ill. Rupert's heart sank. He hoped Ezra had called on more than this one volunteer.

Rupert used Ezra's trick of remaining silent so that the client would tell all. He leaned in with sympathy. Gazing at the sumptuous Lowelle, Rupert was grateful angels didn't really age once they selected their earthly form. He wondered about the Creole's form and surely the Creole was attracted to Lowelle?

"Now my dear Creole just sits," she sighed, "last evening he sent up his final prayer. I'm sure I'm in for a long night tonight, listening to his final witness."

Rupert pictured stiff chairs on a rotting Bayou porch. How unseemly that this beautiful creature Lowelle, who must glow in the moonlight, had to hear a drooling old man's wretched confessions before he passed over.

Rupert couldn't imagine enough sin to fill up an entire night's confession, but the mortal was more than eighty. Would the Creole attempt to use some form of voodoo to hang around after death? Did she care for him? His mind swirled.

"I want something that will ease him, remind him of his youth; distract him with the past so he won't want to cling to the present," Lowelle replied as if she had read Rupert's mind.

"Will you miss him?" Rupert asked.

"I'm done with him!" Lowelle burst into tears again. "I assure you I was fond of him once but I'm done, done! You can't imagine eighty years of servitude!"

Rupert sorted through the bottles on the counter with fervor. He settled on a frosted white vial and held it to the light; a peach glow emanated from within.

Lowelle paused her sobbing to reach out and caress the vial with a gloved hand. Rupert set it on the counter. Lowelle sighed and reached for it. Rupert stopped her hand, cupped it in his own while he gently removed her glove. Then he pressed the vial into her upturned palm. The peach glow resumed and throbbed brighter and brighter. She gave Rupert an inquisitive glance. He held her hand steady and removed the stopper for a brief second. The scent of gardenias in sea spray warmed the room.

“Perfect!” Lowelle almost dropped the bottle in her enthusiasm to give Rupert a hug. She shoved bills onto the counter and disappeared in a swirl of gossamer, no doubt instantly transported to New Orleans by another prayer from her Creole.

Warm gardenias were difficult, Rupert had had to arrive in Charlotte at the precise moment when the sun had warmed them just enough to let off the perfect fragrance, not a day early or the perfume would turn green and acrid. Not a moment late or it would wilt and stifle. Ezra had made him fly on an airplane to the States to indulge in this exercise, since instant transporting through the ether was reserved for prayer assignments and special dispensations. But his very own Southern Sunset Blend had been worth the nine-hour plane trip, if it made this Lowelle angel happy.

As Rupert put away the broom he noticed a fine gold dust had settled on everything. It was impossible to sweep into a pile. He sighed and picked up Lowelle’s payment from the counter. He began to sort her bills and secure them in the heavy ornate cash register. The scent and idea of her gave him a mix of excitement and fright. When he calmed down enough to count, he found she had overpaid.

Chapter 3

Holy Commerce

Mixed in with the copious bills Lowelle had left on the counter was a card for the teashop across the street. “Meet me, 6pm” was scrawled across the face in a feminine hand. Was it a message from Lowelle to him? Rupert hadn’t seen her write anything, but he had been quite distracted when searching through the bottles. Rupert mused on how to approach her, “You overpaid, I hope you don’t mind my taking the liberty, no way to contact you except this note, of course I didn’t assume it was for me but I hope the intrusion can be forgiven...” or “I wanted to be sure the small dose of my Cyryzzma hadn’t disabled your defenses in anyway...”. Rather than sound alarming or worse - like a braggart about the Cyryzzma - he settled on the former.

Rupert’s daydream was interrupted by the tinkle of the bell over the door. Probably an uncouth mortal. But no matter how they entered, gruff or elegant, Rupert always felt a twittering swell about his shoulders. This was his special moment, the moment of perception when the perfect match of soul and scent would come to him.

Verbina, citrus, chocolate, cardamom, pine, beeswax, nutmeg, coffee. Rupert remembered customers by their perfect scent, not their names. This created problems with some of them and might be a mark against his apprenticeship record in Ezra’s mind.

Rupert was peeved to see it was a Lost Soul who had entered. Not a mortal, but almost as bad. Rupert proceeded to assist the LS with a demand for Cuban Cigar fused with Scotch, so typically uncreative. Rupert pretended to listen as the LS insisted this blend was the only thing his

still living, now elderly, wife could remember about him. How boringly common thought Rupert as the LS went on and on with the usual battlefield tales and slobbering over the wife's younger form. Argh, the unspiritual types who lived for worldly conquest were some of worst hangers-on. They rarely passed gracefully, preferring to stay and spew choking scents around their poor remaining loved ones so that they wouldn't forget the LS. Pathetic.

Rupert could hear Ezra. *A customer is a customer. How you treat them should always depend on who you are, not on how they are.*

They helped all sorts at Oblivion. Mortals, Lost Souls, Angels, Saints, plain Ghosts, and the Upper Dominions which included creatures that Rupert didn't care to even think about. Rupert wasn't much on reading up about all the rules, commandments, suggestions, ranks, descriptions etcetera that made up The Creation. Ezra warned Rupert he would someday be sorry on this point, that it was dangerous for Rupert to rely on inspiration and intuition entirely. With Ezra missing from the shop today, Rupert was starting to understand what Ezra meant by this comment.

Each type of Being needed different scents for different purposes. With his undisciplined mind wandering between Lowelle and the Cyyzzma he needed to replace, it was hard to keep it all straight.

Around noon a departed Saint came in. He was from the fifteenth century and needed to reach his counterpart here in the new millennium. The counterpart trusted the presence of a nutmeg-amber scent as a confirmation when receiving a message from the Saint, but Rupert had forgotten if Oblivion was authorized to give Saints burning incense or just cologne. Thank heavens the Saint only asked for cologne.

The rest of the day sped by except for one unfortunate moment. A desperate aging woman implored Rupert for something to erase the ten years between her and her younger lover. Rupert gave her a sample of young rose infused with the froth of Venus. The woman was enthralled until Rupert accidentally forgot himself and started a conversation with another customer, a Departed Soul, who aging woman couldn't see. This convinced the aging woman she was losing her mind and she promptly left to break it off with the young lover. Rupert was sorry to lose the sale, but sure the aging woman was saved the devastation of having her young lover break it off with her first. He was sure it would have gone differently if Ezra had been there to handle the immortals while Rupert dealt with the mortals.

The clock chimed the half hour. It was five-thirty. Almost time to meet Lowelle. Rupert felt a strange anxiety rise from his toes to his heart. And where was Ezra? Did Rupert dare close the shop early? Surely Ezra hadn't left to attend the Supreme Council of Dominions without Rupert or the Cyryzzma test results? Why hadn't Ezra informed him about his absence? The anxiety was unbearable.

He mentally listed the ingredients to infuse the Cyryzzma. Gold dust. Crystal Clear Artic Air. Night Blooming Cereus. He sorted through the drawers under the counter and found the Gold dust and Crystal Clear Artic Air. The Night Blooming Cereus wasn't in its usual place. Fear squeezed his chest. Had Doreen...?

Slam!

The front door flew open against the wall. Rupert whipped around to face the intruder. Rupert wished he had closed the shop.

It was Ezra.

Puffing, red hair floating in every direction, Ezra tussled with his heavy overcoat and scarf. After much arm wrestling he managed to get everything off his rotund form and fling them at the hat stand. Ezra and the hat stand both tottered on the brink of collapse. Rupert was both relieved and anxious that Ezra was there in time to test the Cyryzzma before SCOD met. But he still had to find the Night Blooming Cereus and make the new sample before the new volunteer arrived, if there was one. And there was the matter of Lowelle's six PM appointment. No matter, it would only take moments to fuse the formula if Ezra could tell him where the reserves of Night Blooming Cereus were kept.

"Cinnamon and Sandalwood!" Ezra shouted as he turned the open/shut sign to shut.

"Yes, we have both but not blended," Rupert replied in wide-eyed panic. Had Ezra forgotten about the Cyryzzma test?

"Quickly!" Ezra's voice cracked into a terrified whisper.

"An effective mixture will only fuse at precisely sundown in Cairo." Rupert answered. He had never seen Ezra in such a state, it was not reassuring.

"We are finished then." Ezra's pale eyes distorted with tears.

Rupert gasped, frantic. "No, it's almost sundown over the Nile now, I can be back in precisely twenty-three minutes. Will that do?"

"He's on his way now, hurry!" Ezra said.

Rupert hoped he meant a volunteer who might have asked for the Cinnamon and Sandalwood as payment for testing Cyryzza. Such a gift was customary. Ezra seemed overly sentimental and sighed as he leaned on the counter.

Rupert seized his chance to bring up the missing ingredient; he blurted, “Do we have any reserves of Night Blooming Cereus?”

Ezra didn't seem to hear him, as if contemplating something sad and unsolvable.

“Go. Transport! Go!” Ezra said with a wheeze.

Rupert was shocked at how urgently Ezra had indicated a transport. It was a strain not to ask Ezra who the Cinnamon and Sandalwood was for, volunteer or client? Ezra frequently implied that discretion in these matters protected all of them. Ezra was from the Upper Order of angels, and had served the Upper Realms of Creation for thousands of years. Without protection from friends in the Upper Realms, it was implied that indiscretions for clients could result in Rupert or Ezra or both being demoted to ordinary Guardian Angels or worse. Rupert shuddered at the thought of making such a misstep when he was so close to his goal. He decided not to ask further about the mysterious arriving person.

Lowelle's experience with the Creole had reinforced his aversion to Guardian Angelhood. The idea of being bound to one particular undeserving mortal, answering their relentless prayers, was onerous. Oblivion was much more flexible. They only filled potion and perfume orders and could turn away customers at their discretion. If Lowelle's reaction was typical, answering human prayers could be worse than Rupert had even imagined.

Was Ezra's distress a sign something serious was amiss?

All Rupert knew for sure was that there had better be a sunset over the Nile in the next twenty-three minutes.

Chapter 4

Auknot Rising

In the few times he'd used it, Rupert found transporting to be similar to waking from a dream with a bit of motion sickness. Ezra had lectured that keeping your focus on your destination was the key. Do not think about where you'd come from or what you expected to see when you got there, but just picture the little plot of earth where you wanted your feet to arrive at a precise time.

Rupert shuddered and felt a blast of hot air force its way into his lungs. Before he could think about whether he was in Cairo or not, he had to spit out an unpleasant mix of sand and spiky locusts. He looked around. He was enveloped in an orange blur. He had arrived in a blinding sandstorm.

A stooped woman robed in black emerged from the background. She was trying to shoo Rupert away with an unidentifiable piece of linen laundry. Chickens clucked around him. Rupert hoped he had arrived in the correct century.

The stooped woman was screaming in Arabic, "Demons in my courtyard!" followed by a long string of old fashioned curses for the evil eye.

"You wouldn't have some tea? You see it's my stomach," Rupert asked her in flawless Arabic, as angels can. She was stunned.

"No! No! Shoo! Shoo! The others went that way! Follow them! Go, go!" Her yelps were getting more insistent.

Others? Had others popped into the stooped woman's courtyard? How very unusual. Maybe she was just frightened by people emerging from the sandstorm, but you would think one would get used to that living in Cairo. Rupert decided it would be useless to ask her "Which way to the Nile?"

Since Rupert wasn't going to get any tea from her, he might as well follow the direction of "the Others" she had mentioned. The heat wasn't helping his stomach. Rupert removed his jacket and carefully wrapped his now itchy white wool scarf around his head in the local fashion, which made sense for keeping away the spiky locusts that swirled in the sandy air.

Rupert pushed open a huge carved gate and emerged from the courtyard onto the street. Other blurry figures in long robes were battling the wind. They all seemed to be hurrying in the same direction. Above the roar of the sandstorm, Rupert could hear the local Mullah calling the people to prayer in a sing-song mournful voice. A man in a modern business suit emerged from the sand and passed Rupert.

Whew, at least he was in the right century. There was no time to waste.

"Sir, excuse me, could you tell me the way to the Nile?" Rupert asked the linen suited man.

"You heathen, infidel, worshipers of the devil! Shame on you, come to the mosque with me, purify yourself!" he replied.

"Yes, hmm, maybe another time, thanks!" They certainly were a superstitious lot here in Cairo. Rupert stopped to check his reflection in a shop window. Nope, no sign he was an angel, just a dashing young Euro-style guy. A form emerged from the sandstorm on a motor-scooter headed straight for Rupert. It swerved at the last second but crashed.

“Eeee!” The rider tumbled off into the street. He grasped a scraped knee. As Rupert approached the hunched figure he was startled to find the rider had gold skin, except the bloody knee part. The man was cringing with pain.

“My good man, could I help you up?” Rupert extended his hand. The Golden Rider took Rupert’s hand. He eyed Rupert’s Euro suit and headgear with curiosity.

“No harm, no foul,” the Golden Rider dabbed at his knee with a hanky. Rupert couldn’t guess where the handkerchief had come from. The rider was wearing an early Egyptian costume, thin pleated, no pockets. Rupert helped the Golden Rider to his feet.

When he withdrew his hand Rupert noticed a considerable amount of gold paint had wiped off onto Rupert’s palm. The Golden Rider handed Rupert the hanky, which was also covered with gold smears. So the rider was only painted gold.

“Going to the Nile?” the Golden Rider asked.

How could the Golden Rider have guessed Rupert’s destination? Was he one of the demons the stooped woman had cursed?

“Come on or we’ll miss the ceremony.” Ceremony? Damn it! Rupert didn’t need any complications at the Nile. He could feel the minutes ticking by.

They righted the motor-scooter, hopped on and zipped along against the flow of a disapproving crowd. Good, not many going to the ceremony at the Nile. Hope this luck holds. They crested a small rise and left the sand storm behind them. Rupert looked back in awe at the towering wall of sand receding from the city.

In front of them the Nile gleamed in golden light. Good, the sun was beginning to set. At the waterfront, the scooter screeched to a halt. Rupert jumped off and examined the breakwater promenade. He searched for the right light angle to fuse the essences.

“This way!” The Golden Rider gestured towards what Rupert presumed was the location of The Ceremony. Rupert waved him off with a salute. The Golden Rider climbed up on the breakwater railing and leapt over into the Nile. No splash? What had the man done?

Rupert raced to the spot and leaned over the stone breakwater’s balustrade. A long graceful boat with a carved tail in the shape of peacock feathers was rocking in the Nile’s waves. It had a beautiful bird, a solid gold tern, mounted on the bow with outstretched wings.

The Golden Rider was waiting to help Rupert aboard. How could he refuse? The center of the Nile looked to be the perfect spot for the fusion. But how could he get the blend accomplished with people watching? Or were they demons? How would one know?

Rupert could hear Ezra’s voice admonish him for neglecting his studies. Rupert thought of the dusty pile of books in his flat. Not to mention the faded faxes of rules and edicts from the Supreme Council of Dominions, curling and fading on Oblivion’s office desk. Neither could now help him tell the difference between people and demons.

Golden Rowers pulled their oars to ease the peacock boat forward. The prayer call of the Mullah faded as they reached the center of the river. It was replaced by a throbbing, clanging, banging, thumping rhythm. Rupert searched the opposite bank. A flash of gold caught his eye but he couldn’t quite make out what it was.

“Isn’t it magnificent!” declared the Golden Rider.

As the boat neared the spot of the flash, Rupert could make out a frenzied crowd also dressed in white linen Pharaoh-era costumes. Many had painted their skin gold. Dancing to intoxicating music, they banged on hand drums made from brass, wood and leather. The women, eyes circled with black and hands painted with henna, were clanging finger cymbals, their arms raised, their hips shimmying to the rhythm of the drums. There were hundreds of them. But none were as beautiful as he remembered Lowelle.

“Auknot, Auknot, Auknot,” they chanted.

Rupert longed for Lowelle to be there. He wanted to see her clap her hands in delight over this spectacle. Oh please, may she be chatting with an angel friend – a girl one – at the teashop long enough for Rupert to happen along later this evening.

As the sun neared the horizon and the peacock boat neared the shore, Rupert could see what had caused the golden flash. Protruding from the sand in the midst of the golden dancers was a giant golden peacock neck and head. Extended tail feathers emerged from the sand a few yards behind the head.

“It’s the miracle we were waiting for, the sign of the End Days!” the Golden Rider clasped Rupert’s shoulder. Then he went on to explain that after being buried for thousands of years, the sand shifted at just the right moment to bring forth the headdress of the missing Pharaoh, Auknot, the one who was to come alive again and save the earth.

“Thrilling,” Rupert said flatly in response. How was he going to shake these Golden People and get on with the fusion? As an excuse to separate from the Golden Rider, Rupert feigned that he was chilly and had to put on his jacket. It was sweltering. Rupert’s jacket was going to be ruined.

No matter. Rupert checked the interior pockets carefully. The packets of cinnamon, the bottle of sandalwood oil, and the sanctified bottle were all safely tucked in place. The countdown had begun, twenty minutes were gone, three minutes were left.

Sweat poured from the frenzied dancers on shore. They were ramping up the pace towards some kind of climax. Sweat poured from Rupert's brow as he watched the sun sink. The Golden Rider climbed to the prow of the boat. The Golden Dancers on shore cheered him. The Golden Rowers stood up.

It was Rupert's chance. Squinting from the golden party to the horizon, Rupert reached into his pocket, extracted a hanky and carefully poured out the sandalwood oil. He sprinkled the cinnamon over the top. Next was the bottle, a striped olivewood flask.

At just the moment when the sun flashed green into the Nile, the Golden Rider screamed a triumphant battle cry. The dancers replied with fervor. Rupert up-ended the vial over the hanky and removed the stopper. He held on tight to the hanky. The vial inhaled with a loud WHOOSH. Rupert popped the stopper back in place.

Got it! Rupert looked around. All eyes were on the golden statue. Rupert's secret was safe. No one had heard or seen a thing, and what better than an added touch of Nile breeze? The Golden Rider motioned for the rowers to take them to shore. Rupert quickly shoved the hanky wrapped vial into his jacket pocket before it could be spotted.

"Good show!" Rupert said as the Golden Rider approached him. Now to transport back to Oblivion in time. As they bumped onto the shore, the Golden Rider noticed Rupert was drenched with sweat.

“You must bathe with us in the Nile, purify,” the Golden Rider gestured towards the dancers who were shedding layers of clothing.

“Oh dear, no, I have an appointment,” said Rupert as they disembarked onto the warm glowing sand. What was it with these Egyptians and their purifying? He pretended to intently examine a handful of sand. Rupert realized the sand’s glow was because the grains of sand were actually gold. It was remarkable.

“You won’t purify?” the Golden Rider pressed.

“Hmm, not right now.” Rupert had learned this phrase from Ezra, it was useful in sounding positive without commitment. The Golden Rider huffed and stepped aside.

Rupert shoved the sand into his pocket and started up the bank in the direction of a path behind the Golden Peacock. The path appeared to lead into a thick palm grove. Rupert looked back at the Golden Rider and waved good-bye. The Golden Rider was consulting with a menacing group of Golden Strong Men. Rupert stepped up his pace. Dusk was falling. He had to get someplace he could secretly disappear in transport home.

“Spy! SCOD spy!” the Golden Rider suddenly yelled out. Rupert turned around to see what the commotion was about. The Golden Strong Men raced towards him. The accusation was for him, Rupert.

“Agent of the Archangel!” the Golden Rider continued.

Oh dear, had they detected he was an angel? Or was it just a ruse to get him riled up and purify? Who were these people? The Golden Ones were apparently on the outs with the Archangel.

Were they why the Archangel had come to earth, had taken human form? Rupert hoped no one important had seen him in the Golden People's boat.

Rupert reached the path behind the Golden Peacock. Blast it, there were Golden Maidens with little lamps singing and marching in line towards him. He could hear the Golden Strong Men approaching from behind. The Golden Maidens approached from the front, they stopped their singing and looked puzzled at what to do about this obstacle on their worship path. Rupert glanced at his watch; his twenty-three minutes were up.

Ezra's voice echoed in his head. *Honor your word, no matter what the consequences.* The Golden Strong Men appeared behind him with golden swords and spears. The Golden Maidens started to cry. Rupert's heart yearned for Lowelle, even for her tears.

Rupert felt a burning deep within his soul. He refused to never see Lowelle again. He reached into his pocket and found the golden sand. Then he reached into the depths of his bowels and let out a yell worthy of a Caesar.

"Ayahhhhh" Rupert shouted. He threw the sand into the air and yearned for Oblivion's cool marble floor. The golden grains reflected the Golden Maiden's lamps and turned into a golden cloud around him. Rupert spun like a whirling dervish. A Golden Strong Man threw his spear into the blur that was Rupert.

Chapter 5

Harem Party

Rupert crashed down the marble staircase that led from his flat to Oblivion. He landed on the vestibule floor. The transport from the Nile had been a bit off. Awareness of a sharp pain in his right rib wiped out all other thoughts. Had the Golden Strong Man's spear hit the mark?

Rupert's heart pounded, his stomach ached, and fear gripped his throat. Ezra's soothing voice swam into Rupert's racing emotions. *Fear is just a thought, it's not real.* Ezra had told him this on Rupert's first day, the first time Rupert was to handle the perfume bottles. Given that the bottles were a portal for The Breath of the Earth, any wrong move could unleash a burp or a sigh that carried volcanic power. Of course he was afraid of them.

A spear prick should seem small in comparison. Rupert prepared for the worst and looked down at the outside of his jacket. No blood. This was an encouraging sign. He pulled back his lapel. Nothing but sweat on his shirt.

Rupert's eyes gravitated to the lump in his inner jacket pocket. It wasn't the spear that had struck him in the ribs- he had landed on the olivewood flask! Rupert's chest had smacked it against the stair. Was the bottle damaged? Rupert gingerly extracted the wrapped vessel from his breast pocket. He slowly unfolded the hanky.

Rupert was horrified by what he saw. The vial was intact but there was blood on the hanky. What! Had he not used his own pristine linen in the blending procedure? Oh no. Rupert had performed the fusion with the hanky soiled by the Golden Rider's skinned knee. Its stains must

have been disguised by the golden glow of the Nile's sunset. Essence of the Golden Rider's blood, Rupert's sweat, and suspended gold flecks or gold paint would have fused with the cinnamon and sandalwood. It was a disaster. Tainted fusion. They couldn't hand it over to the volunteer. It might skew the testing or worse. And if it was for a regular client...Rupert thought about the disastrous results of previous tainted fusions, sea monsters that had to be captured and exported to other universes, saints that couldn't stop giggling in their graves, the giant Sequoia trees in California.

Rupert was sure whatever Ezra had meant by: *We are finished*, was about to come to pass. He had failed Ezra, himself, and possibly an important client. He had put Oblivion at risk. Would Ezra still want to test the Cyryzzma? If Rupert could even make some more of it in time, that was.

"Rupert! Is that you?" Ezra whispered from the other side of Oblivion's door.

"Yes, of course," Rupert replied. Before he could get up from the floor, Ezra appeared and snatched the olivewood flask out of Rupert's hands.

"Ezra..." Rupert began, alarmed about the unknown elements in the tainted fusion. What disastrous effects or powers might they evoke?

Ezra signaled emphatically with a pudgy Ezra finger to his pudgy Ezra lips. "Shh!!!"

Ezra helped Rupert up and insistently herded him to the outside door. Rupert was in shock thinking about the disastrous possibilities. Words wouldn't come. He could barely walk straight.

"But the fusion is..."

Rupert's protest was immediately interrupted.

"I don't have time for you now," Ezra said as he shoved Rupert onto the chilly street.

Rupert again tried to choke out a warning but it was no use. Ezra adjusted his vest and re-entered the vestibule, clicking the door shut. Rupert heard the key turn; Ezra had actually locked him out! Had they already discovered there was no sample of Cyryzzma?

He should be given the chance to re-fuse the cinnamon and sandalwood, not to mention the Cyryzzma, which he had worked on for years. His probation had been flawless so far, completely void of any hint of Unholy Commerce. It was unfair it should end like this.

Rupert stared. The blinds were pulled shut over Oblivion's windows. Who was this mysterious personage that had Ezra on such edge? If Rupert could just get a glimpse. How to get in?

Rupert shivered and looked up. The warm glow of the Lava Lamp beckoned. That's it. Rupert tried to picture a steaming bath, hoping his desire for hot water would unlock the door. But apparently his ulterior motive, a desire to spy on Ezra, was not aligned with Divine Will. The door wouldn't budge. One thing he had learned for sure in school was that doors only unlocked for angels if both the desire was strong enough and the purpose was aligned with the Divine Will.

The London fog conspired with his wet shirt to cause Rupert to shiver. He turned towards the teashop. A raised eyebrow from a dog walker signaled Rupert to unwind the scarf from his head and place it sensibly around his neck. Not much warmer.

Warm light spilled onto the cobblestones from the teashop. Rupert examined his reflection in a dark window next door. He looked like a hooligan. Or a drug addict. His teeth chattered and his lips had turned blue. Lowelle couldn't see him like this.

He skirted the teashop and walked to the Thames. For a long while he stood moping and watching barges. Maybe he could come up with an antidote for the bad cinnamon and sandalwood. After all, he had come up with Cyryzzma, a formula that gave mortals exactly what they needed, the disabling of their self-seeking defenses.

Soon the cold no longer mattered. Rupert forgot about his fusion error and began to feel a bit angry with Ezra, who had once said Rupert was the most talented apprentice ever. Rupert had given it his all. Why was he shoved out? Ezra must have looked for the Cyryzzma and realized there was none.

He had almost been speared on the Nile. Didn't he at least deserve to be told who this important tester was? He had proven himself over and over. Rupert stomped his feet and decided to give Ezra a good parting shot. They should at least listen to his explanation why there was no Cyryzzma in the drawer. Was it his fault they were out of Night Blooming Cereus?

He passed a window where a young boy was playing with toy soldiers. They were arranged to mount an assault on an unlit candle in the middle of the sill. Rupert felt his anger muster. The boy let out a battle cry. When Rupert glanced towards the shout, the candle wick in the boy's window flared alight. The astonished boy jumped back, soldiers clashing off the sill. Rupert sighed, he had to be careful where he looked when angry. Burning anger is what got him in trouble in the first place. Unfortunate targets had unintentionally caught on fire. He willed himself to reign his frustration in, while still harboring a little edge, just enough to keep him warm.

He marched back like a soldier eager for battle, enthusiastic even. He reached the teashop, which was now deserted, shut. Light crept around the window blinds at Oblivion. It glinted off

something in the gutter. A golden label was stuck on the storm drain grate. The vial tossed away by Doreen! Rupert stooped down. The label read Night Blooming Cereus. Doreen's revenge hit home. She had poured out the last of his active ingredient.

Exotic music drifted over the scene, something Arabic maybe? It came from the flats above the teashop, from open French doors leading to a balcony with geraniums trailing over the edge. Who would leave windows open on a night like this? And flowers blooming this time of year? Gauzy curtains billowed out of the room. Rupert backed into the street to get a better look.

A slim female figure was silhouetted against the soft amber light in the windows. She came out on the balcony. He backed up a step further.

Honk! Honk! A taxi swerved to miss Rupert. Too late to hide, Rupert realized Lowelle was on the balcony. He ran his fingers through his wet hair.

"Rupert, heavens, you look spent!" she called down to him. "Come up here immediately, Flat Number 2."

The front door buzzed open. He looked up to the balcony to protest but Lowelle was gone. Rupert felt he had no choice. He entered and climbed the stairs as slowly as possible to Flat Number 2. He looked down at his smelly rumpled clothes. He was sure this was going to be a disaster, not at all what he pictured for a first encounter alone with Lowelle. She would take one whiff and never want to see him again. He should flee.

The door swung open. It wasn't Lowelle.

He was hit by a blast of conflicting scents. Rupert was almost as relieved as he was confused. The entire room was full of women. He couldn't have imagined anything worse, now

he was going to be humiliated in front of not just Lowelle, but her friends. His anger at Ezra flashed across his mind.

Rupert became aware that he was slightly groggy and feverish. The women rushed at him. He felt their hands pull him into the amber-lit room. In a fog of jasmine, curry, and spring apples they pulled off his jacket, coaxed him onto a low couch that surrounded three sides of a low table. The room's intricately woven carpets and the ornate pillows tossed about made him dizzy.

Candles, hookah pipes and incense added smoke, which snaked around a cluster of tin lamps punctured with tiny stars. The shadows of potted palms danced across the walls in the sharp breeze from the open doors. Why did Rupert feel so hot? Where was Lowelle? He couldn't see her among clusters of women that swayed to an oboe.

"Lowelle?" Rupert managed to croak at the Dark Beauty dangling her long hair over him as she removed his shirt.

His throat felt raw. He couldn't focus on the two willowy women removing his shoes and socks, what did they looked like? He could hear water running. Was it a fountain?

"You've caught a fever." Lowelle's voice projected from nowhere. Rupert tried to squint but his eyelids were too heavy. Lowelle's dainty hand appeared over his shoulder with a steaming cup of tea.

"Drink this." Lowelle set a cup next to him.

He was overwhelmed by fresh mint. He wanted to sleep but a vague notion tugged at him. He had to find Ezra and tell him something urgent. The women surrounded him on the couches, chatting with tinkling voices.

A hand patted his shoulder, Lowelle?

No, it was the Dark Beauty again, “She told us about you,” she said as she drew a breath on the hookah.

Was she referring to Lowelle? Rupert wondered what was in the hookah.

“Strawberries,” the Dark Beauty gestured at the hookah then to a bowl on the table filled with a sticky red syrup. Rupert didn’t quite believe her; he detected a scent of anise under the strawberry, and what else?

“Before she was Taken,” her words hung in the air with the smoke. Rupert shuddered; the Dark Beauty was referring to Doreen, not Lowelle. The surge in his guts told him to bolt, but whatever potion was in the smoke had hold of him now.

“What did she tell you?” Rupert tried to be casual but panic was surfacing.

“That the rumors about Cyryzzma are true,” she replied.

Rupert kept silent. The Dark Beauty met the challenge of his silence with her own silence until the hookah beckoned her to take another breath.

“It’s your creation, yes?” she cooed.

“Is that what she said?” Rupert was desperate not to give away anything about his precious formula, but felt an underlying urge to relax into the feathery atmosphere of the women. Their voices harmonized and giggled, their scents entwined with each other.

The Dark Beauty let out another cloud of smoke. Rupert had just let out a sigh, he had to breathe in. His nostrils flared. He recognized Night Blooming Cereus, his missing ingredient for

the Cyryzzma. They had it in their strawberry syrup, the active ingredient for Cyryzzma was in the hookah!

His mind twisted and turned like the smoke- had Doreen stolen the formula too? He had written it on the form for Ezra to send to SCOD. Relax, she didn't have time. They don't have the formula, and in spite of how your defenses have let down, they couldn't have created Cyryzzma without a fusion vial. Or could they? Anxiety pushed him back to fully alert.

"Night Blooming Cereus, an interesting touch," he said.

"You're familiar with it?" the Dark Beauty's eyes sparkled, "It's impossible to get you know."

Rupert didn't want to believe her.

"We could make a trade," she said.

Hoping he sounded casual, he offered, "Froth of Venus is nice."

Froth of Venus, Ezra would have a fit. It was one of their top sellers, it was inevitable that women would fret over aging; anything that kept them young or turned them young was sought after like love itself. However, he knew from the look the Dark Beauty gave him, let alone her face itself, that she was far from needing anything like it. She must be an angel too, forever young. Rupert hadn't learned to sort out in one glance who was an angel and who was human.

Froth of Venus was on the border between those formulas that were approved for use on earth and those that, due to their extraordinary powers, were forbidden for use by humans. Cyryzzma was on the other side of the border but Rupert was convinced the right adjustment of the formula would have it acting like a popularity pill for mortals. The strongest version would be

a powerful tool for the Upper Levels of Creation when they needed to intervene and disable terrible selfishness. But he dared not give even a watered-down drop to these fem-fatales who could use it on who knows who.

Rupert noticed the music had stopped; he came out of his thoughts to find himself encircled by women. Their various hair colors and bright robes and whispers made him think of wings; they huddled close together, surrounded him like a flock of exotic birds.

“Bring us Cyryzzma!” the Dark Beauty whispered in his ear.

Hands came together in a pitter-patter of clapping. Some let out delighted shrieks. A tambourine started a beat, joined by the oboe. The women danced around his settee.

“No, no!” he muttered. They didn’t seem to hear him.

Strange sitars and horns and flutes joined the cacophony.

The Dark Beauty took his hand and led him in a procession around the flat. Where was Lowelle? Rupert tried to hang back but the Dark Beauty’s hand tugged him along. Her wicked sounding laugh accented the music.

Rupert thought he saw Lowelle slip out a door.

“No!” he shouted after her.

The music stopped. He was frantic to follow Lowelle. Had the Creole let go of her yet? Was she free?

“I can’t sell Cyryzzma until it’s certified,” he said, “and I’m licensed.”

He knew before he finished saying it that this wouldn’t close the matter.

“No one is suggesting you sell it, a simple trade among colleagues,” the Dark Beauty said.

Colleagues? What were these women concocting here?

“It’s not for us,” another said.

Someone blurted out, “Auknot.”

Another woman shushed her.

Could they read his mind? Auknot, wasn’t that the name of the cult’s Pharaoh statue? The one he had seen on the Nile? The women all seemed to be wearing Egyptian-like robes and their hands were decorated with henna flowers. They blended with the Golden Maidens he had seen in Cairo. He thought of the Golden Warriors, weren’t they at odds with the Archangel? The Archangel’s horses thundered across his mind. He just wanted to get out of the room, to follow Lowelle, or even just get to the familiar territory of Oblivion across the street.

“It would be Unholy Commerce! Didn’t you see what happened to your friend from the teashop downstairs?” He couldn’t remember the name of Doreen but he was sure the mention of her and Unholy Commerce at once would stop their pleading eyes. Surely trading Cyryzza to Auknot’s crowd would be a disaster.

“Just a tiny whiff,” a soft voice urged, “among angels... since when was Oblivion squeamish about Unholy Commerce, Ezra never was.”

The Dark Beauty had led him back to the settee where strawberry and Night Blooming Cereus from the hookah wafted over him. The fragrance seemed to pacify his resentment that they would admonish Oblivion. Regardless, he would never trade with them now they had slammed his mentor, his Master, his hero. No, Ezra had abandoned him, shut him out without a chance. What would he do now if his apprenticeship was up?

“Among angels” lingered in the air. Could he replace the formula without having to confess to Ezra that the original had escaped onto the street? He was among angels, there wasn’t Unholy Commerce among angels was there? Didn’t the rule only apply to trade with humans? He felt his resistance weakening. They could give him some Night Blooming Cereus, he could make the Cyryzzma and convince Ezra to give him another chance. The hint of a fever seemed to rush to his face and erupt in burning sweat. His reasoning wandered. Was the Night Blooming Cereus affecting him?

Lowelle appeared with another steaming cup in her hand. How much time had passed? Had she left and come back already?

“Everything’s alright now,” Lowelle cooed as she gave him a sip of tea.

Was she standing behind him? He turned to see her but more hands than he could count patted eucalyptus packs on his chest and forehead. Rupert wanted to question them but his tongue felt swollen. The Maidens pulled him up off the couch and three, or maybe four, guided him down the hall to a candle lit bathroom. He stood next to a bath full of glowing water.

“Hand out the rest of your clothes,” Lowelle’s voice came from far away.

Rupert focused on the steaming bath. Candles flickered. The hot water beckoned; a poultice of spices floated on its surface in a muslin bag. The women closed the door and left him alone.

What could be the harm in a quick bath to quell his fever and clear his mind? As he stripped off his shirt he thought about how time in the bath would give him a chance to sort out a way to get Lowelle’s friends to give him the Night Blooming Cereus, and how to approach Ezra for

another test. He contemplated the accusations of Unholy Commerce at Oblivion. Had Doreen slandered them to the Archangel?

Chapter 6

Cold Water

Water splashed. Rupert started awake, he was in the bath. He didn't remember entering the bath. The water was cold. Most of the candles were out. He could tell it was very late- or very early morning- from the window's long moon shadow across the floor tiles. He must have slept.

Bloody hell, he hoped he had handed out his pants by his own efforts. Rupert grabbed a towel from a tall pile on a low table. His dry and pressed shirt, suit, and tie were carefully laid out on a chair within reach of the door. Rupert was sure Lowelle was a lady; of course he needn't worry about the details of how his laundry got there.

He must have had quite a fever. His skin was now cool but not clammy. The Egyptian's call to purify, purify, echoed in his memory. And Auknot. Were these women in his cult? Why did they want Cyryzzma? Rupert quickly did an inventory of his pockets, nothing was missing but he hadn't put anything interesting, like the formula for Cyryzzma, in them in the first place.

He listened for the women's voices, particularly Lowelle's, but there was only the creaking of old radiators. He dressed and made his way into the corridor. The flat seemed deserted, had Lowelle been called away by a prayer of the Creole or was she still here? Rupert didn't dare try any of the shut doors. Did the Creole pass over yesterday, or was that happening now? It must be gruesome to be on duty to answer prayers all day and all night too.

In the front room, the exotic throws on the couches were gone, replaced with English rose patterns. No hookahs or star lamps were in sight. In the moonlight, the palms looked like mundane

Victorian antiques. The silver bowl that held the strawberry and Night Blooming Cereus syrup was clean and sparkling on the coffee table. A card for the teashop was in the bowl, a single question mark in smeared ink marred the front.

Without the influence of fever or hookah or fear Rupert was no longer tempted by the thought of trading even a smidgen of Cyryzza for Night Blooming Cereus. With a clear head he was just about positive that would be Unholy Commerce. The thought of the Archangel's cage sent a shiver down his back. Had Lowelle saved him with the tea or enabled the search of his pockets? He chose to believe she was innocent. How could anything so lovely be otherwise than pure?

He stepped to the closed French doors. The dormer windows of Rupert's own flat were visible across the street but it was difficult to see in. From here he could just make out the glow of the lava-lamp. He wondered if the women had watched the Archangel's troops as he had. Had they seen Rupert watching?

Ezra! What time was it? The front windows of Oblivion were clearly visible. It was now dark behind the shades, Ezra and the visitor, whether client or test volunteer, must have completed their business hours ago.

A small moment of melancholy came over Rupert. No matter what happened, if Rupert was granted a Potions Master License or doomed to Guardian Angel, his apprenticeship was over. Nothing would ever be the same again. He wouldn't be banished – he had been clean his entire probation, not once reoffending - but he had let Ezra down with the bad Cairo fusion of Cinnamon and Sandalwood polluted with gold and blood. His confidence about a license was slipping.

Rupert left the flat over the teashop and crossed the street.

The door to Rupert's vestibule was unlocked. His anger at Ezra had dissolved into deep respect and affection, followed by a feeling of dread. How could he tell Ezra about the botch-up on the fusion? It was probably too late now in any case; the volunteer may have made use of it already. What had Ezra thought when he discovered the Cyyzzma vial was missing?

Rupert started up the marble stair, appreciating a whiff of lemon wax on the railing. He paused at the top step and inhaled deeply, the fragrance mingled well with his admiration of Lowell's dainty wrists. He wanted to think of something to send her in a note with a flower, but his eyes kept closing, signaling he was about to fall asleep standing up. He entered the dark apartment, noticing for the first time how lonely it was.

He would just lie down a moment before returning to the shop to hunt through the reserve ingredients in the back office for Night Blooming Cereus. If he could at least mix the Cyyzzma, maybe he could beg Ezra to get it tested in time for his SCOD hearing. The idea of having to beg again after making the Cinnamon and Sandalwood confession made him even more tired. He lay down on the sofa fully clothed. The Dark Beauty's words echoed in his head as he drifted off.

It's impossible to get you know. The women surrounded him again, clapping.

Their clapping turned to knocking. The Archangel, great cape fluttering in a snow filled wind, was pounding on the door of the shop!

Rupert's alarm, a collection of arias, woke him. He was drenched in sweat. It was only a dream. Or was it? The sun on his windows revealed it wasn't snowing and it must be at least mid-morning. Rupert leapt up. He could hear children on the street below. That was unusual. Children

only came by at this time on Sundays, to the teashop after the services at St. Mary's. Good heavens, it must be Sunday! He had slept through an entire day and night.

The shop door slammed below.

By the time Rupert got to the window and his eyes adjusted to the bright sun he could just see Ezra striding away from Oblivion in full riding kit; red coat, high black boots, and crop. The dusting of snow from the day before had vanished in the autumn sun. Rupert watched him disappear around the corner at the top of the street.

He had to catch up and enter a plea to rearrange the testing, and when was the SCOD hearing? As he dashed to the closet to pull out his own riding kit, he opened the clothes hamper to toss in his shirt. The Golden Rider's hanky, dappled with spots of gold and blood, lay on top of crumpled linens. Horror flooded him just as singers Susan and Andre let out a noteworthy of an angel's last breath. What had the bad infusion unleashed?

Dressed, Rupert glanced in the mirror. Ezra had given him the riding boots as a gift at the end of his first year. The Dark Beauty's words of the night before echoed: "...since when was *Oblivion squeamish about Unholy Commerce, Ezra never was.*" Could his boots have come from the profits of Unholy Commerce? He refused to believe it. After he had worked so hard to keep his nose clean.

As he descended the cool stairs two at a time to fetch the stable keys, Rupert vowed to stab Ezra through the heart if it were true about the Unholy Commerce. This wouldn't be easy. Ezra had taught Rupert to fence and was quite a sport at it despite his rotund figure. Maybe a pistol, there was one in Ezra's desk. Again, Ezra was a crack shot at skeet in the country. Damn it. Rupert

couldn't stay mad with so many fond memories. Or were Ezra's skills part of something more sinister? Rupert scowled with confusion and disappointment in his mentor.

The interior of the shop felt empty. The bottles seemed to scream accusations from the shelves, Unholy, Unholy. Rupert stepped into the office. Everything he counted on was collapsing. He opened the glass pharmaceuticals cabinet, bottles clanked as he made a frantic search for Night Blooming Cereus. Nothing. He searched again, all the while remembering the scent wafting from the Dark Beauty's hookah.

Would he, Rupert, now have to risk Unholy Commerce if it was the only way to remake the Cyryzma and stay at Oblivion? Rupert had to admit he still wasn't even sure what Unholy Commerce meant. Maybe he should look up a definition. No time for that now, he needed to catch up to Ezra. Surely there was another source. He shut the cabinet door and looked around the office.

Rupert knew Ezra usually rode the Roman Path on Sunday morning. It was a slick way through the city on parts only accessible by foot or horseback. Impassable to motorbikes and bicyclists due to canals, bollards, and other obstacles; you had to know the cues and signs to its direction, which of course angels had passed along for centuries. It was a sort of steeplechase for angel horses, usually ending at St. Albans.

As Rupert expected, the hook on the keyboard that read "Bathurst Mews," location of the stables, was empty. Rupert sorted through Ezra's desk drawer, where were the spare keys? He didn't want to depend on desire alone to open the stable nor did he really want to know if his career was in alignment with Divine Will.

The fax machine whirred as if in greeting and buzzed to life. Rupert always found it disconcerting how the thing started on its own, a bit too much like a demon in his opinion. A fax reared its ugly head: DECLARATION OF THE SUPREME COUNCIL OF DOMINIONS. He stared as the machine revealed another line: NOTICE OF PROBATION TERM EXPIRATION: APPRENTICE RUPERT. Rupert didn't read further, he just couldn't face anything Ezra might have submitted, or not, in light of last night's debacles. Thankfully, he spotted the Mews keys under some other faxes. Rupert grabbed them and dashed out of the shop before the fax machine could complete its emission.

He fled onto the street from the dark shop and was almost struck blind by the sun. He stood adjusting his eyes when a familiar sound, tinkling voices, poured over him. The women from the harem-like party over the teashop! A gay laugh followed and he knew Lowelle was with them. Eyes now adjusted, he saw a garden of delight across the street.

Lowelle and her friends were having tea in flounced dresses of cool greens and oranges and peach and deep autumn blues. Broad hats hid their faces, revealing chins and lips and bits of shy glances, brilliant pashminas warmed their shoulders.

"Rupert, darling!" Lowelle called out to him.

Darling, well that was encouraging. But he didn't have time for this now. Against his rational mind, he crossed the street, "Good Morning Ladies," he had tried to sound casual but his nerves failed him and the word 'ladies' came out on too high a note.

The women giggled.

"I would ask you to sit but I see you're on the way to a ride," Lowelle said.

Rupert was relieved. He had to get going but was mesmerized by the sight of her. How did she do that to him? There must be an antidote. He was aware they were waiting for him to speak.

“Who do I have to thank for the party? I’m afraid I was a bit ill.” Rupert blurted.

“Oh no, we’re the ones who must apologize,” the Dark Beauty said.

“Whatever for?” Rupert replied, slightly annoyed about bits he couldn’t remember.

“The Creole called me away...” Lowelle could get only those few words out before she broke forth a sob of bitter anguish.

Women were so confusing. She was in tears again. He couldn’t just dash off now, could he? Damn Creole anyway, typical human, fraught with self-generated problems. Rupert’s urge to burst something into flame momentarily shifted to the Creole. He rationalized that his mount could catch up to Ezra’s, who tended to just trot along. Maybe he should attempt to give Lowelle a few minutes comfort. He must look into that antidote for fem-fatale wiles.

“He’s been a bit rough for you, hasn’t he?” Rupert said as he slipped into a chair beside her.

As she droned on, he thought through opening lines of a plea to Ezra.

“I hope I never have to serve as a Guardian again!” Lowelle screamed loud enough to alarm passersby.

Rupert jumped up without meaning to; her shriek had jolted him. He checked his watch, oh dear, Ezra now had a twenty minute head start. Looking at one’s watch was apparently the wrong move in front of such an already upset lady. Lowelle now sobbed.

The Dark Beauty tisked at him and took Lowelle into her arms.

“Of course you won’t have to, we’ll all see to it together,” the Dark Beauty said. The women gathered in close to her, pushing Rupert from their circle.

“Perhaps she’ll be up to visiting later?” Rupert tried brightly; but he knew he had blown it completely. And Ezra was even further ahead.

The Dark Beauty’s look suggested to Rupert that it was worse than no use. Lowelle waved him off without a word or a lift of her head. He stood by, trying to think of something to do or say to redeem himself. She seemed out of his reach. Damned Creole! Damned Doreen!

“You see I have pressing business...” Rupert said but the cluster of breezy dresses and hats and shawls was escorting Lowelle into the door of the teashop flats; none could hear his feeble plea. No matter, if he didn’t straighten things out with Ezra he might not be welcome here on Kensington High Street in any case. He hailed a taxi.

“Bathurst Mews, fast,” he told the driver.

Chapter 7

Message from SCOD

As Rupert approached the stables, the smell of leather and horse invigorated his sense of righteousness. What had he done wrong anyway? Nothing. And why had things taken a bad turn? Humans. That was the simple answer. Doreen's admirers had given her an unquenchable thirst for more. The Creole had exhausted his beautiful delicate Lowelle. Damn him! Hadn't the Creole been able to learn anything in eighty years? Imagine repeating the same mistakes over and over. Rupert bought some carrots from a chubby faced farmer with a cart at the entrance.

Rupert's mount, Hestia, was a thick grey Arabian who welcomed the carrots with a snort. He led her from the stables. Rupert always felt more powerful when he and Hestia melded together in a smart gallop.

Mud flew up from the popular track of the Rotten Row as a crowd of riders raced each other and showed off for the picnickers along the Serpentine. Rupert rode with abandon until he was sure the hearts would leap out of both he and Hestia.

At Lancaster Gate, Rupert noticed a little person, that is a dwarfed man, leaning against a post. Rupert was sure he had seen the man earlier walking along Kensington High Street. As Rupert approached, the dwarf waved at him as if to flag him down.

He turned Hestia's head sharply and headed back around the North Carriage Drive. The dwarf followed but obviously couldn't catch up with such short legs. Rupert thought to duck into the north arena, a hundred yards ahead, to think. As he approached the entrance, the Dwarf popped

out. Transported! How could he do that? Of course, he was an angel. But what kind of angel would pick to be a dwarf?

Rupert could hear horror violins playing in the background of his thoughts. Was the dwarf some kind of demon sent by the Archangel to locate him and verify some mutterings of the vengeful Doreen? Rupert needed to think of a plan, had he been seen at the party over the teashop? Seen at the Nile with the Golden Pharaoh? He turned Hestia straight across the grass of the park. Families enjoying an autumn stroll protested with sharp looks. Hestia jumped the Serpentine. Elderly and young alike stared open mouthed.

“Rupert, I’m George!” the Dwarf’s plea faded behind him, “The Apprenticeship Council...”

Apprenticeship Council! They normally didn’t come to you, you went to them after your hearing. Was the Dwarf there to collect him? To whisk him off to a new assignment without a hearing? Had Ezra betrayed him?

The dwarf’s voice faded as Rupert galloped towards the entrance to the Roman Path; he could see far ahead lots of other riders were headed the same way, typical for a Sunday. Rupert thought he glimpsed a red coat. Why was Ezra wearing such a thing, normally reserved for master of the hunt?

Could he even catch up to Ezra with this dwarf on his tail? And would Ezra be willing to do anything for him? Obviously Ezra had already abandoned Rupert; maybe there was no chance to turn the situation around. After all, Rupert didn’t even have a sample of Cyryzza to present.

A simple plan came; he would run away on Hestia through London on the Roman Path. Out to the country, where he would find a job with a chubby faced farmer growing carrots. He could sleep in the grass and tend gardens; inhale their sweet fragrances unmolested by anyone.

Rupert charged for the Albert Gate. Good, no sign of the dwarf. He made for the black and gold wrought-iron entrance to the park. A glint of light blinded him; Hestia bucked. Rupert turned her off the gate back towards Kensington Palace.

After his eyes adjusted, Rupert looked back. At the Albert Gate was the Golden Rider from the Nile on a motorbike. He flashed a mirror at Rupert for attention and was waving. How could the Golden Rider have gotten from Cairo to London? This was a disaster. Angels seemed to be after him everywhere. The motorbike had a passenger who carried a long spear. It was one of the Golden Strong Men who had chased Rupert along the path during his escape from the golden beach.

There was no way to catch up to Ezra now. His mind raced. Rupert almost hoped for a golden spear in place of being hauled before the Apprenticeship Council without Ezra or Cyryzzma to defend him against the false accusations of Doreen. Where would SCOD send him?

He thought of Lowelle, longed to be back at her side, drying her tears. He would have no chance with her now. Why hadn't he helped out her friends? They obviously were associated with this Golden Auknot Cult; maybe they had put the Golden Ones onto his tail. Could he still make a deal with them?

The Golden Rider sped alongside Hestia on the parallel Kensington Road outside the park. Rupert and Hestia arrived at the Palace Gate. The Golden Rider tried to enter but was detained by a policeman. Thank heavens for civility.

Here came the dwarf George, strolling along with the other Sunday walkers. How could the little man pop in and out without detection? Surely George was too odd for people not to notice. Rupert and Hestia were trapped.

The Golden Rider sped past the policeman. What! A motorcycle let into the park! Shocking! This was obviously the same thought on the minds of the entire Sunday crowd. The Golden Rider aimed for Hestia and Rupert.

George stepped into the motorbike's path and glared. The motorbike swerved off.

"Shocking!" said George.

So this dwarf had some kind of powers. Rupert and the crowd were transfixed as Policemen on motorcycles entered the park and gave chase; the Golden Rider exited the other side of the park with Bobbies in full pursuit. The Sunday crowd went back to their picnics on tartan blankets, chatting with excitement.

George approached. Rupert tried to urge Hestia to turn and gallop away but she was transfixed by the dwarf.

"Rupert!" George held out a bunch of purple clover for Hestia. She put her head down to nuzzle George.

Rupert's mouth was still agape in the direction of the police chase.

"Surely you received the fax this morning from SCOD that I was coming?" George said.

Rupert sat in panicked silence. George was now leading Hestia back towards the stables. Should Rupert jump off and run?

“You are Rupert, aren’t you?” George continued.

Rupert’s mind sped on; trying to develop a plan.

“You haven’t seen the fax,” said George, “but surely you knew your apprenticeship was up today?”

“Did Ezra present my request for a Potions Master License to SCOD? He must have noted that my formula for Cyryzzma will surely show...” Rupert had blurted out more information than he had meant to, hadn’t Ezra taught him to keep quiet to learn what the other party knew before talking?

“SCOD hasn’t heard from Ezra in months. My instructions are to take you back to the line-up. What formula?” said George.

“What line-up?” answered Rupert.

It occurred to him that, given the reaction of Auknot’s Golden people, it might not be prudent to spread news of Cyryzzma around to just anyone. He had no evidence that George was who he said he was; Rupert couldn’t believe Ezra hadn’t submitted his intention to present the formula to SCOD for certification and to ask for a license. Rupert’s paranoia was on full alert.

“Were those friends of yours on the motorbikes?” asked George.

“What line-up?” Rupert replied.

“You do know them? They seemed to be signaling you,” said George.

“No! What line-up?” Rupert hoped to deflect George’s attention from the Golden people and the formula.

“As SCOD said in the fax, even with the recent drastic drop in human prayers, the Guardian Angel line-up is in desperate need of volunteers. Since your apprenticeship has ended, it is *assumed* you would leap at the **opportunity**,” George said.

Arg. Rupert knew most ordinary angels would be honored with such an assignment. But not him. He deplored the idea. Look what it had done to Lowelle. Humans, they didn’t deserve that kind of effort. He could, however, help them with Cyryzza, which actually repressed the human impulse to selfishness.

“Okay, what is it you have to say then?” George said.

He had read Rupert’s face, Rupert never was much good at hiding how he felt, or worse, George was able to read his mind. Some angels could. It was an annoying hazard. And now George knew that Rupert didn’t want a Guardian Angel post. George now knew enough about him to be dangerous; might as well see if he could get George on his side.

“I have this formula,” Rupert said.

“Why didn’t Ezra submit it?” George said.

“He pledged he would do, as support for my Master License at the SCOD hearing,” Rupert said.

George didn’t have to say, “why didn’t he,” Rupert could read it on his face.

“Let’s go,” said George, “Guardian Angel’s an honor and, hey, it’s not so bad here on Earth.”

As they passed through the alley to the mews, George had slipped a sticky bun off a vendor's cart and was mashing it into his mouth, muffling his voice.

"Let's review the alternatives," George said. "Asteroid pusher, cloud seeder, hurricane whip. Very attractive. Which one would you choose instead of Guardian Angel?"

The idea of plotting an asteroid's path through deep empty space, or gathering cloud seeds from dust in other universes, or whipping up the walls of a hurricane on a barren planet made Rupert numb with boredom. George was right, Earth was not only 'not so bad' but was an olfactory delight, not to mention it was where Lowelle had chosen to live, and it was where Rupert would put up a fight to stay. And he would find a way to do it at Oblivion, mixing the scents and potions he loved.

"Ezra is just around the corner, on the Roman Path," Rupert pleaded, "He should return soon and can explain the whole thing."

Rupert prayed he was telling the truth and Ezra had delayed going to SCOD because he was waiting for Rupert to give him the final pretested vial of Cyryzzma.

"Or better we can go find him!" Rupert pleaded.

But George had just discovered Nutella pancakes on another cart. He was stuffing his face.

"Okay, one hour, then it's Guardian Angel Station," George said. "Are there more of these carts?"

"No!" Rupert said.

Rupert took control by grabbing George's third crepe and flinging it into a bin while saying, "We can go back to the shop and see if Ezra left the paperwork."

George pouted while Rupert paid the vendors for the dwarf's snacks. Good, Rupert felt he had the upper hand. But he shuddered to think he would have to show this representative from SCOD the mess in the office.

He wondered how Lowelle was doing with the Creole and if she would even speak to Rupert again. At least he would be back in her vicinity. And maybe he could persuade the Dark Beauty to vouch for Cyryzza's formula. Too bad he hadn't been friendlier. One of Ezra's favorite sayings came to him: *don't make assumptions, anything is possible.*

Chapter 8

Dante's Garden

George watched Rupert, who delayed leaving the stable by carefully grooming Hestia and cleaning out her stall. It took well past noon. Ezra did not return. The Sunday morning sun was gone. In the gloom of heavy rain clouds Rupert and George walked back through Hyde Park, then Kensington Gardens to Kensington High Street.

Rupert hesitated at the teashop to glance at the flat above. The French doors to the balcony, as well as their curtains, were shut and still. Not even a lamp lit to fight the afternoon gloom. Lowelle seemed like a distant dream. Would he see her again or had her Creole ruined everything? Not to mention how annoying it was that the George creature was now matching Rupert's every step.

"Already tried the nosh there, quite flat," stated George pointing to the teashop.

Really, George had talked to teashop women? Through the windows at street level Rupert could see the Dark Beauty holding court over tea; no Lowelle in sight. Rupert sighed and crossed to Oblivion. Rupert paused when he realized he didn't have a key to the front door, having used the side hall earlier that morning.

"No worries," said George as he reached in his pocket and pulled out a silver key with a grand tassel.

How disturbing, Rupert was convinced that George had read his mind. How did George know Rupert wasn't about to pull a key out of his boot or something? And, what? The Supreme

Council of Dominions gave George a key? Why? Rupert immediately worried about Doreen's scheme to discredit him or Oblivion or both, was George to look for evidence against him? Rupert was smug there wouldn't be any evidence. But how would Rupert know, what with the mess of unread faxes and files strewn about?

George headed for the office, Rupert in tow.

"I'll search through these," George announced dangling his short legs from the cot in the corner, covered with papers, where Ezra usually took his after-tea snooze.

Rupert felt irritated. How dare George just take over Ezra's spot!

Rupert's idea to return to the shop proved highly convenient for examination of the faxes and files by George, who dove right in reading documents obviously marked with stamps like "Confidential" and "Master's Eyes Only". Who did this George think he was?

Even though the Dark Beauty had said it was impossible to find, Rupert was itching to get on the computer to search for a supply of Night Blooming Cereus. But he had told George the internet was down to keep him from emailing any authorities. Rupert thought it was weird to have to use computers to communicate with SCOD, but SCOD thought it a great way to limit the gossip of the too chatty Mercurians, who used to hand-carry all SCOD's messages, spreading them indiscriminately about the Universes on the way from place to place.

"A Seraph, from the Seraphim class," George said, "We hardly ever got to do much but sing, not now though; so much strife in Creation, so much consolidation of tasks and elimination of specialties because all eyes needed on decks! You want to hear a few bars?" George belted out a high pitched chord.

Rupert put his hands over his ears, “You mean hands, the expression is all hands on deck,” he yelled, bent over in pain. George shrugged and stopped singing.

A folded piece of paper taped to the underside side of the computer came to Rupert’s attention. Rupert pretended to look at a file while he extracted the note.

‘Cz’ was written on the outside in pencil. Rupert’s shorthand for Cyryzzma. Rupert opened the note. Ezra never used pencil, and it wasn’t in the neat calligraphy of the eighteenth century, Ezra’s favorite, but Ezra’s handwriting was unmistakable. It said: ‘L’s Creole -Cereus 2?’ Ezra must have been in a hurry and why hide the note? He remembered Lowelle mentioning her Creole, a Voodoo expert, was also expert on plants.

Rupert’s heart pounded. Did Lowelle’s old Creole know something about the Night Blooming Cereus? Why had Ezra hid the note? He couldn’t believe his luck. An excuse to talk to her. He would ask Lowelle if she knew anything. George was snoring on the cot, presumably in a sugar coma from all the sweets he had gobbled. Rupert grabbed his trench coat. Thunder announced rain and woke George.

“You ready to volunteer for that Guardian Angel position now?” George said.

Damn, how to get rid of the eyes of SCOD? Rupert shrugged at the rain.

“Going to get tea cakes as Ezra’s bound to arrive any minute,” Rupert replied, “He’ll fancy some with tea in this weather.”

“Okay, let’s go,” said George unfolding a plastic poncho from his pocket.

Rupert sighed, he would have to worry about getting rid of George later. Or maybe the Dark Beauty could convince George of the value of Cyryzzma. This would be tricky. They dashed across the street and entered the teashop dripping wet. It silenced the tearoom.

“How is Lowelle, is she here?” Rupert asked the Dark Beauty.

“Lowelle must see the Creole through another night. You understand?” the Dark Beauty said, lowering her voice so Rupert stepped closer. The disappointed room returned to a din and twitter of women’s concerns.

“I’ll go to her!” Rupert exclaimed, flustered. He refused to simply give up his chances with Lowelle because of her friends, a SCOD spy, or her drooling client.

The Dark Beauty looked George over and took Rupert’s arm. Rupert sensed from the way she looked at George that she knew Rupert was in trouble. And was willing to take advantage of it to get what she wanted.

She leaned in close and whispered, “How kind of you to want to help your fellow angels.”

Rupert suspected it was dangerous to mess with her but he was desperate enough to quell the warning bells in his head, “I need to see Lowelle as soon as possible.”

“Maybe you’ll come back bearing gifts?” she said.

“Most likely,” said Rupert. Did she know something about the Creole and the Night Blooming Cereus? Rupert hoped that the Creole was a source. Maybe he could get some and make the formula before Ezra returned. In that case, Ezra could defend him against George’s Guardian Angel lineup and he could get back on track for a license.

The Dark Beauty's eyes approved. "St. Veronica's Parish, she takes her breakfast at Dante's Garden, you can find her there."

He knew the Dark Beauty would expect something, maybe even the Cyryzzma formula, in exchange for this information but that was nothing compared to his desperation to see Lowelle. Rupert clung to the idea of appeasing the Dark Beauty later with Froth of Venus or some other delight that women usually clawed for.

Rupert calculated the time difference between London and New Orleans. Six hours, perfect! He would arrive in the morning just as Lowelle was relieved of her Creole night duty. Why helping a mortal pass over was a nighttime activity Rupert didn't understand, he had skipped that class to apply for his apprenticeship at Oblivion.

"Dante's Garden! Rave reviews for American Breakfast! When can we leave?" George blurted with glee.

Rupert's stomach seized. George had overheard either the Dark Beauty or Rupert's thoughts. Rupert couldn't feel less like eating.

"I hear Andouille sausage is the best! With American bacon and eggs and hash browns and toast..." George went on and on. Rupert tuned him out.

Wham. The floor under Rupert and George disappeared and splash, rain sprayed him from a passing vehicle. What?

"Sorry, that happens sometimes when I get too excited to go a new place," George shouted over the passing traffic and Rupert's nausea. George had apparently transported them both instantly. Extreme emotions would do that.

The smell of bacon and coffee penetrated the thick New Orleans humidity. Rupert steadied long enough to read the sign swaying over his head. Dante's Garden. Best Breakfast in the World, Saint Veronica's Parish. The sun peeked through clouds and illuminated piles of equipment and furniture on the damp sidewalks. Due to a recent hurricane, New Orleans looked like an old stage set of Paris dumped in a new millennium junkyard.

A glint of gossamer flashed on a hat up the street, Lowelle approached in boots and a fluttering dress awash with purple, green, and pink bouquets. She raised her petite hand to wave. It was too late to kick George under the behemoth of a vehicle spraying drainage water from the gutter onto Rupert's favorite riding jacket.

As Lowelle kissed Rupert on both his muddy cheeks, Rupert made a small contrition for his bad thoughts about George and the SUV. Rupert hoped he didn't smell too badly of horse.

"And who is this?" Lowelle asked of George.

"Just another faithful servant. Hungry? Can we eat?" George replied with the enthusiasm of a jockey in the starting gate.

Rupert wiped mud off his face and jacket to buy time. How could he dispense with George? Rupert spied an internet café up the street. George could check his email!

Too late. Lowelle had already taken George's arm, well, repulsively almost George's armpit, and they were headed inside the restaurant. From the way the suave host fussed over Lowelle and George, Lowelle was obviously a regular at the place. Rupert was struggling to both wipe his boots and keep up when he saw where they were headed. Disaster! A long common table already occupied with several boisterous handsome young customers that knew Lowelle. A

generous amount of air kissing commenced. George was introduced all around to the Boisterous Crowd's delight. Well, Rupert had had enough.

He stepped between George and Lowelle and announced, "Charmed I'm sure," to the Boisterous Crowd who replied with amused smirks at his muddy riding clothes and not-too-disguised imitations of his snotty accent. Lowelle's smile looked forced.

Rupert put his finger to Lowelle's lips before she could raise a protest and whispered to her, "Sorry but I'm afraid I need a bit of fresh air." Her fawn eyes softened.

"George, why don't you enjoy the breakfast and we'll meet up at the internet café up the street in a bit." Rupert felt quite good at the way he was taking command. "You can check my school records, it may change your mind about my volunteering for, well, anything."

"Suit yourself, they need a Canal Duster on Mars," George replied as he dove into the menu.

Relieved for a chance to be with Lowelle, Rupert let George's comment go, he would deal with SCOD issues later. He took Lowelle's arm and led her out the nearest French doors to what he assumed was the outdoor dining area. No such luck. The doors led to a narrow patio overhung with dripping banana tree leaves. At the end, a curtain of banana trees hid one little table and two chairs in a corner, currently occupied by dreadlocked dishwashers on a break.

Rupert snatched and opened Lowelle's pastel umbrella, then shook the banana tree trunks and declared, "Send out a waiter with some linens and such!" Dodging a torrent of rain drops from the leaves, the Dreadlocked Dishwashers scrambled inside. Rupert took off his jacket and placed it over one of the chairs with the silk lining turned out for Lowelle to sit on. Rupert's shake was

vigorous enough to get the leaves to stop dripping and he couldn't believe their luck, the sun came out. A waiter with linen and silver appeared.

“Americano,” requested Lowelle.

Unsure what she was talking about, but suspicious of anything starting with ‘American’, Rupert requested black coffee and menus.

“But your stomach...” she protested.

Rupert pulled out a tiny carnelian vial, the size of a pillbox, which he kept for emergencies just such as this. After the waiter left, Rupert snapped it open. WHEW. The vial let out a blast of cedar, grapefruit, and spring thaw. The entire tiny courtyard was instantly cool and breezy. His stomach settled.

Lowelle clapped and the bright smile that delighted him returned to her face.

“Much better don't you think?” Rupert said. Only then did he notice there were dark circles under her eyes; he was reluctant to bring on a bout of crying by mentioning anything that might be associated with the Creole.

“How do you do it? Tell me everything.” Lowelle settled in to listen, wide-eyed. They devoured several strong coffees, Eggs Benedict, grits, tropical fruits, and crayfish in spiced butter while Rupert told tales of collecting orchids under the watchful eyes of bright parrots in the Amazon, of harvesting rare pinion nuts while being stalked by a mountain lion, of bargaining with notorious Basque rebels in Spain for rare petrified woods. Lowelle ordered a split of champagne.

“I never dreamed Ezra's work was so complicated and dangerous!” she said as she leaned forward in anticipation of the next story.

Rupert's heart sank. Could she have been thinking of Ezra all this time? Did she not like him, Rupert, at all? And apprentices were forbidden to drink champagne. What should he do when it came to the table? Was he still an apprentice? Lowelle sensed something was wrong and put her hand over his.

"Thank you for coming here, I know it's far away from your work, you have cheered me more than I can say," she said. "I hope I didn't take you away from a terribly important project, the one you and that darling Seraph George are up to, how can Ezra manage without you?"

Even Lowelle knew George was a Seraph? Rupert's face burned with shame from his lack of educational school knowledge.

"What's wrong?" Lowelle asked.

"We've had a wonderful breakfast, why spoil it?" he replied. But the worries of the outside world had already come crashing into the banana tree patio. Unholy Commerce, Ezra's seeming neglect, the botched Cinnamon & Sandalwood, the end of his apprenticeship and unknown fate, the Dark Beauty's expectations. How could he have thought he had a chance with a vision like Lowelle? How could he tell her he loathed the very thought of what she was admirably bearing for the Creole? Was there any escape from it all? And how could he ask her now for help to find the Night Blooming Cereus? She might think that was why he had come to her. Anxiety threatened to take over.

"Dearest Rupert," Lowelle began as she took his other hand in hers, "I selfishly dreamed you would come to rescue me and distract me, and you have, but now I can see you aren't really

here, your thoughts are far away, what's bothering you? You have to tell me what I've caused or I shall torture myself over it!"

Rupert's heart threatened to explode in his chest; he couldn't stand for her to suffer. But how could he tell this sophisticated lady angel the troubles of an ignorant apprentice on probation? The Champaign arrived; she reached for it and poured him a glass.

To distract her from his decision not to take a sip, Rupert launched into a full-blown saga of his troubles. Lowelle forgot the Champaign. It went flat in the glasses as he talked and she listened. Her delicate hands held his except when he broke free to gesture wildly about things like the Golden Strong Men chasing him at the Nile and the demands of moving from apprentice to Potions Master. He even explained his concerns that he and Ezra may have been accused of Unholy Commerce by the vengeful Doreen.

"Ezra went for a ride and disappeared. It makes no sense unless he was trying to escape the cage of the Archangel's Troops."

Rupert sighed at the thought. He was about to tell her about the missing ingredient he needed to replace the Cyryzzma he had spilled on meeting her, but she broke in.

"Rupert dear Rupert, I had no idea. Your troubles are far worse than mine. And my Creole will pass soon, probably tonight," she said.

"No, my troubles are mostly of my own making. Nothing like what you faced every day for eighty years." Rupert replied, slightly panicked at the thought of the Creole passing without divulging what he knew about Night Blooming Cereus. He could see he was going to have to tell her his whole story or it might seem to slight her.

“Whatever do you mean? I only serve one puny powerless human. They are pathetically sad really,” Lowelle said.

“I don’t think I could do what you do,” Rupert said. It was his deepest confession. He hated saying out loud to anyone how horrified he was of being an ordinary angel answering ordinary human prayers.

“What do you mean? Of course you could. Why couldn’t you?” Lowelle asked.

Rupert looked at her, perched on the edge of her seat with concern for him. No one had ever shown this much interest in his personal story, not even Ezra. Rupert had never wanted to be known by anyone like he wanted to be known by Lowelle.

“When it was the early times for me, when I was just training, I was first assigned to horses,” Rupert explained. Rupert hadn’t thought of those early days for a long time, but now they flashed across his mind. The time when he and all his angel friends were first assigned to an animal felt as fresh as the patio breeze. As students it was their job between terms to get the feel for the earthly realm, to learn to navigate earthly visits while they studied the laws of Creation.

“Our herd was mustangs, wild ones, in the plains of the American Southwest. They ran free, rather like my companions and I. Before we had our bodily form, we would sweep over the endless plains with the herd, flying for hours to explore. It was on these adventures that I discovered my gift.

“I would get lost, distracted because of fragrances, sage or wheat or oak. But soon I could always find my way because I could tell every kind of rock or dirt from the odor.

“The thrill of every new smell kept me from my book studies. Instead, I memorized how different combinations of odors affected the horses and other animals. I cured more diseases than authorized while doing my own experiments with beeswax and aloe and mud balms.

“Back in school, my Teachers all became frustrated with me. Then I heard about Oblivion from an old gentleman in Kentucky, a Lost Soul, on a trip with some horses that were being considered for racing. The Kentucky Gentleman had traveled to London and been impressed with Ezra’s skills.

“None of our horses belonged in racing but I knew Oblivion was where I belonged. I skipped class and applied for my apprenticeship to become a perfumes and potions master. The Teachers were glad to see me go. No one thought I was fit to serve humans.” Rupert paused and decided not to explain more.

“But I don’t understand. I can see that potions are your gift but why is the idea of serving humans so terribly difficult? Is it because you didn’t finish your studies?” Lowelle asked.

Rupert was quiet. The banana leaves swayed in the breeze. Clatter continued in the kitchen and street noises drifted over the patio wall. Lowelle waited, motionless.

“Because of the horses,” Rupert started but couldn’t finish.

“Which horses? The ones that weren’t selected for racing?” Lowelle asked. “Did the humans do something to them?”

“I’m afraid you’ve guessed it,” Rupert didn’t want to explain further.

“You were very fond of the horses? Attached? You know we aren’t supposed to get attached to earthly forms, everything passes from here eventually,” Lowelle tried to comfort him but she was making it worse.

“I was off searching for blue grass and bay leaf,” Rupert paused again, far away in his memory, “I should have been there to heal them, make them better equipped for racing. To endure being pushed harder. To not stumble or fall... or have to be put down.”

“It wasn’t your fault! You weren’t assigned to the humans, they have free will, you couldn’t have stopped them from hurting the horses if you had tried; our interfering with human’s free will is against the laws of Creation!” Lowelle insisted.

“No that’s not it at all,” Rupert replied, “yes, some of the horses had to be eliminated after the race trials. They were lame or had broken legs, it’s usual. And no, I wasn’t there to comfort the horses at the track. I found them later at the slaughterhouse.” Rupert was distraught from the memory, “I was with them when they passed, they were at peace.”

He could tell Lowelle was pained and confused by his story. He had to tell her the rest, even if it meant losing her respect. He had to tell her about his crime and why he was on probation. Why there was a black mark on his record.

“It was the smell of death. I know everything here must pass away but I saw the slaughter as an unnecessary cruelty before death’s appointed time. I can’t stand the smell of death. Mixed with strong emotion it’s too much for me. I lost control and tried to destroy the men responsible. My anger started a fire. It trapped the slaughterhouse workers,” Rupert whispered. “Their fellow men tried to save them, but some...perished.”

He could tell by the look on Lowelle's face that she was shocked. Shocked and maybe a little afraid. To interfere in such a manner, to attack humans, was absolutely forbidden without a specific command from SCOD.

"It was a long time ago," he added. "But you see, I don't know how to be anyplace but at Oblivion. Human flaws anger me so, I don't trust myself with them."

Rupert called for the check, which Lowelle had to sign since Rupert had transported with nothing but his riding outfit. Another humiliation in front of her. It was hopeless. But they stepped into the street and she consented to wander arm-in-arm around the junk piles.

"Rupert?" Lowelle broke the silence.

"Yes Lowelle?" Rupert braced himself for her brush off.

"You must promise me something." She started.

"Of course," Rupert vowed to follow through on her request like a gentleman, even if he never saw her again.

"You must let me help you stay at Oblivion," she said.

He put his arm around her and drew her closer.

"With you by my side I can do anything," Rupert replied.

Chapter 9

New Apprentice

It was afternoon by the time Rupert and Lowelle arrived at the Internet Café in search of George. Lowelle made Rupert promise to meet her again that evening; she was off for an afternoon of sleep and preparations for her final night with the Creole.

Rupert was relieved she had asked him if he wanted to meet the Creole. This way he didn't have to reveal his other motive for coming to New Orleans: to inquire about Ezra's mysterious "L's Creole- Cereus 2?" note.

She had blown him a kiss. Rupert had a warm glow.

But what to do about George? It was no use trying to give such a gifted transporter the slip. Rupert had to convince him to give up. He sighed and opened the internet café door.

George was a mess. Piles of snack bags and pop cans were teetering on the edges of the computer desk where he worked. He was munching on cheese puffs. The keyboard was covered with orange fingerprints.

"Have you tried these?" George held the bag over his head without looking at Rupert.

"No! Put that junk down," Rupert was disgusted but Ezra's advice oozed in: *creatures will always reveal to you who they are, you don't have to ask them, you just have to believe what they do*. George was succumbing to the same treacherous pits all angels were confronted with when first visiting earth: physical delights. George was quickly becoming a foodie. Rupert wondered if he could get too fat to transport.

“Congratulations, you have the worst ever school records. Not to mention the Incinerating Incident.”

Rupert cringed.

George continued, “And, okay, I contacted SCOD and no one has heard from Ezra about you in the last month. And no one has heard from Ezra at all in the last twenty-four hours. In fact, there are some pretty nasty rumors going around,” George said, “We need to leave right away for SCOD HQ, a probation hearing has been set for Wednesday but you can take the Guardian position right away and be done with it.”

Rupert expected the floor to fall out under their feet and they would arrive at SCOD HQ. Hmm...Rupert looked at George who was staring around the internet café as if he didn't recognize where he was.

“We need to leave right away for Guardian Angel line-up!” George said.

Nothing happened. No transport. Rupert exhaled.

“We need to leave right away to find the Archangel's Troo...,” George's third attempt to transport was interrupted by Rupert.

“No! We need to wait until evening to meet the Creole with Lowelle,” said Rupert.

Nothing happened. George's eyes narrowed.

“And why is that?” he asked.

“And what are the rumors?” Rupert stared George down, which wasn't easy given George's enormous intense eyes.

“A nasty business on the Nile and it looks like Ezra is involved and, word is, so are you,” said George, “I understand the Archangel is very distressed.”

So George was the Archangel’s spy, or had least turned into one for the moment.

“No!” Rupert replied, “I’m not involved in the Auknot Pharaoh Statue Golden People or whatever cult.”

Rupert could see in George’s face that he had revealed too much.

George insisted on a full explanation or it was press the button on an email to the Archangel’s Troop Master to come collect Rupert until his Wednesday hearing. The internet café kicked them out for spilling pop the computer. The email didn’t go.

George tried to transport them to SCOD HQ again. Nothing happened.

On the damp sidewalk in glaring afternoon shadows Rupert finally got him to concede that if Cyryzza was valuable enough for Auknot to be after, as evidenced by the Golden Riders in Hyde Park, there might be something to it.

Although George made it clear he thought Cyryzza was just a rumor, he gave Rupert twenty-four hours, or until George could transport them to HQ, to produce some. Rupert reminded him that transport only worked if it was aligned with Divine Will. George’s cranky facial expression made Rupert regret this reminder.

Lowelle transported Rupert and George to the Creole’s cabin deep in the Bayou. Rupert would have liked to have taken a boat, to inhale the humid smell of mosses and orchids, to explore little coves overhung with branches of exotic plants, to watch bright birds and fish reflect the

sundown. But the transport got them there while the Creole was still alive. George conceded that this fact somewhat confirmed that all was well with the Divine Will.

The ancient Creole sat on a porch swing, his head tilted to the side as if his neck was broken. His knees and ankles displayed sharp points through faded coveralls as he rocked. Lowelle sat next to the Creole in the swing. She introduced them. It was impossible to tell if Creole's eyes, grey from cataracts, even registered the visitors.

"Rupert is an herbalist, like your Gran," Lowelle opened the topic, "he works with Ezra, do you remember him? From Oblivion?"

The Creole shifted his skeleton a bit. He stopped rocking, emitted a grunt.

"Did Ezra talk to you about Cyryzzma? I'm the one who created it." Rupert said.

Silence fell on the Bayou as the last of the sun's golden light left the horizon. A bird squawked. A gator splashed. Bugs hit against an oil lamp.

Rupert tried again, "Do you know of Night Blooming Cereus?"

The Creole came to life. He lifted his head, coughed, and spit.

"I don't know you," The Creole boomed in a deep voice.

Lowelle took his hand, "He's a friend of mine, and of your Gran's kin."

The Creole smiled, "Gran taught me..." He stared into the distance.

"He often drifts off on a memory," Lowelle said, "it only takes a bit of patience and he'll tell us."

When dawn broke, Rupert was ready to give up. Lowelle pulled from her pocket the vial of Southern Sunset she had purchased earlier. There was only a drop left.

“I was saving it for his last breath, I think it’s time now,” she said.

She held it a moment until it warmed, then slowly removed the stopper. The air flashed with green light, then a mist of gardenias in sea spray spread over the scene. Rupert breathed in; the Creole’s memories of dark exotic women with magnolias in their hair washed over him.

The Creole smiled at Lowelle, “Okay, gorgeous, just for you.”

Lowelle put his arm around the Creole. Rupert had a twinge of jealousy that almost caused him to miss what the Creole said next.

“Blooms only at midnight, on the date appointed by Vesta,” the Creole muttered.

“Vesta the asteroid?” asked George.

“But do you know where I can find some?” Rupert pressed.

The Creole’s body shuddered; Lowelle gently eased his head onto her lap.

Lowelle whispered, “Summer. That’s what the rise of Vesta means. The Night Blooming Cereus only blooms in summer.”

The mist thickened until it obscured Lowelle and her Creole; they disappeared, transported to what Rupert assumed to be the Creole’s Ultimate Destination.

George sang “Rest Now ‘til Summer’s Peaceful Sunrise,” a slow bluesy dirge Rupert could have done without.

Rupert shivered in the Bayou’s autumn chill. Now what? He didn’t want to think about the Dark Beauty controlling the only known supply of Night Blooming Cereus. If they hadn’t smoked it all up in the hookah. He needed to check around. As reluctant as he was to leave in case Lowelle returned, he knew his options were running out.

George finished his song.

“Time to go, I hear there are openings for storm blowers in Siberia,” he said.

Rupert cringed. How many horrible angel jobs could there be?

“We need to get home, NOW!” Rupert yelled at George. Oops. Rupert’s stomach informed him that George took emotional commands very seriously. When the room stopped spinning, Rupert saw to his relief they had transported to Oblivion’s office.

“Sorry, but you said now,” George helped Rupert to the cot. Rupert brushed George’s orange handprint off his ruined riding jacket.

Rupert was disappointed to see that there was no sign of Ezra having been there in the office or in the shop. Both felt quite empty with a loneliness that filled Rupert with foreboding. Where could Ezra be? Had something happened to him on the ride? Or were the rumors true, had the morning ride been a ruse for Ezra’s escape? Rupert refused to believe that Ezra could be mixed up with that weird cult or other forms of Unholy Commerce. Something foul had happened. But right now Rupert had to convince George not to exile him to some stupid fate.

Rupert ordered some Indian Curry to distract George.

“Naan bread is great! You may have one hour to make some calls to see if the other shops have any Night Blooming Cereus. Then produce this Cyryzza!” George said.

Ezra would never approve of going to competitors for anything. But Rupert was desperate, he needed to think. He nodded agreement just to get George busy with something other than staring at him.

As if Rupert needed a reminder it was well into autumn, a ferocious rain poured onto the perfumery's awning. Rupert called every other shop and source he could think of while George drank tea and checked his email. Rupert eventually managed to bump George off the computer with a bribe of chai and biscuits. He confirmed that the Creole was correct on the point that the Cereus only bloomed in summer. There was no email from Ezra.

Rupert longed for the days when Ezra would dispatch him to an exotic land on a noble quest for essential oils. How gratifying it was to capture a fragrance in the warmth of the Fez spice market. Where was Ezra now? He had to get George off his back so that he could look for Ezra and resolve his apprenticeship. He appreciated Lowelle's offer of help but he really wanted to impress her by securing his position on his own.

George noted that no one had a drop of Night Blooming Cereus and the hour he had given Rupert to sort things had been up for several hours. Rupert ordered an assortment of fruit, dessert chocolates, and cakes to keep George busy. George fell asleep in another sugar coma.

The only thing that Rupert's internet research reconfirmed was that the Night Blooming Cereus actually bloomed only right at midnight. Rupert admired this type of precision in the grand design of Creation. Simple laws that were easy to follow, not at all like the willful chaotic unpredictable humans.

Rupert gazed at George's "home page" on the computer. He entered "Night Blooming Cereus" one more time like a crazed addict who just couldn't stop himself. The same list of links came up for the forty-seventh time. Rupert had been to all twenty-five thousand pages and found nothing promising. You are missing something here. He scanned the home page.

A line across the top in light blue announced “Images Maps News Shopping Mail.” He clicked on Shopping. Night Blooming Cereus at The Mall, Night Blooming Cereus Online Shops, Deliver Night Blooming Cereus by Courier. I don’t think so.

He clicked on Images. Stunning images of blossoms: starbursts floating in darkness, impossible pin-points of pink light climbing a tree, people toasting at blossom parties. A close-up reminded him of Lowelle’s delicate curves. He closed the images to recompose himself, but it was too late, Rupert had fallen for the Night Blooming Cereus, he longed to inhale her rich beauty.

He clicked on News. One hundred and thirty thousand articles. Rupert was startled. The first page all included the name Bergen. He smelled a fresh trail.

Harold Bergen, American millionaire, had recently married a luscious London widow, Lady Herminie. Bergen had added to her estate, now called Bergen’s Grove, an elaborate desert greenhouse. A spectacular Night Blooming Cereus stolen from the desert in New Mexico was the central feature. Mr. Bergen was crucified in the press. Environmental this, class climber that. Rupert’s own lust for the Night Blooming Cereus almost rendered him sympathetic with poor Mr. Bergen.

Rupert clicked on one last article. “Curse of Vesta” dated the day before yesterday. The Night Blooming Cereus had refused to bloom this summer, in spite of swelling buds. And Mr. Bergen’s enterprises were all failing. The article speculated: Were the two related? Ancient custom said that Vesta cursed those who engaged in wicked commerce. The term was too close to Unholy Commerce, it made Rupert uneasy.

“But what luck!” He whispered under his breath, finally a possible source of unseasonable blossoms that didn’t lead back to the Dark Beauty. His eyes went heavy, a bath and some sleep were overdue. Rupert locked the shop to leave for his flat when a voice squeaked from the office.

“Are we going?”

He had forgotten George.

“We?” was all Rupert could think to say.

“To see if it’s bloomed, at Mr. Bergen’s? Or would you rather polish rocks on Pluto?” George said.

Rupert was past the point of tired where he could be civil.

“Fine, rocks on Pluto would be fine! Let’s go. But don’t come to me when Cyryzzma turns out to be the solution for all humanity!” Rupert yelled.

George looked stunned. He just sat there blinking. No transport to SCOD HQ or the Archangel’s cage was forthcoming. Rupert’s confidence soared. He was doing the right thing. George was shaking. But something was wrong, George was crying. Rupert no longer felt smug, damn, the little Seraph was taking away any pleasure Rupert had gained from his righteous position.

“They fired me,” George blurted out.

“What?” Rupert said.

“By email, can you believe it? It seems beneath SCOD to do such a thing,” George said.

“What, why?” Rupert asked.

“I didn’t bring you in on time, the food was just too delicious,” George replied. “I had a quotient to make for the Guardian Angel line-up. I never was any good at it. I was going to try to get you there and then plead for an extension to the deadline but now it’s too late.”

Rupert regretted his outburst.

“You can go back to singing,” Rupert encouraged.

“No, I’m totally fired. I have to work my way back into the inner circle,” George said.

“How will you do that?” Rupert asked.

“Will you hire me? I can be your apprentice! You can teach me all about how to make potions and Cyryzza! And I can sing while we do it!” George sang something horrible from a musical dated in the 1950’s, Rupert’s most detested period for music.

As if things were not bad enough. How could he trust George enough to hire him? But how could he *not* hire George? George already knew enough about Cyryzza to be dangerous. What if he went for a job, say, to the Dark Beauty or, horrors, Auknot for example? Rupert resigned himself to the inevitable.

“Okay, fine but you have to do exactly as I say!” Rupert crossed his arms until George nodded enthusiastically enough to be believed. He wondered what powers the Seraph might have retained and reminded himself to be on guard. George might still be a very clever spy, not fired at all.

Chapter 10

Greenhouse Prayer

To avoid a transporting accident Rupert sent George out to flag a taxi while Rupert went upstairs to change and pray the night didn't have another ruined jacket in store. George was waiting with a taxi when Rupert came back downstairs. It wasn't far to Bergen's Grove, the estate where Mr. Bergen lived with his new wife, Lady Herminie.

Rupert had the taxi leave them well away from the main gates. He prayed the tabloids were accurate on the new greenhouse and its contents.

They climbed the garden gate and, yes, there it was! Bergen's shiny new greenhouse reflected the waning moonlight in its glass panes. George and Rupert crept up to the greenhouse doors. Grow-lights were on inside but Rupert couldn't see anything moving. They entered. A cathedral ceiling vaulted over their heads. Rich and dank earth odors blended with a light hint of Cereus. Rupert felt intoxicated. They made their way through a maze of dark jungle plants. Rupert pointed George towards some desert sand wavering under heat lamps at the other end of the room.

The greenhouse door creaked open behind them.

Rupert and George dove under a planting table as the legs of a woman in red high heels and a man in tuxedo pants appeared.

"Should we take it back to New Mexico, see if it blooms there?" the man asked.

"Moving is too risky," the woman replied.

"Fiona, curse or no curse, I need it to bloom now!" the man said.

“I’ll come back at midnight and see what I can do,” sighed the woman.

“You’re running out of time, we all are!” the man said, exasperated.

The man led the woman away. Rupert strained to see out from under the table. The woman in red looked back over her shoulder. Rupert caught just a glimpse of her. Oddly, she was wearing sunglasses. She looked up at the ceiling just before they exited.

Rupert followed her glance. A mass of gray thorny sticks clung to the iron ceiling trusses. It was the Night Blooming Cereus. Ugly without its blossoms.

Rupert strained his neck as he stepped onto the sand. He could see heavy pink unopened buds spurting out from the prickly grey sticks. The scent grew stronger. Rupert closed his eyes and inhaled. He sensed that it was almost time for the buds to open. The warmth of the lamps lulled him into silent worship of the intoxicating fragrance.

“Becoming a little attached are we?” George’s accusing voice awakened Rupert from his dreamy state. The moment was ruined.

“Go back to the shop and get a bottle,” Rupert snapped.

Rupert curved his hand around the lumpy form of a bottle hidden in his pocket. He wanted to be alone with the Cereus at the moment of glory, if it bloomed.

“What about the Fiona person coming back?” George asked.

“You can create a distraction. I’ll only need a moment,” Rupert said.

George was hesitating. How irritating it was to deal with an “apprentice” questioning your plan. Rupert wondered if Ezra ever felt this way about him.

“Go!” Rupert yelled. George faded in an immediate transport.

Finally alone, Rupert lay down on a bench to un-cram his neck and keep watch. He was quickly overcome by a deep sleep.

“Are you my Angel?”

Rupert thought he was having a nightmare. A girl about twelve with flowing hair stood over him. He tried to wake up, which is difficult when you are already awake. He felt a thud in his chest when he saw he had been caught out by a human-child.

“Who are you?” He asked to buy time.

“Virginia and this is my garden.”

Rupert felt panic rise in his throat. He swallowed it down with the first thought that came to him.

“Well, your father sent me to take care of it,” he replied.

He figured it wasn't a total lie if you defined Father properly.

She looked over his non-gardening clothing. Her eyes narrowed.

“You mean my step-father?”

She had him there.

“I thought you might be the Angel I was praying for,” Virginia whispered.

Rupert searched for an escape. He heard a rustling in the leaves. It was George, signaling.

There were prayer request technicalities that Rupert knew about vaguely. He didn't know if this scenario obligated him to answer this Virginia child. In spite of his narrow escape from being delivered to the Guardian Angel line-up, could George, would George, call the Archangel in if he thought Rupert was avoiding a prayer request from a child? Rupert couldn't risk it; he had

to assume anything George saw would be reported, George was trying to get back into the inner circle after all.

Rupert wished he had at least read the ordinances on prayer. He looked up at the Night Blooming Cereus but only found silence. The grey sticks seemed strident next to the delicate child.

“I said, I was praying for an Angel.” Virginia’s lonely voice broke in.

To calm his panic, Rupert pretended she was just an ordinary customer.

“Now, why would you need an Angel?” He asked.

“Oh, it’s not for me,” she replied.

He used Ezra’s sales technique of silence. Damn Ezra, why had he disappeared and left Rupert to cope alone? Or worse, why had Ezra engaged in Unholy Commerce? Had the Archangel’s Troops caught him? Rupert envisioned flames, bare feet on coals, hot chains. Faced with images of hell, a smidgen of sympathy for Ezra returned.

“It’s for my step-father. Do you know him? I suppose Angels know everyone,” Virginia said.

“I didn’t say I was an Angel,” Rupert defended.

“And you didn’t say you weren’t,” she replied.

George was pounding on his wrist where his watch would be if Seraphim wore watches. Rupert glanced at his own watch. It was eleven-thirty, just half an hour until the internet legends said the Cereus would bloom. Rupert wondered if his relationship with Ezra was like having a step-father. The body most angels assumed were orphans or outcasts with no traceable history or relatives.

“Why does your step-father need an Angel?” Rupert asked.

“He seems overly anxious to me,” Virginia answered as she scrunched up her forehead like a grown-up to illustrate.

Rupert laughed but it was to cover up how sad he suddenly felt.

“Okay, I’ll answer one prayer for you after I complete my appointed task.”

Virginia looked skeptical. From his leafy hiding place, George rolled his eyes.

“What is your appointed task?” She asked.

Rupert pulled the perfume bottle from his pocket. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see George was furious that Rupert had sent him on a fake errand to fetch another bottle.

“To gather the scent of the Night Blooming Cereus,” he told her. George displayed further exasperation. Rupert knew Ezra wouldn’t have approved of this much disclosure either.

“It hasn’t bloomed yet. They say it’s cursed. Why don’t you do my miracle first?” she asked.

“Miracle? I didn’t promise a miracle,” Rupert replied.

“I prayed for an Angel to relieve my step-father’s anxiety. I’m sure it will take a miracle. Everything’s gone quite wrong in his life. That’s why the Night Blooming Cereus is cursed and won’t bloom. Don’t Angels read the news?”

Rupert didn’t have time to debate, besides he had read the news. But really how hard could a little human anxiety be to relieve? The fragrance would be gathered in a few minutes, he could send George around in a few days to cheer up the step-father with a few American Musical songs and be done with it.

“Miracles take time. As soon as I have the scent, I’ll make a start,” he told her.

“No! You can’t have my Night Blooming Cereus until you answer my prayer.” With these words she grabbed the bottle out of Rupert’s hand and threw it towards a jumble of ferns. It flew through the air end-over-end. Rupert inhaled. He was sure this would be the last breath for all of them. If an empty bottle landed just right and exploded they would be sucked into a dark hole in the universe.

George emerged from his hiding place. He did a few handsprings across the room and caught the bottle just before it hit the ground. Virginia squealed with delight.

“I’m George, your faithful servant and assistant to Rupert here.”

Great. Virginia’s request was now clear and non-negotiable. Not to mention witnessed. And thanks to George, she knew their names.

Rupert thought about Lowelle. She wouldn’t even hesitate to answer the prayer. The sooner he got the scent, the sooner George was off his case and the sooner Rupert could get back to the business of finding Ezra, getting his license, and ultimately settling a position at Oblivion—dare he hope it would be with Lowelle at his side?

Rupert looked up at the Night Blooming Cereus. It was motionless. He looked back at Virginia.

She pointed.

Rupert followed her finger to a lit window in the mansion’s hulking form beyond the steamy glass of the greenhouse.

Maybe the step-father was the more expeditious way to get what he wanted. Rupert would simply plead with the man.

“I’ll wait here,” George said.

Virginia nodded enthusiastically.

Good, Rupert was happy to have the annoying apprentice out of his face.

Chapter 11

An Attempt

Rupert strode with confidence into the house and found his way into Harold Bergen's study, which would have been an interesting place if Rupert hadn't been on such an urgent mission. The study smelled of something familiar, something masculine. Rupert was under too much pressure to identify the scent. Ancient Roman bottles beckoned to him, on display in cases under amber lights. But their swirls of glass just made Rupert dizzy, he couldn't concentrate.

It took him a moment to realize he was alone. Whew. What now? He listened to the old house creak. There wasn't any indication of a human moving about. Rupert stepped to the window and looked down at the greenhouse. Would it be reasonable to assume he was relieved of his obligation if Mr. Bergen couldn't be found?

"Don't move."

It was too late to transport. The familiar smell was now overwhelming, a cologne? But Rupert was too distracted by fear to be able to place the scent.

"Kind sir, Mr. Bergen, I'm here to implore you on behalf of Virginia." Rupert turned to face the famous anxious man.

"I doubt that," Mr. Bergen said, not looking anxious at all with a cell phone to his ear. He pointed to it.

"The authorities are on their way."

Rupert's eyes focused on the tall clock behind Mr. Bergen, eleven fifty-five.

“Okay I confess. I came to sneak a look at the Cereus and was caught out by Virginia. She thinks I’m some sort of angel here to answer her prayer, which is about you by the way. How dare you worry a child! And furthermore, what is she doing up at this hour? What kind of a father are you!? Oh I’m sorry, as she corrected me, step-father.”

Mr. Bergen looked pained.

Rupert sensed this wasn’t a good reaction when you were trying to answer a prayer. Did he have to go over the top every time he dealt with wayward humans? What were those prayer procedures? The file in his brain for “prayer” seemed to be empty. He sensed he had Mr. Harold Bergen at a disadvantage, and Rupert was running out of time.

“Look, Harold, if I may, we both have the same problem. Virginia. I wouldn’t have dreamed of entering your home if it wasn’t for her pleas. I beg you to relieve her of this worry, just call her in and I’ll go and you’ll never have your peace disturbed by me again.”

Mr. Bergen strode to the window and gazed down at the greenhouse.

“I’ve been worried about her.”

“You would have a lot less to worry about if she was in bed like a proper young lady,” Rupert said as he was backing out of the room.

As soon as Rupert cleared the door he clamored down the nearest staircase. He tore down the corridor and out into the garden. He could hear Mr. Bergen closing in on him. Rupert tripped over something as he neared the greenhouse doors. He fell with a thud. It was George’s foot. Damn. George rolled him under a rose bush.

“Didn’t bloom,” George grinned tapping on the empty vial in his hand.

“As if that was good news,” Rupert whispered.

A spooked and angry Mr. Bergen thundered past.

“Virginia!” Mr. Bergen boomed.

The lights went off in the greenhouse. Sirens were approaching.

“I know you’re in there!”

George and Rupert scrambled out the side gate onto the street just as a taxi dropped off Fiona in red, still wearing sunglasses.

“Not blooming tonight!” George announced. She gave him an alarmed look and hurried into the garden gate as if she had seen a ghost.

Rupert and George dodged through an alley. When it was clear they weren’t being followed, they walked slowly back to Oblivion in the rain. It took hours. Rupert refused to talk about what had happened with Bergen.

As they arrived, a taxi deposited Virginia at the entrance. She spotted them and strutted over, shaking her umbrella.

“Hello young lady.”

“Hello George,” Virginia said.

“What are you doing here!?” Rupert yelled. It was incredulous that Bergen had let her out. It was almost 6:00 am.

“You’re easy to find, Oblivion is the only perfumery on the internet that carries Night Blooming Cereus products.”

“We’re out at the moment,” Rupert snapped, hoping she would just leave if he was less than friendly. Rupert noted Virginia’s eyes were puffy, like she had been crying.

“My mother gets her Froth of Venus here.”

“How’s your father?” George asked.

Rupert assumed George was making a spy inquisition into how he had done on Virginia’s prayer request. He would be reported as a failure on that point for sure. Virginia smelled vaguely of her father’s study.

Suddenly Rupert recalled the scent from Bergen’s study. It was Cinnamon and Sandalwood. Had Bergen been Ezra’s client? The one that received Rupert’s bad fusion? This was worse than he could have dreamed. How had Bergen been affected? It seemed best to avoid Bergen altogether.

Virginia pointed her umbrella at Rupert.

“You told him,” she accused.

“Told who what, exactly?” Rupert feigned.

“You told my step-father that you wanted him to pretend to be less anxious!” She blurted out, teaful.

Oh dear. Rupert resisted looking at George.

“I never told him that. You shouldn’t be concerned with the worries of grownups in any case.” Rupert lectured.

“You’re a terrible naughty angel and you’ll never get my Night Blooming Cereus, so you better change your webpage,” she declared as she flagged another taxi.

Oh dear. Everything was going dreadfully wrong. Rupert was about to explain to George what had really happened, just in case this incident was going into a spy report to the Archangel, but he was preoccupied about the Cinnamon and Sandalwood.

“What now?” George asked as they entered the hallway.

“I need to think. Wait for me in the office,” Rupert said. “There’s some salami and cheese in the little fridge.”

The orange glow of his lava-lamp welcomed Rupert home. He flopped down on the couch with a sigh.

He had the gut feeling he would never be able to answer Virginia’s prayer. And who knows how the bad fusion had affected Bergen. Now the only plausible source of Night Blooming Cereus was the Dark Beauty. Would it be Unholy Commerce to deal with her, she was probably a member of Auknot’s cult.

The Archangel would have Rupert “Taken,” probably straight to hell without a trial. In fact, this was probably where Ezra was right now. Rupert’s dream of the safe cocoon of Oblivion had been an illusion. Oblivion was overhung with a cloud of unholy temptation. He knew George would be hungry again soon and want to go out; if Rupert wanted out of all this, he only had a short time to escape.

He could go to Lowelle in New Orleans, throw himself on her mercy and hope she had meant her offer to help him. He could get a regular job or maybe help her with her work in some small way. Rupert vowed to study up and find a loop hole in the rules that would save him. It depressed him, legitimacy no longer seemed an option.

George could deal with SCOD on his own. George could probably even answer Virginia's prayer.

Rupert carefully packed a small soft bag; he had learned you couldn't transport anything big without being in grave danger of it landing on your head. He checked the mirror. His heartbeat sped up at the thought of seeing Lowelle again, maybe even rescuing her from the clutches of the Creole. Rupert was ready to start the transport. It would take some kind of emotional device to get going.

Music. He put *Moon River* on the DVD and danced with his bag in his arms, picturing Lowelle. Nothing happened. The moon in the song had made him think of the last place he saw her, the bayou. His anger at the old Creole, drooling on the porch, had popped up and must be interfering. Why couldn't the old guy just have told him where to find some *Cereus*? And was he competition for Lowelle's affection?

He reminded himself that the Creole had passed and couldn't be a threat now. He started over on his attempt to transport to Lowelle. It was no use. Images of valiantly overshadowing a ninety-year-old human to win a girl were uninspiring. He couldn't imagine Lowelle thanking Rupert for showing up with nothing to offer her but his troubles. And on top of it, disparaging the old Creole who had loved her an entire lifetime. Bloody hell, the transport just wasn't going to work.

Tap. Tap. Rupert couldn't believe it, George was knocking on the door already. Rupert's escape plan had failed.

"Damn it George!" Rupert yanked the door open.

It wasn't George. It was the old Creole, now a Lost Soul. Rupert was stunned.

The Creole opened his slobbering skeletal mouth and declared, "Auknot is rising."

The Creole tucked a fiddle under his chin and raised a bow. He turned with a limp and began to play. Mournful notes struck Rupert's heart.

The notes took a twist as the Creole went down the stairs, each draw of the bow sped up into a devilish tune. Was the Creole involved with Auknot too?

Rupert was unsure of what he saw as the Creole descended into the unlit stairwell. Rupert thought the old black man actually seemed to be getting younger with each note. The Creole turned and grinned, he was now a strong young man.

The Young Handsome Creole swept the bow across the fiddle in a crating chord and belted out with gravity, "And Auknot has Ezra!"

Chapter 12

Vortex

Before Rupert could recover enough to shout questions about Auknot and Ezra at the Creole, George bounded straight through the Creole's form. The Creole disappeared altogether, leaving only footprints of gold dust on the stair.

"Whew, that was close Boss!" George said.

Hmm... 'Boss' Rupert liked the sound of that. But he mustn't be taken in by Seraph Spy George's tactics to get Rupert to let his guard down. Did he know Rupert was attempting to get away? Of course. He had forgotten George's mind-reading ability.

"What?" Rupert said.

"Rule 38 in the Book of Transports, you know, Reversals," George said.

Reversals? Rupert had no idea what George was talking about. Ezra would quiz Rupert on these things but Rupert rarely knew the answer. But now that Rupert was the Boss, why shouldn't he quiz George?

"Yes, of course, and the recital is...?" Rupert asked.

George recited, "Rule 38: When improperly prepared, a transport can reverse. If you are improperly prepared because of an Object of Resentment, said Object of Resentment may be transported to you, instead of you to your destination."

So that's why the Creole had appeared. Rupert could see this quizzing George was going to be quite a convenient idea.

“Look at this,” said George. He held up a sheaf of official looking forms printed on pale blue linen paper. From what Rupert could see SUPREME COUNCIL OF DOMINIONS was arched across the top of each page in overly fancy print.

Rupert frowned.

“A Mastery Certification request has been delivered!” George announced.

Rupert’s heart soared. Mastery Certification? Had Ezra submitted paperwork? Or was it another attempt by George to keep him off guard and/or beholden?

“It only has to be filled in,” George said as he went through and read the title of each document, “Skills Validation, Verification of Character & Integrity, Master’s Promotion & Placement Recommendation, Certification, Testing, & Licensing of Original Formula, Archangel’s Certification of Master Potions License.”

Yes, well ‘filled in’ was a big “only has to be”. Rupert took the papers from George. They were already smudged with grease by George’s foodie fingers. No matter, without Ezra or Cyryzzma they probably weren’t ever going to hang on the wall at Oblivion anyway.

Rupert imagined Ezra’s pudgy fingers wrapped around a silver fountain pen as the answers to questions were written down in Ezra’s most careful calligraphy. Under skills: ‘Improper Fusion of Cinnamon & Sandalwood’, ‘Careless spill of test vial of Cyryzzma’, ‘Insubordination to a Seraph’, or under integrity: ‘Refused to Answer Prayer of Miss Virginia Bergen’, or ‘Consorted with Golden People of Auknot on Golden Beach of the Nile’. It all added up to one thing: ‘Certificate Denied’ on the Archangel’s page.

Rupert's bowels boiled. He WAS a Master Perfumer! He would not be denied his destiny by accidental incidents and hysterical humans. Ezra knew the truth, hadn't he said over and over that Rupert was the most skilled apprentice OF ALL TIME? Well if Auknot had Ezra, Rupert would do anything to get him back. Rupert would get his certification. To hell with the Bergens and this Auknot character.

"George!" Rupert yelled as he glared at the scone in George's hand.

"Yes, boss?" George answered with a puzzled look on his face, "This scone seems to be heating up on its own."

"Cairo!" Rupert thundered, not wanting to think about the possibility his state of mind was warming the scone.

Good, no sign of flames. He tried to calm down.

The room began to melt around them. The stairs disappeared. The floor wobbled and bobbed. Thanks to George's sensitivity to emotional commands, Rupert and George had instantly transported to a boat in the center of the Nile. Gold dust was everywhere, it created a sparkling scum on bobbing waves. The sun blazed white hot.

Rupert sat down in an attempt to prevent a bout of sea-sickness. The boat was one of many Nile feluccas searching the breeze, its red triangular sail fluttering, a slight scent of cedar rising from its damp hull.

George dumped a bucket of gold-dusted water over Rupert's head. Another jacket ruined, this time vintage tweed. But Rupert had to admit he was a tad bit cooler as the weak breeze picked up.

“Sorry Boss,” George said, “What are we doing here?”

Their felucca’s sail came around to reveal the Creole at the helm of their small craft. Closer now than in the stairwell, Rupert could see The Creole was still young but wrinkled in the brow from worry. The Creole was shirtless, his deep chocolate colored skin glistening in an effort to ward off the stifling heat.

“We be driftin’ on the rise of Auknot,” the Creole said in his deep bass voice.

Jumping up, Rupert shouted, “Where’s Lowelle?”

In spite of the Creole’s considerable muscle mass, Rupert menaced the LS by swiping at him with the only weapon Rupert could put his hands on, the red plastic water bucket.

Ducking, the Creole replied, “I had my water, thank-you, Lowelle is where she should be, sleeping on embroidered silk sheets in Saint Veronica’s parish.”

Rupert’s temperature and blood pressure rose at the implications that the Creole had been to Lowelle’s bedroom. How dare he? Lowelle was a delicate lady, this voodoo master had exhausted her and who knows what else! How dare he presume to tell Rupert anything about Lowelle?

But at least she was safe and out of the Creole’s sight for now.

“Boss!” George pointed to the shore.

There it was, the encampment of Auknot. Humans painted gold. The gold sand melting in the heat. Rivulets of gold dust flowed into the Nile. No music rose from the worshipers this time. They were strangely solemn. Rupert searched for the Golden Peacock head that was supposedly the top of the notorious Pharaoh’s headdress, but couldn’t see it. How could such an enormous

statue have disappeared? Had some museum or national agency already collected it? It seemed unlikely, that sort of thing usually took years to excavate.

Golden Strong Men lined the beach, at attention, armed with spears and long curved knives. Golden Maidens, their hair entwined with thin golden ropes, carried golden bowls of dates and apricots and bread. Golden boats, not as large as the one Rupert had boarded for his first visit but still grand with stylized peacock feathers painted on their sides and sails, bobbed as the Golden Maidens and Golden Strong Men and other Golden People waded into the Nile to board them.

“Hurry!” Rupert cried, “They’re getting away!”

“Sail don’t go any faster,” the Creole replied.

Rupert found the Creole’s calm irritating. The Golden boats were almost full. Rupert sat down with a sigh as the Golden Rowers picked up their rows and pulled away down river to the synchronized beat of a drum. The breeze faded and feluccas drifted aimlessly.

“Look. What’s happening?” George asked as he gazed at the vacated beach.

In the spot where Rupert had last seen the peacock head rising out of the sand, presumed to be only the headdress of the huge statue of Auknot, the shore was now sinking. A hole opened in the center and the golden sand began to drain away. The vortex picked up speed and soon the entire beach was swirling around the hole. The golden sand was soon gone and a rich black soil was revealed, level with the river. The rich loam mixed with Nile water to form a muddy sludge that was sucked into the vortex.

“The Nile is draining!” yelled George.

“I highly doubt that something which has been here thousands, maybe millions, of years can suddenly drain away,” Rupert replied. “It’s most likely just the hole where the statue was. They didn’t fill it up properly the first time. It will stop draining soon. You’ll see.”

“Auknot’s not just any pharaoh,” the Creole said.

“Statue,” Rupert said, “not just any statue. George, don’t listen to any of this ridiculous legend that Auknot is going to rise again and become some sort of salvation for the human race. That sort of myth is prevalent here on earth. Cyryzzma is what will save humanity.” Save it from itself, Rupert added silently.

George wasn’t listening. His saucer eyes grew even wider than normal at the sucking sound of the water as the vortex gained speed. Golden froth was forming around the edge as the swirling action became more violent.

Rupert noticed their felucca was now making a good pace towards the beach. But there wasn’t any breeze, their sail was limp. What was happening? Rupert’s chest seized with fear. Good Heavens, could it be, their boat was being drawn into the vortex!

“Going to have to take this one as it comes, we don’t have oars,” said the Creole.

Take it as it comes? That was a pretty audacious statement from a Lost Soul who couldn’t bear to leave his darling Lowelle and pass over. No, the nasty Creole even had to use some kind of voodoo to return as a Living Dead in a young man’s body! Take it as it comes? We’ll see about that. And what about the useless information he babbled concerning the Night Blooming Cereus? Why had Ezra scribbled “Cereus 2”? Did the Creole know something more? Was there another Cereus?

Rupert's silent diatribe distracted him from the terror of being drawn into the sinkhole.

"We have to transport Boss, where are we going? Just tell me!" George yelled. Rupert tried to conjure someplace, New Orleans to see Lowelle? Rupert had failed at that earlier, and had reversed the Creole to them. New Orleans wasn't meant to be right at the moment. Back to London? No, Rupert had to find Ezra! Get his Mastery Certificate, then he would have something to offer Lowelle. Auknot had Ezra! They had to find Auknot!

The felucca was enveloped in the foam at the lip of the hole. An unnatural wind roared like a tornado around the opening. A flash of gold zinged through the air like lightning.

"I don't know. Where is Auknot!" Rupert yelled at the Creole.

"I don't know!" the Creole answered.

A shrill whistle numbed Rupert's eardrums. "What was that?" Rupert yelled.

The Creole pointed at George, who had two fingers in his mouth. George whistled again, louder. The lightning flashed again.

George raised his fingers to his lips. Rupert couldn't stand it, his ears were nearly bleeding. He just wanted to pass into the hole, and probably hell shortly after, in peace. He smacked George on the back. George choked. Good, no more whistle. They had reached the hole.

Lightning flashed. George drew in a great breath and let blast a whistle that would make a train proud. Rupert wiped blood from his ear. His head was exploding. Another lightning streak flashed by and hit George on the shoulder. He was knocked back off the boat. Rupert caught George's arm as he dangled over the edge.

The solid gold tern that had been mounted on the front of the peacock boat during Rupert's first trip to the Nile landed on George's shoulder. It seemed to be alive. It emitted flashes of lightning. It dug its claws into George and looked at Rupert with begging little eyes.

The boat cascaded into the vortex front first. Rupert and George fell free off the side. The little Golden Bird clung to George. The Creole was flung off his seat at the back of the plunging boat. He too grabbed onto George. Every single creature seemed to like George, while no one took to Rupert. Not that he wanted them to, but still it would have been nice if just once...Rupert couldn't stand it that jealousy would be his last disposition on earth.

"George, take us to Auknot! Where is Auknot!?" Rupert yelled over the roar.

"This way to Auknot," the bird chirped, "I'm the Golden Harpy, who are you?"

"I'm just an old Creole," the Creole said.

George raised his fingers and whistled.

Everything went black for Rupert.

Chapter 13

Old Friends

Some of Rupert's favorite memories were in the Medina at Fez. Ezra sent him there often. A city that allowed no motor vehicles meant that the clomping of hooves and the laughter of children filled the air. Rhythmic organic sounds, easy on the ears. And the sights and smells of the market made him swoon. Veiled women carried baskets on their heads. The baskets were brimming with leeks, blood oranges, cardamom, chilies, fresh bread, almond oil, sea salt, green olives, fennel, raisins, and saffron.

He loved to get lost in the streets. Rupert had peered through narrow doorways into intimate classrooms with dirt floors. Shafts of light filtered through olive branch ceilings while children wrote lessons on chalkboard tablets. Or women and girls sat cross-legged at giant looms. They sent their olive wood shuttles through the threads again and again. Creating intricate carpets that surely would someday fly on their beauty alone.

Since the first things Rupert was conscious of after the fall into the vortex were memories of his beloved Fez in Morocco, he must have shed his earthly form and begun the journey back to where angels dwell. Home. Rupert hadn't thought of the Hidden Universes as home since he had settled into the apartment above Oblivion three years ago. Not since he had found the orange lava-lamp. But a lava-lamp was no substitute for watching the birth of stars.

Lowelle. Would he ever see her again? Or even be able to have the kind of feelings he had for her again? Without an earthly form it wouldn't be possible to have feelings. So why was he feeling that now? Oh my. Rupert lifted his hand to his face. His face was still there. Intact. So was his hand. He opened his eyes and saw olive branches woven into a thatch roof trellis. Was he actually in Fez?

George's face protruded into his view. George was moving his lips but Rupert couldn't hear anything.

"He must be deaf," mouthed the Creole, whose face had shoved in beside George's. Rupert supposed George could hear every word. The Seraph's hearing, among other things, was obviously another thing superior to Rupert's.

The next face to appear, the Dark Beauty, shocked Rupert from his drowsy consciousness. Why was she in Fez? Never mind, his ears hurt.

The Dark Beauty's hand, painted with gold and henna flowers, placed a poultice over Rupert's ear. Undertones of something Rupert didn't recognize passed by his nostrils. This wasn't a surprise, since there were almost five thousand types of plants in Morocco, the richest source on earth. Fez was probably the site of the Garden of Origins.

The poultice drained towards his ear drum.

Cool cucumber and lemon water was poured down his throat, he swallowed and reached for the hand of the woman who held the cup to keep it there as he gulped more. Was she another one of Lowelle's friends? As the liquid slid down his throat Rupert felt his chest cool and expand

until he was floating with each breath. Rupert could feel his energy returning but his head was still spinning.

He wanted to stay in Morocco forever and concoct fragrances in the pink light of dawn at the nearby Roman ruins where the olive press was still in use by the local villagers. He had been there with Ezra. Ezra! Was Ezra here in Fez?

“Arebly gonnin ano?” was all Rupert could get out for ‘are we going to find Auknot?’

“Sure thing Boss,” George answered. “But we better nab Ezra fast if you want to be on time to meet Lowelle! She said to meet for breakfast,” George winked at him.

The cross look on the Creole’s face was not an entirely unsatisfactory result from George’s remarks.

“I don’t think I can recommend doing anything fast around the Cult of Auknot,” said a cheery and familiar voice.

Noureddine Hamchali was at his side! Favored spice guide, spiritual guru, master of the medina and master of the Sufi Qanoon, Rupert’s favorite Moroccan musical instrument. After wild spice hunting all day, many a night was spent dancing at weddings or around a fire pit. He had listened to Noureddine coax the ancient zither into both demonic and angelic trances.

Rupert tried to greet his old friend. “Moradiamchi,” was all he could mumble.

“No time for that Boss,” George said, “Donkey’s waiting.”

The Creole and Noureddine carried Rupert to a flat two-wheeled cart tied behind a donkey. The Dark Beauty and her veiled friends gathered around Rupert on the cart.

“Wouldn’t you reconsider and simply join us in the Cult of Auknot?” the Dark Beauty said to the Creole as she tied up her sleek blue-black hair with a gold ribbon and covered its glory with a dull blue scarf. “It would be much easier than sneaking you in, less dangerous too.”

“No way,” butted in George. The women giggled. He was having his George effect on these ladies too.

“Catch you later on that,” the Creole winked at the Dark Beauty whose black eyes flirted back at him from under her long thick lashes. Did she suspect the Creole might know about Night Blooming Cereus? Rupert panicked that she might be up to no good- getting mysterious “Cereus 2” from the Creole. Rupert tried to speak but it was no use.

The women covered Rupert with a light blue cotton cloth. Rupert was still unclear if these women were the same women from the harem party over the teashop in London, the scents were completely different: morning dew, chrysanthemum, and honey but women were like that, thank God, always changing their fragrance.

“We can get in by the Blue Gate,” the Dark Beauty said to the donkey’s driver, who walked at the donkey’s head and pulled it along by its bridle. Noureddine, the Creole, and George walked alongside.

“Why can’t anyone get in, if this Auknot wants to save everyone?” the Creole asked.

“Auknot has brought us something precious and there are those who want to destroy hope and love and everything beautiful,” the Dark Beauty replied.

“What’s he brought that we didn’t have before?” the Creole continued.

“A new way, a way where we don’t have to give up our dreams, where we don’t have to be shamed and called sinners,” the Dark Beauty said as they began to climb a slight slope in the cobblestone street. Rupert didn’t trust her or her explanations.

Through a slit in the cloth that hid him, Rupert watched the market stalls end and metal shops begin. He pondered what was wrong with her statement but the haze of the poultice and his fuzzy hearing were getting in the way of his usual sharp wit. The clanging of metal workers punching decorative holes in tin lamps rang in his ears, Rupert couldn’t think of a thing to even mumble. Besides, no shame and no sin, this would make it easier on the angels that had to deal with all humanity’s nasty dilemmas. Rupert almost felt compassion for the poor humans; they did have a few too many rules to follow.

And all their natural impulses led to sin if overdone.

The street became narrower. They were now in a residential area with freshly white-washed walls. Openings were trimmed with elaborate tiles. As they passed by, Rupert watched doors and windows slam closed or open just wide enough for one eye to peer out from the shadows.

“Seems like I’m not the only one who wonders if you can get something for nothing,” the Creole nodded to the doors.

“It’s human nature to be suspicious,” the Dark Beauty said.

“This Auknot takes over their entire city, the oldest walled Medina in Africa, and starts a secret revolution? They should be suspicious,” the Creole said.

The Dark Beauty climbed off Rupert’s cart to walk by the Creole.

“There are no secrets in the Cult of Auknot, only love and acceptance,” she said.

Her ankle turned on a cobblestone. The Creole caught her before she could fall. She firmly linked her elegant arm with his muscular one.

The Dark Beauty and the Creole now walked in sync. The Creole's objections were either silenced or he was distracted. Good, maybe the Creole will forget about Lowelle now, Rupert hoped. But what if the Dark Beauty extracts information about the Cereus?

Rupert noticed their pace was responding to a faint drumming coming from the top of the street. Alongside both sides of the cobblestones ran a miniature canal made of marble. It was filled with rushing water. Rupert could see children washing their feet in it before entering doorways. Gold dust was mixed with the water, leaving golden footprints on white stoops. Were they getting nearer Auknot's crowd?

The sun was hotter and high in the sky. It must be noon. What time was it in New Orleans? What day for that matter, was Lowelle waiting at for him at Dante's Garden? The sun glared at him through the slit in the cloth, Rupert closed his eyes. He strained to calculate the time difference. Before he could find the answer, the cart climbed into the shade of a tall structure. Sleep tugged Rupert below a cool dark surface.

"Boss!" George shook him.

Rupert tossed aside the blue cloth and sat up "Six!" he shouted out before he was even awake. If it was noon in Fez, it was 6:00 a.m. in New Orleans, Rupert could make it to breakfast with Lowelle! He stood up, wobbled, sat down.

The entire traveling party responded, "Shh!"

They had stopped in a small courtyard, an enclosed area for feeding donkeys. It was at the side of a series of gates in a thick complicated maze of walls that surrounded the palace at the center of the Medina. The air was thick with steaming manure and flies.

“It’s already 6:00 a.m. in New Orleans, we must hurry,” Rupert whispered to George. He noticed the women were gone. The Creole and Nouredine leaned on the cart. How long had he slept?

“No boss, it’s almost seven-thirty in New Orleans,” George replied, “The Ladies that went inside and should have been back by now. I sent the Harpy to find them.”

The Harpy? Who was the Harpy? Lightning flashed over the gate. Recalling the horror of the vortex on the Nile tightened Rupert’s chest. The little golden bird landed on George’s shoulder. Of course, the Harpy was the bird that brought them here by announcing to George that Auknot was in Fez. Was it a real bird trapped in gold? Or was it a mechanical spy bird created by some Seraphim power of George’s? Or some power of Auknot’s?

“Auknot is rising!” the Harpy chirped.

“Tell us more,” George said as he stroked the bird’s tiny neck.

“Every convert counts, every convert counts,” the Harpy replied.

“News from the young ladies?” George asked.

“We are Auknot’s,” the Harpy chanted in the voice of the Dark Beauty. “You will be Auknot’s. Auknot wants everyone.”

“Are we to go to them?” George asked.

“Converts may enter, enemies will fall,” the Harpy chirped, now in its own sing-song voice, “Power to Auknot, every convert counts, Auknot rises, converts rise, power rises!”

“The legend says Auknot will grow stronger with every convert until he has the power to resurrect from his golden statue. It will come alive and rule once more,” Nouredine added.

The sound of boots marching and the clanging of armor could be heard moving towards their courtyard. The Creole peered out a crack in the gate.

“They tricked us,” the Creole said, “They know we aren’t converts, they’ve sent warriors!”

The gate opened and they were faced with a solid formation of twenty or more Golden Warriors with swords drawn.

Rupert want to scream at them ‘Bring Ezra out immediately!’ but his mouth had turned dry and he was afraid his tongue would stick to his swollen lips. Nouredine stepped forward.

“We’re the spice suppliers, we’ve come to get an order from Ezra the Great,” Nouredine announced.

The Lead Warrior tensed and didn’t lower his sword.

“You’ve heard of Ezra of course, he served Auknot in the ancient kingdom, and we are here to take his orders and carry out the preparations,” Nouredine continued taking another step forward.

Meanwhile, Rupert stood up and advanced on shaky legs until he was at the toes of the Lead Warrior. He popped open a bottle in his pocket, poured some potion on a hanky, brought it to his own nose. The soldier snickered.

“Auknot has Ezra!” the Harpy chirped in the voice of the Creole. The Golden Warriors eyed the Harpy. It made a show of flashing around their heads as it continued the chant, “Auknot has Ezra!”

The Lead Warrior was clearly annoyed at the Harpy, who clearly wasn't a stranger to the Warriors. The Leader relaxed his weapon arm just as Rupert's head cleared.

“Take us to Ezra!” Rupert ordered, feeling strong with each breath.

“You don't want to worship Auknot first?” The Lead Warrior asked.

“Of course we will pay respects,” answered Rupert, thinking it best not to antagonize the warriors. At least they were now on their way to Ezra.

Rupert cleared a path through the center of the warrior's formation, the Creole, George, and Nouredine followed.

The Golden Warriors marched them through a long maze and a series of tunnels up and down. Chambers and more chambers. It was taking ages. Would he ever see Lowelle again? Would she wait for him if he was late? A loud growl emitted from George's stomach, it was ages since they had eaten. How many hours had he been up? With all the time changes including going to New Orleans it was at least a day if not almost two by now since they had really slept. Rupert had no idea if they were underground or above ground by the time they reached the final set of doors in a dark hallway.

The Golden Warriors formed two lines on either side of twenty-foot tall Golden Doors. The doors were covered with Arabesque designs and peacock feather imprints. The Creole,

Noureddine, George, and Rupert huddled together and approached, unsure what to do next. A messenger jogged in and whispered to the Lead Warrior.

“You,” the Lead Warrior pointed out Noureddine, “You may go to Ezra now.”

The Creole stiffened his posture. Noureddine waved him off and followed the messenger without a word. Rupert started to follow them, but a Golden Warrior stepped out of formation and blocked his path.

The Harpy flew up and tapped on the Golden Doors with its beak. The doors swung open. A burst of sunlight blinded Rupert. George shoved him forward. They were in an open-air courtyard. Rupert looked down as his eyes adjusted. The floor was paved with pink and gold marbles and semiprecious stones in amber and purple and green.

Dominating the center of the courtyard, on the surface of a deep dark pool, the massive golden statue of Auknot stood tall and unreachable. Auknot’s head was ablaze from the direct striking of a sunbeam.

Palm trees and orchids formed a tangle around the court’s edges. Peacocks and other bright exotic birds, parrots, and cockatiels of every color flew from branch to branch and cried to each other. Golden birds like the Harpy flashed around the room, singing out in every language.

Golden Worshipers emerged from every direction, out of the palm jungle, down stairways in the three walls, and flowed in around Rupert, George and the Creole from the Golden Doors.

The sun shifted its angle and Auknot’s long thin angular face became visible. Rupert recognized the Peacock headdress from the beach. A hush came over the room. The birds stilled on branches. The Harpy landed on the top of Auknot’s headdress.

“The time is now!” announced the Harpy in a booming voice loud enough to cause an earthquake.

The Golden Worshipers began to clang cymbals and bang drums and dance and scream.

“You have called me and I have come!” boomed Auknot through the Harpy.

The frenzy of the Golden Worshipers mounted, Rupert noticed the Golden Warriors had joined in the worship and were no longer keeping an eye on them. Rupert pulled the Creole and George into the palm jungle, behind a cluster of trunks. They hunched down. Rupert looked at his watch. It was time to meet Lowelle. This had gone on long enough, they had to find Ezra and get out of there!

George gestured to the stairs in the far wall. “Let’s go!” he yelled over the cacophony of the entranced Golden Worshipers. Rupert crashed through the plants and made a run for the other side.

“You have grown strong and we are now one!” boomed the Harpy. The Golden Worshipers stopped dead still. Rupert and George and the Creole were only half way across the room. Every Golden Worshiper knelt facing Auknot. Rupert and George and the Creole had no choice but to follow their lead or they would stand out.

“Auknot knows, Auknot sees!” shouted the Harpy. Everyone inhaled in unison and held their breath.

The eye lids of the statue of Auknot opened.

A cold chill replaced the sweltering humidity of Fez.

Auknot’s emerald eyes, flecked with copper, surveyed the crowd and settled on Rupert.

Chapter 14

Saint Cecelia

The Harpy hopped from Auknot's Peacock headdress to Auknot's shoulder.

"Convert and be at one with Auknot! Convert and be at one with Auknot!" the Harpy cried in its own sing-song voice.

Rupert rolled his eyes. He drew himself up tall and gestured angrily towards Auknot.

"Where is Ezra!?" Rupert demanded without really expecting an answer.

The Harpy hopped back to Auknot's headdress.

"What business do you have with Ezra?" the Harpy cried in the cavernous voice that Rupert assumed was supposed to be the voice of Auknot.

Rupert thought it suspicious the statue didn't speak for itself. Couldn't the worshipers see Auknot wasn't really alive if a mechanical bird had to serve as a speaker?

The Dark Beauty, in a peacock feather robe worthy of a high priestess, appeared from the side colonnade. The room drew a breath in awe as she strode up to the dais and prostrated herself before Auknot. Rupert wondered if the creatures gathered around the "pharaoh statue" knew how ridiculous they looked. He started to giggle at the scene. George kicked him.

"Speak!" said the Harpy fluttering above the Dark Beauty's bowed figure.

"He's Rupert, the one who created the Cyryzzma, apprentice to Ezra," she said.

“Well done, see to her reward,” the Harpy said. Golden Warriors led the Dark Beauty ceremoniously to a set of thrones on the side of the room. Golden Attendants stepped up to fan her with giant peacock feathers.

Rupert glared at her. The women above the teashop must have been spying on Oblivion all along. Before a thought could form about Lowelle’s involvement, George hissed and nodded towards The Golden Warriors now headed their way.

“I demand to see Ezra!” Rupert blurted out.

“No one commands Auknot!” the Harpy boomed.

Before Rupert could answer, the Golden Warriors broke into a run towards Rupert’s party drawing their swords. The Harpy flashed to George’s shoulder and whispered something in George’s ear. Rupert’s thoughts returned to Lowelle, he didn’t want to believe she could be involved in all this.

“Lowelle is waiting,” George whispered, “Just say the word.”

“Dante’s Garden...,” the words were barely out of Rupert’s mouth before brightly colored birds took to flight and the courtyard disappeared behind a bank of clouds.

“...can wait until we free Ezra,” Rupert finished his sentence to find the Dreadlocked Dishwashers hanging over him as Rupert lay prone in the New Orleans restaurant courtyard.

“Lowelle didn’t say anything about a party of three,” a Dante’s Garden Waiter shooed away the Dishwashers and huffed as he brushed bird feathers off the little outdoor dining table.

Rupert hoisted himself from the limestone paving to one of the two ornate iron chairs, willing his ‘Transported’ stomach to settle. Damn Seraphim efficiency. A feather drifted down

from above. Rupert looked up. The sky was heavy with a warm swell of storm clouds. Seated on the edge of the roof were the Creole, George, and the Harpy.

“Sorry Boss, I thought you were ready to go,” George said.

“Hello George!” Lowelle, in a tailored sheath of pale grey silk, parted the curtain of banana trees and joined them.

Her yellow hat and bag blended with the intermittent rays of sunlight beaming through the gloom. But Rupert scowled. Why was she greeting George first?

“Hope your dreams were as smooth and clear as honey,” The Creole jumped down from the roof and spread a table napkin for her to sit on.

Rupert huffed. How dare the source of eighty years of exhaustion hope such a thing for Lowelle?

Lowelle gave the Creole a sweet look and put her hand to his cheek. Rupert watched the “young handsome” Creole smile back into her eyes.

“Oh for heaven’s sake, we have to do something!” Rupert banged his fist on the table.

“My dear Rupert, whatever’s the matter?” Lowelle removed her hand from the Creole’s cheek to put it over Rupert’s fist.

“Auknot has Ezra.” Rupert said, “We have to rescue him!”

“But that’s wonderful,” Lowelle said.

“What do you mean, that’s wonderful? This dubious Cult of Auknot has all but taken over the sacred Medina of Fez. He has Golden Warriors running all over after anyone who isn’t a convert,” Rupert said.

“But that means the Archangel hasn’t “Taken” Ezra for Unholy Commerce! He’s not in a floating cage somewhere. Ezra is saved, saved by Auknot!” Lowelle clapped her hands.

It pained Rupert that Lowelle seemed to have assumed Oblivion was involved in Unholy Commerce. Did she think he was involved too? What had Doreen told her? He had to clear this up before SCOD got wind of it and he was put in the floating cage.

“The other young ladies in your crowd seem to be fervent converts,” the Creole injected.

“I don’t care who’s a convert, Ezra is being held prisoner!” Rupert continued.

Lowelle’s lip trembled and she seemed on the verge of angry tears. “Ezra is dear to all of us Rupert. You should be glad the Archangel hasn’t condemned him, and that he’s perfectly safe in the hands of the beloved Auknot, who’s here to bring peace and acceptance to all Creation.”

“Lowelle, I’m afraid for your friends, why would this Auknot need to have Golden Warriors about if he’s so benevolent?” Rupert said. He wanted to add: or why would he need Cyryzzma, but thought it best to leave that subject alone for now.

“The Cult of Auknot’s brought harm to no one! You should be happy for Ezra,” Lowelle replied. “As for the Golden Warriors, everything good has darkness come against it eventually. They must prepare for it. You should know that.”

She had him on that point. He definitely couldn’t debate it from his education. He had no clue if she was right. It bothered him Lowelle knew so much about the Cult of Auknot. Why was everyone being sucked in by a statue? It must be the bad influence of those friends of hers. Cults were dangerous. No, stupid humans were dangerous, mostly to themselves. They loved spectacle like the Dark Beauty in her ridiculous robes.

Rupert had to be careful not to accidentally transport the Dark Beauty to them with too much resentment. The little group waited in silence for Rupert's answer. A few fat drops of rain landed on the flagstone paving.

"Come on," Lowelle grabbed Rupert's hand, "It's going to pour." They bounded through the kitchen and out onto the street. The Creole and George followed, the Harpy flashing to-and-fro between them. The clouds burst open in a torrent.

Lowelle flagged a taxi. George tucked the Harpy in his vest before getting in.

"Saint Cecelia," Lowelle ordered the Rastafarian woman driver.

"Saint Cecelia's closed." The Rastafarian answered.

"Yes, we know," Lowelle answered and waved her on. The driver snorted.

"Damn that Dark Beauty!" Rupert proclaimed out loud without thinking.

The Rastafarian raised an eyebrow. "Why thank-you." The Rastafarian winked. "Where you people from?"

"Heaven," Lowelle answered. George and the Creole started giggling and couldn't stop. Rupert was irritated at the interruption to his planning. Didn't anyone take the danger to Ezra seriously? Was he the only one that understood how ludicrous and dangerous this Auknot Cult was? He could see Lowelle was just naïve about the whole thing. He cursed humans for being so stupid as to think they could get something like salvation from their sins for nothing.

"I know one thing for sure," the Rastafarian lectured them, "Darkness probably the only thing that's darkened the doors of St. Cecelia since the parish closed. Come to tell, Voodoo going down there."

This brought on another spate of giggling by George, the Creole, and Lowelle.

“The Dark Beauty’s no joke,” Rupert said. The rest of the group glared at him.

“There you go, we’re here.” The Rastafarian replied as she pulled over on a block surrounded by a solid sand-colored wall.

Rupert exited the taxi and stared up at a round turret towering above the wall. It was attached to the corner of a peaked roof crowned with a simple white cross. Saint Cecelia was raised in sand-colored brick that matched its garden wall, and there was no sign of plants trying to creep over. Very neatly groomed for an abandoned building. Why had Lowelle brought them here? He vowed to keep his guard up.

A rosette stained glass window countered the church’s heavy blank style. It depicted what Rupert assumed was Saint Cecelia herself and was the only uplifting detail. Lowelle paid the driver and approached the ornate iron gates while she pulled an enormous key from her yellow handbag to unlock the gate.

Lowelle relocked the front gate behind them. They climbed the foreboding front steps and followed Lowelle inside. They were safely behind the solid oak doors of the apse before the storm began to really wail. Rupert stared up at the rain sheeting over Saint Cecelia’s stained glass countenance. The air was injected with warm asphalt, a pungent smell humans mistook for rain. If humans could only smell a pure raindrop, not possible here on earth, it would make them weep.

Lowelle lit at least a dozen white candles that sprouted from a candelabrum in a tangle of gold. She held it high. They followed its pool of light into the sanctuary.

The Harpy emerged from George's vest and flashed about the rest of the room. The little bird hissed sparks to light candles in fixtures hanging at odd intervals here and there from the ceiling.

The church had been converted into a sort of loft-style dormitory. Rupert assumed it was where Lowelle and her angel friends lived. Beds strewn with embroidered silk sheets and pastel duvets were placed in dark corners behind intricately carved screens. Their patterns were vaguely Arabic.

Under the center beam of the high ceiling was a rough-cut stone table. Around the slab table were tall-back Louis XIV chairs that seated at least twenty. Massed down the table's center were dried sunflowers and heavy brass candlesticks tied with black ribbons. The Harpy lit pale green candles with its breath.

When Lowelle removed her hat, copper strands of her fawn hair sparkled with reflected candlelight. Rupert felt a burst of annoyance at the presence of George and the Creole. He would love to be alone with Lowelle. She was such a comfort to him. Blast all these complications! What he wouldn't give to go back to the day he'd met Lowelle, the moment before he'd spilled his Cyryzma.

Lowelle ushered them all to seats around the end of the table.

George intruded into Rupert's thoughts by saying, "Don't worry, Boss, it's not too late but we must have sustenance first!"

Arg. Lowelle, assisted by the Creole, spread out fruit and bread and cheese and a hot pomegranate tea that Rupert imagined tasted like wine, but wasn't. Rupert hated the entire scene.

They were wasting precious time but he was cautious not to ruin his chances with Lowelle.

And didn't George say she knew something? Rupert worried about her obsession with Auknot.

Rupert looked at his watch and whispered between clenched teeth to George, "We have eight hours."

"Until what?" George asked.

"Until it might bloom again in London," Rupert replied.

"The Night Blooming Cereus?" Lowelle asked.

"If it's not cursed," The eavesdropping Creole interjected.

"Or Virginia no longer has a reason to pray," Rupert said.

"Who's Virginia?" demanded Lowelle. Her jealous tone gave Rupert a pleasant surge of energy.

"Virginia made a clear and nonnegotiable prayer request to Rupert," George said, answering Lowelle.

Lowelle's eyes narrowed to dark slits, "What did she ask for?" Lowelle made a point of taking the Creole's arm for support.

Rupert panicked and blurted out, "Virginia is only twelve years old and she asked that I relieve her step-father's anxiety."

"Is this something to do with the Night Blooming Cereus?" demanded Lowelle.

“Virginia’s step-father is Harold Bergen. He gave her the last remaining Night Blooming Cereus and Virginia demands her prayer be answered before we can have any of its perfume to create Cyryzzma!” George answered.

“Best we get on with answering that prayer,” the Creole said with a grin. He picked up a fiddle and bow from one of the empty chairs at the end of the table and began to play a little jig. Lowelle laughed and clapped her hands.

Rupert was furious. We? What did the Creole have to offer? He actually wished the Dark Beauty was here to distract the Creole from Lowelle.

“So you found Bergen,” the Dark Beauty stepped from the shadows, “or did he find you?”

Oops. Rupert’s stomach fell out from under him. Had his resentment summoned her by reverse transport? The Dark Beauty, even minus her peacock robes, was stunning in her shimmering blue evening gown and the confidence of a high priestess. Lowelle rushed to hug her. The Creole lifted his bow mid-note.

“You’re home! Can you spare Rupert some of your Cereus supply?” Lowelle asked the Dark Beauty.

“Too late,” the Dark Beauty said, “I gave it to Ezra who has failed to make use of it. He couldn’t reproduce the Cyryzzma. It seems Rupert is the only one who knows the formula.”

Rupert chose to believe Ezra was under coercion, not voluntarily helping Auknot.

“Oh dear,” said Lowelle, “so this Virginia person is the only chance?”

“I’ll go,” said the Creole.

Lowelle clapped her hands. George had brought Lowelle’s computer to the table.

“No!” Rupert blurted out, “Anyway, it won’t bloom for six hours yet.”

Before Rupert could inquire of Lowelle and the Creole about “L’s Creole – Cereus 2,” the Creole and the Dark Beauty disappeared. No doubt transported to the Bergen Greenhouse by the Dark Beauty. Rupert’s only comfort was that even if they somehow secured the Night Blooming Cereus, only he knew the formula for Cyryzzma.

“Maybe we can bargain for Ezra,” Rupert said, “He’ll know how to ease Bergen’s anxiety.”

George looked up from the computer to cut Rupert off, “Ezra? Ezra can take care of himself. Need I remind you Ezra is a powerful angel, it’s the salvation of mankind we all need to be concerned with now. You’ve got to keep Virginia’s Cereus from falling into the hands of Auknot, and Ezra from recreating your formula! Judging from the email I read flying around, the Archangel’s primary concern now is to dispense with Auknot! This is our chance to impress SCOD and be restored to our rightful places!”

Rupert groaned inside. He saw no alternative but another attempt at answering Virginia’s prayer. If he could make some Cyryzzma at least, he could stop the Golden Warrior humans with it. This would allow him to get to Ezra. Hopefully, George was right about SCOD being impressed.

Anxiety swelled. Rupert had to solve Bergen’s problems, convince Virginia, hope the Night Blooming Cereus would actually bloom, get there in time to stop the Dark Beauty and the Creole from taking Cereus to Auknot. And he only had six hours.

Chapter 15

Froth of Venus

It had stopped raining. Rupert needed some air to think of a Bergen strategy. Lowelle led them out to the garden. George and the Harpy insisted on tagging along. Lowelle settled into bright floral cushions on wicker settees under the shelter of an ancient oak that overlooked a wild rose bed, still blooming pale yellow even though it was autumn. Steam drifted above the ground as the last traces of rain evaporated in the noon heat.

The sun may have come out but there were black clouds building in Rupert. How to dispense with Virginia's prayer? He had already tried pleading to no avail with both Bergen and Virginia. Rupert had to admit he was without a single idea.

What calmed the anxiety of men? Lowelle would know. But could he trust her to help him defeat Auknot? Her friends had converted. She seemed on the verge of doing so, and what would become of their happiness if the Cult of Auknot was defeated?

How could Rupert dispense with George? He hoped George would take the blabber-mouth Harpy with him. Why were George and the Harpy reading *Financialist* newspaper? Week old news as far as Rupert was concerned. The Harpy was probably transmitting every word it heard back to Auknot.

"Look, Boss, Bergen Pharmaceutical's stock has crashed," George read out loud, "The much-anticipated new miracle beauty cr me has never materialized. We speculate this is what

caused a huge overextension in the Research and Development Department. Bergen Pharmaceuticals is on the verge of bankruptcy.”

Great, this ought to put Bergen in a much less anxious mood, thought Rupert snidely.

“Rupert, are you really set on helping the Archangel fight Auknot? The cult seems to be doing so much good. Isn’t it possible SCOD has Auknot all wrong?” Lowelle said.

“Archangel has to sign off on Rupert’s certificate,” George interjected, “I checked the form.”

“But surely Ezra will pass your apprenticeship. Auknot is protecting him from the Archangel and will surely protect you too,” Lowelle said.

“Archangel has to sign off,” the Harpy parroted George. To Rupert’s dismay George pulled the ever more soiled blue linen certification documents from his pocket.

“Let me think!” Rupert yelled.

Great, now Lowelle looked a bit hurt.

He needed another idea. He felt everything he cared about slipping away, his position at Oblivion, Lowelle. Rupert watched bees buzz around the roses. What would Ezra do? The sun was baking Rupert’s brain. Sweat formed in his every pore. *Concentrate on what inspires you*, Ezra used to say when Rupert was stuck.

Rupert thought about the exquisite Roman bottles in Bergen’s study. Rupert could love those. What had they held? Probably the Froth of Venus, sought-after throughout the ancient world.

That was it, the Froth of Venus!

It was what every woman wanted. It would absolutely turn Bergen's company around. He would simply assure they got the formula. But how? He knew giving away an angelic formula was forbidden and definitely Unholy Commerce. The martyr's hair ropes on the cage waved at him. No, he would covertly give them some and let them extract the formula themselves. Perhaps with a little help on the side from Rupert, but only if necessary. Bergen would be ecstatic. Virginia would surrender the Cereus. Cyryzma would be handed to SCOD. Rupert would be a hero!

Now, what was the Froth of Venus formula again? He went over it in his head. The kiss-of-a-woman-in-love, wind-blown-waves-in-full-moonlight, mud from the Dead Sea, new pearl shavings, and a melted snowflake. Not exactly readily accessible ingredients. *Divide and conquer*, Ezra's advice echoed in Rupert's head.

"Where does Bergen do this Research and Development?" Rupert asked.

George scanned back through the *Financialist* article, "Ha! Las Cruces New Mexico, do you want..."

"No!" shouted Rupert before George could make a hasty transport, "Not yet."

"Rupert, you've concocted a plan," Lowelle brightened. "Tell us!"

"How much time do we have?" Rupert asked George.

"Before midnight in London you mean?" George answered. "Midnight in London is six hours away, seven from New Mexico, if that helps."

Plenty of time. And Rupert wanted to spend it all with Lowelle. The plan was shaping up nicely.

“George, secure a fresh snowflake, frozen, in an ordinary looking bottle. Meet me at the New Mexico R & D facility in lab two hours.”

“I know where Mississippi pearls are born,” George interjected.

“Oh yes, show us!” Lowelle said. Oh no, she was supposed to go with Rupert alone, not George! And what about the kiss? Beyond reasonable hope, he wanted Lowelle to provide it, but did she even feel for Rupert? He could count on fondness at this point, but a mad lovely kiss? It was implausible. But he had to try.

“Lowelle, I need you to come with me. George, you and the Har...,”

“You are going to SCOD with this aren’t you?” George said, “I mean I still want my position back, and ...” George was near tears, “I just love to sing.”

Rupert felt a smidgen of compassion, and George was his only reliable ally.

“We, George, *we* are going to take the Cyryzma to SCOD, together,” said Rupert.

Before Rupert could say anything more, George had vanished. The Harpy twirled in the air, knocked dizzy by the absence of George’s shoulder.

Bloody hell, they didn’t need that thing along. But good, Lowelle was beaming.

“Pearls and snow, pearls and snow, let’s go, let’s go,” the Harpy twirped.

Lowelle picked the Harpy up off the grass and perched it on her wrist.

“You have to stay behind,” Rupert told the bird.

“But where are we going?” Lowelle’s worried eyes searched Rupert’s, gazing deeply.

His heart crashed against his chest at the thought of kissing her, “The Dead Sea.”

Whoosh. Rupert was in such a state he had transported almost as instantly as George could. Enveloped in rising steam, everything went black, points of light streaked around him. Stars.

Splat! Rupert landed on a muddy beach and began to sink. He was sucked further under with every wriggle to get free. His chest compressed with panic.

Splat! Lowelle landed next to him and also sank, her white dress reflected bright moonlight for a brief moment before succumbing to the black mud. Looking around for anything to stop them from sinking, Rupert saw that mud pits lined the entire edge of the vast expanse of dark Dead Sea water. Flash! The Harpy zipped overhead, watching. Rupert's feet touched solid ground; then his bottom found a low bench, sunk deep in the mud. They were at some sort of resort. They had dropped into manmade mud baths.

Lowelle must have realized the same thing, she began to laugh and smear the mud over her face and arms. Rupert slipped a vial from his vest pocket and laughed at the loud mud fart it made when the bottle sucked in the notorious Dead Sea mud.

The Harpy landed. "Auknot is here."

Rupert shushed him. He was sick of hearing about Auknot. Just let me laugh with Lowelle! The Harpy flew off, indignant.

"Out, out, out, out," a deep melodic voice called out from behind them in French, Arabic, and English. Was it the Harpy?

Rupert felt the solid ground beneath him rise.

Lowelle let out a yelp and scrambled out of her pit, her white dress clung to her body. Rupert managed to struggle out of the slick mud.

“Out, out, out, out,” the deep voice sang.

Golden Warriors rose up from the pits, reeds protruded from their mouths for breathing. Rupert grabbed Lowelle’s arm and pulled her up the slick hill away from the direction of the Golden Warriors, who were now standing at attention facing the sea. The Golden Warriors hadn’t detected them yet.

Rupert scanned the hill behind the pits. A path was lit by star-punched lanterns. The crest of the hill was lit by long low modern buildings, metal and glass with a deep roof overhang. Lowelle clung on Rupert’s arm. As they hurried to the path, a drum began to beat. Rupert glanced up again. The edge of the hill was now lined with Golden People, and more were emerging from the buildings. Some had started down the path.

Thankfully, the black mud clinging to their clothes made Lowelle and Rupert hard to spot against the dark hillside. Rupert stepped off the path. They followed a small side trail uphill that dead-ended at a bench with a view overlooking the Dead Sea. Rupert pressed against the hillside and pulled Lowelle close to him to shield her from the Golden Ones passing on the path below.

Were these Golden People everywhere? It seemed unlikely. How did they get to a resort in the Dead Sea? Had the Harpy already transmitted their location? Maybe the Harpy was Auknot’s eyes and ears as well as voice. Where had that little bird gone? Rupert didn’t see it flashing anywhere.

Rupert returned his focus to three ingredients he and Lowelle were here to get,. The notorious Dead Sea Mud was copious. No problem. But the Windblown-Waves-in-Moonlight and the Kiss-of-a-Woman-in-Love were going to be problematic, especially if they were being chased

by the Golden Warriors. The moon was full. It reflected perfectly in smooth water which barely rippled in the desert air. He hoped George was having better luck with the snowflake and the Mississippi pearl.

Golden People filed by to the beat of the drum. Many were carrying flutes and drums and cymbals. Rupert noticed most were on crutches and had shriveled or missing limbs. Oh well, the Dead Sea was known for its healing powers, which is why Rupert needed it in the mud for the Froth of Venus. On the shore below, crippled Golden People massed around the mud pits at the shore until the beach was filled.

Lowelle's amber eyes shone in the moonlight. Rupert couldn't concentrate. He could feel her chest expand against him with every breath. Her lips were slightly parted. His entire being was riveted on her plump mouth. He put his arm around her, she didn't pull away. He felt her shift her weight. She lifted her arm and pointed.

"Look," Lowelle whispered in his ear, her lips brushing his skin. Rupert didn't want to look. He wanted this moment of standing close to her to last longer. He didn't want her attention on something else. Anger crawled under his skin and settled in his forehead. Blasted humans filing by, drumming!

All he could see were Golden People marching like lemmings. Some of them were wading far out into the sea. Rupert watched the moon's reflection on the water splinter and break up. The Golden People who had waded out to their necks began to swim. Others followed. The water was churning with swimmers. Where were they going?

Some swimmers fell behind or were overrun. The lame began to cry out and disappear under the water.

“No!” Lowelle cried.

She broke from his arms and ran into the flow of the passing crowd on the path. Rupert chased her. She darted between Golden People until he could no longer see her.

When Rupert reached the shore total chaos had broken out. Anyone reluctant to enter the water was being jabbed at by the Golden Warriors. Some of the Golden People resisted and the Golden Warriors carried them into the water. The water was churning as far as Rupert could see. There was no sign of Lowelle on the shore. Had she entered the water?

Rupert spotted a long thin boat with oars at the end of the mud pits. Maybe a vantage point from the water would make it easier to see Lowelle. He made his way through the crowd, careful to avoid the attention of the Golden Warriors. Rupert slipped the boat into the water and began to row. He was only a few yards off shore before the swimmers saw him. Drowning Golden People clasped onto the side of the boat. It rocked and threatened to collapse.

Rupert was despondent. What were they doing out here in the water anyway if they couldn't swim? He wanted to smash their fingers with his oars. Rupert was disgusted with the writhing humanity around him. Rupert clung to the oars and lay down, praying the boat wouldn't sink. Humans! They had gotten themselves into this by believing in the phony Auknot and his cult. Enough Golden People grabbed both sides of the boat that it stabilized.

A flash of light patrolling overhead lit the scene. The Harpy landed on the bow of Rupert's vessel.

“Purify! Everyone must purify!” the Harpy sang.

“Purify! They’re drowning!” Rupert said as he tried to swat the traitor Harpy away.

“Lowelle has joined the pure,” the Harpy sang.

Rupert shuddered with panic, had Lowelle been drowned? From what the Harpy sang, she had obviously entered the water. Rupert grabbed the Harpy by the tail. The Harpy let out a screech so loud that swimmers turned to look.

“Take me to her!” Rupert said.

“No need for that,” the deep voice of Auknot boomed from the Harpy’s throat. The swimmers cheered at the sound of his voice.

“Auknot, Auknot,” the swimmers began to chant in spite of water spluttering out of their mouths.

Golden Warriors chanted, “Purify, all must purify.” Golden People on the shore continued to charge into the water.

“They’re drowning!” Lowelle’s voice rang out over the din. She was treading water in the center of the churning swarm.

Rupert began to row the boat, heavy with Golden People clinging to the side, towards Lowelle.

“No one is drowning,” Auknot’s voice flowed from the Harpy’s beak.

“Can’t you see them!” shouted Lowelle. “Save them!”

Rupert rowed faster.

A bright flash of light appeared under the water. The water boiled and swelled beneath Lowelle. The light illuminated the limp bodies of Golden People suspended underwater all around her. Lowelle dove under and pulled one Golden Maiden to the surface. She couldn't get the Golden Maiden to respond.

"You can't help them," Auknot's voice stated.

Lowelle began to weep and thrash in anger. Other Golden People joined in her grief as they pulled limp lifeless bodies to the surface.

"Lowelle!" Rupert shouted in vain.

The roar of wind came across the sea.

The water began to swirl. Far out from the swimmers, a water spout sucked water into a funnel that climbed towards the stars. Swimmers screamed and made for the shore. Rupert couldn't row forward, the current was too strong. Too many Golden People clung to and had now boarded his boat. He was yards away from Lowelle. She hadn't heard or seen him. He was obscured from her view by his passengers.

Lightening flashed around the funnel. An orb of light traveled up from the water. It was as if the sun was rising in the funnel's center.

"Don't worry, I am here," the deep voice emitted from the Harpy.

The wind stopped, the water in the funnel dropped back into the sea revealing the statue of Auknot. The statue was standing only waste deep in water, water which was deep enough to be far over the swimmer's heads. The Golden Warriors began to cheer.

Rupert sat with his head back, mouth open. He felt numb at the sight of Auknot. Did this mean Auknot could transport? Only angels could transport. Was it just a projected illusion? A trick? Had Auknot been an Angel! Was that why he could transport? Rupert wasn't sure if any other creatures could. But Auknot was just a statue.

The drowned Golden People were the only ones left in the water except for Rupert and his boat passengers. The surface of the water became still, the drowned bodies floated.

Auknot began to walk towards them. Rupert was horrified as the statue moved one stiff leg at a time. Auknot's golden skin emitted its own light.

Ripples of waves lapped at the bodies of the drowned, some of them rolled over. Auknot stopped short of touching the drowned swimmers. When the light emanating from Auknot reached the bodies of the drowned Golden People, they began to stir. The crowd went silent.

The hair on Rupert's arms stood up. This was something unnatural, untrue, and suspicious. Yet Rupert saw it with his own eyes. The seemingly dead bodies were stirring, coughing, sputtering. They came alive and began to splash as if to drown again.

Rupert sprang into action. He rowed and rowed to reach them. The passengers clinging to the side let go to make room for the drowned ones and waded back to shore. The drowned clung to the side of the small boat. Rupert helped them board. He was struck by their scent. It was unpleasant and organic. It reminded him of something from school but he couldn't think what. Was it something Ezra had taught him? He didn't think so. Rupert supposed that being dead would probably make one stink a bit.

Rupert's curiosity overcame his shock and disgust. He pulled a tiny vial from the cache in his jacket and without anyone noticing, uncorked it to capture the scent of the newly resurrected. Rupert slipped the vial into his pocket.

A deep scolding laugh boomed from the Harpies beak.

"You see, I am here to save them all!" the Harpy continued in Auknot's voice.

With another laugh that wormed into Rupert's core, the giant Golden figure of Auknot took a twisting dive. He went head first into the sea and sank under water until his glowing light dimmed and finally disappeared into the deep.

The crowd picked up their instruments and began to play. "Salvation, Auknot is our salvation!" they sang.

Chapter 16

Research & Development

Rupert rowed those awakened from drowning to the shore. Revelers continued their dancing and singing. The awakened drowned staggered off towards the buildings at the top of the hill.

Lowelle had swum ashore and stood shivering, waiting for him, even though the desert air was warm. Surely she was in shock. Rupert wrapped his muddy jacket around her shoulders. None of the Golden People paid them any attention. Rupert moved Lowelle slowly up the path to the bench overlooking the water. Rupert tried to absorb what had just happened.

Had Auknot transported to bring his drowned followers back from the dead? Why had they waded into the water in the first place? The thought of Auknot moving about earth as he pleased made Rupert ill. Didn't anyone see this Auknot creature was dangerous? Rupert hoped the Archangel could stop Auknot, no wonder he had taken a form on earth. But if word of Auknot's healing powers got out, it might be impossible.

How many hours had passed? One? Two? They had to meet George in New Mexico soon. It was obvious Rupert wasn't going to capture the other two ingredients, the Kiss and the Wind-Blown-Waves-in-Full-Moonlight. The sea was still again and the moon threatened to sink beneath the hills. Exhaustion was creeping across his back. Rupert knew if he sat on the bench one minute longer, he would fall asleep against his will.

Lowelle broke the silence, "It was extraordinary."

Rupert was alarmed by the sound of awe in her voice. He became aware she was slightly swaying to the rhythm of the dancing Golden People below. She looked taken in by this whole Auknot demonstration!

Rupert had to admit it was extraordinary that the drowned had come back to life. But were they really dead in the first place or just stunned? After all, the Golden Warriors had just been poking them with spear tips. He needed to analyze the sample scent, was it a paralysis drug that would wear off?

Auknot's presence was less easy to explain. Was he alive now? When they saw him in Fez he didn't seem to have articulated legs. He was evolving. Or was it just a cosmic projection?

"We don't really know what happened," Rupert said to her gently.

"I know what I felt and it was extraordinary," Lowelle replied.

Rupert could see a wildness in her eyes that he didn't want to provoke. He just had to get her out of there. Right now. Where could they go for the waves? The Mediterranean was in an earlier time zone. Perfect.

Lowelle's eyes swelled with tears, "Do you not believe?"

The earth dropped out from under them. The stars brightened. The moon sank behind dark clouds.

Splash! Rupert and Lowelle plunged into the sea. A tall wave swelled towards them. Lowelle screamed. Rupert turned her over against his chest so that she floated safely under his arm. She couldn't see the terrifying wave as it approached.

Rupert fished under his collar. A leather thong hung around his neck. He pulled on it. A flat bottle with a wide mouth was attached. He expertly pulled the cork with his teeth and held the bottle aloft in the sea spray. The moon glinted off the droplet that entered the bottle. Perfect! The powerful energy of the wave sucked Rupert and Lowelle to the bottom of its curve.

Rupert never felt so alive. Lowelle was secure in his arms. He was carving out his destiny in the grasp of Mother Nature's full force. Rupert treasured the feeling until the last possible second. Until the wave would surely crash and thrust them to the floor of the sea.

Rupert conjured a vision of the parting of the waters.

Thud! A bevy of doves rose in protest from a dead tree. Rupert and Lowelle had landed on their backs in a dry river bed.

"Where are we now?" Lowelle didn't sound as enthralled with the whole experience as Rupert was. Actually, Rupert would describe the voice she used as furious. She threw off his protective arm.

The blazing sun, cactus, and a circling black vulture made it clear they were in the New Mexico. A vision of rattlesnakes motivated Rupert to jump up. This was a big mistake. Rupert immediately lost his balance and fell sideways into a large prickly pear cactus. "Ay!" he screamed as hundreds of needles lodged into his skin.

Lowelle huffed, "Serves you right for transporting us all over the universe like that."

The cactus stung almost as much as his pride. Rupert forced himself up. He sensed that there was no possibility that the Kiss-of-a-Woman-in-Love was going to come from Lowelle.

Rupert noticed that a road ran parallel to the dry river wash. A few hundred yards away stood a tall closed metal gate. A large sign announced: No Trespassing - Bergen Pharmaceuticals - Employees only.

At least they were in the right place. Rupert plucked cactus needles from his hand.

Lowelle sighed and helped him with the stickers protruding from his neck and face. It seemed to dissipate her anger at him, thank God, but the cactus needles were causing his arms and neck to go numb.

The gates swung open. Out walked George, who paused, checked his watch, and searched the searing hot landscape. Rupert noted that George had on a Bergen Pharmaceutical baseball cap and a lab coat that dragged on the pavement.

Rupert stepped onto the road and waved. They walked towards each other until they met. Lowelle followed him, her delicate heels sinking into the hot pavement until she pulled them free. How had she managed to keep her shoes? Women were amazing.

“Got it boss!” George held up a velvet box in triumph. “New Mississippi Pearl!” Rupert saw that George’s lab coat was embroidered with the name “Virginia”. Rupert swiped sweat from his face. He hoped George also had the other ingredient, the Melted Snowflake, secured someplace cool. Rupert fingered the bottles in his pocket, Dead Sea Mud and Windblown Moonlit Wave. All that was left was to secure the kiss. But how?

“Where’s the snowflake?” Rupert asked taking the velvet box from George.

“On ice with Fiona,” George answered.

“Fiona? Who’s Fiona?” Rupert asked. The name sounded familiar. He was more dismayed at George’s smooth way with the ladies than anything, “Remember that we need to *sneak* the Froth of Venus in, so they won’t know where it came from!”

“I know, I know. It’s Unholy Commerce to let any of our secret formulas out. Bla, bla, bla...But Fiona’s the real deal, a genius, a bombshell, a...” George wriggled his body with enthusiasm.

“I don’t care what she is!” Rupert interrupted, “We’re in enough suspicion of Unholy Commerce as it is what with all the rumors about Ezra, we don’t need this to get out.”

“Well what’s your plan then? And how long do you want this to take? I thought we were in a hurry to get Virginia’s prayer answered.” George replied, arms crossed.

Rupert had to admit that he hadn’t entirely thought this part of the plan through. He had a vague idea of leading the researchers to the formula, but how?

“We have to show them how to create the formula on their own. Who is this Fiona?” Rupert asked.

“She’s the moon, the stars...” George swooned.

“I mean what does she do here at Bergen Pharmaceuticals?” Rupert asked.

“She’s the Master, the mixer, the magician...” George continued until Rupert grabbed him by the lab coat lapels.

Crack! Pop! A burst of light exploded on the melting asphalt. The Harpy had arrived. It fluffed its golden feathers and announced: “Ask and you shall receive Master Rupert. Fiona Monroe, head scientist, Beauty and Longevity.”

Rupert frowned at the appearance of the Harpy and why did the little bird know this detail about Bergen's employee? Lowelle had just finished picking the needles out of Rupert's neck. She extended a finger as a perch for the Harpy's tiny black feet.

"Okay, George, can you get this Fiona to show us around?" Rupert asked.

"Oh yea, Boss, you betcha," George replied. He turned on his heels and led them through the gates of Bergen Pharmaceuticals.

Everyone from the guard at the front entry to those strutting down the halls seemed to know George. Both ladies and men waved a 'hey George' or a 'good-day folks, George will take good care of you'.

"Exactly what do these people think you're doing here?" Rupert asked George.

"I applied for the position of Go-Guy and was hired on the spot!" George said, "Thanks to the Harpy for imitating you in the telephone recommendations."

The Harpy let out a delighted screech.

"They know about Oblivion?" Rupert was incredulous.

"I had to have prior experience," George said, "the benefits here..."

Rupert had a surprising moment of panic that George, no matter how annoying he was, might actually leave Rupert alone to keep this so called 'Go-Guy' job. Who would help him free Ezra? Who would recommend Rupert to the Archangel for his Master Certificate? George had his uses: quick Transporting, not to mention the knowledge of the statutes that Rupert had skipped in school. And Rupert had to admit, there were also some amusing aspects of having George around. Hopefully this Fiona would turn out to be one of them.

“George, don’t get attached, we have to get in and get out,” Rupert said.

“Yes, Boss,” George said in a disappointed hush. They had just passed through double doors to a locker room hallway with signs saying “Women” and “Men” pointing in opposite directions.

George’s enthusiasm returned, “The employees have an entire spa here!”

Rupert groaned inside. Was there no end to Bergen’s decadence?

“Oh Rupert, can I stay here to refresh? Can you pick me up later? You don’t need me do you? I know nothing of formulas and such,” Lowelle pleaded.

Rupert hesitated, he wanted her to be with him but he also wanted her to be happy. What had he dragged her into anyway? Rupert didn’t want Lowelle in any danger. And her annoyance at him seemed to be fading.

“It’s perfectly safe, just say you’re a guest of Dr. Fiona,” George answered.

“Oh George, thank you,” Lowelle planted a firm kiss on George’s forehead and disappeared into the women’s hallway. The Harpy flapped towards Rupert’s shoulder, Rupert swerved to avoid it. It settled for landing on George’s baseball cap. George handed Rupert a lab coat.

They marched down a long series of corridors; the first section was all painted in blue tones, with “Top Secret: Department Q” was included in the labels on most doors. The employees in this section seemed grim and determined, carrying clipboards only, no coffee or snacks.

“Welcome to Department Q,” chirped the Harpy. “Oops, top secret!”

Then the colors became pink, with “Department B” as the leading title. Didn’t they know the alphabet? Some Scientists. No wonder this division was tanking Bergen’s company. Plenty of vending machines slowed them down as George loaded up, stuffing his pockets with pop and peanuts. Rupert pondered the razor thin fashionistas in the “B” corridor. Their blank looks and made-up faces concerned him. It reminded him that he was going to have to depend on humans for this to work. That fact made Rupert nervous.

George held open a door that said, “Department B – Laboratory of Dr. F. Monroe. Out wafted a scent that rendered Rupert weak at the knees. Mint, patchouli, violets, honey, and something he couldn’t identify. It made Rupert feel sad for some reason. A poignant longing urged his brain to dive far back into the past.

Saddle soap. That was it. Rupert’s chest thudded with the memory of the pounding hooves of Red Sun, the stallion that had taught Rupert everything about confidence. And then Red Sun, that brave warrior, had suffered for his courage. His valiant attempt to race had been rewarded with a humiliating death at the glue factory. Rupert’s sadness turned to disgust at human disregard for the treasure of Creation.

Chapter 17

Kiss-of-a-Woman-in-Love

Rupert pushed past the memory of Red Sun and entered the door George held open for him. To his relief, the laboratory of Doctor Fiona Monroe flashed with distracting lights and vibrated with activity.

Large flat-screen monitors were mounted three high along every wall. Beauty product advertisements featured ample images of youthful flesh. Experiments were being conducted at rows and rows of lab tables. Chemical analysis results blinked on numerous screens. Clumps of what Rupert assumed were scientists put heads together with what looked like younger lab techs. They consulted and nodded and pointed at new results as they were posted on the screens.

At the center, on a raised dais overlooking the entire room, Doctor Fiona Monroe straddled a tall stool. In front of her on her lab table was a multi-level complicated array of glass beakers. In the center was a pile of dark mud on a plate over a Bunsen burner. It bubbled and burped, Dr. Fiona didn't seem to notice the blobs of mud sticking to her lab coat. Her dark glossy brown hair was wrenched into a tight chignon, her brow was furrowed with worry lines and the red lenses in her pointy glasses obscured the color of her eyes. She did not look up as they approached. Rupert immediately recognized her as the woman in red from Bergen's Greenhouse. She had been after the Cereus!

Rupert was amazed at the amount of noise in the room. Every table seemed to have a different style of music spewing from a laptop or tablet speaker device. Everyone was talking.

Rupert tuned in to the discussions to distract him from the ponderous lump of sorrow in his heart for Red Sun. Maybe he could learn something to help with planting the Froth of Venus.

“Heard they’re going to shut down every single department tonight!”

“They’ll never shut down Q, Bergen’s obsessed, that’s the real thing.”

“Chasing a new god to control the masses.”

“Really, this Auknot cult is the way to do that, they’ll take anyone.”

“I heard Auknot can actually heal.”

“I heard they have formulas, Bergen’s sent someone to investigate.” Snickering.

Rupert wondered what Auknot was really up to, using Ezra’s brilliance to some diabolical end. And was Bergen now involved with Auknot, searching for Ezra’s formulas? Or for Cyryzzma? Rupert felt a twinge of guilt that he was about to give away Froth of Venus, one of Ezra’s best formulas. It irritated Rupert to be in this position. He had followed all the rules and it had still come to this, an act SCOD might see as too shady for a Master’s License holder. The lab techs around him continued to pontificate.

“When will the masses learn there is no god?”

Rupert fumed, No God? Who did the humans believe created thinking?! Why couldn’t they see that everything around them was in Divine Order? He watched the lights and chemical compounds ticking away on the screens. Wasn’t it beautiful? Wasn’t it obvious? All Creation flowed to and from the one source, all according to the parallel inter-braided principles quantified on their screens? Unbelievably useless ingrates. That’s what the humans were.

“Dr. F. will take us out to form her own company if Bergen quits the quest for ‘perfect beauty’.”

“Dr. F.’s as obsessed as Bergen. A war of wills.”

“I think Dr. F.’s in love with him.”

“No way, she’s in love with herself!”

“So is Bergen, that pig!”

“Bergen has to be aggressive to do what he does. He’s not on the cover of the *True Caesars* magazine for no reason.”

“He’s clever enough to suck every dollar out of your pocket for a mere kiss.”

“That’s not just Bergen, it’s the entire Beauty Industry. Why would anyone ever wear perfume, for example, without the propaganda machine?”

Rupert’s temperature rose. Was he saving a cad? Did these people not respect the pure lusciousness of Creation, put here on earth for them to enjoy! Perfume, all formulas for that matter, were Divine Gifts! The lack of sleep was having an effect on him. Rupert felt a ragged edge disrupting the cool ‘60’s James Bond exterior he wanted to portray.

George, Harpy on hat, led Rupert up to Dr. Fiona’s dais. She looked ten feet tall from their lower perspective.

An alarm went off under a monitor on the far side of the room, a series of green lights flashed and electronic bells pinged. It set off a wave of excitement among the lab techs at one of the tables. A cluster of techs rushed a beaker towards Dr. Fiona’s table. She held up her hand,

made a few notes on a tablet which simultaneously posted to a wall monitor in her blocky handwriting.

Dr. Fiona waved the techs forward to dump the contents of the beaker into a tube at the front of the table nearest Rupert. A thick copper colored substance with the consistency of mercury rolled its way towards the mud. Everyone fixated as it passed through sieves. This seemed to result in wild graph fluctuations at the nearest monitors, accompanied by more alarms and bells. Dr. Fiona glanced up at them and noticed George.

“George, darlin’, what have you brought me?” Dr. Fiona’s drawl revealed she was from Texas. The copper mercury hit the mud on her plate. Everyone watched colored fumes siphoning from the roiling mud into various glass containers and made notes on clipboards. Dr. Fiona pursed her red lips and tisked. Gloom descended on the techs, the results were apparently not what was wanted.

“Where’s my coffee?” Dr. Fiona sighed at George.

“Coffee’s perking, Gorgeous, this is Rupert, my old Boss,” George replied, “Come to collect the specimen yet let me keep on your ice.”

George turned a few dials on an elaborate espresso machine teetering at the edge of a stainless-steel bookcase full of files and books and small glass pots full of mud.

Rupert cringed at the words ‘old boss’. And what time was it? They needed to get on with it if they expected to be back to the Night Blooming Cereus in time, only one hour until midnight in London. Rupert was about to lose patience with everyone in the room. He frantically looked for a way to focus. Rupert’s eyes settled on the mud.

“I see you’ve discovered the vitality of Dead Sea mud,” Rupert said in a desperate attempt to verify that the bubbling mass could be used as a base for the Froth of Venus.

Dr. Fiona didn’t even look in Rupert’s direction, “Discovered it? Like everyone?”

George navigated through the lab tables to a wall where he opened a large metal door. A blast of freezing air escaped and fog crept along the floor. George disappeared into the freezer then reappeared with a tiny blue-green glass vial. He held it up to the light so that Rupert could see the suspended snowflake then pushed his way back through the cluster of techs.

“Still frozen, Boss,” George announced as he handed the vial to Rupert, “Lucky we had early snow in London, eh?”

Rupert now had four out of five ingredients at his fingertips. Still missing the Kiss-of-the-Woman-in-Love. It should be easy to slip the contents of his vials into the concoctions at other tables unnoticed until an alarm would go off and the ingredient would be rushed to Dr. Fiona’s table resulting in, voila, the final formula.

“Demitasse!” announced George as he poured the results from the espresso machine into a dainty cup.

“Three-minute break!” yelled Dr. Fiona over the din. She lifted the cup from George’s hand and floated out of the room. Good. Rupert had his chance. He bent over Dr. Fiona’s mud dish to take a whiff. Rupert couldn’t risk that she hadn’t acquired it from a genuine source or that it was too diluted by experiments to be used. It was Dead Sea Mud alright, but weakened. The buzz among the techs was loud enough to cover an uncorking of Rupert’s bottle. He made ready.

As soon as the door had swung shut behind Dr. Fiona, the buzzing among the techs turned

into low ebb arguments. Good!

It wouldn't hurt to reinforce Dr. Fiona's Dead Sea Mud with the fresh sample he and Lowelle had captured. He pulled a vial from his pocket and uncorked it with one hand. The vial let out a loud fart. A few techs snickered in his direction. When would this humiliating task end? The tech's banter turned into an uproar of raucous jokes. Rupert snuck over to the next lab table. Lights and alarms began to flash. Only one tech bothered to look up.

"What idiot put the Botox in Dr. F's station? You know that just freezes the flesh for a few hours, Dr. F doesn't want that!"

Botox? Rupert checked, yes it was the monitor for Dr. Fiona's station where Rupert had just deposited the fresh Dead Sea mud. He pulled out his vials and inventoried. Oh no! Rupert had uncorked the stinky death sample from the drowned people by mistake. Botox? So that's how Auknot made them seem dead.

"Who cares?!" Another tech yelled across the room.

"We have to find a way to get on Q's team as soon as possible!" A fellow tech answered.

Rupert uncorked the flat wide mouth bottle to unloose the Windblown Moonlit Wave into a beaker. Lights flashed on the closest monitor. Rupert sidled up to the next lab station and sprinkled New Mississippi pearl into a pot on a burner. A monitor responded.

Why wasn't anyone noticing? The false alarm for the Botox hadn't helped. The techs had their backs to the wall joshing and chit-chatting. No one was serious. Rupert signaled to George to call their attention to the wall monitors.

"Auknot has risen!" the Harpy jumped up and down.

“Auknot! Auknot!” a few of the techs raised their coffee cups.

What? Did Auknot have converts here too? And these people claimed to be scientists! Rupert was furious. They barely glanced at the monitors.

“Hey!” Rupert yelled. “Don’t you people care about your work?” He pointed to the monitors and crossed his arms.

They greeted his indignation with smirks.

“George, you better clue your friend in about the hocus pocus!” one technician chimed in.

“What do you mean Hocus Pocus! Don’t you think Dr. Fiona will be interested in these results?” Rupert was turning red with rage and impatience. Unconscious idiots. He was handing them a huge gift, bordering on Unholy Commerce, didn’t they see what was in front of them?

“Dude, we’re just here to collect our checks,” another tech added.

“Until tonight anyway,” another pointed out.

The group laughed and went back to their huddle.

“Thirty second warning, Dr. F on the way!”

Rupert was aghast. No wonder Bergen Pharmaceuticals was such an expensive failure. Rupert felt another smidgen of empathy for Bergen. This entire lax enterprise made Rupert’s insides churn. Ezra would never have put up with such sloppiness and neither would Rupert when he got his own lab.

“It’s just a front, pal, so Bergen can collect an extra salary!” a tech clapped Rupert on the back.

“Everyone knows but Dr. F, so shhh...” the tech put a finger to her lips, they all laughed.

How dare they? Rupert had put Lowelle in danger for this mission to save Bergan's butt! And wasted his ingredients! Regal women in London would deny their children's higher educations for an ounce of the Froth of Venus. It shaved ten years from a woman's countenance in ten seconds.

The techs scrambled to their stations. Rupert's empathy for Bergen evaporated. The man was worse than a cad, he was a thief, a liar, and had caused Virginia, an innocent- although admittedly precocious child, untoward agony and worry! The demon!

Dr. Fiona burst into the room. Her scent overcame Rupert; he was once again flooded with the memory of Red Sun. And now Rupert's ire was up. They didn't deserve to live, these humans. Rupert was trembling. He was ready to set the place on fire, a good ole refining fire. That was what was needed here!

Dr. Fiona stepped aside to reveal that had Lowelle accompanied her. Lowelle looked like the angel she was meant to be, refreshed, light as a moonbeam in a starched white lab coat.

Dr. Fiona escorted Lowelle forward and flourished her arm at the room's resumed hubbub, "Here we are!"

Dr. F glanced at the monitors. Good! George hustled about the room punching buttons. Reset, the alarms below the monitors pinged and ponged once again.

Rupert quickly charged to another station and slipped out his last vial containing the snowflake. The crack of the sub-zero air holding the snowflake in suspension popped loud enough to attract the attention of the nearest techs, but Rupert didn't care if they saw him.

Rupert tipped the snowflake into a bubbling beaker of clear glacial water. Alarms pinged and lights flashed. It wouldn't be perfect without the kiss, maybe sustain an age loss of a few years for a week or so, but wasn't that the point? That the customer would have to buy it over and over again? And besides, without the kiss, it wasn't the complete formula and therefore not really Unholy Commerce. At the thought of accomplishing his mission, Rupert's urge to burn the place down somewhat cooled.

The techs rushed the beakers that Rupert had altered forward to Dr. Fiona's dais. She was sweating as she whipped her head from one monitor to the next, muttering calculations and the names of chemicals under her breath. She scratched formulas and notations on her tablet, then signaled the dropping of the ingredients into her mud pot one by one.

Everyone in the room stopped what they were doing and watched Dr. Fiona work herself into a splotchy-faced frenzy.

Lowelle slid in next to Rupert. He felt a rush of warmth run through his body at her presence. He gently moved her in front of him so that she had a clear view of the activities on the dais. Rupert slipped his arms around Lowelle's waist, she leaned back against him. Rupert was thankful for her calming energy.

"Good Heavens!!" Dr. Fiona announced. "Extraordinary!"

Rupert smiled. His troubles with this pesky prayer assignment were almost over, Bergen, despite his undeserving despicable nature was about to receive undeniable redemption for Bergen Pharmaceuticals, a salve for the anxiety that caused Virginia so much unfair concern that she had summoned and trapped an angel to remove it.

The techs were mocking Dr. Fiona behind her back, very unflattering. She scooped a small sample of the final mixture onto a cotton ball. She scanned the room, her eyes settled on a tech in her fifties with graying hair and abundant wrinkles.

“Could I ask you to volunteer?” Dr. Fiona’s voice commanded.

The tech rolled her eyes and waded through the maze of tables. She stepped up onto the dais where Dr. Fiona was waiting, triumphant.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I believe you are about to witness a historic moment,” Dr. Fiona said as she dusted off the tech’s face with a soft brush. She set the brush down and raised the cotton ball of formula.

The doors to the lab burst open.

“Dr. Fiona! Ladies and Gentlemen,” a voice boomed. Everyone turned. Harold Bergen had entered the room.

“Mr. Bergen, how timely!” Dr. Fiona blurted out in glee.

“Mr. Bergen, how timely!” the Harpy screeched in a booming voice. George quickly clamped the Harpy’s beak and ducked under the nearest lab table. He stuffed the little bird into his jacket. Rupert’s concern that the Harpy was Auknot’s eyes and ears returned.

Bergen bounded to the dais.

“Everyone listen, please, I have an important announcement,” Bergen said.

“But Mr. Bergen, I’ve found something!” Dr. Fiona implored. “I’m about to test the most important Beauty Product discovery ever!”

“My dear Dr. Fiona, I’m afraid it’s too late,” Bergen said. He waved Fiona’s ‘volunteer’ aging-lady lab tech off the dais. Dr. Fiona stood in shock with the cotton ball still extended.

Rupert felt a tension building in his temples. His vision blurred with frustration. The ungrateful demon swine. So, the lab gossip was true, the company was a fraud.

“The Board of Directors has decided this department can’t continue. The decision is final, you will all leave this lab immediately and proceed to the auditorium where you will be informed of any reassignments to Department Q. Thank you for your hard work and dedication to Dr. Fiona Monroe.” Bergen continued.

The techs smirked and elbowed each other as they rushed to file out of the room. Rupert despised them. Lowelle seemed to sense the trouble that was brewing inside Rupert. She coaxed him towards the door. They mingled in with the lab techs to avoid Bergen’s attention.

Dr. Fiona let out a sob.

Lowelle was pulling Rupert through the doors. But Rupert had lost his reason. He turned and fought Lowelle to stay in the room. A fireworks migraine exploded in his head. Time to smite the lowly. Rupert vaguely directed his energy at the dais. Smoke rose from the mud pot.

Lowelle twisted to face him. She wrapped her arms around his waist and used the full force of her full body to block his path. Lowelle was too short to block Rupert’s direct view. Bergen restrained Dr. Fiona as she cried and pounded her fists on Bergen’s shoulders.

The mud pot was now aflame. Lab techs screamed and ran for the doors. Rupert knew the entire lab was about to flash-over and explode from his smiting energy. Good!

Lowelle pulled Rupert's pounding head towards hers. She pushed her soft lips onto his. Rupert's mouth drank in her sweet breath. Her taste was fresh and soothed the anger of his smiting smoldering mind. Lowelle stroked Rupert's face with her fingers and tangled them in his hair. The lab faded into the distance, Lowelle's kiss swallowed the migraine's fireworks along with every other thought in Rupert's head.

Chapter 18

Angel's Eyes

A mortifying scream broke the spell of Lowelle's kiss. Lowelle and Rupert looked towards the dais.

The flame in Dr. Fiona's mud dish was now licking the ceiling. George ran up with a fire extinguisher and the Harpy flitted about hissing at the flames. The two quickly put the fire out.

"How dare you!" Bergen accused the lab techs closest to the dais, "Dr. Fiona has always treated you with utmost respect!"

Tears streamed from under the red glasses of Dr. Fiona as she stared at the smoldering steaming mud, blackened on her lab table. She lifted the small glass jar with the remaining formula as if it were a fragile egg. She stared at the cotton ball in her other hand. Suddenly, Dr. Fiona brought the cotton to her own face, tracing wrinkles she must have memorized.

Bergen collared one of the lab techs near the fire, "Who did this?! Tell me now or you're all fired! No one will be reassigned to Q."

The Lab techs panicked and backed away from the dais.

One of them pointed at Rupert and Lowelle, "It was them!"

The other techs also pointed at Rupert and joined in a chorus of accusations.

"He slipped things into the formula!"

"I saw him too!"

"Saboteurs!"

“Industrial Spies!

“I was about to report them!”

As Bergen turned towards the doors, Rupert grasped Lowelle about the shoulders and ducked behind the closest clump of techs. The techs parted to expose Rupert and Lowelle. Bergen’s eyes locked with Rupert’s.

Rupert’s head thumped a warning that the migraine was about to return. Lowelle sensed this and put her delicate hand up to his heart. A cool sensation spread over Rupert’s chest. He grabbed ahold of its soothing temperature with his mind. Rupert knew if he could sink below the surface of his anger and restrain it, he could use its power to gain an advantage over Bergen.

“Bring them!” Bergen shouted. Two techs grabbed Lowelle and Rupert, shoved them towards the dais.

“Should we call security?” a tech mumbled.

“Get out! All of you!” Bergen continued.

The techs scrambled to clear the room.

Lowelle let out a yelp and clapped her hands. “You are a vision of purity!”

Bergen and Rupert followed Lowelle’s gaze.

Dr. Fiona’s face was radiant. Every wrinkle was gone. A young girl’s smile appeared on her red lips.

In a trance, Dr. Fiona removed her red-lensed glasses. Ugly scars marred the skin around her emerald eyes. She reached for a mirror from the espresso machine shelf.

No one moved as she applied few dabs of the cotton ball to her eyelids.

The scars melted. Dr. Fiona looked towards to Lowelle.

Lowelle smiled and said, “Angel’s eyes!”

Dr. Fiona lifted the mirror with her eyes closed. The mirror covered her face from the view of Lowelle, Rupert, and Bergen. Dr. Fiona let out a moan of ecstasy. She dropped the mirror, it shattered. Dr. Fiona brought the open jar of formula to her lips and kissed it. Rupert could see the breath from her kiss fuse into the formula.

Dr. Fiona apparently loved what she saw in the mirror. The Kiss-of-the-Woman-in-Love. The final ingredient! Bergen stared with disbelief, mesmerized.

Lowelle whispered to Rupert, “We should sneak out now.”

Rupert was bursting with glee- Virginia’s prayer would be answered- but he didn’t want to put Lowelle in harm’s way. Bergen was sure to be pleased but was still unpredictable. Rupert guided Lowelle into the hallway.

Rupert held Lowelle firmly in his arms and looked into her eyes, “Darling you must wait in New Orleans. I’ll meet you as soon as I can.”

“No!” Lowelle protested.

He smothered her with a kiss.

Rupert could hear a commotion around the corner of the corridor, boots running. Security guards? George burst out of the laboratory, brandishing the fire extinguisher.

“George, take her home, now!” Rupert commanded. Whoop! His arms collapsed, Lowelle was gone but the impression that she loved Rupert remained behind. His heart was full.

The guards rounded the corner.

Rupert pushed the doors open and stepped back into Dr. Fiona's lab. She and Bergen were whispering over the jar of formula.

Rupert announced with joy, "That's it! That's what I came here for! To give you the answer to your problems!"

They turned to look at Rupert in shock. The guards burst through the door and grabbed Rupert's arms. Bergen gestured for the guards to halt.

"What were you really doing at my mansion in London?" Bergen demanded.

"Like I told you then, I went to sneak a look at your Night Blooming Cereus and was caught out by Virginia. She thought I was some sort of an angel, there to answer her prayer about you. And now I've done it! Brought you a formula that will relieve you of any anxiety you might have had about the success of this company!" Rupert was vaguely aware of how crazy this was sounding.

"Uh-huh, you came all the way from London to answer this little girl's prayer? Why would you do that? What would you get out of it?" Bergen said.

Rupert couldn't think of anything to say.

"This is what I think," Bergen said, "I think you came to steal the work of Dr. Fiona! Bergen Pharmaceutical secrets are what you were looking for in London and what you're doing here. And how dare you bring my step-daughter into this? Virginia's none of your business!" Bergen tried to stare Rupert down but Rupert wouldn't look away.

Rupert was glad George had taken Lowelle to safety. Rupert could feel his anger clawing for control. This demon Bergen didn't deserve anything he had! Not the formula for the

Froth of Venus, not the Night Blooming Cereus, and especially not the loving concern of little Virginia. Rupert bore his energy into Bergen, his stare became a weapon. Bergen held fast. The guards and Dr. Fiona stood by as if frozen. Bergen was beet red with furor. Rupert's temples pounded. The headache reminded him of Lowelle's kiss, of the softness of her lips, her soothing calm. He loved her and knew he could no longer do anything she wouldn't respect.

How had Rupert gotten himself into this situation? Did Bergen deserve to live? To hell with these humans! Rupert couldn't remember what was so important about any of it. Rupert had to get out and get back to saving Ezra. Bergen wasn't really even worth smiting, particularly if he lost Lowelle.

Bergen grabbed his left arm like he was having a heart attack and choked out, "I'll have you arrested if you upset Virginia again!"

Rupert looked towards Dr. Fiona. Rupert could tell she knew the truth; that Rupert had helped with the formula. She nodded to him in silent gratitude.

Bergen crumpled to the ground. Dr. Fiona dropped to her knees by his side, the guards rushed forward to help Bergen, yelling into cell phones.

Rupert slipped through the laboratory doors. He checked his watch, a few minutes to midnight in London. The Night Blooming Cereus! He would just have to fib to get past Virginia, if she was even there. After all, hadn't Rupert done everything in his power to answer her prayer? White lies. That's what humans called them, white for the good they represented, the good you could do by telling them. Like getting the Archangel off your back. Like saving Master Ezra from

Auknot, and possibly saving an entire cult of idiot humans from their own delusions. Not that they deserved it.

And if the white lie didn't work, Rupert would JUST STEAL THE DAMN CEREUS. This was an emergency. No one at SCOD would know, George the spy was in New Orleans with Lowelle.

The walls of the corridor wavered. They became transparent. As the wall between the corridor and the laboratory disappeared, Rupert saw an exuberant Virginia run into the lab, arms waving above her head. Was he hallucinating? Was the transport mixing things up?

“The Cereus has bloomed!” Virginia announced.

Rupert recoiled in horror, had he Reversed Virginia to the lab? The walls went solid again. No! Focus! Ezra! Auknot! Oblivion! Lowelle! GET THE CEREUS. NOW! Virginia is out of the way! She's in New Mexico! Who cares how it happened!

The corridor went black. Flurries of giant white snowflakes swirled against the black and stuck to Rupert's face. Yoweee! Rupert landed hard on a London street, slid on ice and slush. He nicked his ankle on a cobblestone, crashed into a bank of snow. The cool of the snow felt soothing for about a minute. Then it began to bite into the exposed flesh of his hands and face.

Rupert pushed himself up and sat while his stomach settled. London was transformed. The street was blanketed white, a golden glow reflected off every surface from the street lights. A freezing breeze sprinkled gold snow-dust in the air. It made Rupert's face burn, enough to distract from the spiking pain in his ankle.

The gates to Bergen's Grove were halfway down the lane, shut tight and covered with ice. Rupert stood on wobbly knees, part from the cold, part from the ankle injury. He could never jump the fence. He prayed his desire would open the gates as Lowelle's desire had opened the locked door the day she had arrived at Oblivion. Rupert kept her form in its gossamer scarf in front of his mind to diminish the pain as he hobbled over to the gates. Rupert breathed in the love he felt when he had kissed her.

The gates to Bergen's Grove warmed. The ice melted. The metal creaked and cracked. As he reached for the handle, he thought of his hand on Lowelle's waist. Rupert could hear the lock turn on its own. The handle opened smooth. He trudged through knee high snow towards the greenhouse.

Lights glowed through its snow covered form, more like a giant beast than the delicate cathedral shape he remembered. Rupert could hear muffled noise inside. Music. Rupert wiped a circle of snow off the glass in the door with his sleeve and peered in. The Creole sat on a bench near a magnolia tree in full bloom, surrounded by bright orchids. Hadn't he last been with The Dark Beauty? Rupert surveyed for any motion among the plants, she was nowhere to be seen, but he remained alert. The Creole fiddled an old gospel tune. Rupert pulled open the door and inhaled.

Rich moist air pushed into Rupert's lungs. The fragrance of the orchids melded with a faint trace of Night Blooming Cereus. Only a faint trace? It must not have bloomed as Virginia had announced, or maybe only one or two blossoms? The Creole finished his song.

"Greetings," the Creole said.

"The Cereus didn't bloom," Rupert stated the obvious.

“Oh, she’s bloomed alright,” the Creole answered.

But the fragrance wasn’t right. Something was amiss. Rupert felt it deep in his guts. Rupert pushed through the maze of the tropical portion of the greenhouse and ran towards the desert area. He broke out onto the sand expecting the warmth of the heat lamps, but there was no change in the temperature.

Rupert looked up at the iron structure, searching for pink starbursts on ugly grey sticks.

The iron ceiling was completely empty. THE NIGHT BLOOMING CEREUS WAS COMPLETELY GONE. Not even a thorn from a grey stick remained on the sand. Except for the faint hint of perfume, it was as if it had never existed.

The Creole’s fiddle cried.

Chapter 19

The Blossoming

Rupert paced under the magnolia tree in Virginia's greenhouse. White petals mimicked the snow outside, drifted down to land on the shoulders of Rupert's puckered and mud-stained jacket. He didn't bother to brush them off.

The deep Gospel whine of the Creole's fiddle twisted into Rupert's heart. All seemed lost. Ezra languished under the chains of Auknot, Rupert's attempt to answer Virginia's prayer had rendered Bergen apoplectic and the Night Blooming Cereus had vanished, presumably stolen by the Dark Beauty. And worst of all, George would surely report the grand measure of Rupert's incompetence to SCOD, probably condemning Rupert to holding up the rings of Saturn or such.

Damn Bergen anyway. The man was a perfect example of humanity's uselessness. The rogue didn't deserve the chances he was afforded on earth, and was the gossip true? Had Bergen forsaken a lovely wife and step-daughter for that mechanical scientist Dr. Fiona? If so, Bergen certainly didn't deserve Virginia's loving concern or Rupert's efforts.

Virginia! Rupert flashed on Virginia's arms, raised in victory as she bounded across Dr. Fiona's laboratory. Had it been a hallucination? Had Rupert transported Virginia and the Cereus to the New Mexico laboratory? He had never heard of transporting an object without the escort of the transporting angel.

The idea of facing Virginia again made Rupert shudder. Virginia was the nightmare of Rupert's failure. A hissing voice from the back of his consciousness stated the obvious, 'You can't

even make it as an ordinary angel, answering the prayers of a human child. You are doomed to a flaming pit of tar.’ A rush of anger at all humanity pounded in Rupert’s temples. Guardian Angel service would be the worst. And service to the likes of a Dr. Fiona or a Bergen for the rest of eternity was unthinkable. And to fail in front of Lowelle? It would crush him.

If this was the end, if he was doomed, Rupert had only one desire left: to see the glory of the Night Blooming Cereus and to take in her intoxicating scent one more time before he was relegated to mind-numbing mediocrity. Oh please, God, may I see her blossom?

Rupert looked up and closed his eyes. He pictured the spiky grey sticks that had previously graced the ceiling above. He heard the greenhouse ceiling groan under the weight of the snow.

Thunder rumbled. Rupert found himself in a dark cloud. Purple sky burst around him. The horizon was red and orange fading to deep blue. Grey sticks of Night Blooming Cereus floated past, suspended in cerulean. Pink buds fattened before his eyes.

Rupert heard a single note roll out of the mouths of hundreds of angels, unfurling a chorus of harmony smooth as silk and gentle as velvet.

One of the buds curled its lips open. A fountain of sparks emanated from the tip as it stretched its petals backward to form a perfect pale star, the butter color of a summer dawn licked with pink. At the center the delicate stamen extended, surrounded with tiny orbital moons of seed which threatened to disburse in the slightest breeze.

Shockwaves distorting the last of the desert colors precluded the fragrance. The sun sank behind a rounded mountain top and the perfume released. Rupert inhaled, his nostrils flaring like a stallion’s. Rupert floated in the New Mexico sunset surrounded by Night Blooming Cereus as

she seeded the storm clouds with her noxious odor. It was his eternity. Or a hallucination. He didn't care which.

A shriek exploded into Rupert's dream. Or was it real? He opened his eyes. Rupert was still in the greenhouse. Virginia and Dr. Fiona clutched each other in shock as they tumbled through the red leaves of an elephant ear plant. Reverse transported? Virginia was horrified. Dr. Fiona's emerald eyes were narrow and alert. Virginia twisted her arms away from the stiff grasp of Dr. Fiona's left arm. The child clawed furiously to reach the scientist's right arm, which was extended over her head.

"Take it! Hurry!" Dr. Fiona tossed something at Rupert.

A single blossom arched through the air towards him. He extended his hands to greet the Cereus. The fragrance spewed forth, filling the warm moist air with a thick overlay of rich intoxicant.

Before Rupert could catch the blossom, Virginia snatched it away mid-air.

"It's Father's!" Virginia declared.

"Yes, and your father wanted me to have it," Dr. Fiona answered.

"It's mine too and I don't like you!" Virginia was crying.

Dr. Fiona looked around at the greenhouse in astonishment as if just realizing she was no longer in her laboratory.

"Where are we?" Dr. Fiona demanded of Rupert.

"I don't care, take me back, I want to be with Father!" Virginia wailed.

Something in Virginia's voice touched Rupert. He gingerly placed his hands on her shoulders.

"It's not so bad, sometimes our desires can take us places we don't expect but wanted all along. You're home at Bergen's Grove," he said.

"But Father's been taken with a heart attack! In the ambulance! I must go with him!" Virginia continued through her tears.

"Where is your mother?" Rupert asked, hoping to dispense with the crying girl as soon as possible. He eyed the flower and damned himself for not having a purified bottle within reach.

"New Mexico," Virginia answered.

"I'll take care of you," Dr. Fiona approached to take Virginia by the arm. To his discomfort, Virginia grasped Rupert around the waist and tucked herself under his arm. She shielded the Cereus Blossom with her sweater.

"No one gets the Cereus!" Virginia said.

"Now Virginia, don't you think your Father would be happier with you if you gave it to me for the formula? The formula that made him so happy because it solves all his problems?" Dr. Fiona's line of reasoning suited Rupert just fine. "Isn't that what you told me you wanted?"

Virginia looked at Dr. Fiona with suspicion.

Rupert saw his chance, "You made me a promise Virginia," he said, "I'm sure your Father will recover from the little fall he had in the laboratory and be happier than ever, all his anxiety relieved now that Dr. Fiona has discovered her formula."

"I heard the medics say it was a heart attack," Virginia insisted.

“They have to say that for liability,” Rupert continued.

“Can angels lie?” Virginia asked.

Dr. Fiona curled her lip and raised an eyebrow in a way that made Rupert uneasy.

“What reason would an angel have to lie?” replied Rupert as he shot a glance at the Creole, noting he tilted one ear forward.

“Do you really think my Father is alright now?” Virginia asked.

“Of course, he is,” Rupert said, noting that humans were always alright, they just didn’t know it. “And you did promise me the scent if your prayer was answered.”

“I suppose,” said Virginia. “But you won’t leave me will you?”

Rupert examined Dr. Fiona.

“I’ll take her to her mother, no harm done.” Dr. Fiona went on to say, “I’d like to try some of the Night Blooming Cereus in my formulas, what do you know about it?”

Rupert’s mind raced. Froth of Venus combined with Night Blooming Cereus. Dangerous. Very dangerous in the wrong hands. The Night Blooming Cereus fused properly could release a person from the drive for survival. This sounded good in theory but without the drive for survival, it was impossible to defend one’s self. Not practical here on earth. Women made beautiful from the Froth of Venus and unable to defend themselves? Rupert was repulsed by the crudity it could provoke.

“Don’t. It turns too quickly,” Rupert said. A white lie he told himself.

“Why are you so keen to get it then?” Dr. Fiona asked.

Rupert thought about Lowelle and Oblivion, he thought about George singing again. Rupert mustered all the life force he could find to convince her, “It’s personal, for a friend, that’s all.” Rupert answered.

In the light of Bergen’s industrial spying on Auknot, Rupert worried why Dr. Fiona was so keen to find out. Had Auknot forced Cyryzza out of Ezra yet? Rupert must hurry. He visualized Dr. Fiona’s laboratory. The walls of the greenhouse melted into the milky way. The desert heat blasted them a moment and then the cool of the air conditioning in the lab caused him to shiver.

Virginia still clung to his waist and Dr. Fiona tottered, unbalanced on her red stilettos.

A shapely blonde rushed through the doors into the room.

“Mother!” Virginia cried and rushed towards the blonde. A petal from the crushed Night Blooming Cereus flower fell from Virginia’s hand.

Dr. Fiona recovered her balance immediately and scooped up the petal before Rupert could reach it.

She rushed to the cold storage room where George had stored the snowflake. Rupert followed her, knowing his chances of getting the petal from Dr. Fiona were better than convincing Virginia to release hers.

Fog from the cold room flowed out the open door. He hid behind it and waited. He hoped to snatch the flower from where Dr. Fiona was storing it and take it back to Oblivion, but she slammed the door shut, exposing him; she faced him with a vicious look on her face.

“Swear an oath you’re not working for Auknot!” Dr. Fiona whispered.

“Bleck!” A large belch interrupted them, a dark fog seeped out around the freezer door. Dr. Fiona yanked it open in panic.

They both charged inside to find George sitting on the floor of the freezer. He was surrounded by red-velvet cake crumbs and smears of frosting. His hair was in disarray, his lab coat stained with red frosting blotches. Something was wrong. The dark fog was enveloping George. From the size of the cake box, it appeared he had eaten an entire Red Velvet cake.

“I think I ate something wicked,” George said, “I want to go home now.”

Rupert felt the freezing cold as evil, his throat closed. He couldn’t reply. A night terror rode with them through the Transport. Rupert hoped London was where George meant by “home.” It was a chill Rupert couldn’t shake. He knew it wasn’t from the freezing temperature where they, thank heavens, had arrived: outside Oblivion. George looked terrible.

Rupert kicked the snow off his boots and entered by the unlocked front door. Lowelle was inside, sitting behind the counter wrapped in a white fur cloak and black ermine hat. Rupert’s gut sank. Hadn’t he told George to take Lowelle home to New Orleans? Never mind, Rupert’s heart warmed to see her cheery smile.

“I wanted to be here to celebrate with you,” she said, “I heard your flower bloomed!”

“Well done!” George said, “You’ll be the Archangel’s brightest shining lamp.”

George belched and opened a drawer in the counter and extracted a slim gold speckled vial. Rupert noticed that the air was turning fetid. George looked drunk. Rupert wondered if he had had more than Red Velvet cake.

“That was a boom-boom blast working with Dr. F. wasn’t it? Let’s shoot off a fax to SCOD and the Archangel regarding the prayer you answered for Virginia, it might count towards my Guardian Angel line-up quota!” George said as he rummaged through the drawers in the counter.

Rupert didn’t bother to correct George on the fact that Rupert hadn’t exactly answered Virginia’s prayer. He was as elated as he was disheartened that Virginia’s Night Blooming Cereus had bloomed. Now there was no chance. Dr. Fiona had only a sliver of the blossom. She had probably already moved it to some other secret locked vault. Rupert was sure Virginia would never let go of the rest, at least not to him.

He wasn’t even sure Bergen had survived the heart attack. Of course, if Bergen had passed on, the anxiety issue was a moot point. And Virginia wouldn’t be happy at all. Rupert sighed. Why was it so hard for humans to understand the true nature of, well, of everything? He had to come up with a new plan.

George belched again. The smell was overpowering.

“George, really, we brush teeth here,” said Rupert.

“If you say so, Boss,” said George.

“If Cyryzma does as rumored, this day will go down in history as the beginning of the greatest Revolution of all time!” George declared.

He pulled the greasy fax application for Master’s Certificate from his pocket and started scribbling on it. Lowelle clapped her hands and pulled Rupert into a dance around the shop. He shoved her away. She was puzzled.

“No, you don’t understand,” Rupert began.

Lowelle looked hurt. How could he disappoint her and stop George from sending the false report?

Rupert was weary of it all. He envisioned a transport to Nourredine's garden in Fez. There Rupert could kiss Lowelle under the orange blossoms and forget all about Oblivion. Perhaps they could make a new start in the spice trade. *As a fugitive*, he heard Ezra's voice reprimand him. *No one wants the life of a fugitive*. How would Ezra know?

"I'll just send off a fax, should hear back from SCOD immediately," George said as he disappeared into the office before Rupert could think of something to say to stop him.

"I'm sorry, it's just that..." Lowelle pulled him close, "It's been a long journey."

Rupert held Lowelle about the waist and buried his head into her hair. He was about to turn and kiss her when the shop door opened and blasted them with snow.

"No!" the Creole shouted. He had apparently walked all the way from Bergen's Grove. It must have taken hours. His shoulders and hair were dusted with snow. Why didn't the fellow see that Lowelle loved Rupert? Forever young or not, the Creole needed to just let go of her and pass on in Rupert's opinion. He did look a bit older though. Was that a streak of white in his beard?

Lowelle rushed to him, "What is it?" She brushed the snow off his shoulders.

Rupert loathed her ongoing concern for the Creole.

George emerged from the office and headed towards the door. The Creole slammed the door shut and blocked his way.

"Slow down ya move too fast!" the Harpy sang from George's shoulder.

Rupert noticed that the smell emanating from George was overpowering the lingering scent of Lowelle's perfume.

Then he saw it. George's hair. It was just starting to grow. The roots were black but glowing with unnatural iridescence. A Demon! George was infected by a Demon! He vaguely remembered someone in school lecturing that demons loved to hide in Red Velvet cake. Rupert vaulted over the counter and opened a drawer.

Rupert lifted out the first empty bottle he could find and snapped the top. Poof! The air drained from the room, then roared back out of the bottle's neck with hurricane force. Everyone was enveloped in a funnel of wind.

George's hair grew longer and longer. It changed from dull black to purple sparkles to glowing red ember. It swirled and twisted around him and bound his dwarf form. He was swathed in glowing red muscle. His face distorted and his teeth grew long and yellow. Huge ears stuck out of his head, rimmed with little black horns. The Harpy swooped onto the Demon's head.

"Out of my way!" The Demon shouted at the Creole through the Harpy's throat.

"No Sir. I'll be standing right here." The Creole held up his fiddle and made it into a cross with his bow.

"Stop, in the name of love," the Harpy sang in George's Seraphim voice.

"So last century!" The Demon laughed as blackbirds emanated from its mouth. The birds swarmed on the gale wind still blowing around the room. The wind from Rupert's bottle had created a sort of indoor hurricane. One of the Blackbirds clasped the Harpy's neck in its beak.

Rupert saw his chance. Blackbirds pecking his head, Rupert dove up into the swirling air, riding on it. Rupert let the wind carry him towards the door.

“Open the door!” Rupert shouted at the Creole.

The Creole, covered in Blackbirds, obliged. The wind blew Rupert, the Creole, the Demon, Lowelle, George, the Blackbirds, the furniture and the choking Harpy into the night sky.

Chapter 20

The Golden Islands

Rupert had no idea what could happen next. Ezra had only instructed that the bottles should never be left unstopped indefinitely. Rupert drifted on the breath of Creation. It flowed freely out of the bottle, swirling around a vortex with hurricane force. He remembered mutterings from school of “black holes” and “alternate universes.”

The swirling wind sucked up the snow. It created a wall of white against which Rupert floated and the blackbirds cawed. It formed a centrifuge where the Demon and the Creole struggled to get at each other.

The Creole grabbed the Demon by an ear. The muscles in Creole’s arm popped into sharp definition. He cursed and chanted prayers.

The Demon sank its long sharp yellow teeth into the Creole’s arm.

Rupert strained to see Lowelle. Her white fur coat made it difficult against the white background. He spotted her a few feet from the clawing arm of the Demon. Her face was distorted in panic. She kicked to swim away from the Demon and the Creole. Her arms windmilled towards Rupert.

Huh! Something knocked the breath out of his lungs. Blackbirds blended into black spots before his eyes, he struggled to stay conscious. Rupert knew he must transport them all to someplace where they could land safely.

Rupert thought of Nouredine Hamchali's spice storage roof, giant vats of spices drying in the air. Once Nouredine and Rupert had taken turns diving into some old lavender seed. It was ready to be replaced and Nouredine wanted to release it into the local stream as a treat for his village festival. It had to be crushed first, so they dove and stomped, smashing the six-foot-deep pile of seeds into a fine powder. The thought of lavender made Rupert drowsy but he knew it would provide a soft landing. And it was in a walled compound that might contain the Demon. It would put them near Ezra.

Wham! Another blow came to his chest. It caused Rupert to inhale crystal cold air. When he regained his senses, he saw it was the Demon kicking him. It was disturbing to see George's bloodshot eyes peering out, pleading under a red and grotesque swollen brow. But Rupert pushed him away. The Seraph-Demon tumbled head over toe. It slid back and struggled to grab onto Rupert. Bam, another kick connected with Rupert's head. Rupert was going to black out for sure this time.

"Sorry, Boss!" George's voice faded in the wind and was covered over by Demon-laughter.

"To Nouredine! Now!" Rupert yelled at what he hoped was still George inside the Demon before its heel planted a blow on Rupert's chin.

"Okay, Boss!" But George's voice didn't sound hopeful of fulfilling the order.

Rupert panicked. He prayed his emotion was enough to carry them to Fez on his own. Please let it be aligned with Divine Will. Nothing happened. He kicked the Demon away again.

The Demon crashed into Lowelle. Red slobber covered her white ermine. She screamed.

The hurricane tilted until it became a long-sloped tunnel. It formed a slick snow slide. They all dropped to the bottom and started to slide down towards a black opening at the end. The Demon and the Creole were in the lead. They continued to claw at each other.

The blackbirds flew overhead, swooping and pecking at everyone. One carried the now strangling Harpy in its beak. Rupert and Lowelle crashed together in an embrace and slid feet first.

The Demon and the Creole tumbled into the black nothingness at the end of the snow slide and disappeared, followed by the blackbirds. A flash of light went off as the Harpy and its captor disappeared into the black.

“Noureddine!” screamed Rupert in desperate hope they would land in the familiar spice vats.

Lowelle screamed and buried her face in Rupert’s chest. He clung tightly to her, glad to be in her arms if this was to be their last moment together. He was grateful they were in these warm human forms where they could feel each other in ways that angels couldn’t in their natural form. Rupert could feel the imprint of Lowelle’s love for him on his very soul.

The snow slide ended abruptly. Rupert and Lowelle were released into the darkness. There was no air. They couldn’t breathe. All was perfectly still. Rupert found he was paralyzed. He couldn’t even twitch his nose or blink an eye. He was helpless to stop Lowelle from fainting. He felt a great emptiness as she lost consciousness.

A golden light flashed. The Harpy flew towards them, cutting the black with blinding lightning bolts.

“Greetings to all and to all a good night!” the Harpy sang.

Rupert was sure it was the end of his human form. He pictured his angel home in the Hidden Universes. His heart was heavy with the loss of earth's fragrant habitat and Ezra and Lowelle and all he had met. He could hear the pounding of his wild horse's hooves on the open plains.

With each blast of words from the Harpy, air puffed out. A soft breeze emitted from the Harpy's beak.

Rupert felt Lowelle's chest expand with a breath. He inhaled. Lavender filled his consciousness. Noureddine's! Were they transported, hurricane and all? The lavender fragrance turned to that of straw and Rupert found himself sliding down a straw lined metal trough. The chute flipped him out on a metal floor in what appeared to be a cage. Before he could stand, a steel door slammed down across the chute's opening. The noise was deafening. Roars and fighting and yelling. Whose vision had transported them? They didn't seem to be at Noureddine's in Fez.

"Lowelle!" Rupert shouted. "Where are you?"

"I'm here!" she answered from far away. "But where are we? What is this place?"

Rupert looked around. The large cavernous room was divided into cages by steel bars. The exterior walls were coated with a dark sticky tar. There was a straw lined chute opening into each cage; a sliding steel door was closed over the cage's chutes.

He could barely see the white of Lowelle's fur far down the row of cages. A booming metallic sound seemed familiar but Rupert had a hard time placing it. At the top of the cages, a narrow slit provided fresh salty air. They must be near the sea. Noureddine's home was inland and didn't have a dungeon as far as Rupert knew.

The room tilted back and forth slowly. That's it. They must be on a ship at sea.

"Are these lions?" The Creole's voice came from the cage next door. Lions? Rupert looked over. The Creole sat in a cage with three lions, one male, two female. He was stroking the female's head. Rupert was terrified of lions, actually of all cats. And cats didn't like Rupert either. When the female lion that the Creole was stroking saw Rupert looking at her, she let out a low growl.

Rupert's eyes raced around his own cage. No lions. He could make out a female lion in Lowelle's cage but it was chained to the wall where it couldn't seem to reach her.

Further down the row, Rupert could see the Demon and George, swirling together in one morphing form that sometimes separated so they could fight. A male lion crouched in the corner, watching them, ready to leap.

The Demon clawed George across the throat.

Lowelle screamed.

The lion in George's cage leapt.

The lion landed with a roar on the Demon. The Demon let out a terrible high pitched scream. With a shudder, George's fully intact body fell out of the Demon, bleeding at the neck from his wound.

George's body went limp on the straw. The Demon seemed to fly into millions of strands then millions of tiny red drops. A demon-vapor.

The red demon-vapor streamed through the bars of the cage and hovered on the ceiling.

An alarm went off. Golden Guards with spears came running. Had the Demon transported them? The idea that dark creatures could transport made him queasy.

The guards opened the cage of George, who was bleeding profusely on the floor under the paws of the lion. The lion was shaking its head in agony from the Demon's shriek. A Golden Guard chained up the lion.

The red demon-vapor raced towards Rupert. Rupert felt in his pockets for a bottle. The vapor dove towards Rupert's nose.

Rupert uncorked the bottle. It sucked in the vapor. The bottle became hot. It turned coal red in Rupert's hand and pulsed but he didn't let go. It seared his flesh.

The Golden Guards carried George out. They released the Creole from his cage but kept him under guard.

"I must go with him!" Lowelle screamed at the Golden Guards. "Take this." Lowelle shoved a medallion on a thick gold chain through the bars of her cage. Rupert didn't remember her wearing a necklace earlier. Had he just not been observant enough? Who had given it to her?

The surprised Golden Guards examined Lowelle closely. They conferred with each other. They finally ushered her out but didn't seem to accept the necklace. She waved and blew Rupert a kiss.

"No, Lowelle, don't go with them!" Rupert shouted after her.

"Auknot is here! He will save us." she answered confidently. Rupert watched in agony as Lowelle ran to George's stretcher, kissed his brow and held his hand.

Rupert wrapped the Demon's vial in a handkerchief and put it in the jacket pocket that didn't contain any other vials. He didn't fully trust the bottle would continue to hold the Demon without melting, the Demon could use the other vials to destroy this universe. He did trust that Auknot had sent the Demon to steal Cyryzzma and that it would pursue its mission at any cost.

Steam was released over the cages through a vent in the ceiling; everyone including the lions fell into a deep sleep. Rupert's dreams were fitful, he tried to break the surface of his sleep but nothing real seemed within his grasp.

"Rupert, it's me." The whisper came from outside his cage. Rupert could barely make out Nouredine. Something in Rupert's brain tried to make sense of the fact that maybe they had transported to Nouredine the person, not to Nouredine's spice farm. It was somehow reassuring that the Demon in the vial hadn't initiated the transport.

"Where are we?" Rupert asked through the fuzz of waking up.

The window slots began to glow with faint pink light. It was dawn.

"The Golden Islands." Nouredine answered.

"Never heard of them," Rupert replied.

"Auknot's created them. The Golden Islands are mining platforms used to search for gold under the floor of the ocean." Nouredine continued.

"But lions and cages?" Rupert asked.

"We discovered that even though Auknot is here to save all humanity, some cases are more difficult. They needed a place to do penance and lie down with lions to be ready to accept all that Auknot has to offer them," Nouredine said.

We? Had Noureddine gone over to Auknot? “What are you doing here?” Rupert asked.

“Come with me, we must hurry, they are bringing in some more penitents soon, you don’t belong here,” Noureddine answered as he unlocked the cage, “unless you think you won’t repent and convert?”

To ignore the question Rupert asked, “What of Ezra? Have you seen him?”

“Shh, soon enough,” Noureddine warned. They trudged up steep metal stairs past Golden Guards who eyed them suspiciously.

A heavy steel door at the top of the stairs slid open automatically when Noureddine punched in a code. A blast of fresh tropical air revived Rupert and announced what they were about to see.

Rupert gasped at the sight of an island paradise, seemingly built on pure golden sand.

A few steps away from the steel door, which was hidden by heavy planting, the hanging gardens of Babylon were put to shame by lush flowers, palms, and grasses swaying in the breeze.

In the rising morning sun Rupert could see across to other platforms floating like oil rigs on the sea, teeming with multiple levels of activity. They were on the top level of the largest platform in a wide-spread flotilla. On upper levels gardens were being planted, houses built, golden temple columns polished. The lower levels consisted of mining equipment that sucked sand from the bottom of the sea on one side and after gold was extracted and purified in large clear bubbling vats at the center; tubes spit the spoils and tailings off the opposite side of the platform, where they splashed back into the water. Huge ships were towing several unfinished platforms into place at the edges of the flotilla.

“Amazing operation Auknot’s put in place,” Noureddine said.

Rupert wondered how a mere statue had managed to put this together in the short time since his awakening. It made no sense. It would take a vast enterprise to support this. Lots of labor and capital. An empire, like Bergen’s.

“What’s your connection to all this?” Rupert asked.

“I’m always as you knew me, a simple spice dealer,” Noureddine said.

Rupert thought of the steam that made them all sleep. “And Ezra?”

“For your Master Ezra, I’m afraid it’s become more complicated,” Noureddine said. “He promised something he couldn’t deliver, and I’m afraid to say...”

“What’s happened! Is Ezra alive?” Rupert asked.

“Alive yes, but I’m afraid Auknot has run out of patience and time. Ezra’s failed with every batch. He has until sundown to deliver Cyryzza. It’s impossible, many of us have tried.” Noureddine said. “But The Queen of the Night, from the Night Blooming Cereus is the key. Only one drop left and it’s rumored to be in the hands of an enemy.”

What did Noureddine know of Dr. Fiona? Or Virginia? Or was it an attempt to get information from Rupert?

“Let’s go see how your friends are doing,” Noureddine injected before Rupert had a chance to ask more.

Rupert and Noureddine walked a short way to a long building that turned out to be a hospital. The empty rows of beds contained a few injured workers who were doted over by Golden

Maidens in long white dresses. They carried platters of fruit and drinks and pills. George's head rested against a fluffy pillow. His eyes were closed and his neck sported a huge bandage.

"Isn't it miraculous?" Lowelle's voice rang out. She had exchanged her furs for the same gauzy white dress worn by the Golden Maidens. Rupert recognized several of the Dark Beauty's angel friends from London escorting Lowelle. Were they really guards?

Rupert rushed to the chair where she sat beside the Creole's bed. He put his hand on her shoulder and leaned down to kiss her. She lowered her eyes and pulled away. Rupert fixated her hand in the Creole's hand. Had she forgotten the Creole was a shriveled old man, a pretense under the voodoo illusion of youth? Was she that impressed by the Creole's efforts against the Demon? Rupert's temperature rose with his resentment. He thought about the Demon bottle in his pocket, would she be so impressed if the Demon had been left to finish its job on the Creole?

Without looking at him Lowelle said, "I understand now."

"Understand what?" Rupert asked.

"What kind of angel you are," Lowelle answered.

"Whatever do you mean? Darling, what have I done? Tell me!" Rupert replied.

"It's what you haven't done," Lowelle said.

Rupert frantically searched back through all recent events. He had tried his best to answer Virginia's prayer, granted the Cinnamon & Sandalwood was a bit of a botch, but how could Lowelle know about that?

Anger mounting Rupert asked the Creole, "What did you tell her?"

The Creole barely opened his eyes, "The truth."

“She knows the truth, she’s been with me all along!” Rupert said.

“I don’t belong with the faithless,” Lowelle said.

Fear mounted in Rupert. He had no idea what she was talking about. What had happened in the short time since their embrace in the snow slide?

“I believe!” shouted Rupert.

“It appears you believe in lying about answered prayers and in blatant thievery to get your precious formulas anyway you can,” the Dark Beauty said as she stepped from behind a patient’s screen at the next bed, “I saw it all.”

She must have been following him all along.

Oh God. Rupert confessed in his heart that he may have *intended* to steal the Night Blooming Cereus, but he hadn’t actually done it in the end, had he? Rupert couldn’t bring up the facts to defend himself. And Virginia’s prayer? Wasn’t it in the end unanswerable? Rupert couldn’t remember all the circumstances and facts.

“Boss!” George’s voice brought Rupert back into the room. “It can’t be true! We’ve already sent SCOD a fax confirming that Virginia’s prayer was answered!”

“No worries George,” Rupert said praying for an inspiration that would restore Lowelle’s respect. He felt helpless. They were expecting the impossible of him.

“Just go! I don’t want to see you again!” Lowelle shouted.

“But we need to escape this place as soon as possible,” Rupert said.

The Dark Beauty stepped between Rupert and Lowelle.

“Escape? Escape what? The salvation of Auknot?” Lowelle said, her voice quivering.

“Why would you want to?” The Dark Beauty challenged.

“Auknot is not salvation! When will you people see that! He intends to murder Ezra!”

Rupert yelled. He now had the attention of all the patients and all the Golden Maidens in the room.

“Your Ezra is a traitor! He committed Unholy Commerce to keep Oblivion open all these years just to avoid answering human prayers. And you are following in his footsteps, so go on, follow! See where it gets you!” Lowelle screamed back at him.

“You don’t know that! Ezra’s innocent, I’m sure of it! Lowelle you have to come with me, you’re in danger!” Rupert said. “Are you willing to give up what we had for this scam?” Rupert gestured around him.

The Dark Beauty laughed at him. The Golden Maidens laughed. The patients laughed. Rupert looked around him and saw how absurd his words were against the background of the seeming paradise.

Noureddine clasped him on the shoulder with a weary look. “Come friend, you need some rest.”

“Make it far from here,” Lowelle said in a voice as cold as night.

Her friends gathered around her. Lowelle patted the Creole’s head and stroked his face. Rupert’s resolve hardened. He would win her back.

Noureddine led Rupert outside.

Rupert churned with anger. He would show them all. He had to save Ezra and expose Auknot before it was too late. There wasn’t time to find Dr. Fiona to get the flower and he didn’t

want to risk not being able to get back here. A transport back might not be Divine Will for what he was contemplating. But he had to go for it.

“I can help,” Rupert said.

Noureddine eyes came alive, “What are you saying?”

“I want to trade the formula for Ezra,” Rupert said.

Noureddine sucked in a deep breath and let it out with a whistle, “You sure?”

He knew what this meant. He was committing Unholy Commerce. He felt sick inside. Trading an unlicensed formula to Auknot would extend his probation or worse, he would be Taken in the cage. But, of course, Auknot didn’t have the Night Blooming Cereus, so how much harm could he really cause?

Rupert felt no doubt and no regret. It was the right thing to save Ezra. There wasn’t time to come up with anything else. He brushed aside the idea he might just be trying to win back Lowelle.

“Sit here,” Noureddine said gesturing towards a bench overlooking the sunset.

He handed Rupert a gold fountain pen and a pale ivory order pad. Rupert began scribbling down the formula as Noureddine nodded with admiration.

Chapter 21

Ezra's Auknot

Rupert's exhale created a fog in the freezing London air. The tropical warmth of the Golden Islands was a far away. He stamped his feet on the Kensington cobblestones and pushed open the door to a boarded up Oblivion.

Nothing had changed and everything had changed.

In a blink of time, Rupert had handed over the formula. Noureddine had returned many hours later with a promise that Ezra was now free to transport home to Oblivion. Thank God.

Noureddine told him they would hold George for a bit until the Cyryzzma worked, Rupert understood, didn't he? They were sure they knew where to get the Night Blooming Cereus. For a brief moment, Rupert wondered if he should warn Dr. Fiona. He thought better of it in case it led them directly to her. She seemed like someone who could take care of herself. And what of Virginia? Rupert didn't want to think about it. She was Bergen's responsibility, wasn't she? Leave the human children to the humans.

When Rupert had inquired of Noureddine if Rupert should meet Ezra at Oblivion, Noureddine shrugged. There was no way to know where Ezra would go after his release, Noureddine had not been allowed to see him. Rupert's guts had churned at the lack of confirmation of Ezra's release but what could he do about it now? He felt a fool.

Rupert could only hope Ezra would show up, since Rupert's attempts to transport to wherever Ezra was at the moment had failed. George had sent a fax upon his release. Did Rupert

still want an apprentice? Rupert declined, but suggested perhaps Lowelle could use him. Rupert half-heartedly hoped George would protect her or at least interfere with any relationship that might develop between her and the Creole. He didn't want to admit he also harbored the idea George might be useful to spy on her for him at some point.

His Wednesday hearing had passed. He was now a fugitive. What was the point of a Master's Certificate now? And the Archangel had surely learned of Rupert's trade to Auknot. There was no doubt it was Unholy Commerce, Rupert had looked it up.

Auknot's people had won. Gold was way up in price. It was only a matter of time before the Troops would show up with the cage to 'Take' Rupert. At least he had freed Ezra, to whom he owed every happy moment of work and wisdom on earth.

Glass crunched under Rupert's feet in the dark shop. The overhead lights didn't work; Rupert clicked on the internal case lights. In the bottom of the cases, coral-colored lights glowed from under frosted glass and gave an eerie sensation of exposed flesh. The floor was covered with splintered woodwork and stained glass; the ceiling had collapsed during the bottle-generated hurricane.

Rupert picked up a velvet lined drawer and started to secure the scattered perfume vials. From his pocket, he retrieved the red hot bottle that contained the demon. As he peeled back his handkerchief, laughing black lips of the demon formed against the curved surface of the bottle with evil grins and kisses. Rupert thought he could hear faint laughter coming from within the vial. He stashed the demon's vial in one of the drawer's locked security compartments.

Where was Lowelle now? She had been whisked off, surrounded by her white linen-clad girlfriends. There were whispers of harems. Rupert didn't want to believe she had abandoned him, but Auknot's spell seemed to be affecting everyone. Walking down the lane he had seen Golden People wrapped in white fur at all the posh cafes, in taxis and shops. He hoped the Creole, George, and the Harpy were with Lowelle. Had she been allowed to go home to New Orleans, or was she in Fez?

Rupert got out a broom but the lonely tinkle of glass in the dust bin depressed him. He eased onto a stool and wondered who had boarded up the shop. Probably the neighborhood council of shop keepers, it gave them a chance to snoop.

A loud snore jolted him from his drifting thoughts. George? Had Lowelle turned him down? Couldn't the meddler leave him alone?

Rupert burst into the back office. The cot was covered with papers and blankets and a form much too large to be George. Had the Demon escaped? Was it one of the Archangel's troops, waiting for him to return?

Rupert raced to the drawer and was relieved to find that the Demon was still secured in its vial, peering out the glass with one distorted red eye. Rupert felt dread rise in his throat. The Archangel?

“Rupert?”

Rupert's breath caught. It was Ezra! A flood of warmth rushed through Rupert's veins. Everything was going to be alright. He rushed back into the office.

Ezra sat on the edge of the cot, yawning and stretching his arms. Red hair waved wildly around the bald top of Ezra's freckled head. Rupert noted Ezra didn't look like someone recently held prisoner. In fact his shirt, though wrinkled, was starched white. The buttons at the midsection threatened to pop from a well-fed girth.

“Dear boy! Make us a spot of Earl Grey. And biscuits, do we have any?”

Rupert rushed forward and almost knocked Ezra over with a hug.

“My goodness, no need, no need, all is well now.” Ezra regained his balance and patted Rupert's upper arm.

“I thought you were lost,” Rupert said, now a bit embarrassed by his display of affection for his mentor.

“Well now, you displayed quite a bit of gumption in navigating my release, have to respect that.” Ezra said, “But sorry to have put you to the trouble.”

Rupert was glad to be making tea. What did he have to say to Ezra now? So much had happened. Rupert had questions. He felt his entire internal landscape had been reshaped since the day Ezra had disappeared. After all he had been through, would Ezra even care about Rupert's meeting Lowelle? And was there some way Ezra could get their absence at the hearing excused, or present unusual circumstances regarding the Unholy Commerce? Rupert felt selfish for even thinking of it at this moment.

“No trouble Sir!” Rupert felt stifled by their formality. The kettle whistled. Rupert wiped George's orange fingerprints from two mugs, filled them with tea bags and steaming water. The

steeping tea gave him a moment to ruminate further. A rush of despair entered his heart. He was sure his Unholy Commerce couldn't be undone.

Rupert handed Ezra the tea. Ezra clunked his mug against Rupert's.

"To the future of Oblivion, yours more than mine I'm sure," Ezra said.

Rupert gulped the tea; it scalded his tongue and throat. Everything that had happened since Ezra had disappeared overwhelmed his senses. He felt faint. Sitting in the office with Ezra was the very thing he had wanted, it seemed the same, yet everything had changed. Rupert wanted to go back to the time when he had chances, with Lowelle, with his probation, with his Master's Certificate. That time seemed impossibly far away, forever closed off by the Unholy Commerce he had committed to secure Ezra's freedom. Was it worth it?

"When did you know Auknot had turned on you?" Rupert asked. He felt an edge creep into his voice. "Or did you know? Are you glad of release from his kingdom or not?"

Ezra sighed and sat down on the cot. The formality of Master and Apprentice melted as Ezra eased back and leaned heavy into the wall for support.

"Dear boy, there is so much you don't know," Ezra began.

"Now that I've committed unspeakable things to your favor I can hardly appreciate the reference of 'boy'," Rupert was surprised at his anger towards Ezra.

"Anger is only justified when you know the truth," Ezra replied.

"Why don't you tell me then?" Rupert demanded.

Ezra stared into his tea then away at the debris on the shop floor.

"It's a long tale."

A winter wind was howled outside, snow flurried and chilling drafts cut through Oblivion.

Ezra hesitated, “Perhaps another cup first?”

Rupert unleashed his anger at the neglected office fireplace. He brushed out cobwebs, crumpled papers, and tossed about twigs and logs until a blaze warmed the room. The kettle sang and tea mugs were banged on the table between two fireplace armchairs.

“So begin!” Rupert demanded.

Ezra closed his eyes, “When I first came to earth it was the time of the Giants. No one had heard from the Ultimate Creator since the Time of the Origins. All on earth felt abandoned and salved their sorrows with earthly pleasures. The Creatures of Heaven became jealous of Humans with their earthly comforts. The Heavenly ones created a great rift in the veil between heaven and earth, allowing Heavenly Creatures and Earthly Humans to break bread together, transport from one realm to the next on desire alone, and marry. These bore the generations of giants.

“During this time I myself fell in love with a human sorceress, the daughter of a Giant. But just as we wed, a war broke out between heaven and earth over the credit for some golden offerings, and the Supreme Council of Dominions issued a proclamation that the rift be sealed to protect Heaven from human invasions.

“I volunteered for service on earth but when I searched the forests for my love, I found she and her family were gone.

“SCOD assigned me to answer human prayers. It was overwhelming in the face of heartbreak. I only wanted to search for her and to stay close to the places where we had courted.

“Soon the human’s unceasing prayers interfered with my search. I applied to return to heaven to no avail. I found the potions she had taught me quite useful in controlling the humans. Word spread until all types of Heavenly creatures trapped on earth also came to me for help with a sniff here and there.

“I opened the shop and found I could avoid the prayers altogether. If I kept busy enough helping the right people, heads turned the other way and no one wanted me to do anything but run Oblivion. Then I found her. It almost came to a happy ending.”

Tears swelled out of Ezra’s eyes. He paused to dab at them and blow his nose.

Rupert felt a twinge for Lowelle, where was she, what was she doing? The storm raged. Rupert could hear shutters banging outside on the street. He purposely didn’t hand Ezra a clean hanky but stoked the fire and threw on another log.

Ezra regained his composure.

“It was rumored she was in Fez. I went there straight away. At the spice market I met Nouredine who warned me not to get involved when I asked about her. I couldn’t listen, you understand. I loved her. She was everything to me.”

Rupert thought of how Lowelle’s dainty hand felt when it nestled in his hand. He softened, gently took the cold mug from Ezra’s hand and warmed it with more hot tea.

“I discovered she was working with her father, now a Grand Master sorcerer. She mixed his potions and he had a grand following.”

Rupert shifted, suspicious of a connection with Auknot.

“Yes, I see you’ve guessed it, she is the daughter of Auknot. He had heard of my abilities and had a price set out for his daughter’s hand. You understand I had to pay the price, any price for her.”

Rupert nodded.

“I moved her to London. I thought we could keep the requests from her father reasonable but as we became more skilled he became more demanding.”

Rupert stopped him with a hand. “So the rumors are true? That Oblivion participates in Unholy Commerce?”

Ezra confirmed with a wave of his hand. Rupert sighed and let him continue.

“At first it seemed relatively harmless, an out-of-line neighbor here, a stubborn high-priced shopkeeper there, a rude young man brought under control by my wife’s light touch on the breezes through an open window or a sprinkle in someone’s salt mill.

“Once you had her safely in London, why did you continue?” Rupert asked.

“SCOD was after me for the unanswered prayers. I had to buy them off with filling under-the-counter orders for members of the council and their friends.”

“Even SCOD indulges in Unholy Commerce?” Rupert was alarmed. “What about the Archangel?”

“No, unfortunately there is no way to buy off the Archangel. Too close to the Ultimate Creator. He will be coming for me and I’m ready. Too many centuries without my wife, you understand.”

Centuries? Rupert didn’t think he could make it another few hours without Lowelle.

“Auknot’s power escalated. He craved gold and began to use the potions to entice humans to find it for him. His mines were notorious. He built an empire with strongholds all over the earth.

“His demands increased. One day my wife discovered her father’s plan to enslave all humanity. Outraged, she confronted him and demanded he cease his search for gold. He not only refused but, realizing she had the power through her potions to disable the human will, he demanded that his daughter help him. She refused. He imprisoned her.

“What became of her?” Rupert asked.

“I begged Auknot to free her. He threatened to have her turned to gold if I didn’t provide the formulas he needed to enslave all of humanity in his gold mining enterprises.”

Ezra’s tears returned. He wept silently in the glow of the fire.

“You see, when the Archangel came to Take members of SCOD for Unholy Commerce they turned me in. They made a deal with the Archangel to lead him to Auknot’s chief conspirator-me- in trade for the dropping of all charges against them.

“I led the Archangel to my father-in-law, desperately hoping I could buy time to save my wife first. But before I could find where her father had hidden her, the Archangel turned the gold formula on Auknot and he was frozen in time, turned to gold, buried under the Nile for all eternity.”

“Some eternity. How was Auknot resurrected?” Rupert demanded, afraid to pursue what might have happened to Ezra’s wife.

“His followers came to me, offered me my love’s solid gold form in exchange for a resurrection formula.” Ezra choked on a sob.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Both Rupert and Ezra jumped at the sound of the heavy knocks on the front door to Oblivion.

Ezra went pale and grabbed Rupert's arm.

"The Archangel?" Rupert whispered, horrified.

"Now that my confession's been heard," replied Ezra, "I'm ready."

Chapter 22

The Messenger

Rupert and Ezra held still. Minutes ticked by like hours. The only sound was the howling of the wind. Had the visitor left? The front door to Oblivion was boarded up; Rupert knew no one could see that he and Ezra were inside.

“I’ll surrender, save yourself!” Ezra whispered.

In spite of everything, Rupert felt a tug at his heart for the man who had been like his earthly father.

“I have an idea,” said Rupert. He motioned for Ezra to stay put and crept into the front room. He carefully lifted the bottle containing the Demon from its compartment. The shrunken Demon appeared to be sleeping, bubbles emerging from its quivering lips. Rupert shook the bottle. The Demon swirled awake and let out a loud fart whose smell managed to somehow seep around the cork. Rupert gagged at the effect.

Bang! Bang! The visitor was still at the door.

Rupert approached with his fingers around the cork. He held the Demon bottle out in front of him for protection and clicked open the door latch. The door flew open from the wind.

Outside a stooped old man, piled with blankets, bent over a cane. Why would the Archangel come in such a decrepit form? It made Rupert reluctant to unleash the Demon on him, but maybe the form was a trick for that very reason.

“I expected you to be more magnificent, Your Most Holy Honor,” Rupert said, “but I must inform you this Demon is ready to do my bidding.”

“You don’t recognize me,” said the old man. He pulled a blanket off his head to reveal a tangled mat of gray dreadlocks against a withered black head.

It was the Creole? The Voodoo spell that kept him young had apparently worn off.

“Yes, I know you now,” said Rupert

“Say my name and release me from the torture of this aging body,” said the Creole. Rupert searched his memory for the Creole’s name. He couldn’t remember Lowelle or anyone else ever using a name. How had they addressed him? How had a man gone through life without ever being called by a name? It was shameful of all of them.

Rupert’s heart was touched. A man with no name couldn’t be called home by the Ultimate Creator. He was doomed to wander the Universes forever, without protection. No wonder the man had clung to Lowelle. Rupert’s hand still held out the menacing Demon bottle. Rupert looked the Creole in the eyes.

“I confess, I don’t know your name,” Rupert said.

A tear froze in the corner of the Creole’s grey lashed eye. The Creole stooped lower and seemed about to collapse under the weight of the snow piled on his blankets.

Rupert stepped out into the icy wind and gently took the Creole’s arm. The arm was bone thin and stiff. Rupert straightened the ancient arm to bring the Creole’s crooked hand out from under the blankets; it shook and was barely covered by a thin woolen mitten. Rupert put the warm

vial into the crooked mitten. He held the hand still a moment to let the warmth ease the movement. Then closed the Creole's hand over the Demon's bottle. The Creole chuckled at the warmth.

"Surely I'll thank you for this, Sir," the Creole moaned. He tucked the warm Demon under the mound of wool near his heart.

There was a disturbance in the blankets. They shifted and swelled. One of the Creole's shoulders distorted and raised, the blankets parted and golden light burst forth.

"Arg! Pugh! Pugh!" The Harpy spat. "That thing is disgusting; don't leave me under here with its gaseous emanations! Not for me! Not for me!"

Ezra appeared behind Rupert's shoulder, "A bit cold for a chat with the door open, I'd say."

"Don't mind if I do," replied the Harpy who flew across the shop into the back room leaving a flash of light behind for the others to follow. Rupert and Ezra assisted the limping Creole to the office and eased him into a chair by the fireplace.

The Demon's farts had subsided and the stench was lessening but Rupert returned to the front door and let it stand open a moment to clear the air. He could hear the muffled voice but not the words of the Creole, punctuated by Harpy screeches, telling Ezra a dramatic tale.

"Danger! Swords! Battles!" the Harpy announced when Rupert joined them at the fireplace.

"And what of Lowelle? Is George still with her?" Rupert asked, worried about her safety in Auknot's cult.

Ezra handed the Creole a mug full of tea. The Creole shook his woeful head at Rupert as he drank.

“Don’t leave her to the fates as I did to my only love,” Ezra said, becoming agitated and insistent.

Rupert’s heart beat faster with the thought that he could still save Lowelle, even if she never forgave him the Unholy Commerce nor Virginia’s unanswered prayers, he could save her. Even if it was against her will, she would be saved.

“You must hurry. George left her for a few moments to transport me back here, hoping you could help me cross over. No telling what happened in his absence.” The Creole rasped.

“Virginia’s war, Virginia’s war!” the Harpy chimed.

“Virginia’s war?” Rupert paled. “I thought I left Virginia in New Mexico, with her mother!”

“Darling, you simply failed her,” Dr. Fiona’s drawl came out of the Harpy’s mouth directed at Rupert but Ezra paled.

Ezra fainted onto the cot, muttering, “I did fail, Fiona my love forgive me...”

What?! Rupert reeled. Dr. Fiona was Ezra’s wife and Auknot’s daughter!

Rupert felt duped. Why hadn’t Dr. F. told the truth about who she was? And this war of Virginia’s, had Auknot found out about the blossom and gone after her?

Rupert had had enough. He stormed to the perfume drawer and began to stuff his pockets with bottles. When he returned to the cot, Rupert uncorked a tiny blue vial and spread some scent on a hanky. He shoved it under Ezra’s nose. Ezra sneezed.

“I’ll patch up our Creole friend here with some potions and we’ll join you,” Ezra mumbled.

“No! You two old codgers have caused quite enough trouble as it is,” said Rupert, “Retire!”

Ezra and the Creole looked at each other, brows raised, eyes wide with hurt.

“I have a few tricks...,” the Creole protested.

“Tricks!” the Harpy mimicked.

“Now see here...,” Ezra began to rise from the cot. Rupert put up his hand.

“The battle of Fez, the battle of Fez!” the Harpy tweeted. Rupert snatched the Harpy off the back of the Creole’s chair, carried him to the desk, and snapped a rubber band on his beak.

“The best thing you can do for me now is wait here as bait for the Archangel, I need him off my back if I’m to save Lowelle,” Rupert said as he pulled a crisp linen jacket from its hangar on the back of the office door and stuffed the Harpy in its breast pocket.

He turned to question Ezra with his eyes.

“I’ll do my best to return before the Archangel shows up for you,” said Rupert.

Ezra considered, silent. The fire crackled.

“It’s a good plan. Like I said, I have nothing left to confess. I’m ready,” said Ezra. “And I believe you’re ready to go on without me.”

“There’s no going on for me either,” Rupert sighed, “the least I can do is save Lowelle before the Archangel also Takes me.”

Ezra put his hand on Rupert’s shoulder, opened his mouth to speak and reconsidered. Rupert pulled away to leave. Ezra clasped his arm.

“There is one possibility,” Ezra said.

Rupert wondered if he could face anything more than saving Lowelle.

“First, you must forget me, our association will damage your chances,” Ezra said.

Rupert considered. He could feel a great sadness welling up. But what else could he do?

He nodded his head, afraid of tears if he spoke.

“I’ve heard of a few; those with extraordinary skill and offers- the Alexander the Greats, Leonardo da Vincis, Mozarts...” Ezra began.

Rupert held up his hand to stop him.

Ezra coughed, “...and a few others like you,”

Rupert knew this wouldn’t work, he didn’t even have his temper under control.

Ezra continued, “...who appealed to the Archangel under a special provision: Salvation for Humanity. It’s not for everyone as it means sure banishment to the Dead Space if it fails. Cyryzzma might qualify you, but you must go in with a powerful argument, only a demonstration will do, I think.”

If he couldn’t have a life with his passion for the earthly creation’s abundant and healing fragrances, a life with Lowelle by his side, the Dead Space sounded like a blessing to Rupert.

“How do I get an audience?” Rupert asked.

“George will know,” Ezra said.

He extended his hand, Rupert shook it firmly. Ezra drew him in and gave him a mighty hug and a slap on the back.

“You are ready to go on without me,” Ezra said.

Ezra’s words echoed as Rupert’s transport to Lowelle began, “Godspeed, Rupert.”

Chapter 23

Virginia Strikes

Rupert's transport landed him flat on his face in a garden shed. The air wavered with heat. He peered through an ornate screen interlaced with climbing floral vines. The smell of sea air and topical blossoms oriented him immediately; Rupert was back on the Golden Islands.

Golden Maidens strolled by, their sandals crunching on the crushed white rock of shaded garden paths. Rupert could hear fountains and the tinkle of laughing women's voices. He strained to hear Lowelle's voice but couldn't sort it out from the background. Women's voices mingled with the sound of exotic bird calls and musicians tuning instruments.

"Ever been in a harem before, Boss?" George's voice shattered Rupert's daze.

"George!" Rupert replied, both startled and annoyed at his sudden appearance; at least he had been looking out over Lowelle. "Where is she?"

"We need to summon the Archangel," George said.

"What? Why?" Rupert was alarmed, but maybe George had read his mind. Again.

"Virginia's in big trouble, let's go," George opened the shed door and fell in behind some magicians and snake charmers carrying baskets down the path.

"George come back here!" Rupert cried out. His yelling attracted unwanted attention from the performers.

George snatched a couple of hats off a magician's handcart. He put one on and gestured for Rupert to follow suit. Rupert sighed and did as George indicated. He followed George down the path before George could get too far ahead. Rupert felt ridiculous acting like a circus performer.

"George, this is important, do you know how to..." Rupert was interrupted by George shushing him. They arrived at the entrance of an ornate white temple. It reminded Rupert of an elaborate tiered wedding cake. Golden Guards stood watch with bejeweled swords and sparkling spears in each archway.

Rupert put his head down to hide his face. This was one time when George could just blend in. They followed the performer's troop past the Golden Guards into a large open octagonal hall. A gold and pink marble floor reflected the sunlight streaming down from the ornate lace-cut openings in the multiple layers above. Was this a circus performance hall?

"What are we doing here?" Rupert asked. He was alarmed and confused at George's emphatic insistence they attend this display.

"Virginia needs us to spy, be her lookout," George whispered.

"What has Virginia to do with this?" whispered Rupert.

"You have to answer her prayer, no matter what," whispered George, "it will be a prerequisite if you want an audience with the Archangel."

"Yes, okay, but I want to find Lowelle and apologize, convince her, or at least make sure she's safe," protested Rupert.

A tall Golden Man stepped out from behind one of the screens. He climbed onto a round raised dais at the center of the room. Hundreds of Golden Maidens in white and performers in red and gold gathered around the dais.

“All quiet for the proclamation of Auknot!” the Golden Man announced.

The room went silent.

The Golden Man seemed confused. He searched the eaves above. The crowd began to twitter and whisper.

“All quiet for the proclamation of Auknot!” the Golden Man announced again, louder.

Rupert felt a scratching at his side, a tickling. The Harpy was struggling in his pocket; claws pinched Rupert’s side over and over. Rupert extracted the Harpy from the jacket pocket.

“Stop that!” Rupert scolded.

George snatched the Harpy out of Rupert’s hand. He rolled the rubber band off its beak. The Harpy let out a joyous whoop and flew around the room in a blinding flash. The Golden Man on the dais looked relieved.

“A wedding, a wedding, oh joy, oh joy! All sing for the wedding of Auknot.” The Harpy announced.

A chorus welled up with song. No specific words were sung, it was one long note, bursting forth from the hundreds of Golden Maidens, one group taking over where another left off, an unbroken chord, filling the air with sweet feminine rapture.

“Oh to sing the divine praises again,” swooned George.

“All quiet for the proclamation of Auknot!” the Golden Man broke through the chorus.

The Harpy settled on the Golden Man's finger.

"Here me now! I have selected my bride!" Auknot's booming voice emanated from the Harpy's beak.

The Dark Beauty was led in. She was dressed gloriously in pink feathered robes. She stepped into the middle of the room and bowed in each direction. Was she to marry Auknot? Rupert strained over the crowd's head to see if Auknot would appear. There was no sign of the Golden Pharaoh, in statue or any other kind of bodily form.

"I have selected the Angel Lowelle to be my bride!" the voice of Auknot echoed.

The Dark Beauty froze, as did most of the room. The announcement was clearly not expected.

Rupert's lungs collapsed. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't think. What had he just heard?

After a moment, the Dark Beauty screamed and threw herself on the floor.

"Celebrate!" screeched the Harpy in a panic.

The Golden Maidens slowly began clapping and singing. The musicians burst into a deafening twisting melody. The Golden Maidens broke into dance. An intoxicating perfume filled the air. Rupert knew it immediately. Froth of Venus!

The Golden Maidens beat tambourines in his face. Rupert struggled through the crowd. He couldn't see Lowelle anywhere in the hall. A group of Golden Matrons surrounded the Dark Beauty while Golden Warriors fanned her. When she came to, she pointed straight at Rupert.

Golden Maidens cried out as Rupert shoved them aside. He wove his way through them towards one of the arches. He had to find Lowelle and get her out of this nightmare! George grabbed one of Rupert's legs to stop him.

"Boss, this way!" George pointed to a square hole in the floor a few feet away. Rupert wondered how the now frenzied dancers avoided falling into it.

Rupert peered over the edge, stairs led down into darkness.

"Is this where she is?" Rupert asked George.

"Hurry before they catch up!" George pointed at the Golden Guards weaving towards them through the crowd, led by the Golden Maidens that Rupert had pushed aside.

George and Rupert tumbled down the stairs into the darkness.

"Where are we going?" Rupert whispered.

Rupert's eyes adjusted. He could see a square of light in the distance. Was it a window, a door? His heart couldn't adjust to the panic he felt for Lowelle. His ability to think was destroyed. George ran ahead at a sprint. Why weren't they transporting to Lowelle? Didn't George understand the danger she was in? This was urgent.

The square of light became bigger and bigger. It became clear to Rupert that they were in a tunnel under the hall, used for a surprise pop-up entrance via the square hole in the floor? They raced towards the square of light. He hoped it lead to an escape from this nightmare. Rupert arrived at the end out of breath and nearly out of his mind. George stood at the opening.

Rupert stepped next to George and peered out. The opening was in a cliff over the sea. What!? There was no escape, just a long jump into the sea.

“There she is!” George pointed.

Rupert followed George’s finger to what appeared to be an entire flotilla of ships on the ocean. Rupert strained his eyes. He could barely make out green and red flags flying on the ships. He was shocked to realize the flags displayed the intertwined white trumpet signet of none other than the Archangel! Ice pumped in Rupert’s veins. The Archangel had arrived to fight Auknot. He didn’t know whether to cheer or be afraid.

Before he could reason out what might happen, George declared, “Virginia has taken the Archangel’s fleet hostage!”

Rupert could care less, he had to find Lowelle.

“George! Where is she? Don’t you see we have to protect her!” Rupert cried out. His anxiety for Lowelle was unbearable.

Oops, Rupert felt the end of the tunnel collapse and the sea rise up to meet him. He should know by now not to trigger George’s transporting powers...

Slap! They landed in the smooth turquoise sea. The water was warm.

Rupert smelled something wrong immediately. Anesthetics all had the same nauseatingly sweet scent. But in the middle of the sea?

“Boss, what’s happening? I sman’t tink...” George garbled his words.

Rupert tried to answer but his mouth wouldn’t respond to the thought he was forming. He drifted listlessly below the surface. The last thing he saw before going under was George’s yellow shirt bellowing up with air. It formed a kind of misshapen float that kept George’s pudgy form at the surface where he drifted on gentle sea swells.

In an eerie world of bubbles and pools of fish, a giant sea turtle drifted by. It was barely moving. Had time slowed or was the turtle also drugged? A bubble escaped Rupert's mouth. He was vaguely aware that he would need to breathe soon. Swim to the surface! Rupert tried to move his arm but it struggled listlessly. The thought of swimming suddenly seemed funny for no reason.

Rupert let out a belly laugh. A huge bubble of air escaped his lungs. Oh dear. He involuntarily gulped in gallons of saltwater. It stung his mouth. The sheer volume of it painfully expanded his throat. He looked towards the surface at the shrinking blob that was George. Rupert was sinking fast.

The air in George's shirt belched out. The bubble rose to the surface. George bobbed on his expanded belly for a moment. The air escaped George's lungs with a belch. He began to drift down towards Rupert.

"All hail and confess!" A distorted voice cried under water. The Harpy shot by.

Rupert couldn't stop himself, "Ungarby commerce," his lips bubbled out.

George gave a clumsy kick. He reached out his open hand. To Rupert's astonishment he managed to close it around the Harpy with perfect timing. George put its beak to his lips. Rupert watched as George's chest expanded. How could the Harpy have stored so much air?

The Harpy must be connected to a portal, like the sanctified bottles! Portal to the Breath of Life! The Harpy swam towards him with George clinging to its tail feathers. Rupert willed his hand towards his breast pocket for a bottle to no avail. His lungs felt like they were going to implode. His vision was going black spots.

Whoosh! Had George managed to extract one of the vials from his pocket? Rupert couldn't see that he had one. The sea turned a golden orange. Speckles of purple light glowed around him. What was happening? Was he dying? Oh please, may I be spared the pain of bodily death.

Purple speckles surrounded his face. Had Rupert been transported to the Hidden Universes already? A gooey slobbery substance covered his face. It signaled he still had a human body with human sensations.

Rupert could feel a rush of propulsion as he was dragged to the surface and suddenly, AIR! The goo released and air whooshed involuntarily into his lungs. They expanded painfully fast. George bobbed up next to him. They had been dragged to the surface by jelly fish!

"I've got quite a headache from that, how about you, Boss?" George's words had the sensation of being near but also far.

Rupert's anger exploded at George, "Where the SPARK are we!"

"It was your order to transport to Virginia," George replied, clearly hurt.

"Lowelle, George, Lowelle. I wanted to transport to Lowelle not Virginia! Blast the damn humans and their little wars with stiff old pharaohs. Don't you see these stupid dramas are going to go on and on for all time? We need to go get Lowelle and get out of here," Rupert shouted.

"I think we're a bit stuck just now," George gestured around them.

His verbal outburst having somewhat calmed him, Rupert examined the scene. The sea had turned orange and gold. Millions of taxi sized yellow, gold, and orange jelly fish with purple spotted tentacles were popping up to the surface. George and Rupert were floating on a small island made of several intertwined specimens. They seemed to be weaving themselves into a giant raft

that stretched from the edge of the Golden Islands towards the flotilla that bore the Archangel's flags.

"Smell that, Boss?" George wrapped a handkerchief over his face like a bandit.

Yes, Rupert could smell a toxic mix of potions emanating from the jellyfish. It was not natural to them either. Rupert had examined the jellyfish toxins and these had been ramped up on steroids in his opinion. He followed George's example and secured his scarf around his mouth and nose.

George stuffed a hanky in the Harpy's beak. It promptly spit it out with disgust.

"Not for me, no siree!" the Harpy sang.

"Tell us what's going on," Rupert demanded of the Harpy.

A deep blast of trumpets blared from the flotilla. BOOM! A gun blast let loose. A bomb landed nearby on the raft of jellyfish. It released purple smoke into the air. A wedge of pelicans flying over flew into the potent smoke and promptly fell into the sea.

Before Rupert could think too much about it, he was distracted by deep chanting. It came from the direction of the Golden Islands.

A regiment of Golden Warriors fully armed with spears and some sort of dart guns appeared at the edge of the island platforms. They leapt onto the raft of jellyfish and marched their way across the jellyfish-raft towards the Archangel's ships. The sea and the jellyfish picked up the rhythm of the chant. Swells helped propel the Golden Warriors, now thousands of regiments, forward in leaping bounds.

Rupert grabbed George and slipped down into the water between two jellyfish bodies. They clung onto jelly-tentacles to stay hidden close to the surface. With head tipped back staring at the sky Rupert prayed for sunset. The regiments of Golden Warriors drew closer.

Soon thousands of strong muscular legs bounded over Rupert and George. Bombs were lofted forth from the ships. They hit the undulating raft and spewed purple gas into the air. Rupert's arms and legs were going numb from the cold water and purple gasses. He noticed that the passing Golden Warriors had packs on their backs connected to masks over their faces. If a bomb hit, the Golden Warriors parted around the fallen soldiers and carried on with no regard for their fellows.

“George, we have to make our way to solid ground,” said Rupert hoping for an instant transport.

“Ships or shore?” George replied.

The gasses must have stopped the possibility of transport somehow. Rupert strained to see in the purple darkness. With Warriors lunging towards them it seemed better to go with their flow towards the ships.

Rupert gathered his strength and lunged up out of the water at a passing Golden Warrior. The Golden Warrior tripped and fell. Splat! Rupert pulled off the mask of the surprised soldier before he had a chance to protest. The soldier gasped, his eyes rolled back in his head, and he began a loud snoring sleep. The oncoming Golden Warriors simply parted around the fallen Warrior. Rupert put on the mask and tripped up another unsuspecting warrior. George was at the ready to swipe and secure a mask to his own face from the fallen one.

They stripped the sleeping Golden Warriors of enough kit to disguise Rupert; George made do with running along under the edge of Rupert's golden uniform cloak. They quick-stepped behind a formation of Warriors and were propelled by bounding off the jellyfish.

The Harpy flew a bit ahead, then came back to guide the way through the thickening purple smoke. Eventually they passed the zone that was in the bombs' range and the air began to clear. The ships loomed over them.

"Watch out, Boss," the Harpy warned.

Rupert could hear the sound of swords and swearing. They crested a wave in the jellyfish raft and found that they had come upon the front lines. Arrows whizzed by. Golden Warriors engaged in combat with the Archangel's Troops, who were masked and in purple cloaks. Hundreds of Troops climbed down over the sides of the ship on rope netting or shot arrows from the deck.

"Why aren't they taking them out with guns?" Rupert wondered aloud. An arrow hit a Golden Soldier nearby. He fell and began to snore. The arrows were drugged.

"Do no harm to humans of course, rule number seventy-eight," quoted George. "What now, Boss?"

Rupert had no brilliant ideas. Climb up the netting that the Archangel Troops were climbing down on the side of the ship?

A shudder went through him as he thought about the Archangel and what it might mean to be in his clutches, especially since he, Rupert, had recently committed the dreaded Unholy Commerce. He felt an impulse to reverse course and run back towards Auknot's Golden Islands, a refuge compared to what might lay ahead in the camp of the Archangel. How had Virginia

managed to get control of this fleet? It seemed a ridiculous idea that she had anything to do with this. George must have something mixed up.

“Virginia!” George yelled and pointed.

Rupert swatted down George’s arm and ducked behind a pile of snoring Golden Warriors, pulling George along with him before they attracted any more attention.

Virginia had appeared upon the deck of the hulking green, red, and black ship that loomed above them. She was dressed in a long white lab coat, her hair braided and her face partially covered with a high-tech clear gas mask that included a communication headset. Rupert could feel her eyes catch sight of him. Even from this distance the orange smear of George’s fingerprints on Virginia’s lab coat couldn’t be mistaken.

“Capture him!” Virginia shouted into the microphone that made up the front of her mask. Her voice boomed out from speakers on the ship. She pointed at Rupert.

Rupert’s guts churned. Was this entire thing a ruse to get him to the ship of the Archangel? Were Virginia and George in cahoots? Turning Rupert in might restore George to his singing post. And why would the Archangel let a child take charge?

Rupert’s thoughts were cut short. Several of the Golden Warriors nearby made a lunge at George. Rupert’s instincts kicked in. He pulled George to safety before he could fully contemplate George’s role in this pickle.

Golden Warriors rushed forward to get at Rupert and George. Archangel Troops, tall handsome angels with purple capes flying, took them on. Rupert and George were surrounded by fighters. They had become the new prize of the fight. Swords clashed between Golden men and

purple cloaked angels. The Golden Warriors made a good run at it but the Archangel Troops were victorious.

Rupert's head was stuffed into a velvet hood. Someone had come up on him from behind. Rupert inhaled, cardamom and hyssop? A sophisticated fusion with chemical overtones. He felt weak, his hands and legs stung as they were bound in thick ropes. The next sensation was of being bound tighter and thrown into the air. Rupert realized they had caught him up in a net. He was being hauled up to the deck of the ship like a lump of cargo. He didn't struggle but a hard landing bruised his bum. He prayed; may the torture and or whatever was next from the Archangel's troops be over quickly.

"Take that one directly below!" Virginia's voice commanded.

Rupert assumed Virginia was talking about George because he heard George's muffled murmur as boots marched away.

Rupert's velvet hood was whisked off while the netting that encased him was released in a pile around his feet. Several golden jellyfish still clung to him, Rupert felt numb wherever their tentacles had clasped his limbs and torso. He couldn't move and his tongue felt thick.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" Virginia demanded.

Rupert tried but couldn't respond. Just turn me over to the Archangel and stop with all this show.

"Nothing? Of course not! Angels are useless, all of you!" Virginia was on the verge of tears.

Rupert was surprised the Archangel had let her on the ship.

“Shame on you! All humanity about to be enslaved and not one of you could care less to save us. Not even your precious Lowelle, how dare she marry him! I’ll show you all. Just watch me!” Virginia was interrupted by several troops who approached, whispered in her ear, and led her away.

The fighting on the jellyfish raft below sounded fierce and the ship’s guns suddenly boomed without pause. More troops poured over the side of the ship. Rupert was left alone to struggle in his semi-paralyzed body.

The mention of Lowelle had brought melancholy to his spirit. Since he had heard the announcement of Auknot’s wedding, Rupert hadn’t dared think it possible that Lowelle would marry Auknot willingly but Virginia’s pronouncement allowed the thought to present Rupert his worst fear, that he had somehow lost Lowelle forever.

Humans, isn’t that what this trouble all boiled down to in the end? Who cared what happened to them? They were just as evil as Auknot, who was behaving just like one of them.

Damn them all, they deserved what they got. Rupert wasn’t at all sorry for what he had done. After all what had he done? Tried to be a good apprentice to his trade and free his master Ezra? So what if he had traded the Cyryzza formula to...

Splash! A bucket let loose saltwater; it hung over Rupert’s face obscuring his view as he spit and coughed. Hmm, what’s this? A slight taste of vanilla.

“One more ought to do it,” Ezra said as the Creole doused Rupert with another bucketful of a bracing saltwater and vanilla concoction.

Rupert felt warmth returning to his numb parts. The Creole pulled off the jellyfish and tossed them aside. Rupert stretched. He checked the vials in his pockets. Good, still intact, he had a feeling they were about to become very useful.

“After my fellow here described the warmth of these golden isles, we decided it was foolish to let our old bones keep creaking in the frost,” Ezra and the Creole let out a giggle, “Looks like we arrived just in time to be a bit handy after all.”

Rupert struggled to his feet and put his hand in his pocket to find a vial in case they needed it for defense. But he didn't have a chance to even warn Ezra. The Archangel's Troops loomed up behind the two old fools and bagged them with dark-as-night velvet bags.

Everything went dark again for Rupert as well.

Chapter 24

Fiona's Legacy

Rupert regained consciousness slowly. His hands were bound but he didn't feel a velvet hood on his face. He strained to adjust his eyes in the dark. He could just make out a small red light blinking at the base of a steep metal stair, a ladder really. Rupert assumed he, or rather they, as he could hear groaning nearby, were in the ship's hold, a brig of sorts?

Rupert's heart pounded at the thought of the lions from Auknot's island cages. No straw seemed to be at his feet, the high windows were also missing. Boom, thud, splash. Rupert could hear sounds of the battle waging on the other side of the hull. At least in here they were protected from the purple smoke and flying arrows.

"Hello Darlin'," the distinctive drawl of Dr. Fiona reached out in the dark, "I see you've decided to join us rather than rescue us."

Still blind, Rupert took a step forward and stumbled over a large lump. Groans. Bodies! After a moment of exploring with his hands Rupert concluded he had tripped over the prone bodies of the Creole and Ezra. Both had snorted back into a deep slumber. Rupert felt his eyelids slump and tug at him to join them.

Rupert rummaged in his jacket pocket and found the vial he wanted. Snap. He popped off the top. Green sparkles and fresh breeze blew about the hold. The slumbering awoke. Rupert's head cleared. Light from the sparkles revealed three small barred cages. One held Ezra and the

Creole and Rupert, one for George, and one for Dr. Fiona. The end of the hold, the majority of it, was barred off and crammed with captured and slumbering Golden Warriors.

“Iceland icicle and periwinkle wake-up!” George exclaimed in a delighted voice as he hopped up.

Less delighted, the Golden Warriors awoke, began to grumble and then to shout.

The Harpy twittered forth from George’s cage. As the vial’s green sparkles fell, they lit up some bags in the corner. The bags were face shaped, the discarded bags that masks had come in. The Harpy snatched some up. It scooped little green flashes and blew them into the bags, dropped them on the floor. They lay there like eerie puffed up glowing faces but they provided a dim green lighting for the brig.

Ezra sat up and sighed. Apparently still dazed, he addressed one of the glowing face bags, “The Archangel’s finally got us has he?”

“Ezra!” Dr. Fiona shrieked. She lunged forward and, in the dim light, she hit her head and glasses square on the bars. They cracked in half and fell off her face. She put her head in her hands.

“My Fiona, my lovely?” Ezra whispered in reply as if he didn’t dare believe it was really her.

She lifted her head. Dr. Fiona’s emerald eyes reflected light from the green globes. Tears brimmed over onto her cheeks.

“You came for me?” She said.

“Everything I’ve ever done I’ve done for you,” Ezra replied. He reached out his hand to her through the bars on his cage. She reached through the bars on hers but their arms could not bridge the span between their cages.

“ENOUGH!” Auknot’s voice boomed from the Harpy’s mouth.

The sound of Auknot’s voice was answered by shouts and cheers from the Golden Warriors. They bent the bars of their cage open and clamored up the ladder towards the deck above. Shouts of Archangel’s Troops met them. A brawl could be heard to commence above. The Harpy disappeared to the deck above. In a few minutes it returned.

“Oh Joy! We’ve won!” announced the Harpy as several Archangel Troops fell through the hatch to the floor. They got up and brushed themselves off, dazed, then fainted.

It seemed implausible to Rupert that humans could have defeated the Archangel’s fierce right arm. But Golden Warriors arrived to secure some deeply slumbering Troops in the empty cell at the end of the hull. They bent the bars back into place and returned to the deck above.

“What about Virginia!?” George exclaimed.

Ezra was staring at the latch on the cage that held Rupert, Ezra and the Creole. As he stared, it swung open.

“See, the Creator means us to be together,” Ezra said. He walked over and opened the lock to Dr. Fiona’s cage without effort. Fiona and Ezra gently reached out and touched each other’s cheeks.

“I have a place ready, a place of exile. Will you come with me?” Fiona asked.

Ezra nodded.

Rupert, although now released from their cage, was transfixed by the elixir in the air of their love. George no longer clamored about his concern for Virginia, and the Creole appeared to be equally enamored of the scene between Fiona and Ezra.

Boom! Everyone ducked in unison. A metal ball flew through the deck above into the hold. It glowed flaming-hot as it flashed in front of the troop's cage and crashed straight through the hull below.

"Uh-oh," said George as water gushed up.

Rupert noted that George was still locked in his cage. Where was the Harpy?

"Hey! Could use some help here!" shouted Rupert as he dashed towards the ladder to the deck above. Up on the deck all Rupert could see were sleeping Archangel's Troops. The ship was starting to list starboard. A few Troops splashed into the water and disappeared in what Rupert assumed was instant transport home to the Hidden Universes.

Off the side Rupert could see a small fleet of Auknot's golden peacock-tail boats. One of them contained Virginia. She was bound and held by two strong Golden Warriors. Rupert had to admit he admired how the little girl continued to struggle and kick and spit at her captors.

Where was the Archangel? If Rupert hadn't seen him, maybe he hadn't seen Rupert and associated him with this mess. The idea of making an appeal had faded far into the background, but the appearance of Dr. Fiona meant Rupert might be able to pry the petal from her; his mind raced with the possibilities, rescue Lowelle...recreate Cyryzza...appeal for a license. Hope rose.

George scrambled out of the hold with Ezra, the Creole, Dr. Veronica Fiona, and the Harpy.

"Why can't we transport to Lowelle?" demanded Rupert.

“Something’s in the jellyfish. They’ve been fed a potion. Gold dust and blood maybe? Something that renders angel’s powers dormant until reversed,” Dr. Veronica Fiona answered.

Something tugged at the back of Rupert’s mind. Gold dust and blood? Guilt rose its ugly head. The memory of the Golden Rider’s handkerchief flooded in. He had almost forgotten the tainted Cinnamon & Sandalwood fusion. Guilty, guilty, guilty. He hadn’t ever told Ezra.

Rupert rationalized, why would Ezra care about his bad fusion now, it seemed trivial with all that had passed. Oh, just out with the confession and be done with it; slip it into the conversation.

“I made that mistake once,” Rupert mumbled. He suspected Bergen had been the client.

Ezra and Fiona both caught it at once, “Oh?” they said in unison with intense interest that made Rupert uncomfortable.

Rupert tried to keep it nonchalant, matter of fact, “Yes, forever ago, remember when you sent me to the Nile to fuse the Cinnamon and Sandalwood? I used a nasty hanky with Golden Man dust and blood on it by mistake. Why, was there a bad result?” Whew, it was off his chest. Such a silly thing to have carried around this long. A weight had lifted.

“That explains it,” Ezra and Dr. Veronica Fiona said in unison while looking at each other knowingly.

“Who was the client?” Rupert asked, expecting to hear Bergen mentioned.

“You disabled the Archangel himself,” said Ezra.

Black spots multiplied before Rupert’s eyes, a roaring filled his head. Stay here old boy, you can do it, focus...Rupert scanned the horizon, the moon was rising. But he knew his fate was

now sealed. He was doomed. He had disabled the Archangel, so that's how Auknot's troops could prevail! Arg.

"Hmm...a disabled Archangel's quite inconvenient at the moment," said George, "Who'll save Virginia and the human lot now?"

"Who cares about that! I won't ever be able to make an appeal now!" Rupert said.

"You aren't the only one involved here Rupert," screamed George angrily, "I will never sing to the heavens again if we can't make something right here!"

Rupert hung his head. He liked George, and now George's chances were ruined too. They watched in silence as the Golden Peacock boat carrying Virginia disappeared into the purple smoke and darkness. Making its way towards the Golden Islands.

The last of the dusk light faded. Stars twinkled as if to remind Rupert that earth wasn't the only place in the Creation. He saw that Dr. Fiona and Ezra had their heads together, whispering, probably phrases of love. Rupert longed for Lowelle and peace.

Ezra spoke up, "Fiona, in exchange for her services, made arrangements with the Archangel for exile in the Fifth Port of the Hidden Universes. I suggest we collect him and go there now to recover. It's highly likely this generation of humans is lost in any case, now that Auknot has use of Cyryzza."

"When they captured me, I had to give up the petal," Dr. Fiona confessed.

The Archangel's huge ship creaked and groaned as it took on water. The waterline crept slowly up its side. The solid vessel threatened to be engulfed at any moment.

Rupert gazed at the night sky. It stung that he had committed the Unholy Commerce. It ended his career on Earth. After the relief of his small confession- about disabling the *Archangel* with the Cinnamon and Sandalwood- he now wanted this larger burden of the Unholy Commerce lifted. But Ezra already knew that Rupert had traded Cyryzzma's formula for his release. And no doubt Auknot had already put the scent to use disabling the human's will for their own survival. If Ezra was right, these dramas would continue for humans for ages in any case, even without Cyryzzma.

More of the Archangel's Troops were slowly awakening and disappearing from the sinking ship. They transported no doubt to recover at some Archangel Troop encampment somewhere in one of the Hidden Universes. Would the Archangel regroup them for another attempt? Rupert wondered about how disabled the Archangel really was from his toxic Cinnamon and Sandalwood.

"There's no hope?" the Creole asked.

"Auknot seems to have won for now my friend, Earth will surely enter a dark age of human servitude until Auknot gets bored and moves on. Or is overthrown in a lax moment of sloth," Ezra said. "We must make ready to take our leave."

Ezra ushered George, Dr. Fiona, the Creole, and Rupert into a life raft. As if to reinforce Ezra's statement, once they were a good bit away, the ship let out a mighty boom and tilted up on one end. Ezra and Rupert paddled away past debris of the battle. Iridescent jellyfish detached from each other and swam away below the surface.

"It won't be long before we all recover our powers, there's nothing to do but wait until our heads clear of the purple," Dr. Fiona reassured them softly.

She reached for Ezra's hand, "then you angels can transport us home."

Ezra smiled at her but Rupert felt uneasy. He noticed George fidgeting to separate some wet hard candy from its wrapper. Would George miss being a foodie?

The ship sank with a mighty sucking sound and whoosh. A last wave rose up from its demise. A tsunami!

Ezra and Rupert managed to get the life raft's small engine started. They steered far enough away to avoid the worst of the fast-approaching wave, taking it broadside. The lights of the Golden Islands made a golden necklace on the far horizon.

Tears flowed down the Creole's cheeks.

Rupert turned away from the hopelessly gloomy scene and stared into the dark water. Ezra and Dr. Fiona's fawning over each other was starting to get on his nerves. A panic about Lowelle was building in his chest. It mixed with rage. Where was she? Was she to marry Auknot willingly? He refused to believe it. Why weren't they trying to save her too?

More debris floated by. They came upon some partially destroyed Golden Peacock boats, floating empty.

"Head's clearing?" Ezra asked.

All stretched and stood and nodded.

"A song, that's it, let's sing our way into it," Ezra said.

Rupert never felt less like singing. In fact he *never* sang.

Dr. Fiona started with her decent alto, a single note that Ezra keyed on, then George filled in.

The Creole covered his ears and shouted, “No! I won’t go!”

He leapt from the life raft into the passing shell of a Golden Peacock boat. The others watched, dazed as the Creole’s Golden Peacock boat drifted away into the dark. They could hear his deep bass voice begin to hum an old Creole tune.

The Creole sang out, “Virginia here I come, don’t you worry none.”

Rupert felt his chest was about to explode. He didn’t care about Virginia and the humans’ little war with Auknot, but Lowelle was worth the cost. He wouldn’t go to the Hidden Universes without her.

“Wait, wait for me!” Rupert shouted.

Ezra and Fiona looked at each other and sighed.

“Huh-rah, Boss!” yelled George.

“Turn us around, we’re going to save Lowelle too!” shouted Rupert.

Ezra cranked up the motor and headed in the direction taken by the Creole’s boat.

Rupert felt the full power of his full angelhood explode in a burst of confidence. The sea began to spin and a spout formed that shot them into the air across the starry sky. It was good to be transporting again!

Chapter 25

Wedding Belle

Rupert felt the familiar dip in his mid-section. Saliva seeped involuntarily into his mouth. Oh, please, may I not be ill! Dust filled his nostrils. Another sandstorm. Were they in Cairo? He smelled sweet jessup. Fez! It had to be Fez! He landed with a thud in a marble courtyard. Surrounded by columns, one side was open to a main thoroughfare.

Rupert stood too quickly. The floor was slick with dust and what? White petals. Rupert slipped and fell flat on his back. As he gazed skyward he saw that gold dust twinkled as it intermingled with the white petals that floated into the courtyard. He saw that Golden Maidens and Golden Men were tossing the mixture from high balconies that overlooked the thoroughfare.

Ezra appeared with George; they helped him up. Dr. Fiona was gazing at some gold dust she had collected in her hand.

“Extraordinary!” she exclaimed as she gave it a sniff, “A formula! Cover your mouths. Quickly!”

Rupert, George, and Ezra followed her example and brought their arms up to nestle their noses in their elbows. They crept to the colonnade and looked up the street, which was lined with crowds of Golden People, tossing white petals and small Laurel wreaths. Gold dust rained from the sky. Horns announced the anticipated arrival of some grand procession, but the street was still empty. Everyone strained forward looking up the street.

Around a distant corner came hundreds of bright parrots. They flew just above the heads of white donkeys and blasted screeches. Some held green ribbons in their beaks. The ribbons extended to the harnesses of the donkeys. The parrots were leading the donkeys.

Rupert counted at least twenty teams of donkeys before the open white coach they were pulling appeared. Everyone cheered as it rounded the corner. They showered the street with petals and wreaths. Beautiful Maidens waved from within the coach.

Rupert's heart rate increased-the Beautiful Maidens looked like Lowelle's friends.

Around the corner next came a brass band. The band was riding on zebras. They had ribbons tied about their bridles pulled along by flying cardinal birds. Magicians and monkeys followed the band, plying their trade to the delight of the children in the crowd. Elephants danced for their trainers. Lions and tigers yawned in floating cages guided by bluebirds. All the birds were mechanical. Rupert wondered where their Harpy was. Still at the battle scene? Spying? Had it been a special Harpy? Or only one of an army of spies and mechanical transmitters, like satellites scanning the airwaves?

Dr. Fiona shoved Rupert's elbow up to his face, he had lowered it absently while watching the parade. Sharpen up Rupert. Be on the alert for Lowelle.

He didn't have to wait long. After a display of giraffes there came pairs of white Arabian steeds. Rupert could feel their spirits nod to him. The sound of their hooves on the pavement made his heart pound and strain with the memory of his Open Plain Horses. Rupert allowed the far reaches of his buried loss to show him the herds galloping over golden grasses in the late afternoon. They kicked up dust as high as the clouds. The sensation of memory didn't last long.

It was replaced by the sight of his true love.

Lowelle sat in the middle of a huge floating sled, gold and jeweled in every color of the rainbow. It had an enormous sparkling peacock tail. Her dress was made of white feathers beaded with diamonds, almost blinding as it reflected the sun. Her head was covered with a sheer gossamer veil that floated around her.

Rupert squinted to see her eyes; he was too far away. He rushed forward. George and Ezra tried to restrain him but he broke free. He shoved forward through the crowd. Onlookers cried out and pointed as Rupert leapt into the street. Golden Warriors ran out from beside the sled.

Good, the two rows of horses weren't yoked. They were held only by mechanical doves with silver ribbons. Rupert patted the horses' necks as he charged up the center isle between them. They parted for him. Golden Warriors tried to push their way in and block his path, but Rupert's spirit charmed the horse's spirits and they rebelled. The horses reared and pawed at the Golden Warriors who fell back in shock.

"Lowelle! Lowelle!" Rupert called as he approached the front of the sled. He reached out to hoist himself on board. Lowelle didn't seem to recognize him. She just stared into the far distance, a slight smile frozen on her face.

A puff of gold dust fluttered over Rupert.

"O welle, I lubbeth thu," Rupert managed to get out before he was overcome from the dust and fell back. He landed flat and watched the bottom of the sled glide over him, nearly scraping his nose off.

“I’mere to resscuth thu,” Rupert muttered. The belled ankles of dancing Golden Maidens jangled by him. Their tambourines, hand drums, and cymbals seemed to laugh.

“Dammit! I told you to mask!” Dr. Fiona shouted over the clanging.

George and Ezra dragged Rupert to the curb.

Howling Golden Wolves passed by, pulled in cages by small boys. They seemed to mock him.

“Get up! Run!” Ezra shouted.

The Golden Warriors were upon them.

“Orge trans!” Rupert mouthed back.

Whack!

Rupert, George, Ezra, and Dr. Veronica Fiona found themselves hanging in various poses from orange trees. The fragrance of smashed oranges cleared Rupert’s sinuses.

“Sorry Boss, I thought you said orange tree, what’s the plan?” George said as he flipped onto the ground and strutted to Rupert’s tree.

Good question thought Rupert. Ezra and Dr. Fiona had also arrived at Rupert’s tree. They all stared up at him.

“Froth of Venus,” Rupert, still fuzzy, managed to spit out, “Auknot’s had to of given an undiluted version to Lowelle.”

“I’m afraid Father’s spies got it from us at Department B,” said Dr. Fiona, “I thought Father had only sent the Demon, which I had neatly baked into a cake,” she winked at George, “but realized too late that the place was also teeming with his other agents, up to thievery of all kinds.”

“What’s the antidote?” George asked.

They all stared at each other. Rupert jumped down from the tree and pulled out the vials he had stuffed in his jacket. Ezra likewise and then Dr. Fiona pulled a few black topped lab vials out of her pockets. They compared vials.

“Well?” George said.

It was bad news. They didn’t have the correct ingredients to reverse the Froth.

Rupert’s eye moved to an olivewood flask that Ezra pulled out. It was the Cinnamon and Sandalwood! If it could disable the Archangel, surely it could disable a mere Pharaoh. Rupert had a plan.

Feeling quite smug and righteous, he snatched the striped olive wood vial that held the tainted toxin from Ezra’s hand, “Let’s get moving, we have a wedding to stop!”

Zap! George and Rupert zinged into the atmosphere.

It was a pleasant enough transport for a change. They landed in a room full of soft thick towels that smelled of peaches. George tiptoed to an elaborate screen that separated them from some kind of steaming baths.

“O...La...La...,” George whispered.

Rupert slipped up beside George to discover they were in the pink marble baths of Auknot’s harem. And that they were completely empty. Rupert smacked George on the head.

“What are you going on about?” Rupert said.

“Can’t a guy have an imagination?” George replied.

They brushed dust off their jackets with the towels.

“Let’s go,” Rupert said.

They crept around the baths into deserted dressing rooms decorated with lacy garments. The faint perfume of Cyryzza blended with Froth of Venus was everywhere. Rupert mustered courage from anger. How dare Auknot disarm his beautiful Lowelle with Rupert’s own formula! Rupert blushed with the shame that he had put both formulas in Auknot’s hands, would Rupert be damned or worse for multiple counts of Unholy Commerce? Fear of the Archangel’s cage flashed across his mind.

Rupert spotted a gossamer scarf hanging from a chair. All concern was momentarily replaced with the vision of Lowelle’s graceful neck.

Rupert pictured throwing the Cinnamon & Sandalwood in the face of Auknot and then spitting! He would smote that Golden Beast Auknot with one look. Burn Auknot to the ground. Lowelle would return to Rupert’s arms once again. The thought made him weak in the knees. He could smell her fawn hair.

“Time to go,” George said.

Rupert looked at George.

George pointed over Rupert’s shoulder.

The announcement had come from a mechanical Macaw. Rupert felt a momentary sadness that their Harpy was only one of many servants of Auknot. He missed their own personal version.

“Time to take your seats!” the Macaw flew off, leading the way down a long pink and gold marble hallway, joining other birds leading Golden Guests. Columns marked shut golden doorways, all of which were guarded by Golden Warriors.

George and Rupert joined the last of the crowd entering a huge columned hall with standing room only. Rupert pushed his way towards the front as trumpets announced the groomsmen and bridesmaids.

Lowelle’s friends, beautifully dressed in heavy beaded taupe gowns, took the arms of gruesome trolls and deformed monsters in Roman formal military attire which included red feathered helmets. Not tasteful in Rupert’s opinion. In fact, the implication was revolting.

The Monster Romans and their Maidens paraded up the aisle to a slow orchestral march.

Rupert made it to the front row where he shoved aside two indignant Golden Matrons to achieve a strategic aisle position.

The hall fell silent.

The orchestra stuck up the bridal march. Petals floated from the ceiling. Small white dogs, decorated with flowers and ribbons trotted in carrying baskets of flowers in their mouths. The crowd clapped as the little dogs dispersed into the crowd. The dogs began to nip at the ankles of anyone who dared move. A rumble went through the crowd.

Large golden snakes slithered up the aisle. The crowd gasped and recoiled and moved back as the snakes coiled around each other and formed a writhing rope along the edge of the aisle.

A huge Golden Cobra reared and flared its hood at Rupert. It hissed him a few steps backwards from his chosen spot. A matching cobra formed the head of the aisle at the other side.

It would be a problem to get around these Golden Usher Snakes, which now roped off the entire front of the altar as well.

Lowelle's scent hit Rupert before he could see her, intoxicating him with love.

She entered floating on a golden chariot, pulled by white doves. The diamonds on her dress glistened so that Rupert couldn't look directly at her. She emanated flashing light.

The chariot paused midway up the aisle. Rupert did everything in his power to keep from running to her but he knew he had to strike Auknot first or there was no chance.

Trumpets blared.

All turned to look at the front dais, where the bridal party flanked two huge golden thrones.

There was a roar and an explosion of golden smoke. The dais was obscured in a fog.

Rupert made ready. He popped the cork on a vial and puffed some green crystals at the nearest Golden Cobra. It went limp. No one seemed to notice as all eyes were peering into the smoke, presumably waiting for the first glimpse of the groom.

"Welcome!" said a booming voice from the Harpy.

A Golden Gorilla with a feather fan entered and fanned smoke from the thrones.

A Harpy perched on the largest throne, the throne of Auknot? The crowds muttered and whispered.

Lowelle cried out as if in a dream and fainted.

Before Rupert could react, the bridesmaids dashed towards her. They tripped over the snakes, which coiled around them. The Maidens cried out, turned red, and choked.

“I see one who does not celebrate the happiness of Auknot!” screeched the Harpy on the throne.

A dozen blackbirds came out of the eaves and dove at Rupert. Before they could peck out his eyes, he sprayed them with the anesthetic green crystals. They fell from the air and clattered on the floor in the silent room. The crowd was bewildered.

“Boss, no!” yelled George.

Rupert ignored him and leapt over the snakes to the throne.

“Show yourself you coward!” screamed Rupert at the Harpy on the throne.

The earth began to tremble. Then roll in waves. A full earthquake. The crowd screamed and tried to run but there was nowhere to go. They fell in golden writhing piles where they were set upon by the snakes. Screaming filled the air as the snakes commenced to coil around and squeeze the life out of Golden Men and Women.

Lowelle hoisted herself halfway up and screamed groggily from her chariot, “Stop it!”

“Don’t worry my lovely bride, I have everything under control,” the voice boomed from the Harpy as it took to flight.

The Gorilla fanned. Two brilliant emerald eyes appeared at the throne where a head should have been. A peacock headdress floated in space above the eyes.

The Harpy flew around the room once and returned to perch on the back of the throne.

Auknot’s emerald eyes locked onto Rupert’s blue ones.

Rupert loosened the cork on the Cinnamon & Sandalwood flask he had taken from Ezra. He prayed the rest of Auknot would appear quickly.

A belly laugh boomed forth from the Harpy.

“Thank-you Rupert,” Auknot said through the Harpy.

Rupert was stunned to hear Auknot use his name.

“Yes, of course, I know your name. Who would I use to launch my reign but Ezra’s famous apprentice?” Auknot boomed. The eyes squinted.

“You executed my plan to disable the Archangel perfectly!” Auknot laughed again. “You didn’t think my Golden Warrior on the scooter was an accident?”

Rupert turned bright red.

He flashed on the night he had returned from Cairo. Sweat formed from shame. Of course, Lowelle’s friends had distracted him from warning Ezra about the bad fusion with their party. They had been Auknot’s agents all along.

Out of the corner of his eye Rupert saw a small disturbance at the back of the room. The crowd was struggling to their feet. Ezra’s stout form appeared and Dr. Fiona was following him. Good, Rupert hoped they had brought something to wake up the knocked-out Golden People and get them to rebel!

Rupert had to distract Auknot so Ezra and Dr. Fiona could make their way to Lowelle.

“But he’s here and can speak for himself!” Auknot said.

Who’s here? Had the emerald eyes spotted Ezra? No, they didn’t seem to be looking in the right direction.

“Rupert, say a word of welcome to the Archangel!” Auknot said.

Rupert’s heart stopped. The Archangel was here?

Chapter 26

The Cage

Rupert's first thought was fear for Ezra and Dr. Fiona. Would the Archangel take them? Rupert didn't want to tip off Auknot by looking directly towards them. Ezra and Dr. Fiona crept towards Lowelle, almost there. And where was George?

"Ah, Lowelle darling," Auknot said, as if reading Rupert's mind, "I see we have some uninvited guests who think they've arrived in time to object to the wedding!"

A storm of Harpies dove at Ezra and Dr. Fiona. The pair covered their heads and stumbled backward into a nest of Golden Snakes; two hissed and wrapped around Ezra and Dr. Fiona. They were each solid Golden Snake up to their necks.

To Rupert's dismay, Lowelle's chariot was lifted high above the floor by the doves.

"Lowelle!" Rupert cried out, "I love you! I'll save you!"

A lifeless hand flopped over the side of the chariot but it was impossible to tell if Lowelle had done it intentionally, or what the weak gesture might mean if she had. Her chariot flew up through an opening in the roof and disappeared.

"Yes, do tell, how you will save her, Rupert?" a familiar, but out of place, voice. It spoke from the aisle where the chariot had been.

"Your Highness!" yelled George from behind him. Rupert turned around to see George emerge from a hiding place behind a column. George knelt.

"Everyone! Homage to the Archangel!" George belted.

Rupert turned and searched the chaotic room for an Archangel-like figure. No one appeared to have the right stature, there were no twenty-foot high auras or cavalry guards.

He noticed Bergen was standing in the aisle where Lowelle's chariot had been.

Rupert confusion was compounded. What was Virginia's step-father doing there?

George crept over to Rupert and yanked him to his knees, "Boss, it's the Archangel!"

"Where?" said Rupert.

"Bergen, Bergen's the Archangel," George answered.

What! Bergen was the Archangel? Bergen?!

How could that be? Rupert looked back at Bergen. He remembered the night Doreen was Taken, the Archangel had stood there in great cape and fur hat. Of course. He had an industrialist's stature. And he would need an industrialist's empire. The original Bergen must have died and the Archangel simultaneously took his form! This sometimes helped smooth the appearance of an angel on earth, particularly a high profile one like an Archangel.

Sure enough, Bergen was growing to twice his size. Full armor appeared out of nowhere to surround Bergen's chest. He wielded a flashing gold sword and marched towards the dais.

The Golden Snakes hissed and reared up at Bergen. He sliced off their heads.

Rupert watched in horror as the Golden Snake bodies grew new heads and the heads grew new bodies. For every snake Bergen cut down, there were two regenerated snakes.

Bergen roared with frustration. A Golden Cobra on the dais reared up, flared its hood and struck. Bergen dodged aside but Golden Boas approached on the ground and wound their way around his body. One grabbed Bergen's hand in its mouth, forcing him to release his sword.

Several others wrapped around him up to his neck, opened their mouths wide; their fangs menaced Bergen's face.

"My lovely daughter couldn't come up with an antidote for the Cinnamon & Sandalwood I see," Auknot's voice smirked through the Harpy.

Bergen was clearly furious but didn't answer.

Golden Snakes approached George and Rupert. Rupert was out of green crystals. He and George were promptly wrapped in Golden Snake to their necks.

Auknot laughed and laughed.

"Court is now in session!" Auknot's Harpy cried out, "Will the accused please come forward!"

"By heaven's high command, I order you to release us!" roared Bergen.

"You are powerless here, but no doubt when I return you to your universe, you will want to know what I know," Auknot said.

The emerald eyes seemed to glow brighter. The Gorilla fanned. The smoke from incense pots next to the thrones intensified. A head of smoke with green emerald eyes formed under the floating peacock crown. The smoke formed a body, thick and muscular. But still Auknot was only shifting smoke, there was nothing solid about him.

"I only want to know the truth!" roared Bergen.

"I see and know all," Auknot answered through the Harpy.

Rupert fingered the bottle in his hand. Which bottle was it? The empty green crystals or the toxic Cinnamon & Sandalwood? The Cinnamon and & Sandalwood had obviously rendered

the Archangel unable to use any of his angelic powers- not transporting, nor smiting with fire, nor opening doors, nor the special power of calling forth natural disasters. Either that or Bergen was taking his damn time saving them.

“What do you claim?” Bergen asked.

“Unholy Commerce, for a start,” Auknot’s voice boomed while his eyes shifted to Rupert.

Rupert’s heart and brain froze. Was Auknot about to tell the Archangel about Rupert’s exchange of Cyryzzma’s formula for Ezra’s release? It was strictly forbidden, and definitely Unholy Commerce, to trade with the enemy – especially angelic secrets. Maybe Rupert could plead that he hadn’t actually provided Auknot with Cyryzzma, just an unusable formula due to the scarcity of Night Blooming Cereus. Maybe he could say he planned to report it to the Archangel before Auknot could possibly obtain any Cereus.

In his mind, Rupert heard the clatter of horses’ hooves, the Archangel’s dark black horses. He heard the creaking of the cage, the cage pulled by the Archangel’s dark black horses. He felt the grip of Martyr’s hair, the ropes that tied one to the Archangel’s cage. Rupert felt the despair of the caged, the ‘Taken’, those that disappeared forever.

“Yes, Unholy Commerce!” a shrill new voice was added to the hubbub. It brought Rupert out of his dark and panicked imaginings.

Rupert turned his head. The Golden Cobra that was wrapped around him hissed a warning and tightened. Rupert couldn’t quite turn far enough to see more than a blur of pink in the corner of his eye. The new voice came from the Dark Beauty. Maybe she would prove a distraction long

enough for him to get at his Cinnamon & Sandalwood formula. But would the scent work on a creature made of mere smoke?

Auknot's form wavered and wafted.

"Why yes, here is a reliable witness!" Auknot exclaimed.

The Dark Beauty pointed at the smoky form of Auknot, "Silence!" she screeched like a deranged parrot.

Everyone's attention, even the Golden Snakes', was fixed on her. She dared turn her back on Auknot to face the Archangel.

"Unholy Commerce, make no mistake," she said.

Her accusing finger was aimed not at Rupert but at Ezra.

"My dear old friend, love is no excuse for evildoings," she tisked.

Ezra's eyes misted over as they traced across Fiona's face, "My Fiona, you are everything to me. You understand, I would do anything for you, anything."

Fiona attempted to bring a hand out and reach towards Ezra. Her captor snake tightened his grip. Her breath wheezed painfully.

Ezra's ruddy face brightened with rage, "Stop it, you monster!" he yelled towards Auknot's half shut emerald eyes, "Do you care nothing for your own daughter?"

"I am not the monster here, I expect the children of my new wife will erase all memory of *my own daughter's* monstrous betrayal of *me*," replied Auknot.

At the thought of Lowelle bearing Auknot's children, Rupert exploded with rage.

He popped the cork off the bottle in his hand and tossed it across the floor towards the dais throne. As it slid close to Auknot's seat, a Golden Cobra intercepted it, swatted it away with its tail. Cinnamon & Sandalwood wafted across the room as the spinning vial passed near Rupert and George. It slid to a stop in front of Ezra and Dr. Fiona. Gagging, they both pressed their noses into the skin of their captor snakes.

Auknot laughed.

"Back to business!" the Dark Beauty cut in.

Auknot stopped laughing, "Good point! Unholy Commerce should be our concern, not love's losses."

"And you!" the Dark Beauty pointed at Rupert.

The Harpy flew to Ezra's shoulder, "Yes, I appreciate your protégé providing the final link. We will all soon celebrate humanity's eternal slavery. Rupert's proved to be quite useful to my plan. He is to be congratulated."

Ezra's red face paled.

Rupert glanced nervously at the Archangel.

"May I say a word in Rupert's defense?" Ezra asked.

"No! The accused may not testify! One more word from you and your sentence will be extended," the Archangel roared.

"He's innocent by his pure heart! Rupert had no thought of Auknot's plans and schemes for humanity. He only thought of his loved ones. Are Auknot's traps Rupert's fault? No! He only sought to free me, a foolish love-struck Ancient One! Let me take his punishment!" Ezra pleaded.

The Harpy let out a screech and dug his claws into Ezra's shoulder.

"You are sentenced to be separated in darkness from all that you love," the Archangel declared from across the room, "You will be Taken forthwith."

Ezra's face registered his agony.

"Our love will never die!" Dr. Fiona called out to him.

Rupert again heard the thundering of horse's hooves in the back of his mind. The terrifying hooves pounded louder. To verify it was just his imagination, Rupert glanced outside through the columns that lined the room. What he saw both horrified him and filled him with hope.

Rupert could see Lowelle's carriage on the road outside. It was being pulled away from the hall by the doves but only a few feet from the ground.

In the far distance, headed towards her, were the Archangel's black horses, pulling the dreaded cage. Would the Archangel's forces rescue them from Auknot's grip after all? Or would they intercept Lowelle and Take her? Surely she was innocent in all this!

Rupert tried to signal George using his eyes. To his shock, he saw that the Golden Cobra around George had loosened and fallen asleep. George was holding its head up like a puppet to hide its demise.

"C & S," George mouthed. The Cinnamon & Sandalwood must have gotten to the snakes. Rupert noticed that Ezra and Dr. Fiona's snakes had also gone lax. He prayed that Auknot and the Archangel hadn't noticed.

Rupert's snake, however, seemed to have escaped the scent's effect, probably because Rupert's initial toss had followed a trajectory away from them. Rupert nodded to George to look outside. George's eyes flew open at the sight of the Archangel's cage approaching.

Rupert frowned, George's exaggerated stare was sure to attract attention.

To cause a distraction for Lowelle's possible escape from the scene, Rupert blurted out, "I confess!"

The room inhaled.

Auknot's joy couldn't be concealed, "What a lovely wedding present! Lowelle and I both want to thank-you from the depth of our union!"

Screams were heard. Lowelle's screams. All attention turned outside.

The black horses had reached Lowelle's carriage.

The doves pulling the carriage landed. They grew into tall white demons with red hair and black claws.

The Archangel's black horses reared. A lone figure could be seen riding on the top of the cage, holding the reins.

It was the Creole!

Rupert cheered inside. As the cage and its horses hit the pavement, the horses turned into tall black Africans in ancient battle dress. They were slick with sweat on their powerful muscles. Rupert's relief turned to panic, was the Creole an instrument of the Archangel or had he come to rescue them?

The Africans and the Red-haired Demons fought with sheer strength, biting teeth, ripping claws.

The Creole, transformed once again to his young handsome form, leapt off the cage and charged to Lowelle. Rupert burned with mixed joy and jealousy as the Creole swept Lowelle into his arms. She was limp and seemed unconscious.

“No!” screamed Rupert at the thought of her death.

Auknot, the Dark Beauty, and the Archangel were all transfixed on the fight between the Africans and the Demons.

Ezra, Dr. Fiona, and George took advantage of the distraction and slipped out of their limp heavy snakes, leaving them coiled in piles.

Rupert saw George point at an opposite courtyard and mouth, “To Virginia!”

Ezra and Dr. Fiona followed George between a row of columns and disappeared in a transport.

Good, they had escaped.

Rupert turned his attention back to the fight. To his horror Golden Warriors had joined the battle. They were chasing the Creole, who carried Lowelle in his arms, towards the hall.

The Creole realized his mistake in chosen direction too late. He slid to a stop on the marble floor in front of the dais. The Golden Gorilla tore Lowelle from the Creole’s arms. A barely conscious Golden Cobra coiled around the Creole’s powerful form. The Creole struggled until he was choking and gasping for air.

Rupert could smell the wilted gardenias in Lowelle's hair as the Golden Gorilla propped her in the throne next to Auknot's. Her eyes were unseeing, glazed over.

Rupert suspected a Froth of Venus overdose. Dammit, he had every ingredient for the antidote except Saint's sweat.

Rupert strained to see if the cage had Martyr's hair ropes, if he was lucky, the Martyrs involved might also have been Saints, a bit of sweat might still be on them. But how would he know?

He decided it was a chance he had to take.

He strained against his Golden Cobra; it hissed at him. He couldn't chance a bite. Rupert relaxed a bit to avoid the snake's ire. But his escape wasn't optional.

"And you!" the Dark Beauty screamed. She pointed at the Creole. "Voodoo is forbidden! Against the laws of man and God! Charge him!"

The Archangel frowned, unhappy with his task. But the Dark Beauty had cast some kind of spell.

"Thief of youth and horseflesh! It can't be denied!" she continued, shrill.

"Madame, please!" the Archangel's tone through the Harpy was firm.

"Caught, all of you!" the Dark Beauty gloated. Her pink feathered entourage clapped and danced.

The Creole let out a long low note, a cry for mercy.

The dancers slowed to a stop.

He began to sing a sad lament.

“The Archangel’s powerless, no need to worry, no need to fear, I can provide,” the voice of Auknot intertwined with the Creole’s song in a horrifying harmony.

A giant fart cut through the intoxicating music. And another. The room filled with stench. The mood changed. Auknot’s eyes narrowed.

Rupert almost laughed. The Creole must still have the bottle in his pocket!

“Ha! I sense my red demon!” Auknot chortled, “Come to me, my lovey.”

The Golden Cobra around the Creole hissed and bent and twisted towards the right pocket of the Creole’s pants. It flicked its tongue inside and came out with the bottle between its fangs. Smiling white teeth surrounded by pulsing red lips could be seen through the glass.

Auknot’s laugh turned vicious, his eyes narrowed towards the Dark Beauty, “Now my precious we shall see what Voodoo breeds.”

The Dark Beauty let out a scream and fled the room.

The Creole shriveled. His face wrinkled. His hair matted and turned grey. His hands curled in on themselves. He returned to his old age. Just a Lost Soul not yet crossed over. Awaiting his judgment day.

Rupert remembered that the Creole had no name. He could never be called home by the Creator. It touched Rupert that this man had been willing to risk his soul for Lowelle. And surprisingly, it saddened him that the Creole would now probably be torn limb to limb by Auknot’s demon and then condemned to a fiery pit for eternity by the Archangel. And what was the Creole guilty of, what was his crime? The same as Rupert, he loved Lowelle. It wasn’t fair, thought

Rupert. Maybe humans weren't all bad after all, they were only after love, the same as the angels. Why was serving them so hard?

Virginia came to mind. Her prayer had been impossible! Rupert gritted his teeth with resentment. The Archangel was sure to find out about George's fax to SCOD. The Archangel knew that Rupert's claim to have answered Virginia's prayer was a twisting of the facts.

Damn, Rupert's stomach sank, why had he let himself be trapped by Virginia in the first place? Rupert couldn't think. His mind swirled with resentments and fears and no ideas how to save Lowelle.

"Ack!" George's voice interrupted Rupert's circular thoughts.

George, Ezra, and Dr. Fiona stood in front of Rupert.

Auknot's laugh turned hysterical with glee, "Look who's popped back in for the sentencing!"

"Why did you come back?" Rupert asked, hoping the answer was to bring him some Saint's sweat. But he suspected otherwise.

"Boss!" whispered George, "What were you just thinking about? I'm sure you just Reverse Transported us back here!"

Rupert's stomach sank. George was right. His resentment about Virginia's prayer must have brought them back.

There wasn't time to ponder. The Creole's eyes went dim. The Harpy retrieved the Demon vial from the snake's mouth. It flew to the dais and set the vial upright on a table between Lowelle and the smoky form of Auknot. The Harpy shoved its bill into the cork.

“Stop!” Rupert blurted out.

The Harpy freed its bill from the cork.

“Why?” asked the voice of Auknot.

“I’ll help you!” Rupert said.

“Help me what?” Auknot asked.

“Help you with anything you want, just free them,” Rupert went on.

“Them?” Auknot asked.

“All my friends,” Rupert replied, “Including Lowelle.”

“And you will help me control all the rest of humanity with the secrets Ezra has taught you?” Auknot asked.

“Yes!” Rupert answered.

“Forever?” asked Auknot.

“Rupert, No!” The Archangel pleaded, “Love can’t be exclusive! It must be for all humanity, not just your friends!”

Rupert could not comprehend what the Archangel was saying, he loved Lowelle more than humanity for sure, and he knew he would trade her safety for every living creature.

“I’ll indenture to you for eternity if you let my friends go free,” Rupert vowed.

The Archangel cried out, “Traitor! Your fate will be worse than pain, worse than fear, worse than horror.”

“Don’t listen to the powerless, you are making a very sensible surrender,” the Harpy chirped for Auknot.

Chapter 27

Trial

The Hall of Auknot swarmed with Golden Warriors. Some lifted the drowsy snakes off the marble floor and carried the heavy reptiles, four men to a snake, out of the hall. Others surrounded Dr. Fiona, George, and Ezra; ushered them to the rear of the room.

A clatter announced the arrival of the Archangel's horses, led by Golden Warriors up the center axis of the room towards the dais. They dragged the Archangel's dreaded cage, which clanked and creaked and emitted dark energy in the form of fog. Diamond tears of sweat dripped off the Martyr's hair ropes and hit the floor like a shower of crystal rain.

Good, thought Rupert, the ingredient I need for the Froth of Venus antidote. Just give me a chance to get to them he prayed.

"Put him in the cage," Auknot's voice cooed from the Harpy's beak as if in answer to Rupert's plea.

A duet of Golden Warriors pulled out a spray bottle and a long linen sack. They approached the snake wrapped around Rupert, one in front, one behind. When the snake reared, spread its hood and showed its fangs, a shot of spray was sent straight down its throat.

Rupert jerked his head back away from the venom dripping off his Golden Cobra's fangs. A trickle went down his shirt collar and stung Rupert's skin. The Golden Cobra's head wobbled,

the open fangs sliced by Rupert's cheek. The Golden Warrior at the rear bagged the Golden Cobra's head as its heavy weight sank it towards the floor.

Rupert ripped open his shirt and scraped an open bottle over his skin where the venom had traveled. He willed his numb legs into action. He staggered only one step forward before a quartet of Golden Warriors reached him and lifted him off the ground, one on each limb.

They carried Rupert to the cage. The Martyr's hair came alive. The ropes hummed with an angelic tone, they twisted and floated towards Rupert's midsection. The Golden Warriors placed him inside the iron cage. The Martyr's hair wound tightly around Rupert's arms and legs and midsection, there was no chance for his circulation to recover. He hung suspended in a prone position, arms and legs splayed, face up - paralyzed.

He watched hopelessly as teardrops of Saint's sweat dripped to the floor from the ropes. A foreign sense of warmth and calm invaded his chest. Was it the Martyr's hair? Or the complete loss of everything he ever wanted: Lowelle, his Master Perfumer's Certificate, Oblivion? Nothing left to lose. They said it brought freedom. At least his friends would be released. He had done one good deed.

Rupert lifted his head and looked towards the front of the room to show Auknot's emerald eyes that he wasn't afraid. Rupert could tell from the cramp forming in his neck he wouldn't be able to maintain eye contact indefinitely. He would have to make a move.

Archangel Bergen, still wrapped in Golden Snake, spoke with calm, "Beware Auknot, I warn you, my cage has no respect for powers or principalities. It cannot hold ordinary foe for folly

or gain. It will not tolerate that which is not Ordained-To-Be and will not condone any but the One-True-Purpose,”

“Ah, but I see no objection from you to the purpose at hand,” Auknot answered, “I think we all know it’s a dangerous time for angels.”

“It’s true the Supreme Council of Dominions has ordered that any angels who fall prey to objects of earthly fascination and commit Unholy Commerce are to be Taken. It’s true the cage can hold such an angel powerless. And it’s true young Rupert here appears to be in such unholy trade. But you and I are not the judge of such things, and you are sorely out of place and will be put down,” the Archangel replied.

Auknot laughed, “Put down? Not an angel among you has any power left! Humankind has grown weary of your relentless pursuit. Your principles no longer have any appeal. The overcoming of sin and death? Humanity revels in the one and has made great strides on their own against the other; it’s all pure science now. No, the relentless pursuit of good has worn itself out. You see, it is a relief for them to work for me, to have no mention of sin and to engage in mindless employment and enjoyment.”

“Tie them all to the cage!” Auknot roared.

The Golden Warriors brought Dr. Fiona, George, and Ezra alongside the cage where their hands were fixed high above their heads by golden chains locked onto the iron bars. So Auknot would not keep the bargain, or had he even made one? Rupert was the fool again.

Rupert strained to see Lowelle. She was propped in her throne, asleep or dead for all he could tell from her stillness and ashen color. If the overdose of Froth of Venus was significant, Rupert didn't have a single idea left.

Golden Warriors entered the hall, dragging the Dark Beauty and her pink flock.

"She was attempting to release the prisoner Virginia," the Golden Warrior's captain announced gesturing at his captive, the Dark Beauty.

"And where is the prisoner now?" Auknot asked.

"I was attempting to bring her here to testify!" screeched the Dark Beauty.

"We've retained Virginia, we can dispense with her if you wish, your highness," the Golden Warrior Captain answered.

"I'll allow the testimony first," Auknot answered, "bring the girl-human in."

A struggling Virginia was dragged into the room.

"Shame on you, shame on all of you!" Virginia cried, "You, and you, and you and you!"

She pointed to Rupert and the Archangel Bergen and Auknot and George, "You are a disgrace. And you call yourselves angels and powers and principalities. You stand for nothing. You cowards."

"Now dear...", the Dark Beauty began.

"I won't listen, I won't hear it I won't!" Virginia screamed and wrenched her arms free from her surprised guards to cover her ears.

"We'll listen to *you* then," Auknot's Harpy said as it flew to Virginia's shoulder, "let's hear what the little human has to say."

The room went still and quiet. The warmth left Rupert, he braced himself for what Virginia was about to reveal. His fear welcomed the pain as his neck locked in place. He stared at Virginia, his potential accuser, and waited for her condemnation.

“I hate you all! I want to go home!” tears welled in Virginia’s eyes as she marched to the cage and pressed her face to the bars close to Rupert’s head, “but thanks to your tricks and lies, I have no home, what about mother? Why didn’t you tell me my stepfather wasn’t real? What kind of guardian angel are you? A deceiver who can’t even answer a common prayer, that’s what kind!”

The Archangel Bergen was silent.

Rupert hoped Virginia had made the Archangel feel so guilty that he would forget the mention of her unanswered prayer but the Archangel was turning purple with rage, and that rage was clearly pointed in Rupert’s direction. Rupert’s heart beat like a stone. Hell. He was going to hell. Or, based on the distorted face of the Archangel, a fate much worse than that.

“I was even blamed for my Cereus Blossom being put to unholy use!” she said, glaring at Dr. Fiona, who turned her eyes to the floor.

Rupert almost hoped that Auknot would do away with the Archangel. But Rupert knew this was impossible. Darkness never overcame light, only the other way around. And Rupert was now in the shadows, and he wasn’t even sure how he got here. He thought he was always trying to do the right thing, hadn’t he just tried to save his friends?

Virginia fell to the floor where her shoulders shuttered with silent sobs.

“You see! Unanswered Prayers, Unholy Commerce, the cage suits our guilty angel just fine,” Auknot smirked, “Rupert, I’m sure you are ready for some easy employment too, just like humanity, ah yes, here’s your new boss now.”

From the side colonnade, Noureddine Hamchali strode in and took a place at the head of the Archangel’s horse team.

“Rupert is yours but the others go to the lions!” Auknot commanded, “The little rebel included.”

Golden Warriors picked up the now wailing Virginia and carried her behind the cage. They sat her on a ledge at the back, and tied her in place. Then they went for the spray bottle and linen bag to approach the Creole’s snake.

Rupert’s mind raced, who was in a position to help him? The Creole was about to be released from his snake, but what good was that? A distraction!

“Sing us out, old friend?” Rupert asked the Creole.

Noureddine nodded apologetically to Rupert; then tugged at the bridle of the lead horse. He began to turn the cage’s rig around to face the doors. The clack of the hooves on the marble shattered the silence.

The Creole began to sing a deep slow Spiritual, “Going down, to the River Jordan. Going down, gonna soothe my soul...”

“Father, no!” Screamed Dr. Fiona as the cage lurched forward.

His snake hissed but the Creole kept singing as the Golden Warriors approached him.

The Harpy flew to Dr. Fiona where she struggled near the back wheel of the turning cage, “Good-bye, my dearest daughter,” Auknot said.

Dr. Fiona gave up. She went limp, her legs dragged. Ezra went pale, “My darling, no!”

“Going down, to the River Jordan, Going down...,”

Rupert noticed the Creole’s song was having an effect on the Creole’s snake. It was mesmerized, swaying to the tune.

“Quit that singing,” Auknot said.

The Harpy flew to the table between Lowelle and Auknot’s floating emerald eyes. The bottle with the demon belched and giggled with delight. The Harpy swayed to the Creole’s song.

The Archangel’s captor snake began to sway in rhythm with the Creole’s snake and the Harpy. The Golden Warriors made their move to send spray down the Creole snake’s throat.

The cobra reared back and in one swift motion untwisted itself from the Creole’s body. Trying to stay clear of the snake, the surprised Golden Warriors stumbled back and fell.

“Gonna find...the One who loves me,” the Creole continued to sing.

The Archangel’s snake gracefully untwisted and joined the Creole’s snake in a race to the thrones. Golden Warriors frantically whacked at the snakes with no luck.

“Gonna find...the One who loves me,” the Creole’s refrain echoed through the room.

“Psst, George!” Rupert whispered.

“Yes, Boss,” George whispered back, “you got a plan?”

Free of his snake, the Archangel Bergen moved forward in slow stiff motion towards the cage. He grabbed it with one hand. The cage shuttered and stopped its forward motion.

“Virginia,” the Archangel said in a soft voice.

“No! I won’t go with you I won’t,” Virginia screamed at him, “I hate you!”

The snakes had reached the dais. They wound their way towards the smoky figure of Auknot. The sun was setting. The room glowed with orange sunset. The Harpy flew about and breathed torches to life, the flames fluttered shadows on the walls.

“The cobras, they’re going for Auknot!” George said.

“They take the song literally,” Dr. Fiona said, “they love Father.”

Rupert knew they only had a few moments of chaos to make a move, “Can’t we transport?” Rupert asked.

“No, it makes a vortex of the cage,” George replied, glaring at Archangel Bergen as he passed them on the way to now screaming Virginia.

“Quickly, what does everyone have?” Rupert asked.

“Nothing but an old man’s sorrow,” replied Ezra.

“Oh darling, you have my love,” Dr. Fiona said, “and I have seeds, some seeds from the Night Blooming Cereus! In my jacket pocket!”

“Praise be,” said Rupert, “we can use those...”

“You stole those from me, they’re mine!” screamed Virginia.

“I’ll take those,” Archangel Bergen said striding over. He dug into Dr. Fiona’s pocket and pulled out a small paper packet. The Archangel continued to the back of the cage to untie Virginia, he offered the packet to her. She grabbed it but wouldn’t look at him.

The cage shuddered under the Archangel's touch. The Martyr's hair ropes rained tears of Saint's sweat. Rupert managed to catch a tear on his lip. The last ingredient to save Lowelle from the poison of Froth of Venus was as close as the tip of his tongue and he was helpless!

"My Maker come...carry me home," the Creole sang.

Rupert screamed inside his heart, 'Lowelle is mine, carry me home.' He never willed anything harder than he willed his freedom to save her. His desire for Lowelle warmed his core.

Snakes wrapped around Auknot's smoky legs. The smoke swirled higher, the emerald eyes rose with it until they towered over the room. As the snakes reached waist high, Auknot's opaque smoke hands grabbed their heads and held them out at his waist. He laughed through the Harpy, who circled Auknot in golden lightning flashes.

"If we're to get out of here, I need an antidote for the tainted Cinnamon and Sandalwood!" Archangel Bergen shouted at Ezra.

"Only Auknot's powerlessness can release you," Ezra replied, weary.

"It's too late, all humanity has been saved by Auknot," the Dark Beauty cooed.

"It's your fault Rupert, humanity is doomed, congratulations, you've finished us!" Virginia shouted.

Rupert shut out the voices and concentrated on Lowelle. He was confident in his assumption; right desires opened locked doors didn't they? How could his love for her be wrong?

"Carry me home, to the One who loves me," sang the Creole.

Rupert ignored all else in the room. He began at her feet, delicate and ladylike in thin sandals, her pearlescent white toenails reflected the full moon that had risen and was now pouring

through the opening in the ceiling. Her ankles, dainty with delicate bones defined, were tied with white satin ribbons. Her calves curved pale and disappeared under the hem of swan feathers. Her waist was as pronounced in a satin belt as it was the first day in the window of Oblivion, the place where she belonged, at Rupert's side. Her lace gloved hands rested in her lap, Rupert peeled off the gloves in his mind and he could feel her palms, cool and soothing on his cheek. Her chest barely rose with faint breath. The length of her neck made his eyes well with tears of admiration, the soft round curve of her chin called out for his lips, her pert lips for his forehead. The eyelashes of her closed eyes rested on her angled cheek. Rupert imagined he could see her amber-spiked fawn eyes, she must be dreaming of their life together. The crown of her fawn colored hair shone above a band of gardenias in the light of torch fire, like her halo. The soft hair curved and flowed to her waist, adorned with tiny violets. Rupert imagined replacing each tiny flower with his kisses.

The cage was shivering and creaking. The welds that held bars in place were popping. The bars were glowing with heat. The gold on the chains holding Ezra, Dr. Fiona, and George were softening. George yanked his wrists free and helped the others.

“Lowelle, I love you!” shouted Rupert at full force, “I *will* be with you!”

Auknot's eyes, almost at the ceiling, were growing larger. His laughter had turned mad.

“Gonna be, with the One who loves me,” the Creole had found a viola in the litter left by the wedding orchestra and drew the bow deep and slow to his song.

Archangel Bergen set Virginia, now exhausted and quiet, next to the Creole.

The Archangel drew his sword. He charged Auknot.

The cage heaved a sigh and burst open, the fog of darkness from inside flew up to the ceiling and out into the night. Rupert fell to the floor of the cage with a thud. He found the Martyr's hair ropes no longer bound him tight but were softly resting around his limbs, wrapping him like a caress. Yes, desire opened all doors. He quickly popped open a bottle to suck the Saint's sweat from where it had landed on his lip.

Ezra, Dr. Fiona, and George cheered as Rupert righted himself.

Auknot's smoky figure, as tall as the room, snakes wrapped around his calves, roared. Archangel Bergen slashed in a rage at the snakes. But their cuts healed as soon as the sword sank into the snake's bodies. He stabbed through the smoke at Auknot's knees—but it was only smoke. Auknot laughed and the Archangel, unwilling to give up, twisted and flailed with his sword, hopelessly hitting at the haze.

“Well done!” Ezra slapped Rupert on the shoulder then turned to embrace his love, Dr. Fiona.

“Home!” Ezra shouted. Their two forms wavered, and they were gone, transported. Rupert pictured them happy, in angel light, in the Hidden Universes.

Rupert dashed to the dais and lifted Lowelle from her throne. She groaned. Her pulse was faint and slow. He didn't have much time to fight the overdose.

“George, help me with the formula,” Rupert handed George the bottle with the Saint's sweat.

Rupert looked up, Auknot, roaring with laughter, was still distracted by Archangel Bergen, who continued to dance and slash and swerve away from cobra bites. Cobras multiplied as he cut off their heads.

He couldn't risk transporting Lowelle without reversing the overdose, her heart would surely stop.

"Call me home, to the River Jordan," the Creole sang.

While Rupert held Lowelle, George slipped ingredients from Rupert's pockets- ground nasturtium, peppermint, sapphire dust. He opened them one-by-one, emptied them into the bottle. George popped the cork back on. The mixture swirled and pulsed blue in the moonlight, signaling that the antidote for Froth of Venus was complete. He handed Rupert the bottle.

Rupert brought it close to Lowelle's lips and pulled the cork out for just a second. Lowelle breathed in a wisp of blue moonlight. Rupert held his breath and listened to her chest. Her heart continued to slow its beat. She would need a second dose, but he had to wait for the first to dissipate in her bloodstream completely before he could let another puff into her lungs or it might freeze her. Could he chance transport before the second dose? He would chance it.

"George! Let's go!" Rupert whispered.

The air grew cold. He pulled Lowelle tight to his chest.

The moon grew huge and the three of them began to float out into the sky. Lowelle seemed even more vulnerable in the dark against the stars. Rupert looked back down through the hole in the roof at the hall.

As Rupert, Lowell, and George drifted off, a shrinking Virginia and the Creole stared back at him, mournful. Archangel Bergen followed their gaze and stopped his flailing.

Why was the transport so slow?

“No!” the Archangel shouted, “Stop them!”

He raised his sword which flashed lightning towards them exploding a small asteroid they were passing. The flash of light revealed a dark fog, the fog that had been released from the Archangel’s cage earlier hovered in front of them; it moved with them and seemed to slow their progress.

Rupert looked back into the hall.

Auknot’s eyes stared up at them. He caught sight of Lowelle in Rupert’s arms. A green smoke mouth and nose formed beneath the eyes. The mouth opened and let out a roar that shook stars. The emerald eyed face shot towards them. It had a tail of smoke. It accelerated, Auknot’s face was coming right at them. Rupert panicked.

“George! Open the bottle! Suck in the black fog from the cage!” Rupert shouted.

To his horror George reached into Rupert’s jacket and pulled out the blue antidote that Lowelle needed. He unstopped the cork.

“No!” Rupert shouted.

It was too late. The blue moonlit wisp of antidote floated out. Auknot’s face collided with the blue substance. Blue acid burn foamed in Auknot’s emerald eyes. He screamed from his fog mouth and collapsed back into the hall.

The Archangel charged to the table between the two thrones and grabbed the bottle with the demon in it. He made ready to meet Auknot with the demon, which Rupert was sure an Archangel could easily control.

Lowelle was muttering and becoming feverish. She would need the second dose soon. They were out of ingredients. Rupert had to get them back to Oblivion, now!

George floated towards the black cage fog, a different bottle open and ready. The longer the bottle sucked on empty space, the more Rupert feared that it could burst from the vacuum before George reached the fog.

Below them, the Creole picked up Virginia and made a valiant dash through the Golden Warriors. He commandeered a horse from Nouredine's team and mounted it.

It was clear the Creole and Virginia weren't going to get away. They were surrounded by Golden Warriors.

"Rupert, please," begged Virginia, hands folded in prayer, "save us!"

Damn it. Virginia and the Creole's black horse danced around the Golden Warriors. It reminded Rupert of long ago, of Red Sun and his other charges.

George sucked the black fog into the bottle, they were free to transport again. "Where to Boss?" George asked.

Chapter 28

Broken Spell

Rupert surveyed the scene below. The Creole jumped off the prancing black horse. He smacked its rump. It reared and took off running. Virginia clasped tightly to the saddle. The Golden Warriors scattered out of its way. They closed in on the Creole. The Archangel rushed to his side to join the fight.

“After them!” Auknot roared. The snakes untwisted from Auknot’s legs, sprouted wings and flew through the air. They landed in front of Virginia’s horse. It reared and reversed course. But it was too late.

With horror, Rupert watched the snakes strike. One bit hard into the horse’s flank. One wrapped itself around two of the horse’s legs, causing the sleek animal to trip and fall hard. Virginia screamed as her leg was crushed under the horse. She was trapped. The Creole and the Archangel retreated to defend her.

“Release the demon!” Auknot shouted. The Harpy flashed about the room and landed on the dais table. It popped the cork with its beak.

A wave of hot air blasted out of the bottle. The warm humid brown cloud quickly filled the hall and drifted upwards. The stench soon reached Rupert and George high above. Rupert gagged.

“Boss!” George said, “We have to get down there!”

Rupert wasn’t sure that was a good idea. He hesitated. The Demon attacked the Archangel first. Rupert silently cheered but didn’t really like himself for it. The Demon swirled around the

Archangel until all that could be seen was a red blur. When the Demon separated its slimy self from the blur, the Archangel was wrapped in a red slimy spit cocoon.

Then it moved towards the Creole, who held up his fiddle in the shape of a cross.

A ringing began in Rupert's ears, he felt paralyzed. The volume increased.

Rupert recognized the noise. Souls screaming. Horse's souls. Rupert peered into the void of space. Spirit Horses came thundering in a herd. They came thundering to collect their brother horse, who was succumbing to the Cobra's venom. They came thundering to comfort the passing over. Even horses did a better job of this than humans. They stared into Rupert's eyes, some he recognized as the horses from the slaughterhouse long ago.

On their backs rode the humans that had been burned in the fire that Rupert had started at the slaughterhouse in his anger. The rider's eyes were dark and blank as they turned to look at him. The distinctive smell of saddle soap wafted over Rupert.

Rupert's heart thudded once again with the memory of Red Sun, the stallion that had taught Rupert everything about confidence. Red Sun, that brave warrior, who had suffered for his courage, his valiant attempt to race rewarded with a humiliating death at the glue factory.

Red Sun was the last horse in the Spirit Herd. Rupert's cheeks were wet with tears. Red Sun's Ghost Rider was the man who Rupert hated the most, the one who had sealed Rupert's disdain of the entire human race, the horse trader who had captured the wild horses for racing and ordered their deaths. Why would Red Sun carry him for eternity?

Red Sun and his Ghost Rider paused next to Rupert.

"There's something eternity can't forebear," the Ghost Rider said.

“What?” Rupert felt compelled to choke out. He still wanted to strangle the man with his bare hands, even if the rider was only a wisp of ghostly ether.

The Ghost Rider tipped his hat, “Don’t worry, we’ll take care of Miss Virginia for you.”

They galloped down to the hall and disappeared in the torchlight.

“Virginia’s crushed leg wouldn’t kill her. She must have been bit by a snake,” George said in a panic. She looked grey. Rupert’s heart melted for her.

“Here take this,” Rupert drew out the cobra’s venom he had collected. He mixed it with the last drop of Saint’s sweat.

“Snake antidote,” Rupert said.

George gave Rupert the bottle of black fog that was in his hand. George took the bottle of snake antidote and disappeared, transported to reappear at Virginia’s side far below. Her horse let out its last breath. Its spirit rose to watch over them. Golden Warrior guards rushed over to move the dead horse off Virginia’s leg. She writhed in pain.

Rupert saw that the Demon was busy in a whirlwind. He wrapped the Creole in red slime. The Archangel might survive the ordeal but Rupert doubted the Creole, just a Lost Soul, could. He would be transformed into some horrible creature, serving the demon. Rupert wondered if a Lost Soul was what eternity couldn’t forbear.

‘Going down, to the River Jordan,’ the Creole’s song echoed in Rupert’s head. No one, no one at all, had ever belted out a song like the Creole’s. His voice flowed like honey over hot biscuits. When the Creole was gone, his song was gone. Rupert felt a pang.

But what could Rupert do about it? He clung to Lowelle's warmth, floating safe, far above the scene.

Lowelle's friends, the Golden Maidens, followed musicians into the hall. They were dressed in shiny pastels, sprinkled with gold and flowers for the wedding. They had bells on their ankles. Their tambourines shook to the flutes and violins.

Auknot's eyes and smoky figure had settled down to the size of a regular giant. He danced around the cocoon of the Archangel, now solid as stone. The Golden Maidens danced with him.

Rupert checked Lowelle's pulse again, it was desperately faint. What could he do? He shut his eyes and pictured Oblivion. When he opened them he saw the same scene. No transport, it must not be in the Creator's will that they escape home now.

A sense of defeat invaded his chest. He had failed utterly and now Lowelle would be taken by Auknot. It was only a matter of moments before the Demon would come for them. Rupert was glad that at least Ezra and Dr. Fiona had escaped to their secret place of exile.

Rupert wondered if there was any course of forgiveness with the Archangel. Rupert thought about whether he really had any regrets. He felt he had done everything right: tried to save Ezra, tried to help Virginia save humanity, tried to save Lowelle, and then there was his past and his horses, he had wanted to save them too.

Everyone knew it was impossible to save humans; that took greater powers, so what did it matter he hadn't followed the rules of Holy Commerce? Wasn't love more important than rules? The only regret Rupert could think of was that he hadn't named the Creole, who couldn't be called home without one.

Blam! Rupert and Lowelle landed hard on the marble floor, transported back into the hall. Auknot clapped. Lowelle's friends ran to them, pried the unconscious Lowelle from Rupert's surprised arms and fussed over her.

The Demon stopped twirling; the Creole's face was still visible, the only part of him not dripping with red demon spittle. With a diabolical grin the Demon looked at Auknot with manic eyes. Auknot blinked slowly, laughed, and seemed to nod a yes. The Demon stuck out his slimy tongue and made ready to lick the Creole's face. It too would soon be covered with the red slime.

Lowelle's friends bolstered her head. They put a potion to her lips. She sputtered and coughed. They wiped her forehead with a golden cloth. She looked dazedly around the room.

"My darling!" she said. But she wasn't looking at Rupert, she was looking at Auknot!

The Golden Maiden's clapped.

Rupert's heart sank then his anger burst.

"Foolish! You foolish angel, you will regret this!" Rupert shouted at Lowelle.

"Rupert you don't know what you're talking about, Auknot's perfection," she replied with a slur, "I'm not the one who'll have regrets, you will if you don't join us!"

"Darling, he already has," Auknot burst in, "too late for his friends, however."

The Demon continued to lick the Creole's face.

This had a profound effect on Lowelle. She seemed confused. She looked at Rupert with pleading eyes. Rupert saw his chance. He would have no regrets.

Rupert reached into his pocket and dashed forward, pouring black fog from the bottle that he had exchanged with George onto a hanky. He grabbed the Demon's tongue with the hanky. The

heat of the Demon burned through the cloth. He only had a moment before it would burn off his hand. Rupert looked into the Creole's eyes. The Demon scratched and clawed at Rupert but the black fog held him back.

"Take a name," Rupert blurted out, "take a name you love."

"Jordan Rivers," said the Creole, "My name is ole Jordan Rivers." A tear rolled down the Creole's cheek.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Jordan Rivers," said Rupert.

"Everything you need is waiting at my cabin," the Creole Jordan Rivers winked.

The Demon's tongue burned through the hanky. It was like a hot coal on Rupert's fingers, he let go. The Demon's tongue licked the face of the Creole until it was covered. The cocoon of red slime hardened.

They heard the Creole hum a muffled tune, then let out a groan. He was silent. Frosty air wafted around his red cocoon. The Demon jumped and danced and leapt high. It grabbed a sword from a Golden Warrior, took aim and on the third swing, smashed the Creole's cocoon broadside. It shattered into a million drops of blood vapor. The ghost of the Creole appeared in the center. He tipped its fingers at Rupert, and whistled. The ghost of the black horse trotted over, the Creole mounted him.

"Going home, thanks to One who loves me," sang the Creole as the horse reared and galloped after the thundering herd. The herd made its way through the roof into the distant moonlight.

The Demon came at Rupert.

“No dear darling Demon, it’s time for a wedding!” shouted Auknot with glee, “and it will give me special pleasure to have young Rupert as my witness. And, of course, with Ezra and the Progeny of My Disappointment gone, we shall desperately need his services in the future.” Auknot roared with laughter.

Rupert felt faint. What had he done? Would he have to face this for eternity?

The Harpy swooped about chirping, “Clear the hall.”

Golden Maidens and Warriors began to clean up the hall and sprinkle petals on the floor. They placed the red slime cocoon of the Archangel on top of the cage and pulled it out of the hall.

Rupert looked at Lowelle. The Golden Maidens had helped her back on the throne and placed the gossamer veil over her face. But something had changed in her posture, she looked directly towards Rupert. She was crying. Rupert’s heart swelled. Finally! Auknot’s spell had been broken. Her love for the Creole must have awoken her. Love of humans was maybe good for something after all.

“Save me” her lips mouthed.

He fingered the bottle in his pocket. It still contained a remnant of dark fog. A Hurricane was just the thing.

“I need my apprentice!” Rupert made his way over to George who was tending Virginia.

“Jordan Rivers. That was a beautiful thing Rupert,” Virginia said before she passed out.

“Ah, I forgot about the young rebel. Too bad you survived the fall from the horse only to be fed to the lions,” Auknot said as his smoky figure settled on its throne.

“Virginia, do you still have the Night Blooming Cereus seeds?” Rupert asked. She nodded and handed a small packet to Rupert, he secured them in his jacket.

Rupert dashed to Lowelle, grabbed her, and before the Demon or Auknot or the Golden Warriors could react, Rupert sped to George’s side and popped the cork on the black fog bottle. The bottle let out its contents, which swirled towards the Archangel’s foggy form.

The bottle howled. As the wind began to whirl around the room, Rupert opened the little packet of seeds and sprinkled them into the wind. The Demon roared. Auknot gestured for the Demon to chase them.

It leapt into the wind. The seeds found their mark. They clung to the hot Demon. They burrowed their way under his skin, they popped with delight in the heat, they rooted; they sprouted and shot out grey sticks with sharp thorns. The Demon began to claw at this skin and scratch his own eyes out. The Night Blooming Cereus grew a network of needles that stung and burrowed deep into the very fabric of the Demon. It glowed with furious heat. The hotter the Demon got, the faster the plant grew. The Demon was now the very soil for a thriving cactus that needled into its every cell. Buds formed among the stickers. The Demon screamed fire. The Night Blooming Cereus responded by bursting into bloom. In an attempt to soothe his skin, the Demon spit out his own cocoon, a cocoon covered with blossoms. He froze in place. The thick fragrance spread rapidly in the growing windstorm from the bottle. Golden Warriors and Maidens alike were rendered defenseless from the flower’s perfume.

The hurricane intensified. Rupert noticed that if he set aside his fear of Auknot and concentrated on manipulating the bottle, he could will the hurricane to tilt this way and that, swirl tighter or wider.

It was time to make their escape. He wanted to leave the room before they transported, to avoid bringing any unwanted guests along. Rupert focused the funnel in their area, surrounded them with it and had it splay out the opening in the ceiling.

Rupert carried Lowelle and George carried Virginia. They let the funnel lift them up through and above the roof.

Poof. A blast of hot moist air met them. A blink, a splash, a burst of birds taking flight, and an alligator slipping into the water. They were all standing on the creaky porch of the Creole's cabin. The faint scent of Night Blooming Cereus added a surreal glow to Rupert's mood.

Chapter 29

Jordan's Moon

“Rupert, darling, you’ve saved us all,” Lowelle grabbed his face with both of her dainty hands and kissed him on the mouth through her veil.

The sight of her veil irritated him. He yanked it from her head a bit forcefully.

“Boss, boss,” George tugged at Rupert’s sleeve.

“What is it George!” Rupert wondered if all heroes felt a little cranky just after success.

“Come on George, we’ll find some food, I’m starving,” Virginia led him in the front door.

When it slammed shut, Rupert turned to Lowelle.

“Lowelle,” Rupert said.

She looked at him with her big fawn eyes.

“Since the first clap of your hands the day we released the Cyryzzma into the street, do you remember?” Rupert asked.

She patted his arm and sighed.

“I was drawn to your joy, your courage, and your brilliant light,” Rupert went on, “in a way that meant without it, I couldn’t face existence. Not here on earth or in the Hidden Universes or in eternity. You are the only thing that matters to me. I want to love you on and on with every breeze and blossom and every heavenly scent in the world. You are love to me. I cannot part with you.”

He fumbled in his pocket. The remaining bottle had a label, attached with a chain. He worked it off carefully and palmed it. He took both her graceful hands in his and squeezed them slightly. He brought them to his lips and kissed their palms one by one.

He put the right hand back on her lap, brought out the chain, and said, “Will you be my angel queen? May I defend you and stand by you forever after?”

Her entire countenance burst into a broad smile, “Oh my brave Rupert, forever after!”

He wrapped the chain around her ring finger and kinked the label in place. She held out her hand as if he had placed a priceless fairy globe or blinking star on her finger.

A cheer went up from the crack in the door where George and Virginia were spying. Rupert picked Lowelle up and carried her into the Creole’s front room, which seemed much cozier now.

“But where will you live?” Virginia’s furrowed brow betrayed her anxiety. Rupert realized nothing was resolved for the poor child, whose father was revealed to be an illusion and whose mother must be sick with worry by now. They must get her home as soon as possible. Reality snapped back into place, the complications of Auknot and the Archangel and Virginia washed over him.

“Virginia, we must get you home to your mother, is she still in New Mexico?” asked Rupert.

“No! I refuse to go home until you fix it for my father! You promised! I want my real step-father back! Not that thing covered in red slim. Not that Archangel person either, get him out of my step-father!!!” Virginia answered, stomping her injured foot and yelping in pain. Rupert felt his stomach churn.

Damn these complications! Rupert wanted everyone to just go home.

A hero just shows up when he's supposed to Ezra's voice echoed in his mind.

Rupert looked at Virginia. Her eyes were crying behind her brave insistence. Confusingly, he thought about the question brought up by the rider on Red Sun. Eternity can't forbear what? Lack of forgiveness? An unanswered prayer? Unholy Commerce? It bugged him that he didn't know the answer. An angel that couldn't bear humans? Rupert watched Virginia's accusatory stance. He knew it was wrong she didn't have a guardian angel. George's eyebrows were up, also accusing. Everyone was waiting for him to say something, to do the right thing.

He thought about everything that had happened. About how hopeless humans were. That there were probably more Auknots waiting to rise and destroy and enslave. It would be an endless cycle. He liked being the hero, bringing them all here. He looked at Virginia. And George. They needed him. And Lowelle. If she really loved him, she would stay wherever he did, Rupert was sure of it, becoming more intoxicated on the hero high.

"Virginia," he blurted out, "I'm sorry, you're right, I am a bad guardian angel. But I'm willing to be your bad guardian angel."

Virginia ran to him and hugged him. But fixing it was going to be a whole other matter. Rupert now took on all the anxiety.

"George, take Virginia inside," Lowelle pried Virginia off him, "and this time shut the door."

When they heard the door click and creaking footsteps fade, Lowelle turned to him, "Are you mad? How are you going to fix this for her? Auknot is in charge here now, this place will be

changed forever, and you've promised her something she can't have! Our only hope is to join Ezra and Dr. Fiona in the Hidden Universes. Leave all this behind."

"You had your chance to serve with the Creole, with Jordan Rivers. How can I escape this? Archangel or no Archangel, SCOD will find me," Rupert said, "I have to try to make it right."

"And what about your promise to Auknot, do you think he will just let you roam about and take care of Virginia now? Our only chance is to leave."

"You're right. But I can't just leave her here," Rupert said, "And you know I can't take a human to the Hidden Universes. I have no choice but to stay."

"And face Auknot? You haven't been successful at anything but running away so far." Lowelle said as she eyed the chain and label on her finger, "You couldn't really promise this could you? You are just a liar!"

"Lowelle, no, I want to take care of you more than any..." Rupert's voice faded.

He knew he couldn't follow through on his promise to Lowelle and follow through on what he had promised Virginia. He didn't like caring so much. It hurt.

"I'm not staying here. The only thing that can happen here is you will end up a criminal, we will always run. Take me to the Hidden Universes or..." Lowelle slipped the chain off her finger, "...you will lose the love that quells your burning temper."

Rupert looked at her but couldn't think of the right thing to say. He felt angry she would give him an ultimatum. Was she really the Lowelle he thought he loved?

She tossed the label into the swamp. Jordan River's rowboat was tied to the porch. She marched over to it and without looking at Rupert, boarded and cast off.

“Lowelle, please...” Rupert begged. He felt an idiot. He felt helpless. How could do anything for any of them? He knew she was right, he was good at running away and had no control over his temper without her love. Lowelle rowed the boat around the bend in the swamp. Rupert waited but she didn’t return. His heart went with her. He felt he had nothing left to lose.

He opened the door to the cabin. George and Virginia looked on him with pity.

“Alright young lady,” Rupert said weakly to Virginia, “I’m all yours.”

She looked skeptical, “But what can you do? How can you help father...”

He heard Virginia’s voice talking but the specific words she was saying faded into the background. When had he slept last? A quiet splash outside reminded him of the dangers here, snakes and alligators, the oldest living things on the planet. The earth breathed heavily. Humidity dampened their clothes. The smells here were not Rupert’s favorites, except for the high note orchids; everything was too close to death and rot.

Rupert gazed out the window of the cabin. It formed a perfect frame around the moon, which shimmered in the smooth water. A blue light flashed among the vegetation. And another. Lowelle had told him they were either natural gas or Lost Souls trapped there by voodoo. Huge broad wing white owls swooped around on the hunt for small prey. A breeze began to blow and ripple the surface. It caught the white lace window curtain in a graceful arc. The scent of something like Night Blooming Cereus wafted in the window. Was there a bayou version of the flower? L’s Creole/Cereus 2, Rupert had never asked Ezra about his note. *Everything you need is at the cabin*, Jordan Rivers said. Is this what he meant? The thought twisted its way into Rupert mind and he was instantly obsessed with finding the flower.

“What is it? Do you hear something?” George asked.

“No, there’s nothing,” Rupert whispered.

“Nothing is right!” Virginia shouted, “You have no ideas at all!”

But Rupert didn’t hear her. Everything faded for Rupert but the scent of this new flower. He was to be Taken, and if his last memories were to be the fragrance of Lowelle’s hair and this exotic flower, melded together forever in his consciousness, Rupert would be eternally at peace. But it wasn’t enough. Rupert wanted the memory of the flower’s curves in the moonlight to blend with the curve of Lowelle’s cheek and her waist. He couldn’t stop, he shoved his way past George out the door, into a rotting canoe.

“Rupert!” Virginia’s hurt cry followed him.

“He won’t get far,” George assured her.

Rupert paddled after the scent. He had to find the flower. The scent was growing stronger, he was getting close to the source.

There it was, a stunning pale coral blossom, clinging to moss and shouting its fragrance at the moon. Rupert’s heart exploded in his chest. This was a scent that could launch nations, create romances, inspire masterpieces and no one else knew of it. He would name the potion Jordan’s Moon.

“George, George, do you have a vial?” Rupert yelled.

George popped into the canoe, almost tipping it over. Transported! Rupert was on to something! He carefully opened the vial in front of the stamen. A puff of pollen entered with the

inhale. Rupert set the cork back in the top. Ah, peace, even if only for a moment. This is what he, Rupert, was created for. This is what the Creator had put him here to do.

Pop! George and Rupert were back in the cabin's back room with Virginia. The instant transport was a good sign.

“Good news!” Rupert said, “We have the best formula ever!”

“What about my prayer?” Virginia asked, “Did you hear anything I was saying?”

Rupert felt high. He felt invincible.

“I'm sure I can make something that will solve it,” Rupert said, “potions are always the solution. As your Guardian Angel...”

George looked on, astonished.

Virginia's face twisted into a rage, “NO! I refuse your offer. You are worthless! George, find me another Guardian Angel.”

She limped into the bedroom on her crutches.

“Doesn't look good, Boss,” George said, “I have to get on to SCOD, file a report on all the goings on down here before it's too late. Get an army down here to clean up this mess...”

“What are you talking about George! With this new...” Rupert started.

“This mess which was largely created by the pursuit of Cyryzzma,” George reminded him. “Haven't you made enough trouble? For a moment, I thought you were going to save yourself, maybe all of us, by your offer to be Virginia's Guardian. But really, how were you going to pull that off? I'd like to know! You couldn't hang on to Lowelle, and it seems Auknot is in charge now. It's about time I sent in the Unholy Commerce report.”

George paused to open another bag of cheese puffs.

“Really? Another bag of cheese puffs! You are as much enamored as any angel by what’s down here, aren’t you!” Rupert shouted. He was frustrated, angry. George was right but after all they had been through, George should give him another chance. He felt his temperature rising. He knew this was a bad sign but he couldn’t think why.

George’s bag of puffs smoked, then flamed, “Ouch!” George dropped the bag and stomped out the flames.

Rupert knew what had happened, his temper again, without Lowelle...

“See, there is something you’re good at! I’ll recommend fire-breathing in the star nursery. That’s the only sort of job you can handle,” George’s eyes had grown half the size of his head. They were bulging out.

Potions. I’m good at potions thought Rupert. It’s the only thing I’m good at. A plan came to mind. He would show George, and Virginia and the Archangel and they didn’t need an army.

“That’s it George! Thank-you, you are right, there is something I’m good at,” Rupert replied.

George looked smug.

“Not fire-breathing,” Rupert went on.

Rupert left George with mouth open and rushed into the other room where he found Virginia pouting on the bed, rubbing her broken leg.

“I know you think I’m useless, but I’m not! I’ll show you, I’ll solve everything,” Rupert told her, “I can do something for your leg too, you’ll see.”

Rupert picked up Virginia and raced to the other room.

“Put me down,” screamed Virginia.

“George! Let’s go!” Rupert yelled.

“The only place I’m going is to file my SCOD report,” George said, arms crossed.

“Oblivion!” Rupert cried out.

Chapter 30

Golden Opportunity

The air was so cold it burned his lungs on the first breath. London was covered in snow, Kensington High Street had an extra layer. Rupert, carrying Virginia, with George following pushed their way through the drifts to Oblivion's door.

Inside, Rupert sat Virginia on the counter. George headed for the office.

"I don't want to be here, I want my mother!" wailed Virginia.

Rupert took no notice of her but went to the cabinets and quickly sorted through them, opening and banging doors until he found what he wanted, bags of gold dust and an empty gold bottle. He fused the orchid from the swamp with a few other ingredients.

George had returned from the office.

"Power's off, can't fax," George said to Virginia, "I'll flag a taxi for you."

"Stay here!" Rupert's calm and confidence gave George pause.

Rupert went outside, brushed the snow from the frozen bench in front of the shop. The street was deserted. A few snowflakes drifted lazily in the yellow light of the street lamp. The moon hung low on the horizon and dawn brought a soft dove tone to the sky.

George tore the paper off the front window and peered out. Rupert rested a moment to breath in the fresh smell of the cold dawn, savoring its brisk minty bite. His head cleared.

Rupert tore open the bag of gold dust and set it on the bench. He got up and took a few steps from the bench, then turned to face it. He pulled out the bottle and held the stopper between his fingers, ready to uncork it.

He went deep into his thoughts about the last few days. He pictured Lowelle helpless on the dais, he heard the Creole's song, he saw the snakes bite the black horse. His blood began to boil. Auknot used not only humans who could choose. Auknot used helpless animals and birds in his slave service. It was cruel, the animals had no choices.

Rupert liked the Harpy, why did it have to do Auknot's bidding? Rupert smelled smoke through his resentments. The Reverse Transport was working.

Rupert opened his eyes and stared straight into the emerald eyes of Auknot, hovering over the bench, flashing with lightning.

Rupert pulled the stopper out of the bottle.

First an inhale. The very breath of God. The smoke of Auknot seemed immune to the bottle's inhale.

Rupert waited patiently. More smoke appeared. Auknot's form was outlined in smoke that turned to steam as it hit the freezing air. Auknot's breath appeared through a smoky nose and mouth. The bottle exhaled.

Rupert grabbed a handful of gold dust. The wind swirled out of the bottle. Rupert twisted it into a mini hurricane and brought it in close. He was in complete control of the hurricane. It sucked the smoke of Auknot and Rupert inside a funnel.

Auknot was laughing until his smoke entangled with the wind and twisted around them. Auknot yelled in agony. Rupert threw a handful of gold dust into the air and grabbed another handful.

It settled on the spot where Rupert expected Auknot's form to be. An outline appeared. Rupert threw more gold dust again and again.

A gold form was solidifying. Rupert manipulated the bottle until it tightened the hurricane around Auknot's emerging form only.

A gold hand reached out of the swirling mass to grab at Rupert. Rupert ducked. Auknot's face, dusted in gold looked out, searching until he found Rupert's eyes. The emerald eyes cut fear into Rupert's heart. Rupert tightened the funnel again. In a few seconds the face was sucked back inside.

A great yell was muffled by the wind, "Ayeee!"

Something heavy hit the cobblestone walk with a clunk. Rupert put the stopper back in the bottle. The wind dissipated, the funnel disappeared. What was left was a gold statue. His arms rose in defiance at the sky. Peacock headdress, pharaoh's garb, all in solid gold. And those emerald eyes- they were now dead glass, even in the sunrise.

A muffled cheer went up from behind the window. Virginia and George rushed out the door. They laughed and wiggled and stuck tongues out in the direction of the statue of Auknot. George helped Rupert drag it inside.

Rupert cut the celebration short. Rupert knew they didn't have long, maybe less than hours, before the Archangel was on their trail. With Auknot powerless, the Archangel now had his

abilities restored. As if in answer to his thought, a few threads of Martyr's hair that still clung to his jacket wriggled.

Rupert pictured the Archangel bursting out of his red stone cocoon and gathering his horses and cage to come for Rupert. He brushed off the shreds of Martyr's hair and shuddered at their ability to come alive again.

He didn't have to wait. He felt the transport begin. Where was the Archangel transporting him to? He sniffed the murky air. Swamp? He couldn't be at the Creole's cabin could he? The gold statue of Auknot was swirling along beside him. They slid along over tree tops, startling birds.

The cabin was below. The statue dropped straight into the water, causing a giant splash. Rupert heard stirring among the trees; he could just make out the outlines of Troops and horses. Rupert watched the gold form disappear beneath the surface in the moonlight, and he braced himself for his own fall into the treacherous water.

Where was the cage? He squinted and spotted something behind the cabin. Between the trees, he could see it was a new cage, floating behind white horses. It wasn't made of iron, it didn't have Martyr's hair ropes. To his horror, it was made of the Martyrs themselves, bloodied at the neck and holding hands. Their hair floated out and joined together to form the top of the enclosure. Rupert couldn't think about the fate that awaited him. He closed his eyes.

When he opened them, he was standing in the cabin's main room.

Archangel Bergen rocked in a rocking chair by the stove. Red cocoon gone, he looked like the ordinary businessman Rupert had taken him to be the first time they met at Bergen's Grove.

Rupert felt a fool. He had no weapons, no bottles, no scents to use on his foe. The front door banged open behind them. Footsteps tromped across the room, Rupert expected brawny troops.

It was George, Virginia trailed behind him.

“Getting too good at this reverse transport thing, eh boss?” George said. Rupert blushed with shame at his predicament.

“Virginia, I’ve done it! Saved humanity from...,” Rupert said.

“From your own formula,” Virginia spouted, “all of you angels are a disgrace!”

“Quiet!” the Archangel Bergen commanded.

Virginia glared at her stepfather and crossed her arms.

“Virginia, I do owe you an apology and an explanation, but first I think I need to show you I’m sincere by giving your guardian angel his due.”

Rupert’s stomach sank. Why hadn’t he gone with Lowelle? At least she wasn’t here, sparing him the humiliation in front of her.

“Do you have anything to say?” Archangel Bergen asked Rupert.

No one moved. Moisture dripped off moss outside. Rupert flashed through his life, what could he offer as a defense? He hadn’t done what he was told at school, he hadn’t paid attention to his assignment with the horses and they had died, he spent day after day and night after night on earth pursuing that which made him wild with passion, scents- fragrances- perfumes- pure essences of odor -all passions. All to escape the true purpose of angels- serving humans directly.

What good had he done? He had hidden in Oblivion, amassing formulas. He had started fires with his angry smoting mind. He had put chasing after Lowelle first instead of finding Ezra

and helping Virginia, he hadn't treated George like a real apprentice and had no intention of doing so, he had fallen for the Night Blooming Cereus as surely as other angels had Objects of Fascination on earth that got them in trouble, and in the end, yes, in the end he had been willing to break every rule -which to be fair he didn't really know in the first place- to save his friends instead of spreading universal love and answering human prayers. He even let George lie to SCOD about answering Virginia's prayer, never mind she was standing in the room, and never mind he had committed Unholy Commerce twice, once to free Ezra and also in front of the Archangel by promising to help Auknot enslave all humanity.

Rupert was doomed.

"I don't care what you thought," Virginia screamed at her stepfather, "you can't just smash into someone's life like that!"

"I'm sorry Virginia, you're right. I didn't know about you when I assumed the body of Bergen. He had died of a heart attack and I had only moments. We were looking for a way to fight Auknot. I needed Bergen's wealth and position in this world. I never meant to harm you! It was the last thing I would want," the Archangel was losing ground, "we didn't realize at the time that he had proposed to your mum just then."

"But you did hurt me, and there is no way to take it back now," Virginia cried.

"As soon as I found out about you, I decided to stay, to live out an entire life as your step father," Archangel Bergen said.

"And what about Mum, she doesn't even know what you are, which is a big bully liar for your own selfish reasons!" Virginia said.

“May I interrupt?” Rupert said.

“No!” Virginia and Bergen replied together.

“You offered me a chance to plead my case,” Rupert said.

“You might as well let him because I’m through with you both!” Virginia retorted. She stomped out of the cabin.

“I’ll see what I can do,” George said to the Archangel.

“Verified Unholy Commerce aside, I can’t imagine anything that could possibly convince Virginia you’d be an acceptable guardian angel,” the Archangel said to Rupert, “but what have you to say?”

“I know why I was created!” Rupert said.

“Don’t try to convince me that it was to stop Auknot,” Archangel Bergen said.

“No, no, it’s *how* I’m to serve humanity,” Rupert said.

“Do tell, you’ve finally discovered you are to serve humanity? This is the same humanity you’ve sold into slavery? Yes?” Bergen replied.

“No, I know I made mistakes but it was because I wasn’t doing *what* I was supposed to be doing, *how* I was supposed to be doing it,” Rupert said.

“This is supposed to be a plea against Unholy Commerce?” the Archangel answered, “A plea to the very person you disabled with your created gift?”

“No, no, you’re not understanding. I’m supposed to be serving humanity by using my gift of potions! Not answering prayers,” Rupert’s argument wasn’t nearly as elegant as he had imagined.

“Your plea makes no sense and is not one of those allowed in a case of Unholy Commerce, where did you go to school?” Archangel Bergen continued, “Plea denied. Please just go to the cage and not create any more charges or cause me any more problems with Virginia.”

Rupert couldn't believe it, denied? This was the *Creator* we were talking about here, and the *Creator's* intentions.

George brought Virginia back into the cabin.

“I've decided,” Virginia announced.

“Decided what?” asked Archangel Bergen in a darkening mood.

“If Rupert can do it, so can I,” Virginia said.

Rupert held his breath. This didn't sound good.

“Do what?” Archangel Bergen asked.

“Get past what you are. You can't help what you are, that's just the way it is. Like Rupert got past what the Creole was, a most despised being; a flawed human that needed help. If Rupert could find enough compassion for the Creole to risk his life to allow Jordan Rivers to choose to be Jordan Rivers, I can forgive you enough to let you be my stepfather,” Virginia said.

Rupert wasn't sure this helped his case but it was true, he had felt compassion for the Creole for being a human, and it had made easy the risk he took holding the Demon's tongue long enough to allow Jordan Rivers to choose his name.

Archangel Bergen held his arms out to Virginia who ran into them for a big hug.

“I've been quite worried about you and this is the best thing that could happen to me,” Bergen said.

Virginia then turned to Rupert.

“And I forgive you too. George explained that it wasn’t your training to be a guardian angel and about how the flowers are special for you, I’m like that about them too,” Virginia said.

Rupert didn’t know how to respond. He just shook his head in gratitude that someone had understood him.

“You can come to my greenhouse again sometime, can’t he father?” Virginia went on.

“Well,” Archangel Bergen was slightly peeved at this last forgiveness.

Virginia gave him a stern look, “What are you worried about now?”

Archangel Bergen replied, “I’m not worried about a thing, not a thing,” He put his arm around his stepdaughter.

Virginia winked at Rupert, “Then I guess all my prayers are answered.”

Archangel Bergen looked from the smiling Virginia to Rupert.

After a long moment, he said, “Rupert’s answered your prayer? Then I guess the case against him for not answering must be dismissed.”

Rupert breathed a sigh of relief.

“I’m convinced you’ve learned compassion for humans, but the Unholy Commerce is another matter, only SCOD can forgive that charge,” the Archangel said.

The Troops hauled Rupert to the Cage over Virginia’s protests.

Chapter 31

Smoke and Light

George, in his new job of Advocate, argued Rupert's case to SCOD.

SCOD eventually dismissed over a technicality. No one could prove Auknot was real. No one had seen anything but smoke and lights. There was no trace of a statue, and Rupert couldn't be convicted of contracting with a smoky illusion or even a mechanical Harpy. Nouredine Hamchali had disappeared and there was no trace of Cyryzma to be found. The Archangel was satisfied that the Divine Order was now restored.

Upon his release, Rupert set about revitalizing Oblivion with a grand spring opening.

Virginia visited often, bringing him new specimens she had grown in her vast network of greenhouses.

When Virginia was old enough, the Archangel's Bergen persona had a sad but natural passing and the Archangel resumed his duties from the Hidden Universes.

Rupert sent messages via George to the Hidden Universes for Lowelle. But he didn't hear back from her. Ezra's courage in living without Fiona all the years Rupert had known him served as a model for Rupert to go on without her.

About the Author