

Remedy – Sample Chapter

K.J. Simmill

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Fiction:

The Forgotten Legacies Series:

Darrienia

The Severaine

Remedy

The Dream Walker (working title)

Non-Fiction:

Herbal Lore

To the Gods, both old and new.

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Chapter One

The Treasure Hunter

Dawn approached, not caring for those who would be bound by its spell. Most would celebrate the first glimmer of light as it cast hope upon a new day, others would mourn the losses of the night; and then there was Rob. For him the encroaching dawn was like the sand of an hourglass, trickling away precious seconds. Where he stood when the final grain fell, and light touched the unseen horizon, would decide his fate. Life or death. Victory or defeat.

Time was of the essence, and too much had slipped away since he had first entered this domain. Even now he found himself being driven deeper into the twisting labyrinth, rather than seeking an escape. But still, he had to hold on to the belief that a portal was within reach. He would not survive being sealed within The Depths of Acheron. The pressure of every passing second bore down on him with crushing force, adding to the fatigued burning that spread throughout his exhausted legs. His lungs screamed for air as he ignored his body's desperate cries for rest. How could it ask that of him when to stop would be to die? Those things, the ones living within the tunnels, were close behind. The scraping of their dull claws on the stone surface echoed through the warrens. But there was light ahead, an opening. He could but pray he would find himself somewhere familiar.

His momentum should have sent him plummeting to his death. It was only by sheer luck the ore lining the ledge's edge had caught the flickering light from his torch. But it had left very little time to react. His feet skidded, giving those precious few seconds required to turn and grasp at the stone ledge as he fell. His knuckles turned white under the exertion. Digging his feet into the wall his gaze turned downward, tracing the path of his torch as it spiralled through the air to leave a glowing trail of smoke and cinders. Despite the countless journeys to this domain, and the horrors witnessed, he was somehow unable to accept this scene. Below stood the abandoned ruins of a stone city, larger than anything he had before encountered. The creatures hissed and snarled from within their darkened shelter, yet did not continue to pursue him. They remained within their territory as if they were fearful to trespass further.

Below, the city's spired buildings and domed roofs stood tall, draped in moss and vines causing the once pale stonework to grow dark with age. The area seemed undisturbed in what, he hoped, was an indication of its long-standing abandonment. Straining his ears he listened for sounds of life, for evidence of things dwelling below. The silence was unnerving. Either this city had been deserted as its first impression implied, or something silent prowled the ruined and darkened streets.

Even at their greatest the craftsmen of his own domain could not construct such beauty. The stonework shimmered with metal, yet woven within, like mortar or binding, vines and roots burrowed. They secured large blocks together in such a manner that deliberate construction was the only plausible answer.

The city had been crafted in natural balance. Its design sung of an affinity between magic and man. The people who had once dwelt within the walls, those who could combine opposing forces and marry them in grand displays of harmony, possessed a talent that would leave wielders of the

arcane in awe. Rob wondered what had become of these grand architects; it was unclear if they had been driven from their homes or simply been seduced by the bestial nature of all within this domain. Had they cast aside the final shreds of their humanity, leaving their structures to become one with the darkness?

This city had been left to ruin. With its masters' absence, nature had once more grown dominant, slowly reclaiming parts of the land. The weight of heavy vines and fungi causing stone to collapse and metal to rust. The city was growing, yet at the same time was plagued with decay.

Narrowing his eyes Rob studied the rooftops. Dark smears revealed silver shimmers of reflected light, some scattered with stripped bones suggesting his concerns about the silence were founded. A nest, perhaps, but certainly a hunting ground of some description. But to what he couldn't be certain. There were no clear marks to allow him to formulate an educated guess. Rob swallowed, recalling his pursuers' reaction to this area. He suppressed a shudder, trying to imagine the predators of those from within the tunnels. Those creatures had evolved into carnivores, everything about them had indicated dominance. Yet it seemed there was something here even they had cause to fear.

Distant sounds echoed through the darkness causing him to turn his focus upwards. Bioluminescent fungi grew in crevices and hollows found within the sheer cliffs, crudely and poorly casting light and shadows. The minimal lighting revealed only towering walls of darkness where the large glowing spores became pinpricks of light, like stars on a clear night, stretching up into an expanse he could not even begin to fathom.

He tried to relax, telling himself the grueling chorus of shrieks coasting on the almost undetectable breeze were far away, carried to his alert senses by the echoes they rode upon. But the tightness spreading across his chest, and the prickling of the hairs at the nape of his neck, warned him his instincts believed otherwise. For the briefest moment the area seemed darker, like a cloud had covered the sun; but here there were no clouds, no sun, no sky, at least none that he had seen.

His grip trembled, his body flinched in response to a strange, eerie cry. The natural flickering light from above was masked by a shadow almost as haunting as the noise which now filled the air. Of all the sounds within the world he could attribute this to none. The shriek contained an almost bestial roar within its guttural depths, as if more than one creature cried from the throat of the being.

Pinpoints of light continued to fade as more complex and ear-piercing screeches echoed their response. Rob felt his tense limbs spring into action, carrying him down towards the rooftops below. There, he could at least seek shelter. With every downward step his chest and stomach grew tighter. His heart pounded with a deafening roar, one almost loud enough to conceal the ever-nearing cries. If he had any hope of escaping he needed to be heading upward, not being forced constantly lower. If he failed to reach an exit before dawn he, like his fate, would be sealed. He would not survive the twenty-eight days it would take for the portals to once more materialise.

Horrible wails reverberated, announcing that the circling creatures had seen him. Their large leathery forms swooped closer before veering away from the wall that briefly deterred them. It would not be long before they adapted their approach. He quickened his descent, his eyes burning from his refusal to blink. He could not die, not down here.

Rob adjusted his position as the first of their talons fixed upon the wall, twisting its enormous frame to begin a vertical pursuit. He aligned himself with the closest rooftop and braced for impact as he pushed himself away from the stone cliff face. He would be exposed for a short time, but if he picked his route with care the shadows and spires could be used to his advantage. Louder, more excited cries, filled the air at his sudden and unexpected movement. Twisting as his body struck the roof he attempted to roll, losing traction against the coat of thick green residue which seemed to cover a smooth surface beneath. He heard the unmistakable sound of a crack before his eyes caught sight of the webbed damage spanning out from the place he had first impacted.

Regaining his footing he carefully began to move, his mind warning him of the dark circling

forms above. He fixed his vision to the expanding fractures. His disruption of the algae revealed nothing but darkness below and, perhaps, a slight hint of reflected light. Each shift of his weight caused the cracks to expand further.

Rob looked upwards, readying his crossbow as he lifted it from the clasp on his belt. Its tether momentarily twisted around his arm as he tried to find the correct bolt. He dared not avert his eyes from the descending creatures. The walls rippled with their movement, their numbers immeasurable through the darkness, and more circled overhead. He loaded the bolt, feeling the floor physically shudder beneath his feet. Cries echoed from above and, with no salvation in sight, Rob closed his eyes launching himself upwards, using his momentum to land heavily on the fractured roof.

The glass shattered beneath his feet, cascading with him down into the large open space below. He prayed, to any who would listen, that his eyes had not deceived him. The shadows of the circling creatures grew larger, their clawed talons scraping on the rooftop, scratching new paths for light to penetrate as they fumbled to find their footing before taking to the air once more. He saw the ripple of thick algae-coated water below him, the source of the slight reflection of light he had seen from above. The heavily decaying stench caused bile to rise in his throat as his form broke the stagnant surface. He fought his way through the thick fluid, gasping for breath, gagging as the odour penetrated his nostrils.

All fell silent, except for the sound of Rob pulling himself from the dense and putrid waters, and onto the slate floor. His hand stirred the sleeping moss, which grew in thick and sporadic blankets, causing shimmers of light to expand outward from his location. For the briefest moment it illuminated the area as its light chased throughout the temple before extinguishing to leave only that in contact with him aglow. Each leaf and capsule activated those within its mat, bathing the area with a gentle green light in a display of nature's own magic. His movements sent invisible spores to pass along silent communication between the capsules, ensuring the gentle blooms lit his path whichever way his feet staggered.

Rob's eyes fixed on what he hoped would be an exit. He needed to get out of here. The darkness that shrouded the room bordered on the unnatural and, in this realm, darkness truly was a thing to fear. It was the flesh and blood of nightmares.

Shadows played as light from above was obstructed by the still-circling hunters. The area was enormous. The tall ceilings were supported by thick columns, larger and wider than most modest dwellings he had seen. The giant cylinders, embossed with images he could not discern through the gloom, made him feel tiny, insignificant. He leaned against the nearest pillar, resting for a moment. He could see very little, but there were enough implications to suggest it could be a place of worship. The grandeur, and time such a construction would have taken, was likely only to be the result of dedication, or servitude.

Rob swallowed, his eyes narrowed almost certain that the darkness had become more tangible. His rising fear was a subtle reminder of his predicament. The familiar glow of moss once more chased throughout the temple before centring on a distant point, adding a depth and length to the room he had not thought possible. The subtle illumination became overpowered by the shifting darkness, as if the shadows themselves worked in twisted unison to quell the light. But the more this spiralling mass advanced, the larger the guiding carpet became. He felt his chest tighten as the mosses' influence expanded further, quicker. Something was coming. His feet slipped in the dank fluids pooled around him as he began his retreat. Turning his back on the moss, but unable to ignore its growing luminescence, he forced his trembling legs into action.

His elongated shadow began to expand before him, warning of the closing proximity, but he dared not glance behind. He knew to behold his pursuer would be to seal his fate. Fixing his sight forwards, he focused on the small ray of light he hoped marked his escape.

Each rapid breath was perfectly timed with the hard impact of his boots upon the floor. The light at his own feet was slowly being overpowered from the increasing glow behind him. A light that was not fading, but growing ever larger to become visible in his peripheral vision.

The glimmer of metal reflecting in the expanding light caught his attention just moments before his damp hand slid down the surface of an overly large door. Within it, clearly illuminated, lay a smaller, locked door. Taking his dagger he wedged it between the securing bolt. The trembling of his hands forced him to muster control over his panicked breathing, but fear warned him of the increasing darkness of his shadows. The three perfect copies, one from each angle of expanding light, were growing more solid, darker, warning him how near his pursuer drew.

With great effort he forced his gaze to remain steadfast on the bolt. Tensing his muscles against the tremors he prised it from the wooden structure, the echoing sound of metal set his nerves further on edge. He shoved the door, surprised how easily it opened as he tumbled forwards into what would have once been a street. Scrambling to his feet he hastily slammed the door, pressing his body firmly against it until his commonsense caused him to question the use of such an action.

Rob's frantic vision searched the area before him. Whilst he could have marvelled at the eloquence and beauty of the buildings, which lined the cracked paved streets, his mind had turned to survival. He beheld only shelter and shadows, where brilliant structures and architecture were in abundance. His footsteps echoed, the only sound through an otherwise silent tomb.

Dark buildings towered over him, their blackened windows not quite concealing the flickers of movement his mind warned him came from within. The hairs on the back of his neck began to prickle, causing him to glance upwards as he took shelter beneath one of the many archways that littered the winding streets. The small voice in the back of his mind, the one he often trusted to keep him safe, told him the portal was higher, that he needed to gain height, and quickly. He called this voice commonsense. The portals were always close to the surface. But he was a stranger to this area. With the vast monuments he could see little before him, although the roaring of water cascading down from one of the aqueducts became increasingly more prevalent.

He followed this sound until his sight fell upon a central reservoir. The amount of water being deposited was a clear indication that only a small portion was visible above ground. Edging forwards, confident the roaring of water would disguise his rapid footfall, he worked his way up what appeared to be a stone staircase beside the thundering torrent. It was only on closer inspection that he noticed the water descended an identical structure, separated from this one by a small channel. He looked above, hoping the dry texture of this stone signified its lack of use.

Crouching near the top of the aqueduct he surveyed the area. The bridges were joined, creating a complex outer ring to the basin this city had been constructed within. Several channels, similar to the one he had just climbed, descended in various locations, all depositing the water collected as it cascaded down the basin's cliffs from numerous sluice gates. Small sections of the outer ring had crumbled away, sending waterfalls crashing down into unseen depths.

He walked the stone canal, keeping constant vigil on his surroundings as he followed his new path over the city. As yet he could not discern a way to scale the basin; but there was bound to be something near the outer ring, a means to access the sluice gates in case of failure. He just needed to find it.

The aqueducts forming the outer ring were larger and wider than the one he had so carefully walked. He felt safe upon its thick stone platform, but still his pace never faltered. He felt the staggering clumsiness of each hurried step. His body visibly recoiled as the familiar wail sounded from above.

He forced his limbs to work harder, his stomach tightening as the roar of water from the damaged bridge before him grew louder. The waterfall, seeming so small from his initial vantage point, now appeared in all its splendour, ever growing, monstrous. The cries from behind forbade him from rethinking his path, but the almost inaudible churning of heavy waterwheels below warned of and equally fatal danger. He would rather attempt this jump than offer himself as a feast.

His feet left the bridge. Every muscle tensed, adding extra force to the leap, but still he knew it would not be enough. Grasping his crossbow tightly he let out a cry, drawing the attention of

his pursuers, spurring them into action before they lost their prey to the depths. He released the bolt as the first shadow sailed above him. The agonised cry came as audible evidence his aim had been true. He rotated his hand, securing the tether as the rope grew taut. The struggling efforts of the creature lifted him higher as it attempted to flee. Water whipped around him as he was dragged through the spray, his grip remaining firm as the creature continued its frantic flight.

Gasping for breath Rob scrutinised the area below, noticing for the first time the thick heavy chains which operated the counterweights to open and close the sluice gates. They had cleared the break, and covered a surprising distance given the obvious fatigue of his carrier. Pulling himself up he unhooked the tether before uncoiling it from his grasp, hoping his judgement was correct. He braced himself for impact, rolling as he struck the ground. With barely enough time to confirm his path he rolled again. Putting extra force into the movement he propelled himself from the aqueduct towards one of the chains, hoping he had gauged it correctly. He fell several feet before his extended arms impacted with the chain. He could but hope his pursuers had thought him lost to the currents below.

He dared not pause to catch his breath. He had to push onward and upward to what appeared to be a dark ledge above the sluice gates. Reaching it was his only hope of escape. Grasping the thick chain in his hands he used the large links as a ladder, knowing if negotiated correctly it would shield and protect him while he climbed.

When he had scaled half the chain's length he felt it shudder beneath his weight. From above the sound of grinding gears began to echo. He closed his eyes briefly, before redoubling his efforts. The leathery beating of wings and the flurry of movement below caused his stomach to lurch in time with the chain. Whilst some of the sluice gates seemed to remain permanently open, others appeared to release when the pressure reached a required force. Their timing most likely calculated to ensure the continued movement of the great waterwheels he had seen within the aqueducts. It made sense, people with the ability to erect such a place would also incorporate a method to ensure water could gather to the strength needed. It also made sense that a newly opening source would attract predators. Not only water would be carried from the land above.

Rob tightened his grip as the mechanism shuddered once more before dropping slightly. He turned his attention to the chain running parallel to his own. His had lowered as that one had risen. With a deep intake of breath he tentatively transferred his weight across to the rough surface of the corroded wall, not fully releasing his grasp until he was certain it was safe. As quickly as he dared he edged across, his fingers and feet utilising water-worn ridges and crevices.

The grinding sound echoed again, sending a flurry of shadows from below up into the air, racing upwards past him as the wall at his fingertips began to grow damp. A second wave followed, the force of their movement knocking him off balance and into the flock. Their rapid movement battered him as he fell, knocking him aside until he felt the force of the chain strike him. He clawed desperately at the metal, wrapping his limbs around the link and tightly interlocking them until all movement from below had halted. His body protested against the prolonged exertion and injuries, while his adrenaline, coupled with his mind, channelled it away to be dealt with at a later time. Right now he could only focus on surviving.

It was only once he fully regained his balance he became aware of the roaring sound of the water, and the gradual rising of the chain as the gate opened the remaining way. The creatures played, delighting in catching their live prey as they raced up and down the cascading waterfall feasting on all caught within its currents.

When the chain's movement stopped he was still several feet from what he had thought was a ledge. His stomach tightened as he realised the darkness had been formed by a change in the rock's stratum, giving the impression of depth. That left him only one option, the water tunnel. If the water was, as he believed, channelled from above, it had to enter from a portal of some description. If he followed the tunnel perhaps he could find an escape.

The water had begun to slow, indicating its resources had been depleted. Rob was certain this meant the gate would soon close once more. Before he had time to reconsider he reached out

towards the wall, working his way across towards the gated opening. Like the city below it was large, the gaps more than adequate for him to force himself through and land arms first in the shallow water that remained undrained. He waded through the ankle deep water. Its gentle current, while forceful, was not enough to delay him.

The tunnel was short, ending abruptly with a stepladder leading down into a cylindrical passage. His heart hammered in his chest as relief swelled through him, looking down he could see the night sky, and a familiar arrangement of stars. He scratched his head for a moment, frowning. He had never seen a portal such as this one before, one where his own world was inverted. Jets of water erupted, entering the tunnel in small angled sprays as he wondered how he could escape the portal when the gravity of his own world became the dominant force. That was something he could address shortly, for now, there was no more time to delay. With a deep breath, and still weighted with concern, he jumped.

Rob saw the sky rushing towards him. His arms flailing in panic, not even realising the sky was a reflection until he broke the water's surface. The portal had exited near the churning paddle blades of an old waterwheel, sending him tumbling into the river below.

The raging currents battered and pulled him towards the turning wheel. Surfacing, he gulped for air trying desperately to break free of its snare and swim to the shore. The currents dragged him down, the churning motion of the mill audible even through the silence of the water. He struggled against the seething undertow. His limbs burned and energy rapidly diminished as he fought the slow, painful battle until his knees struck the incline of the riverbed. His fingers clawed at the river's bank as he pushed himself forwards until his trembling arms gave way beneath him.

Rob dragged himself up, still lying partially in the river as his strength faded. He was aware of the icy coldness of the lapping water, but lacked the strength to move. Then finally, with great effort, he managed to turn over. His eyes became transfixed on the rhythmic turning of the waterwheel. The strange sound of the moving water gripped his attention as it cascaded from the paddles to fall into the portal he had only moments ago emerged from.

He let his head fall back onto the muddy riverbank, savouring each painful breath as his gaze lingered upon the softening shades of the sky. The sounds of the dawn chorus sang in harmony to the water's own music as it returned to its natural rhythm. Relishing the morning's cold touch upon his damp and shivering skin he placed his right hand on the pocket of his battered tan jerkin. Feeling the weight of the bounty within he let out a deep, throaty chuckle.

* * *

It had been many years since Rob had last stepped foot in Elpída. There were as many reasons to avoid this temple as there were that drew him to its door. Yet here he stood, overlooking its grand design and marvelling at the gardens and out-buildings, all of which had thrived in his absence.

Elpída was now the size of a small town. Once nothing more than a broken down temple had stood here. Now it had been revived, expanded, and its purpose adapted to give a home to the lost and orphaned, as well as becoming a respected schoolhouse.

The silence was unnerving, but it was not the first thing he became aware of as he stood, arm outstretched, at the temple's main doors. There was a reason he had not returned, why he sent his donations, or left them without crossing the threshold. Why had he thought today should be any different? Lowering his arm he pushed his hand deep into his jacket's pocket, removing a small coin pouch. He gauged its weight nodding to himself, before lifting the lid of the metal donation box and placing it inside. The lid closed smoothly without the betraying groaning sound of metal he had come to expect.

Rob's hand moved down the door, feeling the smooth grain beneath his touch. Part of him had hoped the box would betray his presence and see him welcomed within the walls. He wasn't sure he had the strength to enter alone. Reminded of the strange silence, he moved closer to the door, straining to hear the tell-tale signs of life as a sense of foreboding washed over him.

At this hour the temple should be busy. The morning prayers should have recently concluded, and the temple was normally filled with the unmistakable bustle of life. It was a schedule rarely

deviated from. Yet it stood shrouded in silence. As he listened he could hear but a single sound. The rhythmic scraping of a blade being sharpened on leather. Its never faltering pace warning of a well-practised hand. His stomach tightened as his deft fingers instinctively loaded a bolt into his crossbow before quietly placing it back on his belt. Whoever was inside would have realised someone had approached from the initial noise, but he hoped his silence assured them they had been left undisturbed. He closed his eyes, listening for the children, for any sound except for the one he heard.

Slowly he moved to the windows, attempting to peer through the plain glass. The drapes were drawn, obstructing his view of within. Surprise would be his only ally. With a prolonged exhale he braced himself before forcing his weight against the door, surprised when it gave with ease. The resounding impact of the wooden doors against the walls forced more adrenaline to race through his system as he prepared himself for the image he feared he would behold.

The echo of metal clattering across the floor immediately drew his attention to the rapid movement of the figure before him as she dropped to her knees. His fingers quickly slipped from his lever trigger as he beheld the scene before him. The metal pail, sent tumbling from her fearful reaction, rolled, soaking the wooden floor with its dirty contents. Kneeling in the spilt water, with her gaze fixed upon the floor, was a woman. Everything about her posture signalled submission. Her body was rigid with fear with startled breaths being drawn in quick succession. Despite her alarm she did not raise her head to look at the figure who had entered the temple so violently.

Rob allowed himself a moment to regain his composure. His own breathing calmed as he realised the danger had been imagined. He took these moments to study the figure before him. She was unfamiliar. Her white dress, now turning partially transparent around her knees as the water absorbed through the thin cloth, revealed her to be a novice. Dark stains and dirt blemishes told tales of her tireless labour.

Her fear of him was understandable. People like her were often the focal point of aggression, and his entrance would have done little to put her at ease. She sat in silence not daring to move, barely daring to breathe, as she awaited his approach. Rob saw her cringe as he began to slowly advance. Realising she flinched at the sound of each step he paused to study her further, aware that her reaction was the result of many years of conditioning.

Her long black hair had been carefully braided into a single plait. This once tidy presentation had become slightly unravelled by her labours, freeing small wisps from their bindings. Her hair was a dark contrast to her ivory complexion, an enchanting combination, especially when paired with her strong feminine jawline. Even Rob, who had travelled extensively, was unable to place her origins. But, aside from making her mysteriously beautiful, these traits were not the cause of her fear. It was unlikely, given her more obvious heritage, any would look on to see the beauty before them. This young girl was Méros-Génos. But never had Rob seen one with a feature as prominent as hers.

Most Méros-Génos—often referred to as Demi-humans or Demies by those trapped in archaic beliefs of superiority—possessed a trait of the creature their essence was bound to. This was normally a subtle quality. The pure, those thought to belong to bloodlines preceding the Titanomachy, could walk amongst humans unseen. Whilst the others were once dubbed Demi-human, and thought of as lesser beings by Méros-Génos and humans alike.

It was said the fusing of man and beast was a mistake in the release of souls ready to be reborn from the underworld. It was rumoured these souls, in life, had somehow tethered to another creature, drawing on its instincts and traits. When their souls were united at the Gate of Shades it cause the merging of the two.

Once this new soul was ready to be reborn it was different, no longer fully human. From the moment the life-force entered its intended vessel the fusing of it and the bestial essence altered the growth of the child, causing it to possess strange and unnatural characteristics which belonged to the animalistic aspect.

The joining of two Demi-humans, or Méros-Génos, often resulted in the birth of a child

sharing the traits of both parents. There were, however, rare occasions when two human parents would give birth to one of these 'impure' souls. Some would love the child. Others sought to be free of the burden through abandonment or sacrifice, and hope that their next child would not be tainted in such a manner.

The Demi-humans possessed more pronounced features, such as scales, claws, a tail or even bestial ears. But often such things could be hidden to shield their nature from those who would persecute them. The Méros-Génos, seeing in them a partial likeness, came to understand the Demi-humans. They realised that while created initially by magic and mistake they were no different in essence to themselves. Eventually they welcomed them as kindred spirits, hoping to be rid of the derogatory term. But such was not to be. Hate is far harder to quell than acceptance is to give. Their label was shortened further by the uneducated, and used as a term of degradation. A word uttered to describe the most worthless and detestable of Mankind.

The Méros-Génos, where possible, hid amongst the humans, concealing that which made them different. Some thought humans to be the lesser-species and created settlements of their own where they could live unburdened. But this young lady had no hope to walk amongst humans unseen. She had something Rob had never seen their kind possess before, wings. She would be an outcast to all. Destined to be labelled a harpy, and shunned by both races. These large appendages mirrored the darkness of her hair, and whilst almost Moiraic in their feathered appearance, their shade would ensure no one would confuse her with the benevolent beings thought to watch over and guide the people of this world.

"Good morning," Rob spoke softly, the deliberate gentleness of his tone causing the woman before him to raise her gaze to meet his. Her smoky grey eyes reflected the deep fear his presence caused; a fear still mirrored by her posture as she struggled to breathe. He offered her the warmest smile he could muster, before continuing to speak. "I am Robert Raymond. By chance does Iereia Sunniva have a moment to spare on a weary traveller?"

Cautiously rising to her feet the young woman folded her arms across herself. Offering a slight nod she began to back away, never taking her eyes from him until she reached the door. Only when her hand firmly grasped the handle did she turn, quickly making her departure.

* * *

Rob had not been left waiting too long, but even a few seconds alone with the statue of this temple's patron deity, Artemis, was enough to see him question his presence. The Iereia was a busy lady. She had better things to do than waste her time with him. He was beyond redemption anyway. His pacing steps had halted briefly, before continuing with fresh purpose as he made his way towards the exit. He could leave a note perhaps. His business was not so important that he should request an audience with the person who had constructed this haven from nothing.

"I see you are still adventuring." Rob cringed, his departure stilled as the familiar voice caught him in the act of retreating. He turned slowly, turning the corners of his mouth in a forced smile, but as soon as his sight fell upon her all falsities drained away. Sunniva, as always, carried herself with the grace of a queen. Her elegant steps created the illusion that she glided towards him, rather than walked. Without pause she approached, extending her slender arms around his torso to pull him into a warm embrace. The silk of her dress whispered against him as he raised his arms, returning her affection.

The welcome was brief. She pulled back wrinkling her nose, critically scrutinised his dishevelled appearance, and looked down upon her own once flawless attire. She shook her head slightly, picking the small pieces of debris from her own white dress, which had been transferred during their embrace. "I swear, Brother, it was not too long ago you announced the world was void of such escapades. 'Everything has been discovered and all that can be plundered has been.' Or words to that effect." She recited mimicking his voice terribly.

"True," he grinned, ruffling a hand through his brown hair. "But that was *before* the Severaine unsealed The Depths of Acheron. So much has happened in the last six years." Everything had changed the day the Severaine had broken free of its seal. Until then few had even known of its

existence. By the time the true danger was realised so much had already been lost, lives had been destroyed, and cities had been razed to the ground under its unrelenting power. The world had lived in fear, and the Gods had all but abandoned them.

His gaze turned heavy as he shifted his vision to stare beyond her, into a place only he could see. His face grew shadowed by torment. The glaze of his eyes showing the distance his mind had travelled even with such simple words. Sunniva allowed him this moment, it had been so long since last she had seen him, yet the past still haunted him relentlessly. "Oh well." He forced out the words with a heavy sigh, trying to dispel the regret. "Is it just the two of you today, you and—" Rob grasped for a name he now felt he should know. "Who was that Méros-Génos anyway?" he questioned. When he had first seen her there was nothing familiar, yet now he had the strangest feeling he should have recognised her.

"Yes just us. There's a traders' market in Estarc. Such things are good for the children. Some may earn apprenticeships, and the younger ones enjoy the festivities," she explained.

"And the Méros-Génos?" He glanced towards the door, through which the young lady had made her escape. A small tugging sensation in the back of his mind caused his eyebrows to knit tightly together in a frown. He returned his attention to Sunniva, awaiting her answer.

"You truly have been gone too long if you fail to recognise your own niece. That was Taya, and shame on you." She waved her index finger as she scolded him lightly. Rob felt his stomach knot and his shoulders slump as her mention of the young lady's name brought a flood of remembrance.

"Taya Ethelyn, as I live and breathe. But she was just a," he gestured the height of a child. "My word, Sunni, have I really been gone so long a girl could become a woman?" Sunniva was unable to ignore the self-deprecating tone of his voice. She reached out to gently stroke his arm as his gaze returned to the door.

His mind filled with memories of the sickly child his sister had raised as if she were her own. But the woman he had met seemed far older than such memories would allow. Then again, he knew her life had been anything but easy. He scratched his chin in contemplation. He had stopped seeing his niece as a Méros-Génos long ago, but the sight of her in adulthood had come as a surprise. So much so he had been unable to recognise her.

"Sadly yes. It has been a long time since last you graced us with your presence, Brother. Last I recall you departed for Oureas' Rest, hoping for news. We haven't seen you since..." Sunniva's tone, like her eyelids, lowered with regret before her words trailed off into silence. She knew better than to bring up a past her brother so clearly still fought with and caused him to distance himself from these walls.

Even after all this time it seemed he was still unable to forgive himself, or perhaps he blamed her. Why else would he willingly keep so much distance between them? He had been distant for some time, but she knew her actions were as much to blame for their estrangement as his were. There had been times when she had seen him approach her door, but never had she opened it to welcome him. She had simply let him leave. There was part of her, in earnest, that understood his grief and willingly accepted the burden of his blame. He had sacrificed so much for her as they grew. His commitment to her had seen she could meet the required donations needed to train at the Acropolis. If not for him, she would have been unable to accept the destiny fate had placed before her.

"Six years," Rob's voice once again reduced to a whisper as he realised exactly how long had gone by. His fingers instinctively sunk deep within his jacket pocket, brushing the cool metal of the small object within. Its texture upon his flesh brought him both comfort and distress. "It seems like only yesterday," he reflected, quickly removing his hand from his jerkin as the dull flame of anger began to burn within the pit of his stomach. Six years. It had been six years and still he was no closer to finding what he sought.

Each month he risked life and limb on the whim of nobles, and not once had he even found the slightest indication he was close. Six years, wasted. He felt his nails digging into the calloused

flesh of his palms, his fist tightening slightly before he forced his hands to relax. "That would make Ethelyn what, twenty now?" He forced his mind away from his previous thoughts. They were dangerous, especially if fed. He needed to stay calm. Think and plan. The answer was waiting for him, he just hadn't come across the right person or rumour yet. There was still time, as long as he drew breath there was still time to make amends. Rob avoided Sunniva's concerned glance, taking the opportunity to divert his attention towards his backpack. He rummaged through its contents, focusing anywhere but on her.

"There about. It's hard to say for certain, she was so young when she was left at the door." Rob nodded slightly, he remembered the day well. His sister had been little more than a child herself when she became responsible for this temple, and Taya had been left at her door soon after.

"Is she staying with you then?" Sunniva knew exactly what her brother was asking. She ran an orphanage, and the children housed were expected to be self-sufficient by the age of seventeen. She would often help them find work their skills were suited for, and failing that, see them to Albeth Castle. Oureas' Rest was always grateful for labourers, and provided food and shelter for those who aided them. But Taya would not be welcomed in such a place. Whilst the Méros-Génos were accepted within their borders, they would not see her as such. She would be viewed as a monster, a threat.

"The situation with Taya is difficult. You know I think of her as my own. She is family to both of us. I raised her from an infant, how could she be anything else? I think of her as my own. Besides, even if I were to find somewhere willing to overlook her obvious disadvantage, how long do you think they would continue to tolerate her presence when her hallucinations returned? Most are not equipped to deal with one touched by the Maniae." Sunniva gave a heavy sigh. "I truly thought we were about to begin a new era, that at least some good would come from the devastation.

"I thought we would build a new world on the ashes of the old. A world where Demies and humans could unite. They worked together so well to rebuild after the Severaine. They stood united, shoulder to shoulder. How quickly the banner of unity was burnt when difference once more became the focal point. It seems relationships cannot be reforged as easily as iron and timber can."

"You're wrong. So many have willingly embraced the Méros-Génos. There are still extremes, and they fall to both sides. Unfortunately this island is one of them," Rob lamented, shaking his head slightly as he spoke.

"I honestly don't feel she would fare well. The people in this area alone show so little tolerance. Given the chance they would see her drawn and quartered before suffering her presence. Mothers scream at the sight of her, the young seek shelter behind the closest adult, and those are the more tolerant of attitudes." Sunniva glanced towards the door as she bit her lower lip. She could imagine Taya stood just on its other side, listening to their every word, probing their conversation for evidence of lies.

The precursors to a relapse had been evident for some time now, and her paranoia was unquestionable. The traders' market had come at an opportune moment. It allowed Sunniva the time she needed to try to quell the rising storm, but Rob's arrival here, as wonderful as it was, had only served to worsen things.

There would soon be little choice but to have her returned to *that* place. They could work the miracles she could not. She was but one person. Her ability to repress the unwanted thoughts was limited, but her stay with them was not yet due. She had to endure. She had to pray for the strength to hold the Maniae at bay a little longer. The safety of everyone under this roof depended on it.

"It must be difficult, for both of you," Rob acknowledged softly, his fingers seizing the item he had been searching for within the backpack. He presented the pouch to Sunniva with a smile less joyful than that he had managed before being reminded of the burden his sister bore. Sunniva opened the draw string slowly and marvelled at the small figurine within. The pearl figurine was

delicate and beautiful. The crafter had paid so much attention to detail that she could almost see the moon's reflection in the wolf's eyes. It sat in a baying position. Its pose indicative of once being part of a larger display, one no doubt involving Selene, as this was clearly intended to represent her wolf. "I retrieved this from one of my adventures. I thought it would be more at home in a temple than gathering dust on a collector's shelf."

"It's remarkable, we'll keep it safe. Thank you, Brother." He gave a dismissive shrug, as if to imply she should think nothing of his gesture. If she was aware of what he had endured to obtain it he would be more likely the recipient of another scolding, rather than the gratitude she currently offered.

"You can always sell it on if you find yourself in hardship. Such things fetch a good price on the market. On that note, I've added my donation to the box out front. It's overdue, like my visit. I'll stop by again once I've completed my current errand at the Plexus. I'm really proud of you, what you do for these children is remarkable." He encouraged the conversation to a point where his departure would be accepted, knowing if he didn't he could easily lose the day in her company and both of them had things they needed to attend to. He felt so at ease in her presence he questioned why he had postponed his visit for so long.

"Thank you, Brother, you have no idea what it means to me." She placed her hand on his, squeezing it gently before he turned to leave.

"Well, it grows late and I still have to report to the Plexus. Since there's the market in Estarc I'm best heading to Riverside Quay." He began to walk away, raising his hand in a parting gesture at the door. "I'll stop by again before I leave," he reaffirmed before pulling the door closed behind him.

After Rob had left, Sunniva lowered herself to her knees before Artemis, closing her eyes in silent prayer as she tried to gather her strength. Her conversation with her brother had exhausted her more than she had expected. So much had changed since last they spoke and it was essential he remained unaware of all of it. She was not in a position to answer his questions, and so, she had guided their conversation. In return she had been reminded of exactly how precarious the situation with Taya had become. Her next appointment at Mirage Lake was not scheduled for over a month, and despite her needs the escorts were unable to retrieve her any earlier. Perhaps, with her brother's arrival, there was another option. Assuming he stayed long enough.

Sunniva tried to force her mind into a state of calm, and allow feelings of peace and tranquillity to wash over her. A task made almost impossible by her awareness of Taya's presence near the threshold of this sacred space. Sunniva's training at the Acropolis had gone beyond that of those normally chosen by the Gods. She had been designated to a special purpose, and as such had been given her own private blessing. She had been privilege to insights others remained oblivious to and central to all was Taya.

The oppression of Taya's presence made recovering from her exhaustion more difficult. It left her weaker, and thus diluted her own attempts at treating her. In turn this resulted in Taya's unwanted behaviour gaining dominance. It was a vicious cycle, and one which often resulted in injury.

On more than one occasion Taya had nearly been successful in taking Sunniva's life, and would have been, if not for the intervention of those living within Elpída. They knew the dangers. Those within this temple had been carefully chosen to help with not only its normal operations, but the extra burden of Taya's condition.

Closing her eyes again she tried to find the recharging energy of peace, but instead found only silence. A silence which only served to remind her she was alone with Taya. For that brief moment, instead of the confidence and strength she felt just moments before Rob's visit, she felt only fear.