

WHERE THE SHADOWS PLAY

by Raymond T. Williams

Within the realms of the dead there is a place beyond oblivion, a place between Heaven and Hell, where souls go to wait out their judgment--limbo to some, purgatory for others, but a veritable playground for all things that dwell within the shadows.

Arken sat silently on a large rock, waiting for the unconscious young man that lay sprawled at his feet to awaken. A groan came from the young man, his hand started to twitch. Slowly his arms drew together and he pushed himself up onto his knees. The young man groaned again.

His whole body aching, he felt like he had been dropped from a great height. He opened his eyes and took in his surroundings.

“What the..?” he exclaimed, the sight that befell his eyes was like nothing he had ever seen before. It was pitch black yet there was a strange blue glow that illuminated everything it touched, highlighting the desert that stretched out before him, allowing him to see in the darkness.

Glancing around, he searched for the source. There was nothing. No moon, no stars, just a blue glow that emitted from nowhere and everywhere.

“You’ll get used to the light,” Arken stated from behind him. The young man spun around catching sight of Arken for the first time. He was tall and slender but well toned--an athlete’s physique. His skin was pale green, his eyes golden, and his deathly black hair stood about a foot straight up.

“Ahh! Who are you?” the young man screamed, falling back over himself.

“My name is Arken. I am your guide,” he hopped down from his perch on the rock, and with a slight smile, he reached out to help the young man to his feet.

“Get away from me! Don’t touch me” he said, scampering backwards.

“Now come on Steven, I told you, I am your guide,” Arken took a couple of steps toward Steven, grabbing him by the arm and lifting him to his feet with ease.

“Hey, I said don’t touch me,” Steven said, brushing his arm where Arken had touched him, “how do I know you’re my guide?”

“Ask anyone, they’ll tell you,” he replied as if it was obvious.

“Ask who? We’re in the desert, in the middle of the night. Who the hell am I going to ask?” he could feel the anxiety rising in his voice.

“Ask Bob, he’s just over there,” Arken thumbed back over to the rock where he'd been perched. As Steven looked over, he noticed a skull hovering about three feet from the ground.

“He does not lie to you my dear boy,” the skull confirmed in the voice of a person who had been well educated. Bob’s clear blue eyes reflected the light that surrounded everything. Steven froze, his eyes wide, his mouth hung low. After a few seconds he regained control and sprinted in the opposite direction.

Dodging rocks the size of dogs that seemed to jump out at him, he skidded left and right, finding it hard to keep his footing. Something about the blue light played with his senses. It was hard to judge distance, and something about the gravity was wrong. Suddenly

out of nowhere the ground fell away from him. Tumbling head over heels down a steep slope, Steven had the wind knocked out of him as he hit every rock on the way down.

Laying there dazed, a weight suddenly slammed into his back and pinned him to the ground. A hand covered his mouth and gripped his cheeks tightly.

“Don’t move, don’t make a noise, or we are both going to be in a whole world of pain,” Arken whispered in his ear, the tension in his voice clinging to every word. Steven turned his head slowly to look at Arken but what he saw beyond Arken was more disturbing than a floating skull. Along the face of the cliff in front of him there were over a hundred pairs of red orbs, a strange cackling sound filling the air around them. As Steven focused on the red orbs, he began to pick out silhouettes that the red orbs belonged to. Leathery wings flapped and stretched as the beasts prepared for flight, their deep throated calls to each other electrifying the air.

“They are preparing for a hunt. If we are lucky, they will fly right by us,” Arken whispered, still holding Steven’s mouth shut.

Then, like an avalanche into the sky, the beasts took flight, their call growing louder as they grew more excited, letting themselves freefall before spreading their wings and soaring out of the ravine. As they streaked past, Steven was able to get a clear view of them. They were slick scaled panther like creatures. Small curved horns protruded from their foreheads. They soared high with their huge bat like wings and searched the earth below through red glowing orbs of hate. The sky was their territory.

As the last beast flew off into the distance, Arken released Steven and helped him to his feet.

“What were they?” Steven’s voice quivered with terror.

“They are called ‘Cackurs’, one of the more dangerous denizens named after that cackling noise they make when they get excited about the impending kill they are about to make,” Arken searched the sky to make sure nothing was still hovering around.

“It’s lucky they didn’t see us, their vision is based mainly on movement. Come on, we have a fair walk ahead of us and we don’t want to be here when they come back.”

“Wait a second, I’m not going anywhere till I get some answers. Who are you? Where am I? Where are we going? What’s wrong with your skin and eyes? And what’s the deal with the floating, talking skull?” Steven’s voice reached an all time high by the end of his sentence and his breathing had become loud and staggering.

“Calm down, one thing at a time,” Arken focused on Steven and in an almost unnaturally calm voice explained, “as I said before, my name is Arken. I am your guide. I am a reverant, one of the undead unable to move on until I complete my quest, therefore, there is nothing wrong with my skin or eyes, not that you with your pink skin and brown hair can talk! You are in the middle of the Chakra desert on an astral plane know as Limbo. We are going to meet a very special lady, and Bob ‘the floating, talking skull’ as you put it, used to be a powerful wizard and is my friend. Now if you’re ready, I suggest we get moving,” Arken turned and started walking. Steven stood slack jawed then ran after him.

“What am I doing in Limbo?” Steven asked.

“When you died, you had neither been a completely good person nor a completely bad person, so your soul was sent here to wait for judgement and your actions while here will determine the outcome,” Arken explained as he powered on up the slope.

“My dear boy, you do ask a lot of questions don’t you,” Bob had caught up and was hovering at eye level with Steven, landing on Arken’s shoulder like a well trained parrot.

“If you’re such a powerful wizard, why are you just a skull?” Steven asked.

“Let me just say, I use to have a lisp and spells are very delicate when it comes to casting. The correct pronunciation is required for all words,” Bob gave Steven, who was struggling to hold back a grin, a warning glare. Bob turned away appalled by the cheek of their new companion.

The arid landscape passed by them, and strange animal calls cooed through the cool desert night. Steven caught glimpses here and there of some of the most unusual creatures he had ever seen.

“So Arken, how is it that you have come to be my guide? What do you get out of it?” Steven asked. Arken’s hand moved to his hip, his fingers finding the concealed blade, images flashed behind his eyes, images of pain and sorrow, and bloody hands. “Well?” Steven’s voice came again, bringing Arken back to the present time.

“I killed five men, sent their damned souls straight to hell,” Arken answered in a low, solemn voice. “Now I have to help five men to heaven before my judgment will be given,” his yellow eyes giving Steven a steely glare.

“You’re telling me you killed five people and you’ve still got a chance to go to heaven?” Steven gasped.

“They were all bad men,” was the only answer Arken offered.

“I never killed anyone and I’m stuck here, and my guide has murdered five men-- how’s that fair!”

“If you weren’t already dead it would be six,” a smirk creped across Arken’s face.

Ignoring Arken’s last comment, mainly because he wasn’t sure whether Arken was joking, Steven continued “What’s my great quest then?”

“We do not know. All the information we have been given is that you are to be taken to the crossroads. Now please cease with the questions,” Bob said, rolling his eyes in irritation.

“Crossroads? We are in the middle of the desert, there are no crossroads in the middle of the desert,” Steven said in disbelief.

“We’re here,” Arken said, stopping next to a seven foot tall boulder that was as wide as a man.

“Here? There is nothing here, just a stupid rock” Steven stood with his hands on his hips and looked around.

“Bob, if you wouldn’t mind, please show our friend the path.” With Arken’s request, Bob lifted off his shoulder, hovered in front of the boulder, did a quick once around and then facing Arken and Steven said, “Could you please take a step back, this spell can be a little temperamental.”

After they took a couple of steps back, Bob gave a little bow--the best a floating skull can do--turned back to the boulder and started to chant. The words were in rapid succession, bleeding into each other. As he continued his chant, he started to rotate around the boulder, Steven was unable to tell where one word started and another ended. The ground rumbled beneath them, and Steven looked around with his nerves on edge. Bob became a blur as the gravitational pull of the spell spun him.

Steven looked at Arken panicking, and the ground shook violently under him. His legs were preparing for the ground to fall away. Arken stood there calmly, arms behind his back, watching Bob work his magic. Cracks of light snaked around the boulder. With a thunderous boom that could have been mistaken for a solar system exploding, the boulder shot out a spear of light towards the heavens.

“There you are. The crossroads,” Bob said as he landed exhausted on Arken’s shoulder.

“That’s a crossroad?” Steven gasped in bewilderment, trying to see the top of the tower of light.

“It’s a crossroad for astral planes, a means for travelling from one plane to another,” Arken explained.

“Few know of their existence, even less know how to use them,” Bob added.

“Now what?” Steven asked, circling the tower of light.

“Now, you begin your quest,” a soft feminine voice said from behind him.

Spinning around, he saw a beautiful woman standing in a slightly see-through, pale yellow gown, her slender figure showing through. Her long, dark, wavy hair came to rest just above her waist, and her blue eyes shone like sapphires in silvery moon light.

“Who.. who are you?” Steven spluttered, the words tripping over themselves as they rolled off his tongue.

“My name is Hecate, Goddess of the Dead. I am the one who summoned you here for this matter of urgency,” she stated. Steven took a couple of steps forward. He noticed a growling noise getting louder as he stepped closer. When he was within a few paces of Hecate, a huge black dog stalked out from behind her, its teeth showing as a throaty growl rumbled forth. Its eyes were made of pure blue flames that flicked from its sockets. The dog stood between his mistress and Steven, all the muscles in its body tense, ready to attack in an instant. Steven took a slow cautious step back, his eyes darting left and right looking for support, two more pairs of flaming blue eyes made their way from behind the mysterious woman to either side, taking up their sentry position. Not daring to look away from the large dog standing practically eye to eye with him, Steven took another step back and in a tight voice that he tried to make sound calm, he told the dogs to take it easy.

“Don’t mind them, they just get a little nervous around strangers. Come, Cyprus, heel.” The giant dog stopped growling, looked back at its mistress and then eased itself down. Although it was sitting down, Steven could tell it was ready to pounce in an instant.

“Athens, Barbados, you too, boys,” she smiled at them. The dogs laid down resting their heads on their paws.

“They really are the most loyal of companions,” her voice as gentle as a summer breeze called to his heart.

“Why have you summoned me here?” he queried, wishing this meeting over as quickly as possible, the stare from the dog named Cyprus unnerving him.

“The daughter of a friend of mine has been kidnapped and to fulfil your requirement for a place in heaven I am giving you the task of freeing her from her captor.”

“What? Why me, I’m nobody special, can’t you and Arken do it by yourselves?” Steven asked.

“Unfortunately I can not go as my presence will be detected as soon as I arrive. You on the other hand have only just arrived on this plane and so far I have been able to cloud your presence from him. Now time is of the essence, you must take this task and succeed.”

“Whoa, you haven’t told me anything yet. Who is this kidnapper who’s so powerful he can sense your presence? And you still haven’t said why you choose me and not some other dead guy,” this time Hecate raised a hand that cut Steven short.

“Where you are going is the realm of fear and hate, a plane ruled by Hades. It is his castle you must sneak into to rescue Persephone, daughter of Demeter, Goddess of Spring. The decision in choosing you was timing, but fear not, you will not be alone in the quest. You will be accompanied by Arken, whose bravery is matched only by the skill of his sword. Bob-his words can protect you from what a sword cannot. Lastly, Cyprus will go with you as your guide through the underworld. He will be able to lead you to the castle and find Persephone once inside. Take this cloak and put it on before entering the city of Lathouras. Now go.” Steven took the bundle from Hecate and went to ask another question but felt his feet pull away from the earth. There was a flash and he was moving fast inside a tunnel of light. ‘No



wait,' he thought, 'I am part of the tunnel.' It was happening so fast, blue bolts of electricity flicked over his non-existent body as he moved in an unknown direction.

Before he had time to prepare, he was thrown from the light, the air was knocked from his lungs as he hit the ground, and the bundle given to him by Hecate dropped out of his hands.

Rolling over himself a few times, he caught a glimpse of a cliff as the world spun around him. Throwing his arms out and kicking his feet, he tried to stop his momentum but it was of no use. He could see the edge getting closer with each turn.

He saw a small rock sticking out of the ground. He reached for it, "Please God," he said as his fingers grabbed hold of it. His body kept moving as his right hand held tight, his legs skidded around so he was facing away from the cliff. For a second he saw Arken straighten himself up as the big black dog came leaping out of the light behind, 'obviously used to this kind of travel,' Steven thought. Then as gravity would have it, the momentum of Steven's body pulled his hand free and he skidded backwards.

He felt his feet go over the edge first, the sense of empty space sending a shiver up his spine, making him as stiff as a board. 'This is it,' he thought, 'no coming back, the final death,' his chest was making its way over the edge with his feet pointed downwards. Arken had taken a few steps forward and Cyprus was right beside him. They were running but it looked too be in slow motion. 'They aren't going to make it,' Steven thought and with that he was clear of the cliff. His whole body was frozen in fear, terror etched on his face. As the cliff rose above his line of sight, all sound left his ears, the only thing he could hear was the thumping of his heart. He watched the cliff face slide past only an arms length away, but a mile in his eyes. He closed his eyes for the last time and waited for impact.

His body jerked, his bones slammed together. "That wasn't so bad," he said to himself. He opened his eyes to see the cliff face still in front of him, 'I must be caught on something,'

he thought looking down. Nothing stood between Steven and forest below, all he could see was his dangling white legs. He looked up. Right next to his eye was the flaming blue socket of Cyprus, his teeth clenched tight on Steven's shoulder. Cyprus' front legs had come over the edge and were pressed against the side of the cliff, while his back legs struggled to stay on top.

Slowly Cyprus walked backwards up the cliff with Steven hanging in his mouth like a dead rodent.

When Steven was safely on solid ground, he sat for a moment to get his breath back. Gathering his lost bundle, he untied it and found a beautiful short sword wrapped within the cloak. The sword's hilt had three large dogs carved in it, which were inlaid with gold. Steven re-tied the rope, and hung the cloak over his shoulder like a sash. Strapping the sword to his waist he walked over to where Arken was giving Cyprus a rough pat on the back, which he looked like he was enjoying. Walking over to the big dog, Steven thought he would say his thank you in the same way, but as soon as he reached out, the loud growling rumbled forth again. Steven raised his hands and took a couple of cautious steps back.

After a short rest, they started moving towards a distant castle. Cyprus lead the way, sniffing the air intently for any foes the might be nearby. Bob and Steven were in the middle, arguing about how many questions Steven had asked in the short time they had been walking, while Arken brought up the rear, his slender pale green form moving stealthily over the rough terrain, blending in with the surrounding foliage, falling back every now and then to make sure they were not being followed.

“So, you're telling me all of Hell is like this, with denes forests, high humidity, loud squawking demon birds and other god forsaken monsters that wish to eat me?”

“Yes. Except for the city, Lathouras, where we are heading. Hell is a dense rainforest with humidity that high you could sweat your own insides out. There are a few tribes

scattered about but most civilized denizens, if you can call them that, live in or around Lathouras,” Bob informed him.

“Will you two please be quiet, we are in Slogarth territory,” Arken said stepping out from nowhere next to Steven, making him jump. Cyprus looked back and gave a soft growl in agreement.

“What the hell is Slogarth?” Steven queried.

“A Slogarth is like what you would call an ogre from where you were from. It is the size of a small tree with legs and arms as thick. While they are not very bright, they are very strong, they have razor sharp teeth and white lifeless eyes that will pierce your soul right to its core. They hunt in packs and look a lot like that thing over there!” Bob’s voice became a scream as he realised what he just said.

“RRUUUN!” Arken yelled, drawing his sword, “head to Lathouras.”

Arken faced the Slogarth, sword ready, muscles taught. The Slogarth came charging forward raising a giant spiked club above its head, ready to pound Arken. The club came crashing down with severe force. Arken took a small jump back. The club whistled past his head and thudded into the ground, the spikes burying deep.

Arken sprang forward. Leaping over the spikes, he landed on the base of the club and ran up the Slogarth’s arm, driving his deadly blade through its collar bone into its chest, slicing its lung.

The Slogarth let go of the club and with a thunderous roar swung for Arken as he leapt past, his bulky mass making him too slow to catch the nimble reverant. Clutching his shoulder with one hand, the Slogarth heaved the club out of the ground and swung at Arken’s head. Arken sprang behind a tree for protection. The club missed Arken’s head by inches and smashed right through the tree. Once again, Arken sprang forward while the club was still in motion.

As Arken ran past, he gave a few quick cuts to the tendons on the back of the Slogarth's legs, dropping it to its knees, but it wasn't about to give up the fight. With labouring breath the Slogarth leaned on its club, trying to prop itself up. As the lumbering hulk swayed, trying to gain its balance, Arken darted in again with a flurry of slashes across the huge creature's gut, spilling its insides. Arken watched as the Slogarth fell. When satisfied the creature was not going to get up again, he followed the path the group had taken.

Cutting his way through the forest, Arken caught up to the others. They had been cornered by three of the monsters, with their crudely fashioned clubs. 'Fools,' Arken thought to himself, 'I told them to keep moving towards the city.' Wanting to get an advantage, Arken stayed back from the action, concealing himself with the surrounding trees.

Cyprus was in front of Bob and Steven, growling with ferocity and snapping his huge jaws with enough force to break a man's arm every time one of the Slogarth's took a step closer. Steven stood at the back, holding his sword with trembling hands. Bob was hovering to Steven's left, and Steven could vaguely hear him chanting.

Arken watched for an opportunity to strike. Then it happened. Two white hot streaks of flame burst forth from Bob's eyes hitting the Slogarth which was closest to him in the chest, sending it stumbling backwards. Tripping over its own feet, it fell onto its backside with a thud, a huge burn now covering its entire chest. The creature in front of Cyprus charged forward, hoping to take advantage of the disturbance. It swiped with its huge club, trying to knock Cyprus off his feet. The black dog's eyes flared as it sprang out of the way and made a zigzag towards its attacker, dodging the oncoming swings with ease. Launching himself forward with his powerful hind legs, Cyprus collided with the attacking Slogarth. Landing on top of the huge monster's torso, Cyprus opened his massive jaws to show his sharp fangs and their impending doom to his victim. While Cyprus crushed down on its throat, the Slogarth punched Cyprus in the ribs, trying to knock the dog loose. This only made things worse for

the Slogarth as the dog's teeth clenched tighter with every blow, tearing away at the Slogarth's throat.

Cyprus gave a howl of victory, which was cut short by an explosion of pain in his chest. His feet were lifted off the ground and, before he knew what had happened, his body slammed into a nearby tree.

The Slogarth, which had sent Cyprus flying, raised its club above its head in a war cry staring at Steven.

As Arken left his place of observation, he saw the powerful blow that took down the large dog. Sprinting forward, he hoped to get there before the Slogarth that was still sitting on the ground regained itself and joined its companion in battle. As he got closer he could smell the stench of burnt Slogarth.

The Slogarth who had fought with Cyprus was now swinging wildly at Steven. His counterpart had regained enough to get to his knees. Arken didn't miss a beat. Running over the back of the burnt Slogarth, Arken somersaulted into the air and drove his sword down into the back of the creature that was attacking Steven.

The beast flung its arms wildly, trying to pull the dangling reverant from its back, but with all the motion it only drove the bite of the blade deeper, drawing a jagged red line down its back. Arken pulled his sword free and with one foul sweep chopped the Slogarth's legs off at its knee caps. The Slogarth toppled its body twitching in the throws of death.

Bob chanted another spell. A flurry of ice shards flew at the last remaining Slogarth. Using its club, it managed to block the majority of them, but two struck, one in the right shoulder and one in the abdomen. The Slogarth struck out and clutched the skull. Gripping Bob in a crushing grip with one hand, and dropping the club, it pulled the ice shards free. Unable to speak, Bob was vulnerable. He could feel his jaw bone cracking under the pressure. Powerless against the grip, Bob prepared himself for the inevitable.

Suddenly the monster's grip slipped. Bob did the only thing he could think of in aid to save himself, and bit the monster's finger. The Slogarth's grip went limp. Bob spun out of the way, ready to cast another spell to finish the fight. What Bob saw was so surprising it stopped him in mid sentence. In front of him the large Slogarth stood on a slight forward angle, motionless, its arms and head hung limp. The only thing keeping it on its feet was Steven, holding onto his sword which was now embedded into the Slogarth just under its ribcage.

Steven let the monster collapse before pulling his sword free. He stared at the thick red blood that clung to his sword.

"You saved me," Steven turned to see Bob hovering over towards him, "I can't believe it, you saved me."

"I, I just stabbed it. You were being crushed... the dog's dead, I just stabbed," Steven said his eyes glazed over, as he made a stabbing motion.

"Well I'm just glad you did boy. Show me your sword for a moment," Steven held the sword out as Bob moved in close and whispered to the sword. The sword's blade glowed green for a moment then faded back again. Bob moved away from the sword and looked at Steven.

"I have blessed your sword: The Heart-Seeker. Aim for the heart and your strike will ring true," Bob informed Steven with a nod of gratitude.

"Cyprus isn't dead," Arken called out from where he crouched beside the huge dog. "He's hurt, but he's not dead." Steven looked over to see a dazed Cyprus licking a wounded leg.

"We have to keep going. Cyprus if you can move, we must do it now." The dog barked in reply, stood up with shaky hind legs, straightened them out one after the other, causing a few loud cracks, then headed off in the direction of Lathouras, the others quick to follow.

The last lengths of the journey did not take long. Standing at the edge of the forest, looking over the clearing before Lathouras, Steven stood in awe of the monstrous city that lay before them. Twisted metallic towers formed a skeletal hand reaching for the sky.

“Right, this doesn’t look so bad then,” Steven said whimpering as he turned around and took a couple of steps toward the forest.

“Now is not the time to quit, not when our quest is so close to coming to an end,” Arken spoke softly as he focused on their destination. Steven turned to Arken,

“It’s ok, I don’t need to go to heaven, I could learn to like living in Limbo. You know I’m getting pretty good with a sword,” he said waving the sword around trying to look like he knew what he was doing.

“Even if you ignore the fact that our actions here today determine where our final resting places will be, are you really that low that you would leave an innocent girl to face whatever horrors are in there?” Arken glared at Steven with his cold yellow eyes.

“No, I guess not,” Steven shuffled his feet.

“Aren’t you forgetting something,” Arken said, pointing to the cloak Hecate had given him.

“Oh yeah,” Steven untied the cloak and wrapped it around himself, “right let’s go.” Steven took a few paces before realizing no one was following him.

“Well, what are you staring at? We have a girl to save,” Steven’s voice came out gruff and harsh. “Hey what happened to my voice?” he asked in his new deep rumble.

“It is not just your voice you should be worried about, dear boy,” Bob sniggered. Steven lifted his arms up to where he could see them. Huge brown furry claws had replaced his once small pink hand. “Ahhhh...” he roared. The air vibrated around them. He reached up to rip the cloak off but what his hands found instead was a pair of wings. “What has she done to me,” he roared. Frantically Steven tried looking at himself. His legs were that of a goat, his

torso that of a bear, and bat wings protruded from his back. He reached up to feel his face. There was a ring through a large flat nose on the end of an elongated face, and two short, curved horns protruded from his forehead.

“A bulls head! NOOOOOO,” the roar was so loud this time that it scared a flock of bird-like creatures into taking flight. While Steven tried to rip the wings off his back, Bob broke into hysterics at seeing a seven foot tall beast trying to fight with its own wings.

“If I had tear ducts, I’d be crying from laughter right about now. That Hecate, what a witty sense of humour,” Bob manage to get out between fits of laughter. Cyprus sniffed him a few times, gave a wary growl, but didn’t get close.

“Hold still, for a second,” Arken said, reaching up to Steven’s neck. Finding the cord, he untied the cloak, leaving Steven standing there in his natural form.

“The cloak, when worn, gives the illusion that there wearer is a Maletos, a very angry and powerful denizen. Its roar can bring down a house. Hecate gave you this gift because there would be no way you could walk through the town safely looking as you are now,” Arken put the cloak back on Steven and tied it firmly so it would not come off easily. “For this to work, you will need to keep your mouth shut. A Maletos doesn’t speak unless it’s telling you how it’s going to kill you,” Steven nodded to Arken’s warning with an angry scowl then stomped off towards the city.

They walked through the streets of the demon city, turning this way and that, few really paying attention to them, and those who did darted off down the nearest lane when they saw the angry Maletos. Not many creatures were silly enough to get in the way of an angry Maletos, and none that did have told their own tale of how they faired in the battle.

“Are you sure you know where we are going?” Steven asked as quietly as he could with his new vocal cords.



“Yes,” was the answer Arken gave in his eerily calm voice, his focus on the road ahead.

“Oh, so if we are going to the castle, and you know where we are going, then why is the castle behind us?” Steven pointed to the largest tower that rose above the city.

“Because, we are not going to the castle yet. We are going to a tavern first to meet an associate,” Arken said.

“Oh, so we are not going to the castle to save the girl then? Change of plans is it? Going down the local tavern for a couple of rounds of pigs blood, hey? No worries, glad we got that sorted then,” Steven’s icy sarcasm dripped off his tongue.

“This associate works in the castle. He has information on how to get inside, or do you plan to just walk up to the door and knock?” A smirk reappeared on Arken’s face. Steven decided to keep his mouth shut and work on his angry face.

When they arrived at their destination, Arken told Bob and Cyprus to keep watch outside.

As Steven entered the bar, he couldn’t believe his eyes: denizen, of all shapes and size, each one more disgusting than the last. Human serving girls were darting in and out of the ruckus crowd. Barely clothed, they wore collars around their necks, which had a chain connecting them to a series of pipes running along the ceiling, allowing them to move freely inside the bar to serve the grotesque customers but unable to leave the building.

Arken headed over to a table in the back corner that was occupied by a green snake-like creature who called himself Slaven.

Slaven told the pair about a maze of tunnels that ran under the city and that there was an exit somewhere in the castle’s garden area.

After obtaining all the information, they said a hasty farewell and began to leave. Not being used to his massive size, as Steven stood up he collided with a serving girl behind him,

bumping her into the table she was currently waiting on, spilling a cup of some kind of hot dark liquid over the creature that sat there.

“What in the nine hells,” the creature hollered in its crude dialect. Picking up the serving girl in one hand, the creature started backhanding her with it other.

“Spill my drink will ya?” it punctuated with a backhand that sent the scrawny girl flying.

“There’s no need for that, friend, it was an accident, my friend and I where just having a drink when he knocked her. How about I buy you another drink and we call it an end?” Arken’s hand had already slipped to his sword.

“Don’t call me friend, I ain’t no friend of a reverant, your not much better then that slag over there.” The creature was now standing, its height and bulk matching that of Steven in his Maletos form.

“So you can keep your money, ‘cause when I’m through with you, I’m gonna get that little girlie over there, skin her and then tear her innards out,” it pointed to the girl lying dazed on the floor. That was it, Arken snapped. His sword flew in his hands. Spinning in a blur, he chopped the creature’s arm off that was pointing to the girl. The creature grabbed the stub of his arm and yelled in a murderous rage. This got everyone’s attention; the tavern suddenly went silent.

“I think now would be a good time to leave.” Steven whispered

“I agree,” Arken shoved past the angered beast following Steven out the door.

A surprised look sprang onto Bob’s face as the pair came barrelling out the door.

“Quick, before they get out, roar and collapse the building on them,” Arken faced the doorway preparing to battle anything that came after them.

“But it’s just an illusion, I can really do that,” Steven countered.

“What kind of illusion would it be if it didn’t give you the powers to go with the look? Now roar,” Arken ordered and Steven roared as loud as he could. Cracks formed along the front of the tavern, the windows burst inwards, the door splinted, and with a crash the front of the tavern collapsed trapping all within.

“Not quite the whole building but it will do, good work,” Arken congratulated Steven.

“Now, we have to move and we have to move fast. Bob can you help us with this?” Arken asked.

Bob spun around their feet chanting, casting the spell Haste.

“It will not last for long, however it will get us to where we are going,” Bob said taking up his position on Arken’s shoulder. The three of them, Cyprus, Arken and Steven, sprinted as fast as they could through the city towards the hidden tunnels, Bob held onto Arken’s shirt with gritted teeth. Passer-by’s only saw three streaks fly past them, by the time they had a chance to take a second glance, the streaks were faded and the three of them long gone.

Not long after entering the pungent, slimy tunnels, Bob’s haste spell wore off, and fatigue caught up with them so they walked slowly and quietly through the tunnels towards the castle’s garden. In their usual order, Cyprus leading, Arken bringing up the rear, Bob and Steven in the middle.

“It’s weird you know, Arken has this eerie calm about him and then in there, boom!-- he just exploded when that thing hit the girl. I know Arken is dangerous, you can tell by the way he moves,” Steven look behind at Arken who was silently bringing up the rear.

“A long time ago, Arken use to be a farmer, he had a wife and daughter. One day when he returned from town, he found them raped to death. Arken took up a sword and tracked the killers. He came to a campsite of five drunken soldiers celebrating their return

from battle. Arken said he doesn't remember much of the fight, just a vision of his blood stained hands and the darkness seeping into them," Bob informed Steven solemnly.

"You're telling me he was just a farmer and yet he killed five soldiers," Steven said in disbelief.

"All men know how to kill, for some it just comes more naturally," Bob said, Steven's face going from disbelief to sympathy.

"We're here," Arken said pointing to a small opening in the wall. Arken peered through the vines that separated the garden from the tunnel. Arken saw a young girl flitting around the garden, her long white dress flowing as she darted here and there looking for something. Arken signalled the others to keep quiet, Steven moved up to see what was happening.

"Wow, she's beautiful," Steven's eyes popping out at the sight of the lady in the garden. They watched her dart off to the side just out of view.

"Found you," she called out in delight.

"Ah, you are too good for me at this game, even with this helmet I am no match for you," came the voice of an unseen man, "now come my dear, the hour is late and dinner will be waiting for us."

"Oh please, can't we stay out a little longer, it's such a lovely night and I'm not even hungry," she begged.

"I'm afraid not, my dear, you haven't eaten a single thing since you got here. Why don't you come inside, have some dinner and if you're good we can come outside again and play tomorrow," he offered.

"Oh, all right, I might just have some berries," her voice faded as they walked away. Arken climbed out first, ducking low in mind of his pointed black hair. Doing a quick scan to confirm there was no one else around, he waved the others to come through. Bob was first,

then Steven tried to squeeze through, his demonic wings getting caught on the inside. Tucking them in closer he tried again. He managed to get half way before becoming wedged.

“You will have to take the cloak off before you...” Bob didn’t get a chance to finish his sentence, because at that moment, Steven tumbled out of the hole in his human form, the cloak hanging in two halves above his head.

“Oh man,” was all he could say as he looked at the tattered cloak.

“Oh man is correct, a goddess gives you a gift and you ruin it,” Bob just shook from side to side.

“I didn’t mean to, it just happened,” Steven protested in defence.

“I didn’t mean to,” Bob mocked in a whining voice.

“Enough you two, we have better things to be doing than bickering. You next Cyprus, come on,” Arken said in a stern voice. The big dog stuck its head through the hole, estimating the size difference between him and the hole. Drawing his head back inside and out of sight, Cyprus began to make strange noises, and then there was silence. Steven looked inside to find a small puppy wagging its tail, trying to jump out of the hole. Steven picked him up and gave him a scratch under the chin.

“Cute little fella ain’t ya, oowwwf,” Cyprus thought it was a good time to change back to his normal size, crushing Steven under him. Looking Steven right in the eye, Cyprus growled with all teeth bared. Stepping off Steven, he went and stood by Arken.

Getting into position, they could see a clear path up to the door of the towering metal structure. As they snuck along the tree line, they snaked in and out of little gardens. Reaching the doorway, Arken turned to them.

“I’m hoping to do this quickly and quietly. Once we are inside, Cyprus, your nose leads the way, in and out before they know we were even here,” he reached for the knob, nothing happened. “Damn it, it’s locked. There goes that idea.”

“Wait,” Steven stopped him before he could start bashing on the door, “Have you got a dagger?” Arken pulled a small dagger out of his belt and handed it to Steven. Within seconds the lock clicked open. Steven turned to see three very surprised looks.

“I used to be a thief, I guess that’s why I’m stuck in Limbo,” he gave a cheeky grin, slipped the dagger into his own belt and eased the door open. Arken slid through the door first, sword in hand, two skeletal guards stood either side of the door. Arken dealt with their rotting flesh before they could sound an alarm.

The party, now deep inside the tower, followed Cyprus’ keen sense of smell. Vilely decorated hallways hung tapestries of tortured souls and gruesome statues of unimaginable creatures. Dodging guards at every turn, they climbed their way up several flights of stairs. As they were about to exit the stairwell onto the sixth level, the door swung open, causing Steven to lose his balance. Swinging his arms wildly, trying to stop himself from falling over the edge, the only thing in reach was the guard that had come barging through the door. In one swift movement, Steven hoisted himself up and swung the guard clean off the steps and down six flights of stairs with a loud scream that ended abruptly with an echoing thud.

Standing in the doorway was a second guard, eyes wide and clearly stunned at seeing the intruders. With his free hand, Arken picked up the second guard and threw him over the edge to join his counterpart at the bottom.

“We must move quickly now, that was enough to alert the whole tower.”

Moving steadily down the corridors, they heard shouts of alarm and footsteps coming up behind them. Cyprus skidded to a halt outside a pair of large decorative golden doors, almost knocking a nearby desk and its contents onto the floor. Cyprus scratched and sniffed at the door to indicate that Persephone, the girl they had come to rescue, was behind it.

Arken stopped next to Cyprus, poised for the oncoming wave of guards. “You two get in there and get the girl, Cyprus and I will keep the guards back.”

Steven pulled Arken's dagger out of his belt, ready to pick the lock, but before he got the chance to use it, he realised the door was already unlocked.

"Not much of a kidnapper if he doesn't even lock the door," Steven said, puzzled. Looking down the hall past Cyprus, Steven saw a group of guards come charging around the corner. Looking behind he saw another group coming up fast. Steven turned back to the first group who were now only steps away. He noticed a golden helmet sitting on the table next to Cyprus. Realising he was about to need all the protection he could get, he grabbed the helmet and darted into the room, closing the door behind Bob.

Steven and Bob stood in a pitch black room. "Hello," Steven probed softly, "Is anyone there?" There was a soft murmur and something shifted ahead of them. Moving blindly forward a couple of paces, he questioned the dark a little louder. "Is anybody there? Can anybody hear me?" The murmur became soft laughter that seemed to come from several different places. Steven, too scared to move, squinted, trying to see who was laughing.

Then it clicked. Two red glowing orbs appeared about ten paces in front of them, then another, and another, until there were six pairs of glowing orbs surrounding them.

"Bob, I hate to ask this, but are you able to give us some light?" Steven whispered.

"Of course," he politely replied. "Lucidius, Ominous, Illuminartos," Bob called to into the darkness. The room filled with the light of twenty candles to reveal six Cackurs perched on small ledges around a large empty room. "Now I know why the door wasn't locked," he said to himself. The noise from the Cackurs, now echoing off the walls, sent chills through Steven. His face paled with fear. Frantically he looked for a way out. There was one other door in the room, opposite to where they'd entered from. Steven could faintly hear the sound of swords clanging, but it was the sound of the cackling that held his attention.

Steven and Bob just stared at the Cackurs and their strange war dance. Some stood on hind legs, while others bobbed their heads up and down, but all looked directly at them. Simultaneously the Cackurs took flight, circling the room above them.

“They’re looking for us, if we do not move they may not see us,” Bob’s voice whispered from behind Steven. At that moment two Cackurs stopped their circling, dropping into a dive, one coming from the left of the room and one coming from the right. “Don’t move,” Bob warned. The first one, coming from the left, flew straight in front of Steven, the tip of its wing a hair width away from his nose. Steven wasn’t so lucky the second time. The huge cat-like creature crashed right into him, their heads connecting.

Steven was sent crashing to the floor, the helmet was knocked loose from his grip. Somehow he managed to keep a hold on his sword. Looking up from his new position on the floor, Steven saw the Cackurs break the circle and move into a dive, locked onto his position, their fangs ready to rip into him. Steven scrambled backwards as fast as he could until he came against a wall. He reached out and picked up the helmet which was now sitting on the ground next to him. Placing it on his head he thought to himself, ‘I’m going to die...Again.’

In his crouching position, Steven braced himself and raised the point of his sword towards the descending attackers. Before they reached him, however, they veered off, all except one, which was not lucky enough to pull up in time. The Cackur’s chest slammed into Steven’s sword, with such force the sword went all the way in stopping at the hilt. Lashing out in its final throws before death, one of the Cackur’s claws tore a gash in Steven’s arm. Its breath, hot and filled with the stench of rotten meat, assaulted Steven’s nostrils. Repulsed, Steven kicked the creature from the end of his sword, his arm burning with pain.

“What happened? Why’d they fly off like that?” he called out to Bob while watching the Cackurs begin their circling again.

“Because they lost sight of you,” Bob answered, still hovering in the same place.



“What makes you think that?” Steven asked.

“To put it simply, it is because I have lost sight of you,” Bob answered. Steven wondered how Bob could keep his voice so elegant at a time like this.

“What do you mean?”

“When you placed the helmet on, you vanished from sight,” Bob said as calmly as possible.

‘Vanished hey,’ Steven thought for a moment. “Don’t move I have an idea,” Steven told him.

“Have no fear, son, I have no intention of moving from this spot.”

Steven quietly crept around the room while the Cackurs continued to circle. Steven could feel the tension in the air, the Cackurs were on a hunt and he could feel their excitement as they called to one another. Pulling his helmet off, Steven now stood on the opposite side of the room. Instantly, the Cackurs spotted him and dived. Steven waited till they were almost in reaching distance of his sword. Slamming the helmet onto his head, he sidestepped out of the way and aimed his sword at the nearest Cackur’s chest.

The Heart-seeker lived up to its name, the sword was driven in deep, causing the heart to explode on impact, then Steven used the creature’s own momentum to fling it off. Steven imagined that from where Bob was watching, it must have looked like the Cackur’s chest had exploded for no reason.

‘Two down, four to go,’ Steven thought as he ran to his new position, pulling the helmet off again.

Cackur after Cackur, Steven taunted and slew them as they came after him, until the last one laid screeching in agony. Steven’s sword arm hung limp beside him. Exhausted and covered in their black, vile blood, he stood over the last Cackur. Using both hands, he lifted the sword above his head and drove the blade down into the side of the scaly creature’s

ribcage. The sickening sound of bones braking churned his stomach. Steven looked around the room at the carnage he had caused. He couldn't believe his eyes; he had barely any experience with a sword.

Taking the helmet off, he stood visible in front of Bob, slick black blood covering him from head to toe, stinging his eyes and nose. He wiped his face clean.

"My dear boy, are you alright?" Bob hovered over to Steven. Steven just nodded his head in a daze. Outside the room, swords clanged loudly, then a scream that was cut short. Snapping back out of his own thoughts, Steven looked at Bob. There was a new spark in his eye. "Come on Bob, we've got a girl to save," with a quick wink he ran for the adjoining door.

As he barged through the door he immediately tripped over. On hands and knees, he looked up to see a young woman with long, blonde, wavy hair standing there, holding a large candelabra, about to clobber him.

"No, please wait, Persephone, I'm here to rescue you," he threw his hands up to protect his head. She lowered the candelabra, "Who are you?" she asked, jiggling the candelabra in her hand, looking like she was still going to hit him with it.

"My name is Steven. Hecate, a friend of your mother, sent me and my friends to rescue you," He gestured towards Bob, who was now floating in the doorway.

"What is that?" Persephone said, shocked at the sight of Bob.

"I, my dear girl, am known as Bob, and I am a powerful wizard," he proclaimed. Steven slowly stood up, still wary about his head. Looking deep into her eyes he pleaded, "Please Persephone; there is no time to waste."

Her full red lips parted into a smile. She hitched her dress up with one hand and, pointing to the exit with the candelabra, she said, "Alright then, let's go."

They ran back out into the corridor where Arken and Cyprus still battled valiantly.

Skeletal bodies laid strewn everywhere Arken's sword moved in a blur as he parried and countered the attack of two guards. Cyprus stood on the chest of a fallen guard, crushing its head in his powerful jaw.

Glancing back, Arken saw the others come charging out of the room.

"Time to move," Arken yelled. Cyprus let go of the shattered skull and joined him in clearing a path to the stairs. Bob set fire to the corridors and the stairs, with a few well placed fireballs to protect their backs.

Swords rang, teeth tore, fire flew and a candelabra clubbed as they all worked together to keep back the ever growing horde of demonic guards.

Bursting out into the garden, they fled for the secret tunnel. Crawling inside, they slushed their way through the tunnels, loosing the guards far behind them within the maze. Without slowing, Arken, Steven, Cyprus and Persephone ran from the castle, through the tunnels, out into the streets of Lathouras and onto the dense rainforest that surrounded it, and as always, when a fast departure was needed, Bob held onto Arken's shirt with gritted teeth.

Reaching the crossroads, they rested momentarily, just long enough for Bob to catch his breath to perform the chant that would activate the crossroads for them to travel to Limbo. As they rested, Arken bound all of their wounds in clean bandages and Steven recounted the story of his run in with the six Cackurs--with Bob adding his own comments in when given doubtful looks from Arken.

As soon as they were ready, Bob started his chant around the crossroad stone. When the path was visible, the five of them leapt into Limbo, where Hecate and a second lady, who looked like a gracefully aged Persephone, awaited their arrival.

"Gentlemen, I see you have returned," Hecate's sweet voice welcomed them. Cyprus walked over to his mistress and sat beside her, and Hecate patted his head softly.

"Mother," Persephone said as she ran in to the other woman's arms.

“It is so good to have you back,” Demeter exclaimed, hugging her daughter tightly.

“I would not get too used to it, Demeter, as she will be coming back with me,” a man’s voice stated from behind them. Steven spun around to see a young man standing confidently with his arms folded across his chest. Steven’s hand went to his sword, but Arken stopped him. “This is no longer our fight,” he whispered into Steven’s ear.

“Listen to your friend there, little man, you may have defeated my pets but I am out of your league,” he strolled over to the group defiantly.

“Hades, how dare you show your face here, after what you did.” Disgust etched onto Demeter’s face.

Hades laughed mockingly, “You cannot stop me, even with the god of gods on your side. I have taken her as my wife and she belongs with me.”

“Even if that is so, we cannot allow you to take her,” Hecate stepped in, her dogs, sensing her mood, moved in closer to her and started a low growl.

“Your petty threats, dog woman, mean nothing,” Hades’ tone was icy, “She has eaten my fruit and can no longer leave my realm,” an evil grin spread across his handsome face.

“Is this true?” Demeter asked.

“No, umm well...I was tricked, I only ate a few berries. I didn’t think it would do any harm,” Persephone defended. Hades laughed again.

“Now, come, Persephone, your new home awaits you,” Hades reached out for Persephone to join him.

“Wait,” Hecate commanded as Persephone started towards Hades. “Only eating a couple of berries is not enough to taint her completely. Persephone will be fine to live outside your realm as long as she goes back regularly to neutralise the effect.”

Hades scowled as Hecate spoiled his plan. "Fine then, I will bring her back in a few months time to see her mother. Now come, Persephone," Hades demanded, moving for Persephone again. But Cyprus moved in to block him.

"I think she has spent enough time with you, Hades. She will be with her mother for the next six months, and when that time is up, she will be with you for the next six," Hecate now stepped forward herself, to enforce the point being made

"This is your fault," he rounded on Steven, Arken and Bob, who up until then, had remained out of it. "If I can't take Persephone back, I'll take you and make you pay for what you have done," the anger in Hades' eyes flared with every word.

"I have to disagree again, Hades," Hecate said calmly. "This is my realm, and until I send them on, they belong to me."

Hades shook his fists in frustration, turned back to the crossroad stone and in a blink of an eye was gone.

"Once again, Hecate, you have been a true friend. How can I ever thank you?" Demeter asked, giving Hecate a friendly hug.

"Enjoy the time you have with your daughter, and have her back here in six months," Hecate touched Demeter's cheek lightly.

Then, just like Hades, Demeter and Persephone were gone.

"Now, gentlemen, back to you," Hecate turned back to Arken, Steven and Bob. Unable to contain himself any longer, Steven blurted out, "What just happened?"

"The completion of one agreement and the start of another," Hecate said cryptically.

"No, what happened here was we risked everything for nothing."

"Do not worry yourself over the affairs of the gods, Steven, as they are out of your comprehension, more so here than in any other realm, for as they say, Limbo is where the

shadows play,” her smile bewitched him, he knew there was something more going on here than what he just saw and heard.

“You have done what I asked, you have freed Persephone, and for that I will keep my promise. Enjoy your heaven and all its pleasures,” Hecate kissed Steven lightly on the forehead, and then he was gone.

“Arken, the one true warrior of my realm, your tasks are now complete, for the five souls you sent to Hell you have equalled in Heaven. Go and find peace with your family, they are waiting for you,” her smile had the fondness of a mother saying goodbye to her beloved son. With a soft kiss on his forehead he was gone.

Hecate and Bob now looked at each other and smiled. With a small chant, Bob transformed from a skull into a man.

“I have never understood why you journey with men who seek their redemption, Minos,” Hecate shook her head in bewilderment.

“I am to judge the souls of man, and how else can you truly judge a man, if you do not see what drives his actions,” Minos answered, now standing next to Hecate in his true form, looking out over the desert, watching the shadows play.

<end>