

FLAMES OF HERAKLEITOS

A man in a dark suit and cape with large red bat wings, standing with hands clasped in front of a bright, fiery background.

BOB LOCK

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Screaming Dreams

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Preface

Herakleitos of Ephesus lived circa 535-475 BC

Herakleitos was a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher whose writings only survive in fragments quoted by other authors.

Disagreeing with Thales, Anaximander, and Pythagoras over the nature of the ultimate substance, he claimed that the nature of everything is change itself.

Herakleitos uses fire as a metaphor rather than his solution to material monism. This led to the belief that change is real, whilst stability illusory. For Herakleitos everything is 'in flux', as exemplified in his famous aphorism 'Panta Rhei': Everything Flows.

Chapter 1

'Everything becomes fire, and from fire everything is born.' –
Herakleitos

'That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.' The black and white television's picture flickered and James Fenton took off his slipper and threw it at the screen. It struck the small set with a satisfying whack and the picture stabilized. Lucy, his four-year-old daughter tottered over to where it had fallen and picked it up.

'Good girl, Lucy, bring it back to Daddy,' Fenton said and craned his neck to look over the child's mass of black curls as the news repeated Armstrong and Aldrin beginning their momentous walk across the moon's surface.

The child turned to watch the screen and Fenton sighed, 'Lucy, move out of the way, love. Daddy can't see the television. Bring it back; there's a good girl.' He struggled to re-position his body to get a better view but his broken leg responded with a jolt of pain. 'Shit!' He yelped and clutched at the plaster-cast covering the limb.

'Daddy said shit!' Lucy exclaimed, pointing the slipper at him, 'Mommy will shout at you, naughty.'

'Daddy's got a boo boo on his leg, Lucy. That's why Daddy swore. But you're right, Mommy will shout at Daddy for being rude,' Fenton conceded. 'Bring the slipper, baby.'

Lucy carried the slipper over to her father and carefully placed it on the foot that protruded from beneath the plaster-cast. He'd have to keep the cast on his leg for another six weeks until the bone, broken by a fall from scaffolding, would be healed enough for its safe removal.

Fenton hated being confined to the house, let alone the chair in the living room. He was a tall, rangy man who had

spent most of his life outdoors, participating either in his favourite sport, football, or at work in the construction company. Now, however, he was able to spend more time with his child. Something Emma, his wife, had warned him he did not do enough of. Moreover, she was right and he knew it. Nevertheless, staying at home would not put food on the table.

'Not that I have any choice for the next month and a half anyway,' he said to himself. His stomach burned and he rubbed it with his hand; too much sitting down inevitably led to a bout of indigestion for him.

'Lucy, darling, go get a glass of water for me, please.' He smiled at the child. Dutifully she went into the kitchen and he heard her climb onto her little stool, turn on the tap and fill the plastic beaker with the bunnies on it, her special beaker. As the sound of the tap stopped, Fenton grimaced, a searing pain shot through his stomach and he doubled over in the chair in agony. Grinding his teeth, he looked up and watched Lucy return to the room with the tumbler held in both hands, her full attention on it. She did not want to spill any of the water on the carpet. On reaching his chair, she looked up at him and stopped. He frowned as he saw her eyes open wider as if she was staring at something in the air above his head. Her face became pallid.

'Come on Lucy, Daddy's wait...' his breath was ripped from his chest as he gasped in horror and anguish. An incredible sensation of pain ran through his whole body and he convulsed uncontrollably. An agony unlike any he had ever felt before gripped his lower body so forcefully his bowels evacuated unintentionally. He gripped his midriff with both hands as an ever-mounting sense of burning shot through him. His hands, first becoming warm, felt a huge increase in heat as the temperature of his abdomen soared and the terrifying pain increased. Finally, he screamed as a flare of incandescent flame burst out from his stomach.

Lucy opened her mouth to cry out, but was struck dumb by fear as her father tried to raise himself from the chair. She watched as he staggered to his feet, all thoughts of his broken leg long surpassed by the overwhelming fear and pain, which wracked his body as the fire consumed him. Now that he was standing, she saw the flames hungrily lick their way up his torso to his head. He reached forward as if begging her to help him; his hand, untouched by the fire, extended towards her face. His arm, however, was a conflagration, hissing and spitting as the fat dripped from it to the floor. The child dropped the beaker and reached her left hand out towards her father's and her index finger touched the back of his hand. At that moment Fenton's hand ignited and seared the child's finger to it. Now she screamed, a guttural, animal cry of terror and agony as the heat burnt away her flesh and scorched deep, into the bone. She fell back and her finger snapped off at the lower knuckle.

Fenton toppled to the floor as the roaring of the flames mingled with the keening wail which came from the child who huddled beneath the television set as Armstrong planted the American flag, claiming the moon for all mankind.

Boothby turned over in bed and without thinking; he reached across and felt for her. He opened his eyes and the moment passed, the dreadful pain of loss returned. His wife's side of the bed was empty. Would forever be empty. He looked passed her pillow to the bedside table bearing the photograph of her face; her smiling countenance, so full of health, warmed him and he tried to ward off the image of her emaciated body lying in the hospital bed, the image he knew would forever haunt him. Time heals. If someone ever said that to him again he had promised himself he would scream. Ten months had gone by since his Janet's death, yet the loss was as profound as if it had been only ten hours. Next to the photograph stood a

half-empty bottle of cheap vodka and a little brown bottle of tablets. He reached over for the anti-depressant bottle, shook it and realizing it was empty threw it across the room. He was about to pick up the vodka when the phone rang.

'Boothby,' he croaked.

'Christ, you've been drinking again Boothby?' a female voice crooned in his ear.

'Hi Guv'. Drinking? No, just coming down with a cold, I guess.'

'Well take an aspirin; I'm on my way to pick you up. I wouldn't have breakfast if I were you though.'

'Another 'wet one' by the sounds of it then?' he asked, it was their code for a messy murder, and he started rummaging through the cabinet drawer for a Woodbine and found none.

'I wouldn't call it that exactly, but it's not a pretty sight from what I've been told already. You'll see; be with you in ten minutes. Be ready!'

'Yes, Guv',' he replied, put the receiver back on the telephone hook, and threw back the sheets. Swaying slightly he walked over to the bathroom. Shook his head in disgust as he looked at his stubble-covered face and red eyes in the mirror and scratched his square jaw tiredly.

'Ten minutes. No time for a shower, barely enough for a shit and a shave,' he moaned as he picked up the razor.

Laura Murphy curbed the front wheel of her MG pulling up outside Boothby's flat. A street cleaner jumped back in surprise, opened his mouth to remonstrate with her, and left it open as she swung the car door wide, swivelling her long legs around onto the pavement and beamed him a smile.

'Oops, sorry.' She said with a shrug.

'Oh, no problem,' the man replied and remembered to close his mouth whilst he stared at the long-legged brunette dressed in the dark-blue uniform of a Detective Inspector. Its

short, cut-away tunic and skirt, accentuated her tall, slim figure as she glided past him and entered the building's foyer.

'Things are certainly looking up in the force,' the cleaner said softly as he took off his cap and scratched the top of his head. 'Modern times.' He said, shrugging and returned the cap to his balding pate.

Murphy's lips curved into a broader smile as she crossed the foyer, her rubber heeled shoes squeaking on the tiled floor. Her position as D.I. had caused many a double take, mostly by men, and she couldn't help but find it amusing. Taking the stairs to the first floor, she walked up to Boothby's door, raised a hand and was about to knock when it opened.

'Morning, Ma'am,' Boothby grinned and walked out.

She looked him up and down; his skin wasn't his usual healthy colour but at least he had shaved. His battered old leather jacket seemed to be in better condition than his face, 'Morning Boothby, looking good.'

'Don't I always?'

'Yeah, right. How you managed to wangle wearing plainclothes I'll never know,' she looked down at her own uniform, 'and I have to go around in this.'

Boothby shook his head, 'Ma'am, you're the first female D.I. to be assigned a male D.S. A bit at a time, you know what The Met's like. Change takes time,' he scrutinised her uniform carefully. 'Anyway, don't tell me that's a regulation uniform. The cut is too good. It almost looks like you've had Mary Quant knock it up for you.'

'You should keep your powers of deduction for our next case, never mind my uniform,' she tugged at her jacket, 'at least it's a better fit than your smelly old jacket. How old is that? Looks older than you, and that's saying something.'

'Smelly old jacket?' he looked annoyed, 'I'll have you know, this is a Schott. If it was good enough for Brando and Dean, then it's good enough for me. It's just a tad worn, just

like me. And it's a 1938.'

'Oh, God you were born into the wrong era and country. Now you're James Dean or is it Brando?'

He gave her one of his crooked smiles. 'So what's the fuss? If it's not a 'wet one' then what the hell is it that gets you dragging me out of bed this time of the morning, acting Inspector Murphy?'

'This time of the morning? Boothby, you should have been in the office an hour ago. And if you keep messing things up for me I'll only ever will be 'acting', plus the force will look again at female and male officer partnerships,' retorted Murphy, her dark eyes flashing an ominous warning. His insubordination riled her on times but when asked to pick a male colleague she had not wanted anyone else. However, their partnership was groundbreaking and she knew critical eyes were watching them both. She did not want to be one of the first and perhaps the last D.I. to have a male sergeant.

Boothby glanced at his watch, shook his wrist a few times and put it to his ear. 'Ahh, damn thing has stopped. Sorry Ma'am. It won't happen again, and for your information it's Brando. You been to see him in that new film of his yet? I think it's called 'Burn!''

She shook her head. 'No, but it sounds about right. We're going to see a fire,' then she turned on her heel and walked back to her car with her sergeant in tow.

'From the outside you'd never imagine there'd ever been a fire,' Boothby said as he and Murphy stepped out of her little sports car that was parked half on the pavement and half on the road. He put a fist into the small of his back and groaned, 'Ma'am, a sports car might be okay for a youngster like you, but for a fifty year old copper it's a back breaker.'

She laughed, 'I'll take that as a complement, and you're fifty four, Boothby.'

The only sign that something was not right in the little suburban street of Edwardian terraced houses off Chiswick High Road, near the Gunnersbury station, was the collection of police-cars, an ambulance and fire-tender which practically blocked any possible passage through. Uniformed officers made way for the two detectives and held shocked on-lookers back. Boothby opened the little wrought-iron gate set into the white-painted brick wall, which surrounded the tiny front garden, and stepped to one side to let Murphy through.

'Thanks,' she said, and as she walked up the path to the open door, she rummaged in her suit's pocket and withdrew a handkerchief.

The stench of burnt flesh made Boothby wrinkle his nose but nothing on earth would have made him lose his breakfast, a couple of glasses of vodka, not even the sight of the remains of Fenton's body.

The forensic team was meticulously crawling over everything in the room, like a horde of locusts. Inspector Murphy stepped over the plaster-cast leg of what was once James Fenton and held the small perfumed handkerchief to her nose and mouth. She tapped one of the forensic officers on his shoulder and as he stood up she asked, 'How did it start?' She watched in annoyance as he first looked at Boothby and then returned his attention to her. It was something she knew she had to put up with. Not many had gotten used to seeing a female Inspector, let alone one as young as thirty two.

The man shook his head. 'Damn strangest thing I've seen Inspector, the Fire Brigade found no accelerants, no combustibles and the centre of the fire seems to be around the torso area of the deceased,' he indicated the area with a small, stainless steel scalpel.

She raised her eyebrows, 'No sign of a combustible?' Her annoyance grew as the examiner ignored her.

Boothby hitched up his trousers and crouched down for a closer look. He took a biro from inside his jacket and looked up at the forensic examiner, 'May I?' he pointed at the scorched carpet.

'May as well, there's bugger all left apart from his leg which is still encased in the plaster-cast.'

Boothby picked through the soot and dust, finally uncovering the carpet below. Then he pinched a small portion of the residue between his index finger and thumb and rubbed them together. He stood up and examined the seat and the curtains behind it, then shook his head. 'Strange.'

'Probably S.H.C.' Replied the examiner.

'Spontaneous Human Combustion, yeah I've heard of that,' Boothby replied.

'The first I've actually seen, but I've studied the effects. This is a text-book example,' the examiner explained.

'Rubbish,' laughed Murphy, 'there's never been any proof that spontaneous combustion in humans is possible. This man could've set himself alight with a cigarette for all we know.'

'Not really, Ma'am' the examiner replied with a frown. 'As I said, there's no clue as to what started this, but there certainly wasn't anything used to accelerate it. And it's surprisingly similar to an unsolved case down on the east coast. There they found a young man burned to death in his bed. No damage done to the room and very little done to the bed itself, but his body was destroyed.'

'Like here, look at the carpet, the seat, and the curtains. There's hardly a mark on them, yet the body has been totally consumed, well except for the leg. If I remember correctly, the human body's eighty percent water. To get the damn thing to burn up like that takes some doing. Look, even the bones are powdered.' Boothby held up his smudged figure and thumb for Murphy to inspect. 'I bet this poor bugger burned from the inside out. Okay, there's not been any tangible proof or any

witnesses to such an event, but enough cases have arisen throughout the years to suggest S.H.C. is quite possible. Charles Dickens even documented it as far back as the eighteenth hundreds. Damn, I'm almost sure he killed off a character in Bleak House with it!

'Everyone's an expert now, but, actually Boothby, you're wrong on one point there,' the examiner reflected.

'Oh, which one?'

'The witness, there is a witness,' he replied.

'Well, I never heard of one. Which case was it?' asked Boothby.

'Why this one, of course,' the examiner answered.

Chapter 2

Golem

The word 'Golem' can be found in the Bible: Psalm 139:16 uses the word 'gal'mi', meaning 'my unshaped form'. Adam is described in the Talmud as first being made as a golem when his dust was 'kneaded into a shapeless hunk'. Like Adam (whose name literally means 'red (clay)'), all golems are created from mud. To animate a golem one must write one of the names of God on its forehead, place a slip of paper to its forehead, or insert a clay tablet under its tongue. Nevertheless, golems are only figments of a fertile imagination. Well, on our Earth they are.

'One is as ten thousand to me, if he be the best' - Herakleitos

Luther Krell was a mage, and like all of his kind hated being rushed. Yet as he sat in his workshop, he dwelt on the fact that a commission was a commission, and as his reputation was at stake, he had put caution aside and accepted the work. Normally he would have fasted three days for the task required but necessity had made him cut it down to two. The meat was easy to find and he ground the rotting flesh up in the bowl with his mortar. Krell, the golem-creator was nothing if not methodical. The meat he used gradually transformed into a thick, reddish brown paste. The stench permeated his small room, stuck to his clothes, and even seemed to cling to his very skin. It was a good batch, and a good omen. His next golem would be powerful.

Many potential mages, or thaumaturgists as they preferred being called, made animated beings. Thaumaturgy invoked images of miracle-workers or life-givers. However, none had

yet discovered *his* method of life-giving. Many thaumaturgists succeeded in creating passable golems, but only Krell's were robust and refined. Not one had been lost in all the time he had been creating them. They had become the pinnacle of animated clay perfection. All-conquering, yet submissive and subservient to their owner. The perfect bodyguards, assassins, or if wanted, common work-horse.

Recently he had seen a creation of his protect its owner from multiple attackers. That incident had led to him being forced to hurry.

'How I hate being rushed,' he sighed as he ruminated on the circumstances that had forced him into the position he now found himself.

It had been when three golems and their handlers burst into the inn. Krell and his customer had been transacting business. Krell was hex-protected but had not taken the precaution of extending the shield to his customer. However, it was hardly necessary. Within seconds of the door being smashed off its hinges and the six assassins rushing towards them it was all over. Sarreg, Krell's customer, had dived beneath the table but Wide, his golem, had moved with incredible speed. The nearest attacker was shattered as Wide's fist tore the hex from within its throat. Then it whirled around smashing the three human handlers with an outstretched arm. The two remaining golems had frozen as their handlers had died leaving Wide to grab each by the neck. He had lifted the stiffened figures towards the ceiling and smashed them together. Pieces of hardened clay and parts of their interior wooden skeletons had flown to the four corners of the room. Customers had to dive for cover as the terracotta shrapnel showered everyone.

Krell nodded in satisfaction as he remembered how Wide had returned to their table and stood frozen, impassive; and how for a moment he had thought there was a flicker of red fire

in the hollows which represented the golem's eyes. Krell had walked over to where one of the dismembered clay heads had lain and had prised open its mouth. Poking his fingers in its jaws, he had rummaged around until he had clasped onto something. Withdrawing it, he had stared at the spell-tile. There inscribed into the small plaque of terracotta, along with the golem's command, was the owner's signature. Krell remembered his surprise when he had recognised the golem's owner and how Sarreg had dragged his overweight figure up from beneath the table and dusted himself off with nervous celerity. He had dropped the tile onto the table in front of Sarreg and watched as the man's eyes had become saucer-like with horror.

'Wide will not be enough now, Krell,' Sarreg had whispered, his voice hoarse, his jowls shaking with fear. 'He'll not be enough!'

'You underestimate my work, Sarreg. Hasn't Wide proven enough tonight?'

'Thaumaturgist Krell,' Sarreg had responded, with a nervous clearing of his throat, calling the mage by his title. Krell knew this formality would only lead to a request or petition for something, 'I beg of you a boon.'

Krell had sighed, he could not deny a customer as powerful and as well connected as Sarreg, but he could make certain the man appreciated the fact that he was soon to be obligated to him. A very handy obligation too.

'Speak Minister Sarreg; your request is my command.'

A sly smile had spread across Sarreg's face. He had pushed Krell into a formal response and now a denial of the boon or favour would be beyond him.

'By Lustre's Eve I require a second golem, a golem to dwarf my stalwart Wide.'

Krell remembered how he had gasped, 'That's impossible!'

'You deny me your boon after you have freely given it?'

The room had become hushed. Customers, who had returned to their drinking, paused, tankards frozen in mid-air. Servants who had been sweeping up the remains of the golems gaped and thaumaturgist's assistants who had been extracting 'resources' from the three corpses had turned to look at Krell. One of them was Krell's own man, Davvid, his apprentice in thaumaturgy.

'I cannot deny you, Minister, but the forces of legerdemain may well do so,' Krell had explained. 'Never has a golem been created in such a short time span. Lustre's Eve is but four days away. I need three clear days of fasting. I need resources. But most of all, I need a soul.'

'Aye, as you say, Krell, you can't deny me.'

Krell remembered the dropped title, an insult he would never forget. 'You need three days fasting? Well, you have four. You need resources? You have a choice of three. You need a soul? Then you must procure one, my friend,' Sarreg had nodded towards the three corpses and the assistants fussing over them.

In the flickering shadows of his workshop, Krell smiled, as he had smiled that night in the inn, when he had thought, *so be it, the more people think I crop my souls from this world, the better. Nevertheless, time is short.* With a flourish of his cloak, Krell had turned, 'Davvid, I return to my rooms; when you've harvested the resources come immediately there. We've no time to waste.'

Krell recalled how once outside, the immensity of the task had weighed heavily upon him. He had been untroubled by the fasting period, he knew it could be achieved. The resources were available too, but the soul, the soul...

The last reaping had not gone well and he had just recovered from it. Another thing worried him about it too. For the first time ever, someone had seen him.

He dragged himself away from his reverie and the past then put aside all feelings of revenge that he harboured

towards Sarreg. For now, he would comply with the request. He was a master-mage and he would fulfil Sarreg's request of a petition, but once accomplished then he would savour the vengeance he could rain down on the fool.

'But first things first,' he muttered as he rose from his workbench. 'It's time to reap.'

The smell of the hospital turned Boothby's stomach more than the acrid smell of Fenton's corpse and he swallowed the saliva that had built up in his mouth.

'You don't look too good,' Murphy said, noting the pale skin and sheen of sweat that had sprung up on Boothby's forehead.

'I hate hospitals. That's all.'

'Look, Boothby, I know this can't be easy for you. Hospitals must be the last sort of place you want to visit.' She thought of how he had to have spent months in one as he sat in silent vigil by his wife's side watching her slowly die. She wanted to say more, but thought better of it. His wife's death had left scars upon the man, not visible, but scars, none the less. She remembered how the first week back in work Boothby had calmly walked up to an armed bank robber and asked for his sawn-off shotgun. She had almost put him on permanent sick leave there and then until he explained that he knew the gun was unloaded. She had demanded an explanation. How did he know? However, he had just smiled at her and winked. She had given him the benefit of the doubt. The gun, it turned out, wasn't loaded.

'You can wait in the foyer if you like. I can take care of this.'

'No, I'm okay, it's just my cold. A touch of fever.'

'I felt a touch of fever too, in Fenton's house,' she said.

'Anybody would be upset in those circumstances, Ma'am.'

She looked at him and stopped. 'Obviously you didn't spot it. Did you?'

Boothby's eyes narrowed, 'Spot what?'

'The condescending way that bloody man spoke to me. First of all I thought he was going to ignore me altogether and just talk to you!'

He shook his head, 'you're talking about the forensic examiner aren't you?'

She sighed, 'Is it always going to be like that?'

'Ma'am, it's the nature of the beast. The boys take the mickey out of me because I have a woman as my boss. I either start banging heads together, escalate things or I just let them get it out of their system. They'll soon shut up when we get a few more cases closed. Especially if we crack a corker like this one. Just ignore them.'

'I suppose so.'

'Pity we weren't together for The Krays' arrest. Nipper Read's a bloody good copper and he went through the same ribbing because he was considered too young at thirty-six to be a D.I. Yet, he got them in the end. That shut up his critics,' Boothby said.

'You know him?'

'Yeah, sort of. He's always been a bit of a loner though. Didn't your boyfriend, Jason, have something to do with the prosecution?'

She screwed her eyes up at him, 'His name's Jensen, and you damn well know it is, and yes, he was on the team that prosecuted them.'

'Sorry, Jensen. Seemed like a nice sort of bloke.'

She nodded and almost in step, they walked down the magnolia painted halls. Murphy's eyes swept over the drawings and paintings done by the children on the ward. Amongst them, The Beatles, in their yellow submarine, sailed over multi-coloured landscapes. By the time they reached the door to the private room in which the tiny form of Lucy Fenton slept, Murphy was subconsciously humming the hit tune from

their animation. The door was open and they went in. A tall, bald-headed doctor was standing by the bedside writing a note upon a clipboard, whilst a young nurse, barely out of her teens, smoothed down the sheets on the child's bed. The nurse stood up, adjusted her starched hat and glanced at the two detectives as they approached. Emma Fenton, a small, dark-eyed woman, sat by the bedside holding the sleeping girl's uninjured hand. They had been told Lucy's mother had not left her child's side since being admitted. Murphy and Boothby waited whilst the doctor finished his writing, then as he looked up at them Boothby opened his police warrant card and showed it to him, 'I'm Sergeant Boothby, this is Inspector Murphy. You are?'

'Good afternoon, I'm Doctor Marks, can I help you?'

'That depends, one moment please,' Murphy interrupted and went over to the woman by the bedside.

'I'm deeply sorry for your loss Mrs Fenton. I know this must seem beyond all comprehension, but we must try to establish what happened in your home earlier today.'

Marks raised an eyebrow, 'Are you serious?'

'Doctor Marks, we have to make enquiries. Mr Fenton's death wasn't... wasn't... normal,' Murphy replied and catching Boothby's eyes, she looked towards the door, signalling that a distraction was needed to take the doctor away.

'Doctor Marks, if I might have a word with you in private for a moment?' Boothby gripped Marks by the elbow and steered him towards the door. As the doctor opened his mouth to complain Boothby spoke over him, 'This shouldn't take long, please.' He closed the door to the private room behind him.

The young nurse who had been fussing with the sheets, walked over to a vinyl covered chair, picked up the magazine resting on it and sat down to read. Murphy noted that the girl's eyes seemed more drawn to the scene in the room than the contents of the journal. She pulled up the twin of the nurse's

chair and sat down next to Lucy's mother. Murphy watched quietly as the petite, dark-haired woman attempted to control herself. Her face was pale and puffy; mascara streaks mixed with tears on her handkerchief as she dabbed at her reddened eyes.

'What happened? Nobody will explain exactly what happened to my husband and child.' Emma Fenton sobbed quietly.

'We were hoping you and Lucy might be able to tell us that Mrs. Fenton. So far, forensics hasn't been able to throw any light on the circumstances that led up to your husband's death. Can you talk me through what you did this morning?'

Emma Fenton's gaze was drawn back to her child and Murphy waited patiently for her answer, if any answer would be forthcoming. She wondered if it was too soon to put the woman through further interrogation. Then Mrs. Fenton seemed to rally her thoughts and turned her dark eyes on the Detective Inspector.

'I can't think straight and I still don't understand it Inspector. It was just another normal morning for us, nothing odd about it. We were excited about the Apollo 11 touching down during the night, of course. We had breakfast. My husband settled down to watch the television, and I decided to go shopping,' she replied, a wisp of dark hair dropping over her eyes, she moved it back and looked at Murphy again.

'Go on.' Murphy prompted and watched Emma Fenton's bottom lip quiver before she continued.

'Nothing unusual about it at all, well, apart from Jim being home I suppose. He was looking forward to spending more time with Lucy during his convalescence, and of course he wanted to see the repeat of the moon landing. It happened too early for us to watch live and I wasn't really interested in it to be honest. However, being cooped up like that was hard for him, he is...' she paused and drew a long, shuddering breath,

'...was... an outdoors' person. I finished shopping, got home and found...'

Murphy put her arm around the sobbing woman, 'I'm sorry Mrs Fenton. Perhaps it is too early to put you through this, but you have to understand. We've no idea what happened in your home. Any little item that you recall, no matter how small, could prove invaluable to us. That's why I need to ask you these questions, whilst it is all fresh in your mind.'

The woman raised her mascara streaked face, 'Fresh in my mind?' she took in a shuddering breath. 'Do you think I'll ever be able to forget the scene in my front living room?' she shook her head in amazement at the D.I. 'I'll take that image to the grave with me. The sound of my child, screaming the words repeatedly until her voice broke. She hasn't spoken since.'

Murphy's heart seemed to skip a beat. No one had mentioned the girl had spoken. Perhaps it was the break they needed. She took the woman's small hand in her own, 'What words, Mrs Fenton? We were not told that she had said anything.'

'I've been told she was almost catatonic by the time the emergency services came; they think she might never speak again. Her finger, her tiny finger...' Emma Fenton replied.

Murphy patted the woman's shoulder, 'What words?' she continued. 'It could be very important.'

Lucy's mother took a deep breath, 'She kept repeating ...the bat...the bat...the bat.'

'The bat?'

'That's all she would say. Over and over again, pointing at the curtains above Jim's chair, the bat...the bat.'

'I don't understand, was there a bat of some sort in the room? A cricket bat perhaps. Do you know what she was referring to?'

'My husband detested cricket; football was Jim's sport,' she

replied. 'He loved his football. No Inspector, I can only think she meant the animal. She'd seen one on Peter Scott's 'Look' program and thought it was a bird, Jim explained to her it wasn't. That's the only thing I can think of.' The grief-stricken woman's eyes seemed to cloud over as once again the horror surfaced and threatened to swamp her. She sobbed quietly and turned to look at her daughter again as if seeking confirmation that she was still alive, breathing and within her reach.

'Okay Mrs Fenton, we'll leave the questioning for now. We'll come back in a day or two. Nevertheless, I must warn you, we'll have to speak to Lucy too. Perhaps you could try talking to her when she wakes, gently of course, anything she could tell us...' Mrs Fenton rose and took the Inspector's hand from her shoulder, interrupting her.

'Don't you understand?' She said shaking her head, her dark eyes were no longer looking haunted but blazed with anger, 'My daughter's not sleeping. She's in a coma. The doctors say her brain has taken refuge from the horror that she witnessed this morning by shutting down. She may never wake up, never speak,' slumping back down into the chair, she cradled her head in her hands. The brief moment of anger draining her last reserves. The young nurse stood up and approached Murphy.

'Inspector, I really think you should leave now,' she said blushing.

Murphy nodded, feeling as sterile and antiseptic as the stark room. Too emotional to speak she left with the quiet weeping of Emma Fenton sounding in her ears.

Luther Krell praised his apprentice, Davvid, for his immaculate preparations. The glands the young mage had extracted from the bodies were healthy and soon to be rendered down into the juice he required. Luther had gorged on the first day to replenish his reserves of vitality and the juice

had been a welcomed supplement. He knew many thaumaturgists failed to replace the vital fluids and enzymes that a mage's body lost when producing a golem, and many had paid the price.

No legerdemain or sleight of hand could turn a vegetable back in to a revenant again. Returning from the dead is one matter, being alive but with no spark of intelligence, no sense of self, was worse than being one of the things he created, a golem.

The two subsequent days were spent fasting and preparing the spells. The spell-tiles had been fired, their glyphs and instructions neatly incised. The lure paste had rotted well; the stench filled the small house. Soon his neighbours would start giving him black looks again, but they would never dare to grumble. Now as his assistant packed the leather holdall with the necessary equipment and cleaned the workbench Luther Krell sat in a trance-like state, preparing for the reaping to come.

Meanwhile, Davvid sat and waited in silence for his master and mentor's spirit to return to his body. He knew that Luther Krell could exist for days in non-corporeal form, but ultimately he had to return to the body, or the vehicle for his mind would die and his travelling essence would be left, wandering the ether for eternity. The assistant sat crossed legged in front of his master and studied Krell's face and form. Davvid often wondered how old Luther Krell really was. Certainly, no clue could be obtained by looking at the master's face. Yet he had survived for many hundreds of years and his golems survived too. However, the once fair hair of his youth had turned pewter grey and no longer hung shoulder length, but was worn cropped short to just below his ears. His lined face bore no scars or blemishes but carried the pale, delicate features of someone who spent little time relaxing or working beneath the sun. He knew that Luther must have created scores and scores of golems and nearly all of them were still in service. Davvid

noted the man's wide and sinewy shoulders, the hard knobbles of bone that protruded from beneath the erubescant cloak, a red as dark as coagulated blood, barely covering the folded wings; wings that Davvid coveted.

One day he too hoped to have enough magical essence within him to form a pair. He held no illusion as to the cost it would entail to extract that essence from within and the toll it would be on his body. It was not simply a matter of growing wings but of actually forcing out the structure from his skeletal frame. He could little afford the cost on the poor stipend that he received from Krell. The money he would need to pay for resources and the replacement juices for his spent essence would be unthinkable for someone of his social standing. During his apprenticeship, Davvid's payment was in knowledge, and was not monetary, but Davvid knew that financial reward would be easy, once he could reap souls for himself. Then the next step would be golem construction. He glanced towards Krell's new construct and once again shook his head in awe. The empty shell of the new golem was huge. Its head almost touching the ceiling of the room; a ceiling that Davvid estimated to be easily eight foot in height. Whereas a normal golem was a poor facsimile of a man with crude form and little detail, this giant was almost a copy of Luther Krell's best creation to date, Sarreg's Wide. Its shoulders were broad, its chest deep and well sculptured. The muscles on its clay arms and legs highly defined. This golem had been much too large to fire in Krell's kiln, probably too large for firing in *anyone's* kiln. Luther Krell had fired the clay construct in situ by using an ancient and long forgotten thaumaturgic hex that no one could witness, not even Davvid. It had been baked within this very room, but no sign of scorching was visible anywhere, a miraculous piece of magical dexterity. This had to be the world's largest. If Krell could pull this off and in such short time, if he could deliver the massive golem to Sarreg on

the night of Lustre's Eve, he would carve his name into history for all time.

'You think it cannot be done my young novitiate?' Krell asked, his eyes still closed

Davvid jumped as Krell spoke. 'Master, of course not. Only you, Thaumaturgist Krell, have the power to animate such a construct,' Davvid replied formally, using his master's title and bowing his head.

Krell smiled, he held his apprentice in high regard, and he felt he would be a brilliant reaper and golem-master in time. Perhaps another hundred years or so, he had told him, but not yet, not yet.

He rose from the floor with ease, stretched his long limbs and unfolded the gossamer wings. The light from the unshuttered window behind him shone through their thin membrane, revealing the tiny network of veins that criss-crossed them. Krell was proud of his wings and he smiled inwardly as he flaunted them in front of his novice, the boy could barely keep the avarice from his eyes.

'All's prepared?' Krell asked, knowing full well that Davvid had everything ready.

'Yes master, all is done,' he replied and handed Luther Krell the leather satchel.

Krell nodded and accepted the bag, strapped the belt around his waist and let the holder lie against his thigh. 'I should be back before dawn,' he said as he walked towards the window, 'I'll be exhausted from the soul-reaping. Prepare a broth and the remains of the juice for my return. I'll feast to replace the essence lost from my exertions and then sleep for some hours. Wake me before sundown.'

'As you command, master. I wish you luck with your reaping.'

'Luck has nothing to do with it my novitiate, nothing at all. Preparation is everything, however.'

Davvid inclined his head in deference as Krell stepped through the large window onto the small balcony, and without another word or gesture, soared out into the still air.

The valley appeared on the horizon and Krell breathed more freely. Now he was within reach of his target the mounting anxiety he had been feeling began to subside. Even though he had cast glamours to hide his departure from his apartments he still worried that an enemy or competitor would follow or even try to stop him from reaching his goal. If he did not complete his boon to Sarreg then his reputation would collapse around him; he would struggle to get commissions again. He could afford to retire in luxury but riches were not his motivation in life. He was Thaumaturgist Luther Krell; he lived for his work; without it, he was as good as a *foreverdead*. Krell had died a number of times, but with preparation, he had survived his death and had entered his new host. Nevertheless, should his preparation be incomplete, or should the time come when he did not want to exist anymore, then he would embrace the afterlife open armed and join the ranks of those who went before, the *foreverdead*.

Luther landed some distance away from a small copse, folded his wings and with a small hand movement cast a questing hex for any followers. He was pleased to find none. He strode deeper into the woods. Wiry leather-leaved trees rustled and swayed as he brushed past them, he ignored them, intent on finding his quarry. He raised his head and sniffed the air, he was sure he had detected something. He stopped for a second; closing his eyes, he drew in a long deep breath.

Yes, there it was. The faint aroma of rotting. He cast his head around to the direction from which the stench emanated. With his head held high to capture the slightest nuance of the scent, he walked on. The putrid aroma grew stronger as he approached a small clearing within the copse of leather-leaves.

He entered the arena-like area and stiffened as his foot crushed something brittle beneath him. Looking down, he saw he had stepped upon a dirge's nest. Scowling, he stamped and trampled the fragile construction and its contents beneath his heel then wiped the broken and crushed clutch of eggs from his soft boot. Albumin and parts of dirge foetus marred the lush grass as he cleaned them off.

'Damn birds,' he cursed. 'Sing your funeral song over that!' Knowing that once discovered the area would echo with the animal's strident screeching. Krell despised the raucous little creatures. Satisfied that his boot was clean, he cast around for the source of the pungent aroma and grunted to himself when he spied the plant. A garish floor-hugging growth, which was the colour of decaying flesh. It rested beside the trunk of a dead leather-leaf tree. Its flower, which had petals the size of his hands, was puffy and bloated. The surrounding leaves were dark brown and were almost as big as his torso.

He sat down beside it and watched the centre of the petals stir, excited by the vibration of his movement. A subtle tremor of magical force wafted from the plant as Krell opened his satchel and withdrew a number of items. A small wooden container with an intricate screw fitted top caused the plant to shiver in delight as he placed it on the ground close by. Next, he arranged a number of spell-tiles in order and within easy reach. One tile in particular he checked and rechecked. A filigree of glyphs raced across its surface almost as if they were alive. Even to someone as powerful and as well versed in the thaumaturgic arts as Krell, it still proved to be an hypnotic sight. Tenaciously calming himself, he looked away. Finally, he opened a small leather pouch and withdrew the powdered remains of the golem handlers that Wide had killed. He sprinkled the powder in a rough circle around his position, making sure it encompassed all of the plant and him, and left no gaps.

Krell opened the wooden container and the plant's leaves and petals shook in anticipation. He inserted two fingers, scraped the fetid paste out, and looked at it. The meat had rotted well. There was hardly any difference between the plant's stench and the paste he inserted into his mouth. He wiped his hand on the grass beside him and lay down beside the plant's flower. The growth slowly wrapped him within its leaves and the flower, with ominous care, approached his face and open mouth. The petals parted as the flower head got closer and Krell saw the thick stamen rise, questing and probing from within. The air filled with magic. Krell could feel it rippling through his body, and the closer the stamen got to his mouth the more the reaction of the magic coursed through him like a ravaging flame. Soon he would voyage and then reap.

Something bothered him; it was on the edge of his consciousness and troubling him, an itching on the back of his right hand. The itching turned to a burn as the plant's stamen entered his mouth to try in vain to pollinate the rotted meat. He lifted his hand and looked in wonder at the vision of a child's burnt finger that had sprouted from the back of it. It was then he realised the reaping would not be as he expected.

'Luck has nothing to do with it!' He mumbled and almost choked as laughter billowed up from his chest.

The dirge hen returned to her nest with a maw full of worms and ran in circles around it in frantic panic. Where was her clutch of eggs? The worms fell to the ground as she opened her beak-like mouth and wailed the vibrant call that gave her the genus name – dirge.

The call echoed around the copse, an insidious wail that wormed its way into the very matrix of the flora and fauna. But it could not reach her destroyed, unhatched fledglings and it could not reach Luther Krell who detested it so, and whose mind was no longer upon the same planet. It was now

traversing the ether towards perhaps another dimension, at least another planet, he did not know. Her cry did reach another's ears however, someone who had secretly followed Luther.

Davvid crouched in fright as the sound sent shivers down his back.

'Can it be possible that Luther's discovered me following?' He asked himself quietly. Regaining control of his nerves, he stood up and looked at the tile he had sequestered from underneath his mentor's nose. He turned it slightly until the figures upon it aligned. Then he started walking back to where he had left his mount. He was getting closer to Krell's secret.

The hen cried two or three times more before spying the morass upon the trampled grass and then she buried her razor sharp beak-like mouth into it. She wailed once again as the odour of her destroyed brood impinged upon her tiny brain. Then she stopped, another smell titillated her senses, the scent of the destroyer. She poked her hardened tongue into the remains of her children and tasted the scent, drew air over her tongue and up into her nasal cavity where the smell grew stronger and she began to hunt. It did not take long for her to find the spoor, and within minutes she arrived at the hex-circle that Krell had lain down to both contain his reaping and protect his comatose body. The glamour it exuded was sophisticated and complex, meant to fool any hunter from finding him. All they would see would be a large boulder within a deserted opening of a leather-leaf copse. Sophistication was not the forte of a dirge hen however. Normally they were placid creatures, who would steer well clear of any animal other than one of their species, but this hen had transcended the meaning of normal, this hen was enraged and had only one thing on its minute mind... and that was to track the spoor of whatever had destroyed her nest and her unborn chicks.

'Did you really know it was empty?'

'What're you going on about now, Inspector?' Boothby asked, but he knew what she was digging for. Every now and then, when she thought he had mellowed or had let his guard down, she would ask. Three days had gone by since the Fenton fire and she'd asked him the same question once already.

Murphy crunched the gears on the little MG and Boothby winced, wishing again that she would let him drive. She kept him waiting for her answer until she found the gear she was looking for and the car leapt forward. 'You know damn well what I'm on about, when're you going to tell me Boothby?' She glanced at him. 'And what the hell's wrong with this bloody car?'

He raised a hand to his mouth to cover the smile he knew was beginning to appear and then switched on the radio, Marvin Gaye's velvet voice filled the car with '*I heard it through the grapevine*' and he kept time to the beat with his foot.

'I love this song,' he said, trying not to laugh at Murphy's driving. How she had succeeded in passing her driving test he never knew, he glanced down at her long legs, then studied her dark eyes and high cheekbones and took a wild guess.

He composed his face and let out a sigh, 'Off the record?'

'Agreed. Off the record. Just for my ears only, I need to know, Boothby. You owe it to me. I need to know I can trust you with my life. I could once, but since...well you know. You changed, Boothby, after she died.'

Boothby ruminated over her words. Murphy was right, he knew it. He had been hoping the gun *had* been loaded that day. He had been hoping he could have pressured the poor jerk into pulling the trigger and finishing it for him. However, the damn gun had been empty and he had over-powered the potential bank-robber. That resulted in some great publicity for his station and he ended up with a commendation. Murphy had a right to know. Nevertheless, he knew once he told her the truth

she would never trust him again. Now she needed the assurance that her trust had not been misplaced. Therefore, he told her.

‘How many times are you going to ask?’ he shrugged, ‘Of course I knew the damn thing was empty. The fool hadn’t closed the barrels properly. There was no way in hell there could’ve been cartridges in it. I would’ve seen them.’ He lied. ‘What can I tell you, Guv’? I know I’ve changed since she died. Forty one is too young to die.’ He smiled sadly, ‘The boys back at the yard always said I looked more like her father than her husband, but I’m only a dozen or so years older than she was. Janet was everything to me. I know I’m not the same, but you can still depend on me.’ His determined look confirmed his statement. ‘And there’s nothing wrong with the car. Just try using the clutch occasionally. I really wish you’d let me drive, Ma’am.’

Murphy nodded her head and then looked at him again, ‘The clutch?’

‘Yes, Ma’am, the pedal that you’re resting your left foot on?’

‘Oh, the clutch. Very funny, and forget about driving, I saw what you did to the last car you were assigned,’ she retorted.

‘Ma’am, you ever tried to get a V6 Ford Transit to stop when it’s full of stolen bank-notes and the driver thinks he’s Stirling Moss?’ He didn’t wait for her answer, ‘The only way for me to do it, before he got onto the motorway, was to spin him out on a clear patch of road. The Morris Minor Panda car isn’t really a greyhound, more like a tortoise, actually. It was due to be de-commissioned anyway...’

She answered him with a huff and swung the car through the gates of St.Bart’s, into the hospital car-park, narrowly missing a sign post warning drivers to take care within its grounds. Above the gate the statue of Henry V111 stood glaring down, hands on hips, as if chastising her driving too.

Boothby shook his head; the sign may as well be in Dutch.

'And stop shaking your head Sergeant!'

'Yes Ma'am,' he replied and gripped the door rest as she skidded to a stop in front of the hospital entrance.

The couple approached the clerk on duty in the hospital's reception and Boothby flipped open his identity card, 'Hello, I'm D.S. Boothby, this is Inspector Murphy.' He nodded in her direction. 'We understand that a young girl, Lucy Fenton has been moved to another room?'

The grey-haired woman examined Boothby's card with care and then looked at her admissions' book, turned a few pages and ran her finger down the long list until it stopped and then tapped the page twice, 'Yes Sergeant, she's in room four on the first floor, poor child.'

'Thank you Ma'am, most helpful.'

They walked towards the stairs as Boothby returned his wallet to the inside pocket of his old leather jacket and adjusted the little lead-filled cosh that he liked to keep for emergencies. Murphy pulled a face and said, 'When are you going to spend some money and throw that heap of shit jacket in the rubbish-bin?'

'Hey, I've told you, this is a classic, I think they started up around 1928.'

'Ha! A classic what though, Boothby?' She screwed her eyes up at him.

The banter continued until they reached the girl's room, 'Well, there's our good Doctor Marks. Looks like he's had a haircut.' Boothby nudged her.

'Christ, don't start, you upset him enough the last time.'

'Me, upset someone? Never,' he replied and put on one of his grins.

'Doctor Marks, it's nice to see you again. You look a little different, is that a new haircut?' Boothby extended his right hand; the Doctor shook it and then patted the few wisps of hair above his ears, 'I pick up on things like that, all part of the job.'

'How's Lucy, Doctor?' Murphy shouldered Boothby to one side.

'Not good I'm afraid. She's regained consciousness but remains unresponsive. I don't think we'll see any improvement for a very long time, if indeed ever. The shock to the little girl's system has simply overwhelmed her, umm...' he paused and seemed reluctant to continue.

'Something else, doctor?' asked Murphy.

'Look, it's about Mrs. Fenton. She's very close to breaking down. Please, don't put her through too much,' he stopped as the handle to Lucy's door moved.

The door opened quietly and Lucy's mother stepped out, 'Hello Inspector, hello Sergeant Boothby.'

'Hello Mrs. Fenton, I want to apologize for pushing you for information three days ago. It was inappropriate of me and I'm sorry,' Murphy said.

'It's okay Inspector. I know now you were only doing it for the best. But I can't see how we can help you, Lucy may be awake but it's as if she's not there anymore. She's gone. I feel as if I've lost her too.'

Murphy put a protective arm around the woman's shoulders and was about to speak when Boothby grabbed her arm and put his fingers to his lips.

'Boothby...' Murphy started to say, but Boothby whispered, 'Quiet!'

The four people froze at his whispered command and listened. Then they heard it; a small sound from within the room, Lucy's voice, repeating one word, 'Bat -bat-bat.'

Boothby swung open the door and gasped, Lucy was sitting up in bed, her pyjamas were smouldering; her face red and dripping with perspiration. Behind and above her, a tenuous shape took form. Murphy gripped Boothby's arm, her fingers dug into the leather of his sleeve and as he tore from her grip, her nails ripped and splintered. He dashed to the bed,

pulled the child by the front of her pyjama top towards him, tearing out the intravenous tubes as he did so, and launched the little girl into Murphy's arms as the bat-shaped nightmare reached for her.

Murphy staggered backwards out of the room with the screaming child in her arms as Boothby spun and pulled out the small cosh from his jacket. The bat entity took on more substance as it changed from pursuing the child and enveloped the man.

Boothby swung the cosh but it only connected with air, it was as if he was striking at a shadow. Although more defined, the bat-form still had no mass. His old jacket burst into flames and he roared in pain and anger as the touch of the bat burned through his flesh. Realising he would never be able to fight the beast, he turned and staggered towards the doorway. As his head flared into an incandescent torch, he saw Murphy return to the room and he desperately tried to tell her to stop but the unbelievable heat ripped the air from his lungs.

Murphy hit the knob of the extinguisher with her bloodied fist and sent a stream of foam to smother Boothby and splatter across the room, ripping through the shadowy figure that loomed above them like a vast vampire. Boothby crashed to the floor and Murphy played the foam around him and everything possible that she could cover; then she bathed the vampiric shape until she saw it begin to disperse.

The hospital alarm system kicked in adding to the cacophony of sound, the screaming of Murphy, Mrs. Fenton and Lucy. Marks reached into the room and tried to pull Boothby out by his sleeve, but fell back with a handful of burnt leather and charred flesh; he looked aghast at the contents of his hand. Emma Fenton, coming to her senses, scooped Lucy into her arms then ran down the hallway towards the group of orderlies and nurses who were responding to the alarm. The extinguisher spluttering and coughing stopped expelling the

white foam and Murphy threw it into the bat's dissipating form. She watched hypnotised as the thing finally wavered, then winked out of existence. A moan from near her feet brought her mind back to Boothby and she knelt down in the foam, amidst the blood and charred remnants of his wracked body.

His right arm was totally consumed to the shoulder, the right side of his face was charred but his eye was intact. The left side of his body was a seared mass of flesh, the left arm was stripped to the bone; Marks had pulled the cooked flesh from it as if stripping a chicken wing. Boothby's left eye had gone; all that remained was a steaming socket. He opened his mouth to speak but she put her fingers to his charred lips, not daring to touch them.

'Don't speak, the emergency team is on its way,' she said and looked at Marks who kneeled by her side and shook his head slightly.

Boothby groaned, his lips cracked and tiny rivers of blood sprang up from them and ran down the side of his face steaming as they dried, 'Is — Lucy — okay?' His voice was a dry whisper, barely audible, his throat burnt raw from the terrific heat.

Murphy nodded, she could not reply, her throat constricted a wail that she felt build up from deep within herself, she dared not open her mouth.

'Good,' he wheezed softly and desperately sucked cool air into his ruined lungs again. Gasping with the exertion, he asked, 'Laura — you — think — my — jacket — can — be — repaired?' Then he died and Laura Murphy knew that beneath his pain-wracked and ravaged face there hid a crooked smile.

The pallbearers gently lowered the coffin into the freshly excavated grave as the vicar concluded the ceremony. One by one, Boothby's friends and colleagues filed past and dropped

small handfuls of the cemetery's dark earth into the open grave until the final person, a tall graceful woman stepped forward. She caressed the remains of a tattered and scorched leather jacket that she had been carrying, folded it neatly and dropped it onto the coffin's lid. Then she opened the small, black patent-leather bag slung on her left shoulder, extracted her Inspector's warrant card and dropped that in too, knowing full well she should surrender it along with her resignation, but she cared little about any repercussions. She finally made the sign of the cross, blew a kiss at the open grave and stepped away. She walked a pace or two around the bare earth until she reached a marble headstone that bore the inscription Janet Boothby 1928 – 1968 and rested her hand on the headstone. 'Take good care of him Janet, he missed you so.'

The drayk spat at Davvid as he walked out of the copse and approached it. He clubbed the animal across its scaly snout with the back of his hand. It tried to nip him but the muzzle held its jaws enclosed, and so it spat again. This time Davvid made an intricate sign with his hand and the drayk squealed in pain and took the posture of submission to a pack leader. Davvid swung himself up into the wooden saddle strapped to the creature's back. He pulled the reins with an exaggerated roughness and kicked the beast in the flanks with his heels; the drayk unfolded its leathery wings and flapped aloft. Davvid eyed the wings hungrily; he despised having to use this mode of transport. Drayks were for those who could not afford to extrude their own wings, and to have to ride one was almost a badge of shame for a mage.

Once above the trees again he checked his tile, his quarry was nearer and so he continued following Krell's signature. He had become bolder now. Krell did not know he was following him. His strategy had worked. Over a long period of time he had sequestered various hex-tiles that his master had created,

always exhibiting extreme care and caution. Should Luther Krell have discovered the theft then Davvid's life would have been forfeit. He had no illusions that the next golem made by Krell would have carried *his* soul. But his careful plotting had succeeded. None of the tiles were missed, and now he had used Krell's own work against him. Krell would not spot the glamour shield Davvid had cast around himself and the animal, for it was of his own making!

Davvid, laughing at his stroke of genius, spotted a clearing. He had a feeling something was not right. He knew immediately that Krell's work was afoot and his eyes were drawn to a large boulder that wavered slightly as he stared at it. A hand movement from him and the boulder resolved into Krell's supine figure. Davvid coaxed the drayk into landing on the other edge of the copse and dismounted. As he broke cover from the trees, a movement near his master's body made him stiffen.

Panicking again, he wondered if Krell had seen him. Then saw that it was not Krell himself that was moving, but a small animal, hardly bigger than his two hands. It was hopping up his master's legs towards his face. He watched spellbound as he realised it was a dirge hen and stared dumbfounded as the creature wailed in triumph and drove its beak into Krell's eye. His master barely flinched and the dirge hen held its head to one side to study the outcome of its attack. Davvid could not understand why the little creature had behaved so, but all thoughts of its reasoning sped from his mind as he recognised the rarest of flowers that lay next to Krell.

'A Rapture Bud!' he gasped loudly and the dirge hen turned to look at him.

Overcome with euphoria, Davvid cried, 'That is how he does it!' and started to move forward. The dirge hen returned its attention to the prone figure and looked quizzically at the pulsing tube that joined Krell to the plant. It opened its beak,

and before Davvid could magic a hex, snipped the stamen in two.

Krell went into spasms. His body thrashed and convulsed, his back arched to an impossible degree as the dirge hen took fright and ran off into the undergrowth. Davvid sprinted towards the terrible form of his master, whose heels were doing their best to reach the back of his neck. The snap of Krell's spine echoed through the small copse like a whip-crack and he fell still. Davvid reached his side and put a hand on his master's chest. There was no movement. Blood covered one side of his face as it oozed from the ruined eye. Davvid took a deep breath, raised the lid on the other eye, and swore, the whole eye was black. Davvid knew this was no ordinary black. It was the endless, infinite black of a lost soul. His master's essence had been torn from his body. The vessel was dead but the soul was alive somewhere in the ether, and would remain so for eternity.

Davvid laughed now, a joyful, relieving laugh. It was all his. He would inherit everything, and he did not even have to do the killing himself! Tears of joy ran down his face as the enormity of what he was to become took hold. He would be the new Master Thaumaturgist. He would have all the riches and respect that went with the title. He knew Krell's secret for capturing the most powerful souls. It was the Rapture Bud's potent magical quality.

He turned his attention to the plant and choked when he saw that it had died. The dirge hen had not only managed to despatch his master but had also killed the plant when it cut through the stamen. The plant that held the secret. The plant that would not flower for another thirty years, and the plant that was the key to him becoming the most powerful man in the world. Killed by a hen! Davvid put his fingers into his hair and pulled out handfuls as he screamed in rage, whilst in the distance a dirge hen answered his call as if mocking him.

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