

NATURE OF THE BEAST

608 AR, NEAR THE BLACK RIVER, SOMEWHERE SOUTH OF CORVIS

Submerging her consciousness deep into her connection with Belpagor had become second nature to Bethayne, Voice of Everblight. It was not necessary to surrender her mind when they joined, but there was always the temptation to flow entirely into the beast's simpler mind and become a creature of pure instinct. In this animalistic state all sensations became pure, divorced from reflection. It was an empowering bliss.

She preferred to indulge in this addictive freedom from thought only briefly, as there were dangers in abandoning control. On every previous occasion, it had been easy for her to gather her scattered thoughts, but at this moment she felt intense resistance. Memories were fragmented, making it difficult to recall when she had surrendered her consciousness. It had clearly been too long. At her mental urging Belpagor immediately pulled back the umbilical cords connecting its organs to hers. Its muscular tail came down to support its weight as the amplified strength in her legs faded, and the interlocking appendages along its central torso opened to let her pull free. Disengaging in the middle of battle was dangerous, but it was necessary to clear her mind. She crouched for a moment as Belpagor towered protectively over her, ready to lash out at any enemy that came too near.

Around her the whirlwind of battle created a familiar commotion: the rumbling of powerful engines, the defiant shriek of a nephilim followed by the clash of metal biting metal, the heavy footfalls of charging soldiers. Her warbeasts fought around her, extensions of herself, all engaged in a struggle for survival. Several were injured to various degrees, although their draconic state allowed them to ignore discomfort; to dragonspawn, pain existed only to provide awareness of injury.

The enemy was close around her, making it difficult to prioritize targets, but Bethayne sent Belpagor to add its strength to the battle. Her mind raced with the thrill of the lethal fray. Some part of her exulted in the tumult and the way the chaos stripped away the complexity of decisions. She sent her will into Belpagor and urged it to scythe through two of the smaller creatures rushing toward her, which she recognized as mechanithralls from their oversized, steam-powered gauntlets. Belpagor cut through their masses of piping and dead flesh, then clawed through two more while Bethayne summoned blighted power from her arcane reserves. Even as Belpagor completed its attacks she hurled a sphere of violently transformative energies to explode into another mechanithrall in the midst of several others. Razor-sharp spines of bone shot forth to impale all those nearby. The effort of invoking this magic helped clear the lingering fog from her mind, and she began to apprehend just how

numerous the enemies were. She knew she faced the army of the Dragonfather, Everblight's most dangerous adversary.

Near Belpagor, a hulking nephilim protector wrenched the heavy blade of its halberd free from the chassis of a compact blackened metal construct on insect-like legs that was covered in plates of curved black steel. The nephilim bled from a serious gash from the machine's initial strike, which had delivered one of its tusks deep up under the dragonspawn's sternum.

Additional mechanithralls poured through the gaps between the trees. At her mental urging, her carnivean opened its fanged jaws to unleash a sizzling spray of ash, annihilating half a dozen. There were many more, and they closed on the draconic beast to hammer at its scaled hide.

Dark green-black helljacks came into view behind them, one resembling an enormous crustacean with a cannon in place of its front left arm. It fired several long, brass spikes into Bethayne's dragonspawn before advancing to crush the life from one of her hex hunters with its left pincer. *Leviathan*. The knowledge bubbled up from deep within her mind with the familiar sensation of lore reaching her through her athanc shard from Everblight or one of her warlock peers.

The dragonspawn she had with her were fearless, strong, and eager to spill blood. Her hex hunters entered the fray with similar enthusiasm, wielding their runic swords and alternating with invoked sorcerous magic in streaks of blighted lightning delivered through the blades. Still, they were badly outnumbered. Helljacks and bonejacks surged forward with a hungry swiftness that made them seem alive. The enemy spread out in a widening circle, clearly seeking to surround Bethayne and those with her.

A more delicate but stately arachnid creature stood at the center of the Cryxian host. Its steel upper torso resembled a female human's, with a strange, green glow oozing through her ribcage and an iron mask covering her upper face. Soul cages hung from her waist, and she was clearly directing the machines with her will. *Iron lich, among the ruling tier of the Cryxian hierarchy*. Bethayne needed no further information to understand the threat posed by such a being. She was preoccupied directing her forces, shouting orders to the hex blades and maneuvering all her dragonspawn to intercept the threats facing them while trying not to allow any of them to be overwhelmed.

Myriad other machines surged forward to attack. A Deathripper latched onto the carnivean's forward supporting leg and chewed through with razor-sharp teeth. Before the dragonspawn could deal with this, a Slayer leapt against it, slashing tremendous metal claws.

Despite nimble attempts to evade, her shredders quickly fell under an onslaught of heavy mechanithrall fists. A helljack she knew to be called a Corruptor latched another pincer-like appendage onto one of her raeks, and she saw greenish fluid from glass vials pour into its flesh to melt it from the inside. The raek lashed back with its razored tail, slicing through connecting tubing but doing too little damage to prevent its expiration.

Belpagor served again as a channel for the blighted power of one of her explosive spells before slithering forward on its tail to finish off the Corruptor with its claws. No longer blocked by her beast, the Leviathan turned toward her and fired its cannon. She used the last shredder's tenacity to strengthen her flesh and leapt to the side, but the Leviathan tracked her movement with uncanny precision.

She felt the tremendous impact as its metal projectiles pierced clear through her shoulder and left a gaping, bleeding hole. She instantly drew upon her blood connection to the nephilim protector and sent the wound to tear through its flesh instead. Engineered to accept the injuries of the warlock who spawned it, the beast took the transference with an eager hiss. Even as her wound vanished, the nephilim was crippled as the same gory hole opened in its chest.

The pain of this was fresh on her mind as Bethayne recalled Belpagor to her side. She was too vulnerable and knew she had to return to its protective embrace. They moved with perfect coordination as Belpagor swept in behind her on its tail and its lower appendages clicked open to reveal the awaiting cavity in the center of its torso.

It enfolded her so swiftly and completely that an onlooker might believe she had been swallowed whole. She felt comforted and protected while surrounded by the thick armor and draconic bones of its body. She welcomed the brief pain as bone-like needles extending from a variety of umbilical cords pierced her neck and abdomen and integrated their circulatory systems. Her head rested within the beast's sternum, surrounded by a webbing of nerve



tissue, through which she saw the world using Belpagor's superior senses.

She perceived even the slightest motion effortlessly with blighted sight able to pierce through smoke, fog, and underbrush. A surge of powerful energies swept through her as her strength and stamina were tremendously augmented. She felt invincible but held strong within the heady rush, knowing her situation remained precarious.

Just as she completed the melding, she heard a deep thump and something large arced toward her and exploded, splashing vile acidic fluids across Belpagor, three hex hunters, and another nephilim. Belpagor's scaled hide was impervious to the caustic fluid, which dripped with a hiss into the undergrowth below. The nephilim's thick skin partially protected it from the blast as well, but the hex hunters screamed as their flesh melted apart in bleeding chunks to reveal quickly unraveling organs beneath.

Bethayne gritted her teeth against this grim toll but had no time to absorb the weight of the casualties.

She looked for the source and saw an enormously fat undead creature, its skin stretched and stitched together, beyond the helljacks. It carried a wide-mouthed, underslung cannon that dripped greenish fluid from the barrel. *Bloat thrall*. With a surge of retaliatory anger she sent one of her raecks to destroy it, and the sleek leonine dragonspawn blended with the shadows to slip directly past two of the intervening helljacks. It pounced on the bloat thrall, tearing it apart with a toothy maw and lashing it with its tail. The creature ruptured in a blast of torn organs and disgusting fluids that melted the raeck's scaled flesh, leaving the spawn maimed as helljacks closed upon it.

THOSE TOUCHED BY THE MENTAL INFERNO OF EVERBLIGHT'S WILL HAD NEVER FELT HIM MAKE SUCH A POWERFUL COMMAND.

They could not sustain the rate her beasts were suffering crippling injuries. Realizing this, she hesitated only a moment. She could stand and destroy a good many Cryxians, but it would avail Everblight nothing. She knew her role and the place of those who fought with her. She was a chosen of the dragon, keeper of a sliver of his immortal essence. Ultimately no one else mattered, whatever her own feelings.

She turned the leader of her hex hunters, a skilled and devoted sorcerer named Aervass. Her voice rasped through Belpagor's throat as a harsh growl. "Delay them as long as possible."

He whistled to the others without hesitation and directed their efforts with a few sharp gestures. Bethayne guided her warbeasts to where they could best intercept and delay the foe.

This accomplished, she fled into the thorny underbrush and through slender, twisted trees. She leapt and ran swiftly down a narrow ravine toward a stream, moving their melded body with tireless swiftness on her own legs. Conjoined, she and Belpagor became an entirely different entity. Their internal organs shared function, giving her not only the armored protection within its scaled torso but also augmented physical abilities. Their blending was so complete that her life was linked to the beast's; the toxins flooding her body to bolster her strength and stamina required his organs to filter her blood or she would quickly succumb to the poisons.

After she splashed through the deep and wide river and continued up the opposite bank, Bethayne realized she had only a vague notion of her general location. Filtered

information through her athanc that must originate from the warlock Lylyth suggested the waterway was one of the Black River's eastern tributaries. She guessed she was immediately adjacent to the sprawling desolation of the Bloodstone Marches. It was far south of her last remembered location among Rhul's southern mountains.

It had been in Rhul, some indeterminate number of days ago, that Thagrosh had looked up to the clear skies above the southern mountains to see two dragons passing high overhead. Immediately a command blazed across all their athancs like liquid fire. Their master sent most of his chosen hastening away in various directions, accompanied by small numbers of spawn and Legion soldiers. Vayl and Absylonia stayed behind with Thagrosh as the army braced for possible attack, but the others left to ensure the survival of as many of his athanc shards as possible.

Those touched by the mental inferno of Everblight's will had never felt him make such a powerful and immediate command. Bethayne had instinctively retreated into Belpagor and entered an almost mindless trance as her limbs obeyed Everblight. Her beasts and her most loyal hex blades had unhesitatingly followed her through the wilderness, accepting her silence. She had traveled in a haze until set upon by Cryx.

Bethayne found it difficult to communicate with her peers while merged with Belpagor. She struggled to reach Thagrosh, hoping to learn what had transpired. She felt him there, but his mind was closed to her, and she sensed he was in deep communion with Everblight. She next directed her will toward Vayl, who often served as intermediary for the dragon; reaching her, she shared images of the ambush.

She received in return a welcome confirmation that the dragons had not attacked Thagrosh as Everblight had dreaded. Those formidable entities had flown past without showing any sign of having witnessed the gathered Legion below them. Despite this apparent false alarm, Everblight would not yet give his leave for his warlocks to return. As a chosen of Everblight, Bethayne would have to cope as best she could.



An instinct from Belpagor prompted her to halt momentarily within a sparse cluster of trees. She felt eyes upon her. At the splashing of large creatures or machines crossing the river, she listened closer and heard grunted breaths and bestial snorts rather than the rumble of Cryxian machines.

She kept still, hoping the creature or creatures would have no interest in her. Shortly she heard a human voice speaking the Cygnaran tongue in a low but commanding

tone. Through Everblight she had perfect apprehension of the otherwise unfamiliar language. "Move to the left and spread out! Flush the quarry into the open!" There was the sound of more movement to her right, immediately eclipsed by the deeper boom of a cannon firing.

She leapt backward even as a shell whistled down and exploded not far from her, detonating one of the nearest trees. Through the cloud of debris she saw a dozen or more armed farrow approaching up the bank, crude rifles in hand. She had seen such creatures before, employed as fodder in other battles. Several larger, unfamiliar pig-like beasts stood closer to the river in front of a bald, slender human wearing goggles and equipped with an unfamiliar weapon. Upon his back and at his side were several peculiar contraptions filled with glowing green fluid.

Her eyes were drawn to the beasts in front of him. These bipedal boars carried odd, boxy cannons strapped to their backs by heavy harnesses. A thin line of smoke streamed from the mouth of the nearest one. Even as she watched, another adjusted its stance, snorted, and braced itself before yanking on a heavy lanyard attached to the weapon. It bucked as it fired.

She turned and leapt away, her reaction time and movements augmented by Belphagor. The blast exploded just behind her. Her beast's armored torso protected her, but the farrow had seen her and fired in a crackling chorus that sent deadly metal projectiles whizzing past. One hit the back of her left leg and another grazed Belphagor's back, but they were only glancing wounds. Gritting her teeth in frustration, Bethayne surrounded herself with a cloud of ash as she ran, making it difficult for her pursuers to see her precisely. She had, she presumed, blundered into the territory of the farrow and their human master, and she was keenly aware of her peril without warbeasts at her side to feed her power or accept her injuries.

They came up behind her quickly, and the cannons fired. Two shots exploded nearby to rain rocks and debris down upon her, but the third hit her squarely in the upper back. The shell pierced Belphagor's armor to rip through its muscles. She had endured worse, but it did not bode well. She ran forward down a narrow trail and between several large rocks. Additional rifle-wielding farrow came at her from the opposite direction; they had driven her this way deliberately.

Her growl of frustration became an enraged roar through Belphagor's fanged mouth. She drew upon additional energies from her athanc to empower her claws with a potent blighted enchantment that heightened her predatory instincts and empowered her claws to siphon living energies. She charged forward to the nearest farrow, and as her swipes opened gashes across the creature's chest she felt its vitality flow to her and partially close the wound

on her back. When she tore the head off the next farrow, the injury closed completely, and she saw fear in the eyes of the remaining creatures. Several others pulled out clubs and attempted to batter at her, but she ignored their feeble blows and retaliated with killing swipes before rushing past, leaving a sea of farrow blood behind her.

The cannon-toting pig-beasts closed upon her and fired yet again, their blasts striking with increasing accuracy despite the ash swirling around her. She sensed their efforts being guided by a will and realized the human advancing with them must be a warlock; these creatures were somehow tied to him.

Two more shells struck, tearing out additional hunks of her flesh. Slicing through another pair of farrow with her blight-augmented claws let her partially mend these injuries, but additional farrow approached with loaded rifles. She had to close with the cannon-decked beasts—and she doubted she could kill them quickly enough—or find another escape. She looked down the sloping path to her left, a steep descent along a brush-covered hillside. It was too steep for the pig creatures to negotiate easily.

The choice was made for her. She felt a slight itch at her back warning her of approach even as heavy footsteps thudded across the ground. She turned in time to see an enormous, oversized abomination of metal and pig flesh before it smashed into her with enough force to send even Belphagor's mass flying. She soared down the sloped incline to crash into the stout and wide trunk of a massive tree. The wood cracked and groaned but remained intact, bringing her to an abrupt, bone-shattering halt.

She fell heavily to the ground with spots before her eyes. She felt dazed despite the augmented adrenal fluids pumping through her body from Belphagor. She staggered back to her feet in time to see the enormous pig-beast rushing headlong down the slope, wielding a tremendous axe in each of its metal hands. Smoke poured from stacks in its back, and she could hear the sound of a steam engine. She managed to duck under the first wild swing, but the second sank into her side, penetrating armored scales and almost reaching her own flesh. It lowered its head and followed with a brutal upward jerk of its chin that drove its tusks into Belphagor's chest.

Her dual hearts were pounding, her own twice as rapidly as Belphagor's, and both sets of lungs labored to draw breath. Though her link to her dragonspawn numbed her to physical agony, she could tell she was near death. The attacker pulled back its left arm to deliver what would surely be a lethal blow. She heard the voice of the human shouting angrily, "Stop! I need it alive! Alive!"

The human stepped into view. In his hand was a strange pistol-like weapon with a long, sharp needle in place of

a barrel. He plunged the needle deep into Belphegor's chest and injected a thick fluid into the spawn's body with a hissing sound. It took effect with remarkable rapidity, numbing her to all sensation.



Doctor Arkadius called ahead to the hunchbacked farrow who assisted him in the laboratory. "We have quite the find here. You won't want to miss this. Open the doors! Hurry!" He pointed emphatically at the wide doors into the main chamber. It was not clear how much the crippled farrow comprehended of his words, but he responded to the gesture and did as bid, pushing the heavy doors open on creaking hinges. The enormous war hog with Arkadius passed through carrying the specimen.

Arkadius followed, keeping a tight mental leash on the steam-powered half-pig, half-machine beast to be sure it did not wreck the fragile apparatus scattered around the perimeter of the laboratory. He cleared several beakers from the large dissection table at the center of the chamber and directed the war hog, "There! Put it down, gently."

The war hog dropped the limp body heavily onto the metal surface, and Arkadius winced. Inspecting his prize showed it had suffered no additional harm from this rough treatment. He directed the steam-powered hog to move to a wall alcove deliberately built large enough to contain it.

Arkadius could barely repress his excitement over the prospect of discovering the internal mechanisms of the captured beast. Even as he began to prepare for the procedure he cautioned himself not to be too exuberant. The creature was clearly close to death, and given it was an entirely unfamiliar and exotic species, he should not have high expectations regarding its physical condition.

"Look here, Targ," he said to his assistant as if addressing a student. "You can see this creature is massively blighted. Note the pattern of the scales, the general unnatural skin tone. Still, it has very few blemishes or irregularities and remarkable symmetry. Note the armor adorning the upper torso. Expertly crafted, very beautiful patterns in the metal, graceful curves. This creature was valued."

Targ eyed him dubiously and blinked but showed no other reaction. Arkadius considered his assistant an excellent listener as well as an additional pair of hands in the laboratory. The farrow was trained in the use of the various surgical tools and sutures. The offsetting malformation of the creature's leg and twisted spine limited mobility, but those disabilities were trivial weighed against his unusual manual dexterity.

Looking outside the room, he saw several farrow brigands lounging at the bottom of the wide staircase that led from

above into the bowels of the facility. The farrow had a tendency to be lazy unless prodded. He addressed them sharply, "You lads here to attend the dissection?" The brigands were awed and fearful of Arkadius and did not seek out his company as a general rule. As expected, this group offered the equivalent of a polite negation and huffed something about Lord Carver, then began to climb the stairs. He shouted after, "Find something useful to do, like patrolling the perimeter!"

He shook his head sadly. Farrow lacked initiative and curiosity. Attempting to lift them from their primitive state was a constant ordeal. His tests had revealed their intelligence to be not at all dissimilar to humanity's. Despite their potential, though, he had found they were usually best employed for fighting or lifting heavy objects.

Doctor Arkadius turned back to his specimen, and he took a few deep breaths to center himself. Dealing with an unfamiliar organism was inherently dangerous; his various drugs might not have the expected effects, and he could not know what he might find within the creature. Allowing it to perish before he could pluck its marvelous secrets was unacceptable. He pierced the thick flesh of the creature at several key areas with long, hollow needles, each attached to a length of flexible piping extending to beakers and flasks of gleaming greenish fluids. Some hung freely, while others were set over low flames. He adjusted these apparatus and watched the creature with a brooding frown.

It remained unconscious, which was good, and it did not enter into immediate seizures, which was also good. Biting his lip, he placed a listening cone on its chest and listened for its heart. He was surprised to discover an erratic sound. It was almost like two hearts rather than one, with one set of beats slow and loud, the other more muffled and rapid.

He had already mastered human and porcine physiology—the farrow anatomy had kept few mysteries from his piercing mind—but this creature was something foreign. It had been a singular stroke of luck that events had transpired as they had. The matter had entirely derailed his other plans, but a man of science had to seize opportunities for discovery.

He had been journeying north for a clandestine meeting with an unreliable colleague from Corvis, accompanied by an armed escort in case of trouble. The sounds of battle near the river had confirmed the wisdom of his precautions. His apprehension had grown on discovering Cryxians, who rarely came into this region. The sight of dragonspawn alongside lean soldiers armed with peculiar blades fighting against them had piqued his interest. He had heard the rumors of a blighted army that had struck the Castle of the Keys some months earlier, as had everyone who dwelled near the Bloodstone Marches, but this was the first time he had witnessed dragonspawn firsthand.

He had immediately noticed something unusual about a creature that fled the fight while the others remained. Something in its posture suggested intelligence. Capturing it had not been easy, but he had used his knowledge of the terrain to his advantage.

Now that he had the specimen, he was almost overwhelmed with the possibilities of the tests and experiments he could run. Would it be possible to develop the means to detect and quantify blight as a tangible substance or energy? Could he sustain living skin samples removed from the body?

Arkadius took a more complete survey of the creature, paying particular attention to its legs and its two pairs of entirely different arms. "Note, Targ, its lower arms are almost of human proportions. But what's this?" He squinted at the blade-like claws and realized the lower set were made of metal, set within what might have been armored gauntlets that extended up past the elbow. With a bit of struggle he pulled the armor and gloved weapon loose, almost cutting himself even through the thick gloves he always wore. This revealed a slender forearm and a fine-boned and long-fingered hand with sharp, hardened barbs along the knuckles. The delicacy of the hand unsettled him more than its monstrous elements.

The creature's legs were humanoid and oddly slender for the size of its body. What he had taken for scaled plates were actually armored greaves and boots. Decorative flourishes on the leg armor and the clawed weapons matched the thicker armor affixed to the creature's torso. "Could such a creature have been natural once? Can dragon blight have such a dramatic impact on an entire organism?" Targ had no answers, but Arkadius did not seem to notice. His rapturous smile was enough to make the farrow eye him nervously.

He could tell no scalpel would suffice on what looked to be tough scaly skin. "Targ, the heavy saw, if you please." His assistant obediently found a freshly sharpened, hefty instrument among those dangling against the nearby wall. He was curious to see where the smoother flesh ended and the more draconic flesh began. There were aspects of the abdomen that were intriguing. A number of smaller appendages were folded over themselves in an interlocking pattern just above the creature's slender hips. "This is peculiar. Reminds me of a prawn, *macrobrachium acherontium*, but not quite. What use are these appendages?"

He decided it would be best to remove at least one of these smaller appendages but realized he might need to cut through several to get to the skin beneath. It seemed likely there would be softer flesh there, perhaps an easier place to begin his exploratory surgery. As soon as he began sawing the largest set of these overlapping appendages the creature twitched and jerked. He increased the anesthetic drips feeding into its body and began again. He was able

to work his way through the limbs and separate them. The thick blood released in the process was polluted with black streaks and had an acrid smell that stung his nose.

He was almost too busy with the messy mechanics of this operation to realize what was beneath the dislocated limbs. He stepped back a moment and tilted his head, puzzled. Beneath the spilled blood was a female humanoid torso, *inside* the monstrous one. It was partially covered by an armored cuirass, with a girdle of woven black leather below. Numerous semi-translucent fleshy tubes connected to the arms, hips, and sides, blood pumping between them with the rhythm of two hearts.

A sudden movement made him startle. An autonomic process pushed the shapely female torso down and partially out of the creature's chest cavity. This revealed a head, which had previously been lodged below its sternum. The inner creature was elven, with long, pointed ears poking through a tight-fitting skullcap that covered most of her upper head. Her features were extremely angular, particularly her chin and nose, but had a certain exotic appeal.

"Marvelous!" he crowed. "Not one blighted creature, but two, perhaps living in perfect symbiosis? The find of a lifetime!" For a time he was utterly captivated with the sight of her within the cavity that fit her like a glove, as if grown to accept her. "We must get a sample of this fluid exchange," he noted. He took hold of one of the umbilical cords and directed Targ to hand him a scalpel. It was at this moment she opened her eyes.



Bethayne emerged to consciousness with rising panic. She realized this sensation came from Belpagor, which could only mean an immediate threat to her. She felt air upon her skin and realized she was partially detached from Belpagor, something that should happen only by her command. She sent a mental impulse for the spawn to withdraw the connecting tubes that intersected her flesh, but there was no reaction. Their minds and senses were no longer blended, but she was physically connected, which was extremely dangerous. If Belpagor perished in this state, so would she.

Realizing her head was no longer comfortably secured within Belpagor's upper womb, she opened her eyes. Adrenaline surged in her veins as she recognized the face of the human in front of her: the same one who had directed the pig creatures.

Her arms and legs were immobile, and one of her clawed gauntlets was removed. Her mind was relatively clear, but whatever had forced Belpagor into unconsciousness had paralyzed her limbs. Her eyes went to the human's right

hand, where he held a keen bladed instrument against one of the primary tubes connecting her circulatory system to Belpagor's.

"Stop!" She instinctively used the language she had heard him speak during their chase. Fluency came effortlessly through her athanc. "Do *not* cut those cords." She utilized the same commanding tone she ordinarily employed on Nyss and ogrun soldiers. He froze, looking at her with surprise and curiosity.

Her mind raced. The desperate reality of her situation was clear. Her eyes softened and her tone became richer, warmer. "Please. I will die if you sever those."

He withdrew the sharp knife from the cords, eyeing them with a frown. When he next spoke he did not address her but rather the misshapen farrow next to him. "Note that while the external creature seems torpid and properly anesthetized, the inner creature is alert enough to speak and seems fluent in Cygnaran. Most curious." His eyes darted to the beakers of fluids connected to hoses and needles piercing Belpagor. "Should I increase the dosage?" He frowned, weighing the option, then stood and put the cutting implement down, to Bethayne's initial relief. Then panic returned as he fiddled with the valves regulating the mysterious fluids. Belpagor's heart slowed alarmingly.

"I suggest you leave that be." She said the words carefully, calmly, as if speaking to a child. He frowned, vexed.

As Bethayne absorbed details of her surroundings, she made a number of rapid assessments. Within Everblight's mind came identification, even empathy. This was a laboratory, superficially dissimilar to the research abattoir Everblight had employed beneath the Fane of Ayisla, but its purpose seemed similar.

More than the scientific apparatus or the peculiar liquids, the key was in the diagrams upon the walls. She saw numerous anatomical charts of dissected farrow and other pig-like creatures, all extremely detailed and drawn with a skilled hand. On the far wall was a shelved case containing sealed glass containers of organs preserved in yellowish fluid. She realized the axe-wielding and cannon-mounted boars must be the creation of this man: he was a shaper of flesh and machines. His efforts were crude compared to Everblight's mastery yet impressive for an ordinary mortal.

She knew at once he had brought her here to dissect and study her, much as Everblight had done to Iosans below Issyah. In her most persuasive tone she said, "You will learn far more from me as an awake and willing participant."

His eyes widened, and he looked at her with his full attention. She could easily read his expression of amazement

and interest when his eyes traced across Belpagor, and his reaction surprised her. Most humans would have reacted with horror. She saw him begin to view her as a thinking being rather than an inert experiment. She smiled slightly. "I am Bethayne, also called the Voice of Everblight. Give me your name that I might address you properly."

He regarded her with the same look of fascination. She had never been so close to a human without killing him. It was interesting to observe how easily his expressions conveyed his thoughts, with none of the disciplined self-control her own people had possessed even before they joined Everblight. They stared at one another, then he spoke to her directly for the first time. "Why are you not frightened or terrified? You awake in a strange place, helpless, yet you greet me politely?"

Her answer was forestalled by harsh pounding on the closed door to the laboratory. He cursed, "Kerwin's beard! Damn it all!" He was clearly agitated at this untimely interruption. In truth, Bethayne also found it inconvenient. First conversations between strangers established an important foundation, and turning this circumstance around would require delicacy. He yanked the door open. "What is it?" The farrow outside the door said something either in a language Everblight did not know or using an incomprehensible dialect. It was the first time she could remember Everblight being ignorant of a tongue.

Arkadius turned to the hunchbacked farrow and ordered, "Maintain the drips, and get me if there are any problems. He faced the war hog in its alcove. "If she tries to move from that table, render her unconscious. But *only* unconscious." Given his ability to control the beast with his mind, the words were for her benefit. This amused her.

She felt grateful that his departure gave her a chance to test the limits of her circumstances. Belpagor's body remained crippled, and the human's drugs were not helping. Ordinarily she would have tried to rile the warbeast so she could use that energy to knit its wounds, but that was impossible. Nor could she muster much of her own blighted sorcery. Even were she able to manifest her power, killing the human warlock with the war hog nearby was unlikely.

She summoned her will and reached for Everblight's mind to convey the urgency of her situation. "I am in grave peril." The confession was difficult.

The athanc in her chest lit afire as his presence came upon her with such swiftness that she gasped and trembled. He roared into her mind, and she could feel his irritation. This was not the fluid, almost ecstatic blending she felt when Everblight occupied her body for his own use. His voice boomed painfully inside her skull. "I HAVE NO TIME TO SPARE FOR YOUR PLIGHT. I LEAVE IT TO YOU TO BEND

THE MORTAL TO YOUR WILL." He was gone again, sweeping from her mind like a tornado.

A far gentler presence followed. Bethayne felt as if a cold, soothing hand were touching her cheek. "Where are you?" Vayl asked. The barrier caused by her joining with Belpagor made Vayl's mental voice sound distant and muffled.

Bethayne admitted, "Somewhere south; beyond that I do not know."

"We will try to find you, but for now you are on your own. Endure." With that simple command, the sense of Vayl evaporated, leaving only a lingering coolness.



The powerful chemicals injected into Belpagor overcame its ability to filter them for her, and Bethayne lost consciousness for some time. She struggled up through the blackness like a swimmer trapped in a frozen river seeking a hole for air. She knew many hours had passed, as she felt very thirsty and hungry, but such physical sensations were insignificant.

The human, assisted as always by Targ, was at work again. He had removed Belpagor's upper armor and was slowly cutting through a section of its upper left chest. She sensed numerous exploratory incisions along the beast's flesh that compounded the weakness caused by the drugs. She saw no sign his dissection tools had been applied to her own flesh, a sign her words had reached him.

She said, "Inflicting further injury will not serve your purposes."

He met her eyes almost sheepishly, then drew himself up. "My studies require samples. I will not remove anything vital."

Bethayne elaborated, "When this creature dies, not only will I perish, but its body will quickly decompose. You will learn nothing of its internal structure before it becomes a useless pool of fluids."

He was silent as he considered this, and when he spoke it was on another matter. "To answer your previous question, my name is Doctor Arkadius." Giving his name to her had been a type of submission. For the moment she was in charge of the conversation; she could see he desired to speak with her further.

Her eyes went to the war hog with its machined arms, the pipes that went through its flesh, the extensive scars showing where it had been sliced apart and reassembled. "Your work is impressive, Arkadius. I have never seen a steam engine integrated into a living organism."

Though sometimes blunt, flattery could be an effective tool if applied properly. His posture relaxed, and his shoulders straightened a bit. "Organic forms have many advantages over machines," he answered, his face becoming more animated as he spoke. "But flesh has limits. A proper integration of the two allows the whole to exceed the sum of the parts. There are of course many technical difficulties." He suddenly frowned as if remembering to whom he was speaking. "I wouldn't expect you to understand."

She smiled slightly. "You might be surprised."

"You were clearly Nyss, once. When and where did you learn Cygnaran? Before or after you were exposed to blight? What *are* you?" His hunger for knowledge was clear. He reminded her of a freshly spawned carnivean seeking after meat with single-minded determination.

"I am one of the chosen generals of the dragon Everblight." She saw his mouth drop slightly open at this. Fascination more than fear defined his expression. She continued, "What if I told you I created this creature? I shaped it into being, spawned it of my blood, my dreams, and my nightmares. It is as unique as I am."

**SHE STRUGGLED UP THROUGH
THE BLACKNESS LIKE A SWIMMER
TRAPPED IN A FROZEN RIVER
SEEKING A HOLE FOR AIR.**

He placed a hand on Belpagor. "You created this?" His voice conveyed his amazement. "How? I cannot even begin to fathom a method for such a thing."

"My blood is protean, ever-malleable, potent with the seeds of genesis." She saw him respond to the hypnotic rhythm of her words. "I can create more than this, a dizzying assortment of living forms. I can show you many things, wondrous things." She poured into her voice the compelling timbres she had learned as a priestess of Nyssor, her tone rich and latent with subtle power. Seeing his gloved hand twitch, she wondered if any of Belpagor's blood had touched him. Blight would open his mind to her.

He shook his head and stepped back. "You have no reason to share such knowledge with me." A slight quaver in his voice betrayed a longing to hear more.

She lowered her eyes. Despite his resistance she could tell she was reaching him. "Reduce the dosage of whatever you are applying. Allow me to extract from Belpagor. Yes, that is its name. Once our connection severs, you can experiment at will. A fair exchange for my freedom."

He said nothing but stared at her and chewed on his lower lip.

She spoke again, softly. "We are alike you and I. Both of us shape flesh. You by tool and blade, I by . . . other means. I do not object to your learning about me. My master seeks all to understand his beauty, his supremacy. By revealing myself fully to you, I accomplish his aims." Her voice was seductive. By his flushed skin, the way his breath quickened, he was responding even if against his inner judgment.

Targ made what might have been an alarmed snort, but Arkadius ignored it. He glanced to his nearby war hog, clearly weighing the risks. He was reaching for one of the valves to the drug drips when the laboratory door swung open and a farrow pushed through. Even Bethayne could tell the farrow who entered was no simple brigand. Older and graying, he wore more elaborate attire, with bits of bone dangling from tasseled cords and clinking as he moved. He leaned on a gnarled staff and walked with a slight limp. He offered the doctor a respectful bow. "Arkadius, Cryx comes." His voice was gruff, but the Cygnaran words were comprehensible. "Must have followed *her* here." He jerked his tusks toward the dissection table.

Arkadius folded his arms. "What happened?" Watching them closely, Bethayne decided the human was in charge, though clearly this farrow occupied some position of authority, likely that of an advisor.

"Bonejack rooting around. Destroyed now. Sentries saw more. They will find this place, maybe soon." He sniffed meaningfully toward Bethayne.

From the nearest bench Arkadius picked up his needle-barreled weapon. "Very well. Please gather the grunts and make ready for an armed engagement." He turned to the hunchbacked assistant, "Targ, see to the gun boars and fire up another war hog."

Arkadius looked about to march from the room, but the older farrow stopped him with a long-nailed and furred hand on his arm. "Wait," the farrow spoke in conspiratorial tones, "they come for her." His eyes as he met Bethayne's contained a spark of cunning. "Offer her. They may leave."

Arkadius hesitated and looked at her. Bethayne could see fear in his eyes, conflicting with his scientific curiosity. The desire for survival slowly prevailed, and his eyes went cold. "Perhaps you are correct. This may have been a foolish endeavor."

"You don't want to turn me over to them, Arkadius." Her use of his name made his eyes widen.

"No, I do not," he begrudgingly admitted. "But between your survival and mine, there is no choice." He shook his head sadly. "There will be other opportunities, other

interesting creatures, I am sure." He frowned but stalked over to the beakers of dripping fluids and started to open the valves with sharp, decisive twists. It was as if he did not trust himself to carry through unless he acted quickly.

Bethayne felt her heartbeat accelerate even as Belpagor's slowed down. "What will this buy you? Cryx does not care about the details of your involvement. They will destroy you regardless. Arkadius, I know you are not stupid. Listen to me." Her tone was sharp, and she saw she had struck a chord by insulting his intelligence.

"There is a chance they will be satisfied with you. If not," he shrugged, "we will fight them. We have a formidable arsenal and are prepared for war, should it come." He might have believed what he said, but she could tell he was not as confident as he wanted to appear.

"Free me." She put all of her emphasis into the words. "Stop the drugs. I will fight at your side. We will fight them together. You have yet to see my full power."

"So you can turn on me when you get the chance? I think not. You will want vengeance for your capture. I would, were I you." Agony strained his voice. He looked between her and Belpagor, his eyes filled with a mix of emotions, as if he were convincing himself.

"I do not hold my capture against you, now that we know one another. I have seen your capabilities. Think to the future! There is much to be gained by working together." He shook his head but frowned as though deliberating. She continued, "Allies of mine converge on this place. If you have given me over, they will seek your destruction even should you survive Cryx. I do not want that."

"You lie. How could allies find you?"

"We are connected. All of us. By the dragon we serve." She could see his interest and persisted, "Trust me this once. I vow there will be no treachery. On my life, on Belpagor's." Even as she made this promise she could feel her consciousness begin to fade. Her body went numb, and her eyes began to roll back.

"Do not believe her, Doctor," the elder farrow warned.

Despite this his hands were suddenly on the valves, cranking them entirely the other way to seal them. He then pulled loose the needled hoses piercing Belpagor.

It did not take long. No ordinary living thing, Belpagor had already begun to develop a resistance to the soporific drug. In time it would have become able to neutralize it completely, as it had with fire, acid, and lightning.

After waiting until it filtered the toxins from her blood, she sent the mental impulse for it to withdraw the hollow bone shunts and umbilical cords connecting them. She stood

gracefully from the table, several inches taller than Arkadius. His needled weapon was in hand, and he eyed her nervously. She smiled sweetly as she recovered her clawed gauntlet and slipped her hand back into place.

She rested this hand on Belphagor's chest and closed her eyes as she reached across their bond to pass her blighted power through its tissues. She drew upon its inner vitality and cycled it through the wellspring of the athanc shard in her heart, then let it flow back into its tissues, closing its wounds, correcting broken bones, and repairing internal organs. Speaking over her shoulder, she said, "See to your people. We will join you soon."

Arkadius stared at her a moment but then moved toward the door, gathering the farrow and massive war hog as he went. They left Bethayne and Belphagor alone in the laboratory. Her lips curled in a small smile.



Bethayne sent to Vayl as she climbed the stairs. The Vassal of Everblight snapped, "What happened? I could not reach you." She did not wait for an answer. "I think I have found where you are. We dispatched our swiftest hunters. Look for Annyssa Ryvaal." Hand-picked by Lylyth, Annyssa was the leader of the Legion's raptors, as ruthless as she was capable. Bethayne felt a surge of appreciation.

Belphagor moved sinuously ahead of Bethayne. They entered a dusty compound outside the squat edifice atop the entrance to the underground laboratory. The air was hot and uncomfortably dry. The compound occupied a low plateau surrounded by rocky crags in what she guessed was one of the western hill ranges of the Bloodstone Marches, given the reddish hue of the earth. The sparse, thorny vegetation was cleared for several farrow-built structures. These seemed reasonably sound, but the arrangement had a hastily constructed, impermanent look that reminded Bethayne



of Legion encampments, with the exception of the solid, squat building atop the entrance to Arkadius' laboratory. Its reeking outer wings were clearly home to his stock of beasts and a large number of enormous, unaltered pigs and boars.

The farrow troops had gathered and looked ready to move, with an impressive array of brigands alongside others armed with hefty cleavers. Targ had brought a pair of powerfully built war hogs and a trio of gun boars. Her arrival into their midst caused a considerable stir, but she ignored their noises and looks. She sidled near Dr. Arkadius as he pulled a pair of hefty goggles over his eyes. She asked, "What do your scouts report?"

He hesitated only slightly before answering, "Several groups of Cryx have been seen around the perimeter and outer paths. I believe the main body is north of here. We are well fortified; we should dig in and wait."

Bethayne shook her head. "It would be a mistake to let them box us in here. Better to stay on the move and crush what pockets we can find before they gather." She had her own motivation for this suggestion, given Annyssa was searching for her. "We can retreat here if the fight goes poorly."

Arkadius nodded at the suggestion as if it had been his plan all along. He spoke orders to get his farrow underway, dispatching them in large groups. Bethayne felt a vague urgency, perhaps rooted in having been incapacitated too long.

They quickly found a small band of Cryxians. The gun boars fired shells into ranks of mechanithralls while Bethayne sent Belpagor forward to intercept their accompanying bile thralls. She hurled her magic into the enemy with savage enthusiasm, delivering blighted power through her dragonspawn. Showing their lack of discipline, a number of brigands were led astray by a flanking bonejack until their leaders bullied them back into position. To the north, Bethayne saw something past the next hill, possibly kicked up sand and dust. She pointed it out to Arkadius and then rushed in that direction, forcing the human and his beasts to hasten after.

Cresting the hill were the swift-moving forms of what had to be blighted raptors racing forward alongside fleet archers, all firing at targets behind them as they rushed south. The advancing Cryxian force was extremely familiar to Bethayne, the same as she had encountered just days before.

The raptors and striders sent punishing volleys of arrows into the mechanithralls at the fore, buying time for the heavier elements of their force to keep on the move. Those included four thick-bodied nephilim—two soldiers and two bolt throwers. The nephilim soldiers had their short wings extended to glide over short distances, evading boulders and clusters of thorny shrub that would otherwise have impeded them. The bolt throwers occasionally turned to fire their ballistae back toward the enemy.

The nephilim were first to see her. She rushed forward, gaining on Belpagor, who slithered across the dry sands just ahead of her. The nephilim raised their heads and gave a shrieking cry of greeting in one voice. Belpagor answered them with a roar that seemed an echo of Everblight as it resounded off the nearest hills. The sound would have put terror into the living but had no impact on the dead. Helljacks and bonejacks were driving toward them now, ignoring the arrows sent their way.

Bethayne stopped as the four nephilim reached her. They gathered around her reverently and kneeled, their eyeless heads bowed. With a razored claw she made a small cut along her thigh, just above her armored greaves, letting her blood coat the blade. She quickly nicked the skin of each hardy nephilim at the softer portion of their necks. As their

blood mingled she felt her bond to them strengthen until they could clearly hear her thoughts and obey her will.

Arkadius and his farrow had caught up with her, but she ignored their stares and murmuring. The Cryxians were almost upon them. One of the nephilim soldiers hissed and raised its sword, moving toward the forward war hog, but Bethayne directed it toward the Cryxians instead. The others followed suit, the soldiers advancing toward the unliving foe as the bolt throwers reloaded their powerful weapons. Arkadius shouted orders to his farrow, who turned their pig iron rifles to fire on the advancing horde of mechanithralls and bile thralls ahead of the helljacks.

With the striders occupying the enemy, the raptors raced toward Bethayne. A tall, proud woman led them from atop an ulk decked in elaborate barding, including an enclosed helmet with thin slits for its eyes. Sharpened steel blades shone on its sweeping horns, and the bow the woman wielded was particularly elaborate. She had an arrow nocked and pointed at Arkadius, prompting several of the nearest farrow and one of the gun boars to squeal and aim their weapons toward her in return. Bethayne addressed her. "Annyssa Ryvaal, I greet you. These are our allies this day." She indicated Arkadius, his beasts, and the farrow with a sweep of her claw.

"As you command, Voice of Everblight." The Talon of Everblight pointed her bow the other direction and sent its arrow instead into a Deathripper that was closing on them. Her raptors sent other arrows toward the swiftly running machine, and two wedged into the piston mechanisms driving its legs. Bethayne raised a clawed hand as Belpagor moved protectively in front of her and sent her power through him once more, creating a tendril of raw force she used to seize the Deathripper and yank it violently, shattering its fragile arc node and nearly ripping off its head.

The raptors wheeled their nimble ulks around and charged while drawing their swords. Arkadius' war hogs rushed forward as well, bellowing as they raised 'jack-like hands with readied axes. Arkadius summoned his will to create a chaotic array of orange runes around him. The light lit his lean features ominously from below. His power felt alien to Bethayne, but she could sense the unleashing of violent mystical impulses that goaded the war hogs and gun boars into a rage. Their eyes gleamed with aggression, and they ignored the Leviathan bolts and the arcing fire of another bloat thrall that landed among them as they closed the gap with their Cryxian adversaries. Another set of runes flickered into existence around the forward war hog as it crashed into the approaching Slayer.

Another surge of huge-fisted mechanithralls closed on Belpagor. Bethayne reached into its essence and summoned an explosion of choking blighted ash that flickered with

orange and black flames. As they entered this noxious cloud, the thralls crumbled before landing a single blow.

Her will also directed the nephilim soldiers at the forward edge of the fray. They set upon the black-shelled Corruptor with enormous swords, delivering crushing blows that shattered the mechanisms of both its necrojector and its sludge cannon.

The chaos increased as the gun boars and bolt throwers continued to fire on the enemy while the helljacks closed to melee. The iron lich commanding the machines controlled them like a master puppeteer, using her mobile bonejacks to extend the reach of her sickly green runic magic with devastating impact. Farrow fell before her 'jacks in droves, while bile thralls exploded to annihilate striders who could not destroy them fast enough. Crab-legged necrotechs lurked behind the main line to repair injured machines.

The Leviathan endured several axe blows but managed to seize the first of the war hogs in its pincer. It hurled the heavy pig through the air toward Arkadius, who narrowly escaped being crushed. Several scrap thralls lumbered toward him, dead bodies transformed into walking bombs.

Bethayne saw panic on Arkadius' face. By the time he got to his feet the shambling automatons would be upon him. Even as he stood he looked back to her with an expression of dread, clearly expecting she would betray him. The draconic joy of battle had seized her, filling her with bloodthirsty delight. She could not help but laugh, and the blood left Arkadius' face.

Belphagor slithered swiftly toward him. She raised a clawed hand and sent a surge of blighted power through her dragonspawn to burst the nearest scrap thrall in an eruption of spiny bone growths that shredded through the others staggering toward him. They exploded even in death, leaving craters in the ground where they had been. Arkadius had hunkered and covered his head, and his thick leather coat had protected him from the worst of the blasts.

She prompted Belphagor to lift him to his feet. The dragonspawn was none too gentle, and its claw left a puckered, bleeding hole in his chest that made him groan in pain. Bethayne considered this a small and deserved payment. He glared at her through his goggles, but she just smiled and returned her attention to the battle. Arkadius' scowl became a look of utter fascination and interest as it dawned on him that not only had she honored her vow, she had saved his life.

The Cryxian warcaster was masterful, but she was experienced enough to see when her force was at a disadvantage. After her primary helljacks collapsed, she began her withdrawal, making use of her remaining

bonejacks as well as powerful spells to discourage pursuit. Bethayne's raptors and striders chased the retreating army as far as the grove of trees nearer the river, but she felt no desire to go beyond that. Bethayne knew the iron lich had divided her forces while searching for them; those enemies could now be consolidating. Nonetheless, whatever the Cryxian had left would be a fraction of what she had commanded when she began. Not enough to challenge them or hinder their return north.

Once they were certain Cryx was gone, Arkadius and his farrow herded together, weapons in hand, and warily eyed the blighted Nyss and Bethayne. One of the war hogs was down, and two of the gun boars were badly injured. Arkadius was already drawing on his power and using his tools to heal and repair them. He moved with a haste certainly driven by concerns regarding their safety. Bethayne's nephilim had weathered the fight intact, aside from superficial wounds, and her force looked the stronger of the two. Arkadius stopped fiddling with the nearest gun boar as Bethayne stepped closer. His eyes were inscrutable behind his goggles.

She offered a small nod and said, "My promise to you holds. By my accounting, you owe me at least *two* favors: one for forgiving you for capturing me, and another for saving your life." Her eyes were mischievous, but he had no doubt of her sincerity.

Arkadius made a slight bow. "Fulfilling the terms of that debt will be my pleasure. I look forward to our next meeting and hope for a lengthy exchange of information."

She laughed and turned away to rejoin the other Nyss. "I will come for you." Belphagor moved behind her and turned back once at Arkadius as they departed, uttering a warning hiss. With that they marched away, the Nyss eager to return from these arid and hot lands to their more comfortable ice-covered mountains.