

Ghorm was having trouble seeing, his own blood filling his eyes from the huge gash across his forehead. Instinctively, he parried another vicious stab as the warlock attempted to finish him off, just as he had killed many of Ghorm's friends. In spite of his blurred vision, he couldn't help but smile as he saw his best friend, Zend, stand up behind the warlock, wielding his mace high overhead to finish off the dangerous man. Unfortunately, the quick glance revealed the threat to the warlock, who threw himself to the side and narrowly avoided Zend's desperate attack.

'Surrender, curse you!' Ghorm shouted, spitting out a thick wad of blood in doing so. The warlock apparently had no inclination to submit, as he quickly knelt and parried another wild swing from Zend before getting back on his feet. The pain was visible on the warlock's gnarly face as he grit his teeth in agony. Ghorm peered at the deep wound in the man's right thigh, a wound he'd inflicted himself with his curved sword, and wondered what possessed the man to continue his struggle. The band he had been leading were all dead, as were many of Ghorm's men, yet the mad look in the warlock's eyes assured him that despite the man's obvious disadvantage, he would fight to the death. Ghorm quickly wiped blood from his eyes while Zend kept the warlock busy with one huge strike after another, the desperate man blocking each blow from the mace with his longsword, but reacting a little slower each time. For some reason, the warlock was clutching on to a leather satchel in his other hand instead of dropping it to better be able to fight. Ghorm could see that his friend was running out of energy as well, as the attacks became slower and less precise, but he had won them enough time, he thought satisfied. With a resolute step, Ghorm swept in behind the warlock and slashed his sword across the man's back. The blood spilling onto his dark blue robes confirmed to Ghorm that the warlock wore no armor, and before he missed his opportunity, he quickly slashed at him again, this time running the sword along the man's lower back, causing him to scream in agony. Through a forced reaction, the warlock held his arms aloft as the pain of Ghorm's sword ravaged his body, and by doing so, he left a huge opening for Zend to finish him off. With a sickening thump, Zend's mace hit the warlock square in the jaw, sending the man to the ground, a dull thud sounding through the air as his body crumbled. Ghorm kicked away the warlock's sword as it fell beside him, and then glimpsed at the body before looking at his friend.

'What a mess,' Zend remarked, his breathing forced and blood trickling down from his mouth.

He'd been stabbed earlier in the battle by one of the warlock's men, and would need heavy bandaging, Ghorm suspected. Zend was tough though – he had been with Ghorm for many years, and he knew that as long as his friend was standing, he'd be all right no matter the injury. 'Worst one yet,' Ghorm agreed, eyeing his friend as a smile spread on his lips, 'but we stood tall.'

'I think one of them got away,' Zend said, pointing at the thick bushes nearby. Ghorm nodded. He too,

had seen a person leave the clearing almost as soon as the warlock and his entourage were being attacked. A slender person, he remembered seeing, but had no time to consider it as the battle had ensued immediately. Ghorm was the leader of the Purple Knights, a renowned group of adventurers who had bested many dangerous situations in their existence. They had been hired to track down a rogue band of people thought to be led by a man dabbling in magic of the Dark, and arrest them on charge of many of the crimes they had committed. Murder was the main one though, and as the Purple Knights had entered the band's camp, the villains had immediately drawn their weapons. Battle had been their only option, he remembered sadly. Ghorm surveyed the forest clearing and counted his losses; seven of his colleagues – his friends – dead. It was the most devastating thing to ever happen to the Purple Knights. In turn, he counted the ten people whom they had defeated, but he was far from satisfied. The Purple Knights were all seasoned fighters, but what had caused their losses were the surprising magical attacks the warlock and his associates wielded. Magic was rare in the world, especially in the rural regions of the Empire of Kascadore, so it had surprised the knights immensely when strange dark globes of energy were being thrown at them – not from one – but from all ten of their adversaries. *Warlock* was the derogatory term used for a worshipper of the Dark who wielded magic, a very rare combination outside the evil nation of Torn, the only place where such things were not considered criminal. The initial surprise of finding this many – an entire cult it seemed – at once, had staggered the knights and caused them to scramble as the fight broke out. The magic seemed to drain on the warlocks' energy, but unfortunately, those hit with the dark spheres had been wounded from within it seemed, as they crunched over in agony and screamed in pain. A couple had even fallen off their horses, stone dead, a look of shock locked in their eyes as the powerful magic coursed through their bodies killing them from within. Afterwards, Ghorm and his surviving men had taken up arms, engaging in close combat with the warlocks, and most of them had been finished off quickly. A couple though, the last remaining one in particular, had been surprisingly adept at wielding swords, and to Ghorm's great lament, had caused the knights more losses. Seven friends dead, he grimly repeated in his mind.

'Light help us,' he said as he shook his head, surveying the horrific battleground. He felt Zend's hand on his shoulder, giving him a reassuring squeeze. Ghorm looked at his friend, who removed the chain mail hood from his face before speaking in a calm voice.

'They did not die in vain,' Zend said, watching Ghorm nod before adding, 'This was no normal bandit camp. We stopped something foul here today.'

'All that magic. What has the world come to? Why were they here?' Ghorm thought aloud, to which Zend took a couple of steps towards the fallen warlock, and knelt down to pick up the leather satchel he

had been carrying. The warlock had never let go of the bag, even when he fell.

Zend tentatively opened the satchel, his brow raising as he pulled out the contents. He extracted a smaller black satin bag, clearly containing a round, flat object of sorts.

‘Wait,’ Ghorm said and walked over to his friend.

‘Aren’t you curious?’ Zend asked, slightly surprised.

‘Yes, of course, but since he was protecting this so eagerly... perhaps we best just look, and not touch?’ Ghorm suggested, and Zend nodded, opening the satin bag and carefully turning it to look inside. Ghorm stood nervously watching his friend.

‘It looks like a mirror. It’s... beautiful!’ Zend said, his voice changing to sound almost awed, further worrying Ghorm. Magic of the Dark was a very foreboding thing to regular people. Behind their façade as heroic adventurers, the Purple Knights were regular men and women – people who believed in the Light, and who believed that the Dark was something to be avoided. Ten warlocks in one place, combined with this strange mirror had to signify something major, Ghorm thought somberly.

‘Let me see,’ he asked and Zend nodded, holding the bag out for Ghorm to look inside. It truly was beautiful, he agreed as his eyes took in the strange mirror in a black wooden frame. There were several runes and symbols drawn in the wood, Ghorm could see, and the ornate frame was meticulously carved, making it a very fine piece of art. Before he could examine it closer – and he realized he wanted to – Zend pulled the bag back and folded it back into the leather satchel. Ghorm swallowed thickly, looking at Zend for answers. ‘Do you suppose this is what they are gathered for? This mirror?’ he asked in a subdued voice.

‘I think it might be magical. I think they were defending it.’ Zend said, speaking his mind.

Zend was often right in his initial assessments, Ghorm thought. His friend had a knack for piecing together a puzzle, and if the mirror was magical, then it would certainly warrant defending. It was not extravagant enough in some ways though, Ghorm thought. It could merely be a pretty mirror, though he had felt something tingle inside his mind as he’d observed it. He *had* heard of magical items, and if this mirror was potentially one such rare heirloom, and was able to garner the attention of ten warlocks, it was very dangerous indeed. ‘You might be right. Did you feel a... a sensation when looking at it?’ Ghorm asked, deciding to come clean about his experience.

The look on Zend’s face revealed that he had felt it too. ‘I don’t know what it was exactly, but yes, I felt something... Ghorm, I don’t think we should examine it ourselves,’ he answered in a stern voice, prompting a nod from Ghorm.

‘The magic these men used was most certainly of the Dark,’ Ghorm said, pointing at the various bodies on the ground, ‘and as such, we risk the taint ourselves. A stray warlock would not concern me so, but ten

gathered is cause for alarm. What if there are more?’ he speculated.

Zend was silent for a few seconds, before voicing his opinion. ‘We best take this to the city. The Keepers of the Light can examine it, or if necessary, destroy it.’ Zend advised, sighing softly.

Ghorm nodded and turned around to survey the battlefield just as Zend bent over to examine the dead warlock leader. Ghorm peered across the scene of deceased friends and defeated foes. ‘We will have to burn them all first, I think,’ he remarked and took a few steps towards the nearest of the fallen knights. ‘But I want our comrades burnt by themselves. And we should collect their valuables for their families,’ Ghorm continued, kneeling down over a fallen knight and closing the man’s eyes. He could hear Zend rummaging about behind him, and just hoped his friend wasn’t finding any other dangerous things on the warlock leader. ‘Don’t you agree, Zend?’ Ghorm asked. When no reply was forthcoming, Ghorm stood back up and turned his head. ‘Zend? Are you listening to – ‘

Ghorm’s eyes widened in terror as he saw Zend sitting on his knees. He had a desperate look in his eyes as a long dagger was jammed right through his throat. Blood was spurting out and he was making a rasping gurgling sound. Paralyzed by the shock of what he was witnessing, Ghorm only managed to catch a glimpse of the warlock pulling out the dagger from his position on the ground and jamming it brutally back into Zend’s exposed throat once more. Ghorm blinked in surprise as sadness and anger overwhelmed him. The warlock had been feigning it! The mirror had to be important indeed, Ghorm thought, if it could cause a man to successfully feign such deadly injuries as the warlock had sustained. Time progressed slowly as Ghorm considered the notion while he watched Zend’s demise right in front of him. There was no way he could save him; he could see his friend fading right before him, and the two precise stabs he had sustained would kill anyone. With an unwavering expression etched on his face, he regarded his dying friend and saluted him, holding a hand across his own heart.

‘I will take care of your family, my dear friend. And I will avenge you!’ he said passionately while drawing his sword and taking two quick steps past Zend, towards the warlock who was responsible for all this misery. Ghorm thought he saw Zend smile, and then his best friend collapsed on the ground right beside him. Screaming out his frustration, Ghorm thrust his sword down towards the wounded warlock, but once again he was caught by surprise, as a swirling globe of purple energy propelled from the man’s hand and entered Ghorm’s body. It was like thousands of knives cutting him at once, and the pain blacked out his vision completely, and his scream of rage turned into a gasping for breath as the spell seemed to encapsulate his entire body. In spite of the pain, Ghorm had every intention of killing the warlock, and with incredible willpower, he finished his attack, feeling his blade tear into the man’s torso as he jammed it down as hard as he could. Then a new pain settled inside him, and after making sure his sword had been

thrust as hard as possible into the warlock, he let go of the hilt and staggered backwards, his face a mask of agony as the sensation of pain ravaging his entire body from the foul spell kept threatening to overwhelm him. Slowly, his vision was returning, and the pain across his body was subsiding, and Ghorm started to believe he might have fully survived the deadly magical attack. There was still a throbbing pain though, but it was more localized, he thought as he felt his face and his chest, glad everything was still intact. Then his vision blurred again, and he fell backwards, the pain getting the better of him as he landed hard on his back. Tilting his head up slightly, Ghorm finally found the source of the continuing pain, as he saw the warlock's dagger – the same weapon that had defeated his best friend – piercing out of his abdomen, buried almost to the hilt inside Ghorm's body. He coughed and tried to get up, but the fatigue the spell had caused and the pain he was in didn't allow him to move. He managed to see the warlock, lying completely still on the ground with Ghorm's longsword planted firmly in his chest, and chuckled at the irony. It hurt when he breathed. It hurt when he blinked. He knew that the warlock was dying, just as he was, and that was the only satisfaction Ghorm could take in his own demise. As his breathing slowed down, he fell onto his side, and immediately in front of him lay Zend, staring at him with a mixture of disbelief and regret shining in his blue eyes. Ghorm had failed him. He had failed the Purple Knights. He could see that Zend was trying to mouth something to him – to say something – but before Ghorm could hear it, he was dead himself.

Zend saw Ghorm breathe out, and just hoped he understood that he had tried to forgive him. He only had a few seconds left, he realized, but he was certain that whatever they had stopped this day had been worth it. He could hear the gurgling sounds behind him, and knew that the warlock would also be dead within minutes, which satisfied Zend immensely. Then he heard rustling leaves and footsteps, and realized that someone was approaching. He tried hard to focus, his senses dulled by the tremendous pain and strange sensations going through him on his deathbed. Suddenly he remembered: there had been one who ran away. As a masked person knelt down in front of him and grabbed the leather satchel with the mirror, Zend's eyes shone with confusion and despair. Was this another warlock? He looked back at Ghorm. Had their sacrifice been for naught? Zend looked up, his eyes the only remaining part of his body he could control, and saw the leather satchel being opened. Saving the dying warlock didn't seem to be a priority for the person. Perhaps it would turn out all right, he speculated optimistically as his eyes finally closed shut, his body no longer reacting to his mind at all. As Zend exhaled, to his absolute horror, he heard the coughing and gurgling voice of the warlock behind him.

'Good. We will claim our prize yet.'

Peering into the cloaked face of his protégé, the warlock was certain that his life work would be carried out in time, but he had to make certain all his work would not go unappreciated. He had spent years finding the mirror, and even more years using it. He'd come close to carrying out his master plan, but had failed on the brink of success. His eyes strained as he gazed across the small forest clearing, seeing his colleagues slaughtered. He didn't like a single one of them, he realized, as there was no sadness in his thoughts as he looked at them. Like him, they had all walked away from the path of the Light and been swept up by the lure of power that the Dark offered. Throughout his childhood, the one thing everyone had spent the most time teaching him was never to abandon the Light. Yet without the Dark, the Light could not exist, and the Dark was always ready to strike whenever there was doubt in one's cause. Only in encountering and overcoming sensations of the Dark, like greed and jealousy, could one ever become a true being of the Light. Should one ever stray from the teachings of the Light and forfeit virtues like compassion, generosity and kindness, the Dark would be quick to guide one down another path; a path of corruption, deceit and malice. That was the path the warlock had taken; the one he was forced upon, he thought bitterly. He had found no solace in the principles of the Light, and watching others get ahead of him through trickery and ambition had steered him on the path to serve the Dark instead. Everyone in their gathering had their own reasons for abandoning the Light. His was power. He had seen what Torn had become – the great nation under the stern gaze of the man known as Kazoth the Bleak – the very embodiment of the Dark in the world. In his greatest hour, Kazoth had destroyed the entire elven race while transforming his army into glorious shadowspawn – beastmen of pure strength, fuelled by the zest for power. The greatest thing he did, however, was bend the former elven magic so much as to become immortal – to forever wrest himself free of the limits the servants of the Light were forced to live under. Kazoth had singlehandedly established a new world order, and the warlock had desperately wanted to be a part of it. He wanted to be on the side of Torn, a land ruled by servants of the Dark, in its conflict against the countless pitiful countries around it, who futilely fought to retain their way of life and their belief in the wretched teachings of the Light. The warlock peered again at his colleagues. There were many like him; many who saw the potential power and change the Dark brought, and who regarded the lacklustre virtues of the Light as a thing of the past. People from all walks of life shared these new ideals, he thought, from the simple farmer who felt it was alright to wed his daughter to a rich landowner in spite of her objections, to the savvy king who saw a neighbouring nation's unfortunate famine as a way to further his country's wealth by withholding food supplies until an appropriate payment of land, coin or people was paid. To serve the Dark, one had to accept the sensations it brought. One had to disregard right and wrong, and simply rationalize what was *best*. The warlock smiled.

When Torn had conquered the world, and every government and would-be hero had bowed to its supremacy, the world would finally be great. The weak would disappear quickly in this new world order, leaving the strong with more time to fend for themselves and further their needs and ambitions. The strongest would become the new heroes – Kazoth’s generals, governors and advisors. There would still be city states and rebel communities within Kazoth’s empire, he was certain, but rather than him being the outlaw for chasing what he felt was necessary to serve the Dark, he could use his powers to submit those who opposed him, without fear of legislation and ancient tenets from the Light about compassion and fairness. He sighed, knowing that he would not experience it all himself. His protégé was still watching him carefully; he could see the curiosity and uncertainty in the eyes behind the dark mask. Of all the people in their gathering, the only one the warlock trusted was his apprentice, and that was now the only person who remained to continue his life’s work. The warlock was confident his young protégé was up for the task, and felt satisfied that his life had not been wasted despite it being drastically cut short at the hands of the Purple Knights.

All his profound thoughts were interrupted when his apprentice spoke in a somewhat shaken voice. ‘I don’t think you will survive this.’

The warlock shifted on the ground, the pain spreading from his chest where the sharp sword still protruded. The jammed sword was excruciatingly painful, but it was the wounds on his back that were killing him, combined with the depletion of energy after executing the last magical attacks that had killed the accursed knights. He nodded slowly. ‘I know. Now all my work belongs to you. You must use the mirror,’ he whispered hoarsely, blood trickling out of his mouth. His apprentice ran a finger across the warlock’s bloody chin and nodded slowly.

‘Are you sure I can? Will it not control me?’ the apprentice asked tentatively, the masked face involuntarily shifting to look at the leather satchel in which the mirror was located. The warlock smiled at the look of greed and determination that shone in his protégé’s eyes.

‘You are not yet strong enough, but you will be. We have friends who wish to see this succeed, and influence is all that matters for now. The death of these heroes has complicated matters too. Time must pass,’ the warlock said with a derogatory tone of voice when mentioning the Purple Knights. They *were* heroes in this area, and their decimation would be investigated. That fact, coupled with the fact that his apprentice was not yet powerful enough in his connection to the Dark, forced the warlock’s plan to change in a minor way, he realized as he lay breathing heavily, staring at the puzzled expression in his masked protégé’s eyes. ‘You must bury the mirror. Remember its location well, and inform only those you need to use in order to reclaim it when enough time has passed. There will be changes in the times to come. You

must overcome them and when you are strong enough, you will retrieve the mirror... and you will claim the power it holds,' the warlock continued, making sure he had eye contact as he slowly and deliberately explained the plan. When he was certain his words had been understood, he spoke again in a deep voice. 'It will be up to you to rebuild what was lost today. To gain new allies – people who can help you succeed in the years to come. You will need influence to get these allies into positions of power, and to do so you must work hard and diligently, never questioning your loyalty to the Dark or the greatness that awaits you,' he said, carefully choosing his words.

'But master, how am I to –'

'I have told you all that is necessary,' the warlock interrupted immediately, 'it is now your prerogative to succeed. Build your influence. Remove those in your path who wish to oppose you. Make sure you are one step ahead of your foes, and make certain your allies are under control, for betrayal is a sensation of the Dark we all consider.'

'Yes, master. I shall commit myself to this.'

'There is one more thing I must –' the warlock started, nodding at his protégé's agreement, but he was interrupted by a violent cough as his body threatened to end his life. The pain was unbelievable, but it was the mental anguish that hurt the most. As thick blood ran out of his mouth he stopped coughing momentarily, his apprentice fumbling desperately to try and make it better somehow. The warlock appreciated the gesture, but knew full well that his life was at its end. 'Don't waste...' he started, coughing a few more times before finally regaining enough control to speak, 'Don't waste your time on my injuries. Just listen to what I say.' Once his protégé nodded, kneeling back down to look at his face, the warlock spoke in a gravelly voice, his throat tightening as the internal injuries worked to finish him off. 'When you retrieve the mirror, things might have changed considerably. We were very close to finishing our task here, and that might mean certain powers will have grown, or taken a keener interest in it all. There will be changes,' the warlock explained carefully, before coughing once more and speaking again, faster now. 'You have never touched the mirror, so you don't know the sensations it brings – the power it possesses. You would do well to have another touch it first when sufficient time has passed... someone you would have little trouble controlling, or if necessary, removing,' the warlock finished, watching his protégé nod firmly in understanding. Would his apprentice break under the task, or would his plan come to fruition and the power of the mirror be used as he had envisioned? Seeing the obvious uncertainty in his apprentice's eyes gave the warlock a sense of despondency as he closed his own, but he dismissed the notion of failure instantly. He had done what he could. Now eternal darkness awaited him, he thought satisfied, his hand reaching out to touch the leather satchel containing the magical mirror he had now sacrificed his life for.

When he felt the satchel be pulled away by his apprentice, and felt his limp hand hit the ground, he smiled to himself as he gasped for a final intake of air. His protégé would indeed succeed, he thought elatedly as he exhaled.

Watching his master die made the apprentice feel uneasy inside. His mentor, the man who had been fundamental in forming the only life he had ever known, had now left the world, leaving him with an overwhelming responsibility. Through the years, the old warlock had provided him with all the instruments he would ever need to serve the Dark. A smile spread on the apprentice's face as he thought about the power he had come to possess. The smile quickly waned, however, when he remembered the suffering he had endured to get it. Verbal and physical beatings were things he wouldn't miss the old warlock for. He had oftentimes imagined fighting back – or even killing his master – but had stayed true to his inner feelings throughout all the misery. Despite all his hatred for the man, there was greater reward in appreciating his good qualities and learning all he could, rather than letting anger and pain get the better of him and spoil his long-term goals in the process. He would have killed him eventually, he realized when he looked at the dead man before him, but he would have learned everything he could from him first. Then he would be useless to the apprentice. Unfortunately, he hadn't learned everything, as the Purple Knights had ended their relationship before it was due. There was no regret in the apprentice's mind though, because in spite of the values and knowledge the warlock had imparted to him, he had at the same time been shackled to the man's every whim and command. Now, freedom was finally his, he thought happily, and despite not learning everything the old man could teach him, he was certain there were even more things he could learn himself, using what he had been taught to reach higher grounds – larger ambitions. Why settle for the ambition his master had lived for, he mused as he stood up, giving his former leader a final non-caring look. He no longer served any purpose, so the apprentice didn't want to waste more time on him, he reasoned as he went around the clearing, collecting whatever valuables he could find from the dead bodies.

'Build influence,' he muttered to himself as he smiled maliciously. He was looking forward to it – and already imagined himself as a puppeteer, leading others around in tiny strings he could tug and pull at his leisure. Once he had secured himself, and the bloody events of this day had been forgotten by the world at large, he would retrieve the mirror and then he would use the powers within it to fulfill ambitions his master had never even dared dream of. His smile grew wider thinking about the power and opportunities the future held for him, but most of all, his smile grew larger as he embraced his newfound freedom, and the lack of restraints he was suddenly blessed by. Seeing his dead colleagues all around him was a sure indication to the apprentice, that building influence was no longer a matter of earning it or subtly pushing

for it. It was simply a matter of taking it.

Diligently, the apprentice had covered his trail while moving farther away from the battleground. He had gone deeper into the forest, to where the foliage was more lush and the trees more dense. There, amid the shadows of the thick forest, he had decided upon a burial place for the magical mirror. In front of him stood a huge dark-brown tree with vines swept around it and branches the size of the smaller trees surrounding it. The distinct bark on the ancient tree was incredibly thick upon first glance, but when the apprentice felt it, there was a softness and finesse about it he couldn't quite discern. He knew, however, that this would be a place one could find again, which was at the same time well hidden from civilization. Having walked for close to five hours, navigating through the increasingly difficult forest terrain, the apprentice was tired but confident that this was the hiding place he had sought. He took a deep breath, slowly letting the air back out as he gazed upon the mighty trunk of the dark tree, letting his eyes wander upwards along its massive body. A large bird glared angrily at him from its nest high in the tree, and he noticed the movement of a squirrel leaping along one of the tree's mighty branches. It was a lively old tree, he thought, and was satisfied with his choice. Carefully he put the satchel down at the foot of the tree, and knelt down between two huge roots that were partially above ground. Feeling the exposed roots, he nodded to himself and started scraping away the first layers of earth. As a natural alcove of sorts became more visible in between the tree's roots, the apprentice dug purposefully deeper, navigating between the thick roots as he dug a deeper cache for the mirror to lie in. Inch by inch, the earth quickly hardened as he dug down, and he used his dagger to pry loose the rocks and soften the ground. He worked for hours on end, never pausing, the sweat dripping off his face even as the sunlight waned and was replaced by the dim illumination the stars provided. Using only the little light that made its way through the thick forest canopy to the foot of the massive tree, the apprentice continued the painstaking burrowing until he was satisfied with the depth and size of his exposed hiding place. He sat back, peering at the hole he had dug. Dispelling his concerns about whether or not it was deep enough, he crawled to the leather satchel and picked it up while he got to his feet. He could barely see anything in the faint starlight shining through the treetops, but nevertheless walked purposefully away from the tree, standing a good twenty yards from it and merely observed it – studying the details and features for the longest time. It was not for his own benefit he was memorizing it all. No, he had to be able to explain it to whoever was retrieving it, he thought. When he was content, he approached the tree again, sitting down in front of the hole and carefully reaching his arms down to place

the satchel inside it. He rolled over on his stomach to reach the bottom of the hole, but just as he was about to let go, he hesitated. Something tugged on his subconscious, and he heard the words of his master repeat themselves in his mind. *'You would do well to have another touch it first when sufficient time has passed.'* A sacrificial lamb for any unforeseen changes that time might have had on the magical mirror. But his master had said nothing about touching it in its current state, he thought nervously. He knew that the reason the warlocks had collaborated for so long was because of the magic the mirror possessed. The unmistakable sense of wonderment in his master's eyes whenever he had held the mirror, and the many times he had been told about the mirror's uncanny power in hushed whispers by awed warlocks who had served the Dark for decades, made the apprentice hunger to feel these sensations himself. Several years could pass before he would know for sure, and he was conflicted at the prospect of living his life not knowing the feelings the mirror would bring – and the ambition it might give him. Gritting his teeth, he decided he could not live in uncertainty for so long, and he retracted the leather satchel carefully while a million thoughts raced through his nervous mind. Could this destroy him? Would knowing the potential power within the mirror somehow deter him? Would it strengthen him? Was his master right in warning him, or was he plotting farther ahead? He had to find out. With panting breath he sat up and opened the satchel, slowly pulling out the satin bag from within while his eyes shone with overwhelming curiosity and fear. His hands were shaking as he unfolded the cloth and exposed the mirror, resting it in his lap as he studied the intricate frame and gazed at the pitch-black glass. He ran a finger across the carvings, and doing so, he felt the skin on his fingertips tingle, and immediately retracted his hand. Leaning forward, he looked into the black mirror, but there was no reflection. Fear became the prevalent sensation in the young apprentice, but his curiosity had to be stifled, and as his breathing intensified he scurried to his feet and held the mirror out where there was most starlight shining through. Just then, a shimmer ran across the black facade of the mirror, and the apprentice gasped in surprise as he felt a craving inside him, telling him in no uncertain terms that he would possess great power someday. The mirror would be his key to fulfilling his ambitions. As the sensation settled in his mind, the dark glass suddenly started showing a form, and the silhouette of himself grew clearer as he stood wide-eyed and stared at the magical artifact. At that instant, he realized in his heart that he would use the mirror to attain greatness. There was no denying its power, and he stared at the item in his hands with awe and greed shining in his eyes. While rejoicing in the sensation, a striking pain suddenly shook through his head, and the mirror's dark surface turned bright light. The glass appeared to be shifting, changing form, and his silhouette faded as he felt the pain course through him, but no matter what he did he couldn't remove his gaze from the mirror's luring promises. The pain intensified, threatening to shatter him emotionally, as the thoughts of power and potential ran

rampant in his head, and the more he stared at the mirror, the brighter it lit up, and the more pain the apprentice felt brutally evolving inside him. He tried to let go; tried to look away, but it was to no avail. The connection he was making was too strong, and he didn't want to give up the power the mirror promised – he didn't want to risk losing it by letting go. With the pain increasing, his vision blurred and his breathing started coming in gasps, and just as he saw a new image forming in the brightly shining dark glass of the mirror, he finally managed to break away from the lure of the magic. He threw the mirror away, hurling it straight into the dark-brown tree in front of him. The light immediately vanished, and the apprentice began panting as he stumbled backwards, readjusting himself to his surroundings, and feeling his own head for signs of injury but finding none. He stood calmly for a moment, until his breathing had settled into a more regular pattern, but he still felt his heart racing, and his body was tired. Taking a deep breath, he went over to the mirror, picking up the satin bag on the way. Carefully he wrapped the mirror into the bag, mindful not to touch it with his skin, and then he gently folded the satin around the mirror before placing it inside the leather satchel once more. With timid steps, he held the satchel out in front of him and returned to the hole he had dug, dropping onto his stomach and reaching down until he felt the leather satchel connect with the bottom of the hole. Realizing that it would be years before he was once again in the possession of the mirror, the apprentice sighed softly before letting go of the artifact and the power it promised. He lay there for a moment, staring into the pitch-black alcove at the foot of the huge tree. It had been an experience that had changed him forever, he realized. Not so much due to what he had seen or what had occurred – but rather the insight he now had that all the things he had heard about the mirror were true, and that he had felt it firsthand. Now his ambition would be even greater he thought as a smile crept onto his lips, and he would stop at nothing to grow stronger in the ways of the Dark in order to attain his goals. As he got up and started covering the hole, he remembered his master's advice, and nodded to himself as the wise words the old man had given the apprentice on his deathbed sank in. If the mirror would only grow stronger in time, it would be dangerous to be the one retrieving it. He had to build influence, he agreed; make sure to have trusted allies – just like his master had – and make certain to control the mirror on *his* terms and on *his* time. He had felt the connection as something stronger than he had ever felt before, and shuddered to think how the mirror would react once it had lain dormant for several years, growing even more powerful. Growing even angrier as well, perhaps, he thought cautiously. He would need a trusted ally, someone for the mirror to expend its powers and potential hatred on – someone for the mirror to lash out on, so it would be subdued and ready to be used as it was destined to – by the Dark. By *him*, he thought as his smile grew.

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