

# The Ink of Ages

*Draw the word  
Ink the line  
Transcribe the dream  
Nine and nine  
This time is thine*

*Tract VI, The Bibliolatry of The Ink of Ages*

**‘Y**ou are far too pretty to be a slave, boy.’

They were strange words, coming from the Mistress. He paused to look at her then, which was a thing he generally never dared do.

Mistress towered over him – over everyone – six feet of lithe, willowy, coiffed and perfumed, silky, billowing vengeance. For the moment, she looked no different, though, providing no clues to what lay behind her strange statement.

Of course, she never thought him too pretty when she wanted to beat him; to get in a solid blow to send him sprawling. In fact, none of the slaves were too pretty when she wanted to deliver her many varied and always agonising disciplines.

What would make her say such a thing?

The thought made him suspicious. For no reason he could immediately fathom, he decided it would be a good idea to hide – in the orchards with the gardeners, if he possibly could, and as he often did. Mistress spied him as he started to edge away, calling to him as soon as she had. She pronounced his name oddly – *dřarkeer* – after the oddly Roman fashion.

“Where do you think you are going?”

He hesitated, knowing that he should. “To the orchards, Mistress,” he murmured truthfully, “to help The Blue One.” He stopped speaking as she started to shake her head. Resigning himself to what was about to come, he started eyeing her hands, which always began to twitch when she was preparing to strike.

“The Briton can tend the trees on his own,” she said, her tone strange all of a sudden. “I need you for something else.”

*Something else?*

The first tingling of fear started playing in his mind as memories flooded back – of strange noises from deep within the villa at night – rustles and choked coughs echoing through the corridors – stifled, half-terrified cries from the dark. He felt his own ribs aching then, from the last time she had beaten him so badly that he had heard his own bones crack; from the time she had choked him so hard he had fallen into the abrupt sleep of the very nearly dead. And he remembered the older slave boy, Krste. A handsome young Macedonii, Mistress had wanted him for *something else* too. She had taken him from the slave quarters one night almost a year ago. He remembered how he had huddled beneath his bedclothes as the muffled screams and shrieks had echoed around the darkened house – a noise that had seemed to go on and on and on.

They had never seen Krste again. . .

“Yes, Mistress,” he whispered.

He waited then, head bowed, hands clasped, his eyes boring at the floor so he could spy her approach. After a moment, a pair of leather-sandaled feet slid silently into view, first one, then two. . .and stopped dead.

“Look at me.” Her words cut the air like a knife.

He froze, terrified.

The Mistress had *never* asked this thing before. She had, in fact, beaten him savagely for looking at her on the one occasion he had ever done so. It was the reason he kept his gaze so steadfastly floorwards whenever she was around.

“*Look at me!*” The command was unmistakable – unavoidable – irresistible.

Knowing that he would be viciously beaten anyway if he did not obey, he slowly lifted his head and peered up at her, her stern, prow-like Roman-Palatine face barely visible through his eyebrows.

“I wish to task you,” she said. “Tribune Gaius Octavius Verres comes here tonight – for dinner. Given his recent return from the provinces, I thought a special gift may be appropriate. Something that may remind him of what he has left behind.”

Her eyes narrowed as she said her last.

It immediately made him think that she actually meant this Tribune no good at all – as she meant all her fellow men no good – only the Tribune was closer, for whatever reason.

She paused then, as she glared down at him, which made him think she was waiting for something. A reply? After a moment more of terror-inducing doubt, he gave her a faint nod.

“You are to deliver this thing to me,” she responded immediately.

“Deliver, Mistress?” he said nervously.

She nodded. “To my hands, direct from the seller of Eastern *exotica* at the Night Palliso.”

*The night market. . .*

His eyebrows rose. He knew the one of whom she spoke. Everybody did. To his more respectable Palliso customers – the night market’s denizens – he was Lavarius Villius Osroenus, his adopted cognomen – Osroene – being the name of the wild, far eastern Roman province from whence he came.

To the street urchins, however, he was simply *Vereor*.

*The Dread.*

They knew him better.

“The Osroene, Mistress?” he asked in a whisper.

She smiled thinly at him, savouring the fear in his eyes at mention of the name. “Osroenus. Yes. The night peddler.”

They were quiet a moment before he finally asked, “What am I to do?”

Her expression fell. “Go to him. Give him this.” Mistress held out a thin scroll, tightly bound with leather and sealed with a heavy, blood-red wax. “Wait for the thing he gives you in return. Bring it to me without delay.”

Dřarkeer took the scroll gingerly in both hands, as though he was receiving an infinitely delicate ivory sculpture.

“Take care, boy. Take care what you do. Go directly to the Osroene. Go directly and bring me what he gives.” She shot out her forefinger like a lance, the long, red-painted and manicured nail gleaming in the half light. “You must hurry now. The hour grows late and you have far to go. *Now!*”

Dřarkeer fled.

He made for the villa’s front door at first, in case mistress should spy his real passage. As soon as he knew he wasn’t being followed, he paused, then artfully ducked into one of the hidden entrances that peppered the villa’s halls. A narrow, bare-brick corridor stretched darkly, following the length of the house towards the kitchen and the slave’s quarters, which was where he was heading now.

Kitchen smells infested the narrow space – great drafts of heady spice, fresh pressed olives, and pickled lemons. Cook was stirring the kitchen’s huge cauldron, her back to him, when he finally broke cover. She was humming as she worked, a strange tune she had once said was a lullaby, but that sounded, as far as he was concerned, more like a funeral dirge a child would scream by rather than fall asleep to.

Pausing, he watched her for a moment. Finally satisfied that she was engrossed, he quietly slipped across the stone tiles and into the corridor beyond.

He found Livia in the laundry, treading clothes with one of the older slave girls. She saw him immediately, smiling, then gesturing at the older girl as if to say ‘be careful’. *Dřarkeer* nodded, gesturing in turn for her to meet him outside as soon as she could.

Pausing only to rest kissed fingers at the feet of Lares and Penates, the household Gods, as soon as he opened the doors the

late summer smells, of cut grass, crab-trees and olive groves, lit up the early evening breeze like a flare in the dark. He stopped a moment, closing his eyes and delighting in the scents now coursing the early evening air. The sudden echoes from a dozen hob-nailed sandals made him look up, then take off at run for the hiding place he and Livia shared, and where she would come to find him, the leather satchel with Mistresses' scroll clasped tightly under his arm.

He ducked several of the figures who immediately sprang up in his path, narrowly missing the long-fingered grasp of one of them as they tried to grab him.

He didn't look back to find out why.

Night was coming.

The streets of the Vicus Patricius weren't safe when night fell. Then again, at night, no place – from the Castra Urbana to the very Capitoline Hill where the Caesars lived – was.

Normally, Dřarkeer chose to stay indoors once it grew dark, only occasionally venturing out when he had to run errands for old Tiburtina, the Mistress of the household's slaves, but staying close to the Villa nonetheless.

The Night Palliso, though, was half a city away, and arrived at from the Via Flaminia, which would become clogged with charioteers and journeymen as soon as dusk gave way to night. Close to the Ara Pacis, it was going to be dangerous, especially now that he carried something that looked like it might be worth stealing.

On reaching the Aqvarius gate, he quickly checked to see if he was being watched, then ducked in between the two stone, dolphin-embossed plinths that formed the first legs of the massive aqueduct soaring high over head, and settled down to wait.

He didn't have long.

Livia appeared shortly after sunset, the fiery tones of the evening sky streaked through from the funerary fires of the Sepulchra beyond the Porta Salaria. She paused a moment, letting her eyes adjust to the darkness beneath the aqueduct.

"Dřarkeer?" she hissed.

"Here," he replied, getting up to take her by the hand.

“What are you doing out here? It’s late!” There was worry in her voice. Good cause. He found her hand and took it.

“Something’s afoot,” he said. “Mistress sends me to the Osroene.”

She stifled a gasp. “*Vereor*?”

“Same.”

“But why?” She was clearly afraid.

“I don’t know. To give him something. To receive something in return. I don’t know.”

Livia pulled him closer to the opening and the rapidly fading light. “Show me,” she said, all business now. He drew out the scroll, the heavy, red wax seal tumbling out after it.

“This?” she asked as she held it up, letting the last fitful gloaming fall upon it. He nodded. “*Only* this?”

“Yes,” he said, irritated at her implication. How were they to know what it was that she held in her hand? It was valuable enough to be given to the Osroene as payment, it seemed, and that was enough for him.

She turned the scroll this way and that, fixated on the seal now, trying to make out the markings on its thick, disc-like surface.

“I know this,” she whispered as she squinted. Her eyes suddenly met his. “It is a dark thing. Partly of Discordia, Daughter of Nox, sister of Nemesis, the Parcae and Death, goddess of evil, exile from Olympus. Partly of Lucifer, Son of the Dawn, Bearer of Light, God of the Evening Star and the Morning Star.”

Dřarkeer frowned. Odd, the way she had said it. “Which means *what*, exactly?”

“Which means we should deliver it and be done with it and may Fascinus protect us from evil if our offering is true.”

He shook his head. “No time for offerings. Mistress wants me to return from the Osroene tonight.”

Livia lowered her head as she handed him back the scroll. Her face in darkness, he could not tell what was going through her mind, though he could guess.

“You cannot go alone,” she said finally.

“I won’t be long.”

“It is not safe to be with *Vereor* alone – not without having

made an offering to Carna, at the very least.”

He knew about Carna. God of the underworld, she protected guts and houses, as well as having something to do with magic. It was said that she also protected Rome, quelling evil and traitorous thoughts. Her festival was in June. And he remembered all of that only because of Tiburtina’s treat at the time: the remains of the Mistresses’ festive feast of bacon and beans.

“How do you know so much?” he asked. “About the Gods? About *Vereor*?”

“Tiburtina, of course,” she said. He could tell she was looking at him keenly, even though her face was deep in shadow. “Did you not know?”

“Know what?”

“Why, that Tiburtina is a witch?”

Dřarkeer felt tingling shock pricking at his face and neck. The old one was a *witch*? He knew it, though. She had the look about her. And she was always a big one for the Lupercalia, which was by far the oldest and strangest of the festivals for the Gods. A dead giveaway.

“She speaks of the Osroene?”

“She *has* spoken,” Livia replied darkly. “Warnings. The direst of warnings.”

“Then she knows of him?”

She nodded in the darkness.

The two stood there a moment, silent, fearful.

“I must go,” he said, mindful of how late it now was.

She nodded again. “Then let’s go quickly, before we are both too afraid.” She took his hand, and they left the Aqvarius gate together.

The Vicus Longus was already filling. Banned from the roads during the day, Rome’s journeymen, charioteers and merchants made up for lost time the moment night fell. The night traffic was making for the Forum Augusti, which was good, as it was precisely the direction they needed to take.

Huddled beneath Livia’s shawl so as to hide from prying eyes, the two took cover in the lee of a large ox cart piled high with grain sacks, Dřarkeer holding on to its side to help them keep

up, while Livia held onto him. All around them the merchants and charioteers were calling out to each other, shouting the words they always used to try to speed their journey through the Roman rush-hour, 'Make way! Make way for important work for the Senate!' With the only lighting on the otherwise pitch-dark streets coming from the odd house lantern, the shouting served another purpose. Like bats in the night, the calls let everyone know who, precisely, was where, as they jostled and prodded their beasts along the stone-hewn streets.

Accidents were common, death by trampling the most frequent cause. Robbery and brigandry took its toll, too. No one kept order much during the Roman day. The night, however, knew no law, and survival, for those unlucky enough to be forced onto Rome's roads after dark, often relied on wits, a blade, brute muscle, and sheer dumb luck.

Livia and Dřarkeer, on the other hand, were relying on the cunning of the *servi*, the workers of the city's ancient streets

In the darkness, they huddled close, hearing the cries of the traffic all around them. When he judged the Forum Augusti drawing close, they dropped back from the oxen and found a horse-drawn chariot. In the dark, it was easy to mistake the thing for a solid. The moment the vehicle's wicker guard fell off in Dřarkeer's hand, though, the impression changed.

Suddenly, the pair were adrift, their hearts in their mouths as they stumbled through the dark, huge and deadly shapes rattling and careening all about them. Acting fast, Dřarkeer pulled Livia close, hoisting her under his arm, and then dived sideways just as the vague silhouette of another chariot lumbered across their path. Narrowly missing the rear wheel of yet another ox cart as he continued to dodge, he pulled them both into the lee of a house, pushing Livia back against the wall as yet more traffic rumbled past mere inches away.

Just ahead, he could make out a huge, octagonal lantern, swinging slowly in the early evening breeze. He recognised it immediately, as any Roman would: the light at the meeting of the ways; the point where the Vicus Longus and the Subura met.

..

*The Forum Augusti.*

Hugging what was left of the Longus's walls, the pair started moving as fast as they dared, constantly glancing back to gauge the traffic and the hoped-for break that would let them dash across the Vicus Sandaliarius and into the Forum proper. After a moment, the break came, and Dřarkeer hauled Livia roughly after him as they sprinted into the arms of the Forum's waiting columns.

They stopped to catch their breath.

"Are you alright?" he gasped, one hand on her shoulder, the other on his knee.

Livia, bent slightly as she gulped air, just nodded.

"Bad tonight," she said between breaths. "I think - an omen, maybe."

"Rubbish," Dřarkeer said. "No owls," he added. He glanced skywards, just to make sure. "It's no omen without owls. Come on."

He took her hand and started walking fast, skirting the Traiani and its devout tribe of night-time incense burners, who always took up station among the Forum's plinths and archways in the early evenings, to make their libations after the politicians and lobbyists had left for the day. There were more of them tonight, though, huddled in groups of five or six amongst the braziers and makeshift awnings as they peered outwards, wide-eyed at the gathering night, the glow of their heavily-scented fires lighting up the old cloth like huge, dirty-amber lanterns, the shadows of the players within made large and grotesque by the dancing flames.

Unmolested, the pair finally made their way through the Forum's night throngs, then took the shortcut past the Forum Caesaris and on to the Porticus Saeptorum. From there it was but a short walk to the massive arches of the Aqua Virgo and the very birthplace of the Via Flaminia itself. A little further North, just past the Arcus Hadriani, Hadrian's Arch, lay the Ara Pacis – and the *Palliso*. . .

The smells of the place greeted them first, long before its glittering camps of oil lanterns and flaming braziers appeared from between the porticos of the Ara. Strong smells of pine resin and Frankincense, of smouldering chunks of ambergris

and the sap of the cedars, mixed with the smell of roasting meat. Heady and exotic, it wafted south, carried by the northerly breeze coursing from the Flaminia gate.

Topping the rise, they finally rounded the Ara, and the Palliso's lights and bustle came into view. As frightening as the place so often was, it was exciting as well, with Romans of all shapes, sizes and shades bustling and haggling over items that could not or would not be sold or traded by the light of day. Hidden things, dangerous things, unlawful things, strange things.

The children skirted the first of the Palliso's tents, ignoring the calls from the hawkers, avoiding meeting any eyes lest the traders and their helpers thought of adding child-theft to their already shady business dealings.

Livia saw him first.

His marquee was in a slightly elevated position, situated on a mound overlooking the rest of the Palliso. Swathed in a heavy black toga, he was sitting facing them, his chin resting on his fist like an old-style marble statue of Caesar, as he stared outwards into the night.

Dřarkeer suddenly grabbed Livia's arm as he stopped mid-step.

"Look," he hissed. "*Look* at him."

Livia followed his horrified gaze. He was staring at *Vereor*, riveted. And as she watched him, up there on his mound, it slowly dawned on her what was frightening Dřarkeer so badly.

Even from this distance, still a good long way away from the mound on which he sat, it looked very much like he was looking straight at them, his eyes glittering like twin sparks of dazzling gold, flashing in the light of the Palliso's fires.

"It's a coincidence," she said, trying to sound calm and soothing, even if she didn't feel it.

"No," he replied. "He *sees* us. . ."

They both gasped as all doubt was removed.

*Vereor* slowly eased himself upright, lifted an arm, and beckoned to them with a single flick of his fingers.

"We should obey," Livia said.

"But how?" Dřarkeer said, unmoving. "How could he know

we were here?”

“Maybe the Mistress told him to expect us,” she said. “Did you think of that?”

He didn’t reply, just slowly released her arm and started forward.

They approached slowly, the other vendors and traders passing unnoticed. He watched them in his turn, his eyes never leaving them as they drew closer. When they were within ear shot, he slowly rose from his seat.

At first sight, *Vereor* was never what anyone expected. Tall and statuesque, the very image of Roman nobility, and with blond curly hair and ruggedly handsome good looks to match, he stood in stark contrast to his reputation and the ruined and ugly creatures that generally inhabited the Palliso’s dingy canvas alleyways.

He broke out in a long, slow grin as they finally started up the short slope toward him, his eyes looking positively golden in the light of the fires.

“Evening, little ones,” he said when they arrived, his voice rumbling at them as though from the deeps of a Tiber well. His accent was strange, like nothing either of them had ever heard before. Not so much foreign as – different – *perfect*. . .

“Why don’t you come a little closer?”

Hesitating at first, they finally did as they were told, shuffling forward until they were close enough to touch him.

“A strange place and time for two owned children to be,” he said. His eyes suddenly flashed in the half-darkness. “Stranger still to be carrying a thing quite so valuable.” He slowly raised his hand, palm upwards, and then stared straight at Dřarkeer.

Slowly, Dřarkeer opened his satchel and drew out the scroll. Just as slowly, he placed it in *Vereor*’s outstretched hand. *Vereor* just held it while he watched them a moment longer, his golden eyes flashing as he looked from one to the other. Without taking his eyes off them, he reached up with his other hand and broke the scroll’s heavy red seal.

“Tell your Mistress,” he said, “that the price is high. Tell her – it is the highest there is.” He shrugged, as though resigning himself to obey some unspoken and unwanted part of the

contract; a caveat he must deliver. "If what she seeks is not used," he said, his words slithering from his throat like loose gravel, "then I cannot demand her coin. If it is used, though," he added, brightening immediately, "tell her that I shall come to her to claim what is mine." He started to nod, slowly at first, then gathering pace as he grew excited at the thought, his face splitting into a leer. "Tell her, boy. Tell her."

Lost for words, Dřarkeer just nodded.

*Vereor* lifted his hand. In his palm rested a small glass phial. A deep sapphire blue, it glimmered, as though its contents were on fire, flames dancing and writhing at its heart.

He held it up for them to see, but did not yet hand it over.

"Do you know what this is?"

They looked at each other, questioning silently, then back at *Vereor*.

"Just as well," he rumbled. "It is not a thing for you to know. Not yet, at any rate." He slowly reached out then, holding the phial between his thumb and forefinger. "Take it now. Do not delay."

He opened his fingers and let the little bottle go.

Horried, Dřarkeer dived for it, hitting the ground hard to catch it before it struck the ground and shattered. He lay there for a moment, stunned, the bottle saved.

Without another word, *Vereor* just turned and vanished into the shadows.

"Are you alright?" Livia said as she crouched down beside him.

Dřarkeer slowly looked at her, nodded dumbly, then slowly started to right himself, cradling the little bottle in his hands as though it was a prize pigeon egg. Livia noticed his badly grazed elbows, knees cut and bleeding, though he didn't seem to notice. He was transfixed by the little bottle he still cradled tenderly in his hands, its strange blue light dappling his face and eyes.

"Come on," she said, "We should get away from here."

She took him by the arm and started leading him away. Still staring at the bottle, he was apparently happy to let himself be led.

This time they moved through the Palliso's small tent city like

ghosts, unnoticed and quite ignored. Glancing back every now and again, she could still see *Vereor's* marquee, its interior pitch dark now, with not so much as a reflected glimmer marking the fact that it actually contained anything at all.

The final time she looked back, though, and deep within its impenetrable shadow, she was sure she saw two pinpricks of gleaming, golden light, dancing like sparks above a fire.

Her heart pounding with fear, Livia looked away quickly, and did not look back again.



The villa's flares were still in the process of being lit in preparation for the Tribune's arrival. As quietly as they could, they let themselves in through the large, bronze-embossed front doors, making sure to avoid the front-of-house slaves as they moved through the shadows.

"I need to go to the Mistress now," Dřarkeer whispered.

Livia moved close. "Not yet," she whispered. "Follow me." He did as he was told, his hand on her shoulder as she deftly led him through the villa's darker recesses. It wasn't until he saw the feeble lamp light spilling out into the servant's corridor that he realised where she was heading.

"You take us to Tiburtina?"

"Be silent." She paused even as she said it, holding herself quite still, as though she was listening for something, which of course she was.

A cracked and ancient voice whispered to them: "Come now, child. Bring yourself before me."

She reached back, taking Dřarkeer's hand before she led them both into Tiburtina's small room.

Tiburtina sat at the only table, a single small terracotta oil lamp burning at its corner. Her divining cards were out, an ancient-looking deck he had seen her use many times to cast the fortunes of the other household slaves, as well as the Mistress herself. Now, though, she had laid them out in a complex pattern he had never seen her use before, the cards entirely

covering the table's battered surface.

The old lady herself was swathed in cloth, a cowl hiding her face as she sat, peering out at them from within its shadows.

"You have been far this night, young ones," she said. "You have seen much. Perhaps too much."

"We have been to the Palliso, Mother," Livia said. "To *Vereor*."

"Ah," she replied in a single short and sharp exhalation. Livia had just confirmed something she had already suspected. "The Mistress sent you, then."

"She sent *me*," Dřarkeer corrected.

The old woman's head moved slightly in his direction, but her face was still hidden from him, so he had no way of reading what she may have been thinking.

"So she did," the old woman said. "And Livia travelled by your side." Her hand, which had been resting quietly on the table beside her cards, slowly began to move. A long, almost skeletal forefinger slowly uncurled itself, revealing a claw-like blood-red finger nail that she began to rhythmically tap on the table top – *rap, tapper, tap, tapper, rap. . . rap, tapper, tap, tapper, rap. . .*

"Do you know what she sent you to *Vereor* for?" She was still facing in Dřarkeer's direction, so he assumed she was still speaking to him.

He shook his head.

"Livia?" she croaked.

"No, Mother. He did not tell us what it was Dřarkeer had been sent for."

"But he gave something to you?"

"He did."

"Show me."

Dřarkeer looked at Livia for a moment, noted her sharp and emphatic nod, then reached deep within his satchel and drew out the tiny blue phial.

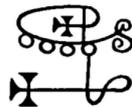
"Ah!" the old lady exclaimed. "Of course." She lifted two age-mottled and vaguely trembling hands. "Give it to me," she whispered.

Dřarkeer gently placed the bottle in her cupped hands, her

fingers slowly then closing over it like an anemone over its prey. She held it that way, her arms outstretched, for several moments longer.

“Ah! I know what it is he has given you. I know what it is the Mistress wants.” She lowered the little bottle to the table and set it upright among her cards, its odd light dappling their faces.

“*Vereor* is not all that he seems,” the old woman said quietly. “Some call him the *Daemon Vereor*, which is closer to truth than they guess. Some say he is a high priest to The God of the Evening Star, which is closer to truth yet again. Others claim his lineage is something else – not of this world – that he has another name.” She leaned forward, moving closer even as her voice started to fade. “In that place,” she whispered, “he has many names – *Malaphar*, *Malephar*, *Valafar* – but he is summoned to *this* place as only one – *Valefor*, the Sixth Spirit, Governor of the 10 Legions,” and she drew a strange and complex-looking sigil in the dust of the table’s top:



She muttered a few words then that they could not understand, and brushed the scrawl away with a sweep of her shawl.

“The Mistress deals with Valefor only for a very special reason. *His* price is high. The highest there is. And I must wonder if she knows – ” She paused suddenly, lifted her head again, the darkened shadow beneath the cowl once again facing in his direction. “Do you know what that reason is?”

Dřarkeer frowned. “The Tribune,” he said simply.

“Ah! The foolish woman.” She leaned forward, her voice dropping yet again, to little more than a breath this time, to the point that they could barely hear it at all. “You are in danger. Mistress means the Tribune harm. That you know as much as you do means that you will not see through this night.”

A stunned silence fell while the old woman let the news sink in.

“She – means to kill me?” he said.

The old woman nodded. “Aye. When you have delivered to her

what she wants. She does.” She raised an old and bony finger. “Livia, too.”

“But she does not know, Mother,” Livia protested.

“Ah!” Tiburtina said. “She knows.” The old woman fell silent for a time, her forefinger drawing lazy, sideways figure-eights in the air while she thought. “You must leave this place,” she said finally.

“But where can we go?” Livia said. “This is the only place I know.” And of course it was true, Livia having been born under the Mistresses’ roof, this was the only home she *had* ever known.

“Somewhere she will never find you, child,” the old woman replied, and slowly let her finger come to rest on the little bottle. At the same time she reached forward, extending a finger until she gently touched Dřarkeer’s damaged and still aching ribs, as though emphasising yet another good reason for them both to flee. “I’ve not told you what it is the mistress seeks.” She beckoned them closer. “T’is power,” she whispered, her long forefinger waving. “T’is fortune and fate.” She paused for a long time, then said in hushed and reverent tones: “T’is the Ink of Ages, the villainess wants. The power to *write* what is written.”

The children silently watched her for a moment, the intensity flowing from her in waves, like heat from a fire.

“She – wants to be a God?” Livia said finally.

“No, child – but *like* a God.”

“And *this* makes it so?” Dřarkeer said, gesturing at what he now realised must be an ink well, still sitting on the old witch’s table.

“What is in it, boy, what is in it.”

“And what *is* in it, Mother?” Livia said.

The old woman just simply reached down to the shelf beneath her table and drew out parchment and weights, a stylus, and a rough terracotta pot of dark pumice blotting-powder. Carefully then, she lay out the parchment, delicately weighting it at both ends, and drew the little ink well to her.

“We must be careful,” she said. “Quick now, tell me Valefor’s compact.” Once again she was watching Dřarkeer intently from

beneath her cowl.

Dřarkeer had an excellent memory, and he recalled the *Vereor's* words as though the man was speaking them to him all over again. Even as he began, though, the old woman started whispering, her words growing louder with each passing moment until he realised that she was echoing what he was saying precisely, or rather, he was echoing her, given she was actually uttering the words slightly sooner than he:

*“If what she seeks is not used, then I cannot demand her coin. If it is used. . . tell her that I shall come to her to claim what is mine.”*

Silence fell and she did not react for a moment. Then she said, “It is well. Valefor’s compact is as it was: between Him and he who offers the seal - the Mistress - not he who draws the Word.”

She immediately broke the little ink well’s seal.

A strange sound sprang up: a low, resonant keening, like a high summer wind through temple eaves, which finally peaked as it moved around the room, wavered, and slowly ebbed away into silence.

“We must hurry,” she said as she lifted the little bottle of ink, peering at it as she held it against the light of her small lamp. “There is not much here, but I think it will be enough. Time to write your story.” She waved them to silence for a moment as she gathered her thoughts.

Then she started to write.

Even as she dipped her stylus, the ink began to sing, a high pitched ringing sound, clear and light, which soared unwaveringly through the room. And as her stylus approached the page, the ink started to run in anticipation, the beautiful, iridescent-blue liquid leaping onto the virgin parchment just fractions before stylus met paper, the strokes of ink then running mere moments ahead of the nib as she started to form the strokes.

The Words came quickly at first, the old woman dipping the stylus several times before she finally addressed the children. She stopped every now and again after that, to ask them brief questions and read back to them what she had written: a glorious, sweeping tale about the children, and their adventure

through the magical doorway, the Ostium Magia, which mysteriously appeared when summoned, and led into an equally magical and mystical place called the Ara Arga.

Home to gods and demigods, and populated with miraculous creatures – nymphs and dryads, cloven-hoofed fawns and satyrs, jewel-encrusted dragons and unicorns, magnificent flying horses with lucent wings of purest pearl that would bear them wherever they had need to go – the Ara Arga was a fairytale place where they would be safe and would grow old without fear or toil, a place of beauty where they could truly live happily ever after.

All the while, the two slave children sat with bated breath, excitedly offering added details and other embellishments as the old woman wrote and read back to them aloud and added yet more to the story's wonder.

She sat back finally, laying her stylus to one side. Lifting the blotting powder pot, she unlidded it and swept its contents out over the text-filled parchment, whereupon she muttered something, then leaned forward and blew it clean.

"It is done," she whispered.

The children glanced at each other, then at Tiburtina.

"*What* is done, Mother?" Livia plucked up the courage to ask.

"Nine and nine," the old woman whispered, Livia's question ignored. "This time is mine." She leaned forward then and placed her hand face-down on the open page. "Let it be *written*."

At the same moment, a breeze suddenly sprang up, coursing through the windowless room, making the lamp's flame gutter wildly, smoke, and then finally go out.

Plunged into darkness, the children instinctively reached out for each other, finding each other's hands as they drew closer. From the darkness, they could hear old Tiburtina gently chanting, the sing-song words sounding alien and strange to their ears.

Then something about the strange draft changed.

It was only faint at first, though still crisp and fresh, growing as the breeze abruptly turned cool. All at once, the scent became almost overwhelming, as though they were suddenly standing in the middle of some distant meadow somewhere high in the

Tuscan hills.

“Turn ye about!” Tiburtina commanded from the dark. “Turn!”

Truly frightened now, they did as they were told. . .

One of the walls in Tiburtina’s small room was alight, the battered old plaster glowing a faint orange gold. In slow stages then, the light started to brighten, lighting the room, then flooding it with brilliant, dappled gold hues. After another few moments, it had grown too bright to watch, forcing them to shield their eyes against the dazzling glare.

With a sudden flash, the brilliance faded.

Gingerly, they uncovered their eyes.

Where an old and battered wall had once stood, now was an opening onto a field of long, golden-yellow grass waving gently in the wind. At the top of a long slope, the field dropped away until it eventually met a forest of magnificently tall trees, their leaves flashing a lush-emerald green in the golden sunshine. Beyond that, on the horizon, tall, snow-covered mountains rose majestically into a dazzlingly clear, powder-blue sky.

It was all precisely as Tiburtina had described it.

Dřarkeer suddenly felt Livia grip his hand hard, tugging at him. He looked at her even as she started to point.

“Look!” she gasped. “Oh, Dřarkeer, *look!*”

Then he saw them too: figures, close to the forest’s edge.

Dancing and cavorting on their long, fur-covered hind legs, their bare chests, waving arms and long, pointed horns made it quite clear what these creatures were. Just inside the trees, other, horse-like animals trotted, the sun occasionally glinting from the beautiful horns that rose from the middle of their foreheads.

The clear notes of a pan pipe drifted up to them then, the tune a rolling, irresistible ballad that spoke of happiness and joy and peace and warmth and all the good things the two of them had ever been denied as slaves of a Mistress quite so cruel. . .

The spell broke as an ancient-sounding voice spoke to them.

“Go, children, go *now*, while you still can. The story’s doorway will soon close.”

“What of you, Mother?” Livia said, turning to look at the old woman. “Will you come, too?”

Tiburtina was still with them, but her room had grown

somehow, and she now appeared to be sitting at the far end of a long hall, except that, judging from the only furniture, her bed and table, it was clearly still the old woman's room.

She slowly shook her head. "Mine is a different tale, child," she replied, her voice faint against the breeze and the sound of the wind in the grass. "This time is yours. Go!"

The children looked at each other.

"But what do we do?" Dřarkeer said.

Livia looked at him, then back at the field, the grass, the forest beyond, the cavorting fawns and the dancing unicorns – the wonderful, magical land of Ara Arga – then back at him again.

"Come on!" she yelped happily, and surged forward, dragging him by the hand.

Suddenly, the two were knee high in long grass, the breeze in their hair, the sun on their backs, running for all they were worth down the long, golden slope to their new life.

Neither of them noticed the room behind them slowly begin to fade, dimming until it was a mere shadow, then little more than a faint stain against the sky, until it vanished altogether.



Alone in the darkness, Tiburtina the witch sighed and slowly rose to her feet. She felt for the parchment, and carefully, lest she damage it even slightly, rolled it up, placing it within a long leather tube she had stored under her table. Later, she would find a suitable earthenware jar she could seal with heavy wax and enchantments, and then bury it deep, together with the world the Ink of Ages had created for Livia and Dřarkeer, to keep them safe for all time to come.

When she was done, and with *Vereor's* little ink well in hand, she slowly made her way through the house, carefully avoiding the other servants as they prepared for the arrival of Tribune Gaius Octavius Verres, eventually just setting the strange little ink well down in a place where she knew the Mistress would find it.

That Mistress would know what the thing was without being

told was of no doubt, as far as Tiburtina was concerned. The vengeful creature knew enough of the dark ways to know what Valefor, a Captain of Hades, had to sell.

And the Ink of Ages would have to have been a very, *very* special request. . .

Too late for the Mistress now, of course.

Setting off once again, Tiburtina made her way to the far end of the house, to the stairway that led to the villa's upper storey. Slowly, she climbed the stairs, each step a mild agony for her old, arthritic bones. Arriving at the upper landing, she set off again, back towards the front of the house once more, passing the open atrium, at the bottom of which the servants were even now laying out the food for the feast to come.

Just as she arrived at the villa's long front room, and its equally long row of shuttered windows overlooking the street, a series of loud booms rang through the house.

It was the sound of the huge brass knocker at the front door, right on time.

*The Tribune had arrived. . .*

At the same time, and from the corridor directly below, she heard shrieks, the sound of Mistresses' enraged voice:

"No, *no!* Stay yourself, you *fool!* Did I not tell you!" The unmistakable sound of a slap rang out, followed by a muffled scream. "I shall greet the Tribune in person. It is only fitting! In *person*, you dolt!"

From above, the old witch Tiburtina looked out onto the darkened street.

Otherwise as black as pitch, by the light of the villa's flares she could just make out the shapes of their visitors: three large figures, gathered expectantly about the still-closed door.

The ancient witch broke into a thin-lipped smile then, when the larger and clearly more commanding of the three slowly looked up at her, his eyes shining from the darkness, two pinpricks of golden light, dancing like sparks above a fire, and she caught the unmistakable glint of his slowly unfurling, leathern wings. . .