

Chapter 1: Kirou-Mekus

It was like slamming face-first onto a bed of shale. The cold was like solid stone, sending shockwaves through his body, forcing the air from his lungs. The Demon blinked before coming to his senses, realizing that the water was closing in over his head. Beneath the depths of the waves, streams of bubbles escaped where the air worked free of his loose and tattered garments. He sank deeper, and the current seized him, pulling him toward the dagger rocks of the shore.

Niggora!

His arms and legs snapped into action, pushing and clawing at the water in an attempt to free himself from the ocean's grip. Instead he met with resistance; his head and shoulder cracked against a jagged, black wall, and torrents of teeth-grinding pain replaced the shock of the cold. Warm, inky plumes of his own blood stained the water, further obstructing his already unsteady vision. His ears rang with a deafening drone, and he fought for his consciousness.

When the ache in his head had dulled, and the ringing subsided, the Demon gripped the rock with his clawed fingers and began to pull himself upward. When his face broke the surface of the water, he gulped at the misty air and fed his starving lungs. The salty water and blood burned his eyes, though there was little to see anyway. A short distance from him was the coast, waves breaking and shattering upon the rocks as scattered diamonds. Could he reach it without shattering himself?

The Demon sighed and pressed his head against the rock for support. He was risking his life to save his life. What sense did that make? He pushed the thought away and prepared to kick away from his temporary haven. He hesitated when he glimpsed liquid silver slip beneath the waves. The gossamer fins of a tail cut the water and vanished. He knew he should go—the immediacy of his situation had just increased exponentially.

He drew a deep breath and shoved himself from the rock, kicking forward with as much strength as he had in him. It seemed a futile effort, like a bird trying to fly against the wind. Where once he was drawn toward the coast, he was now in danger of being swept out to open water. He pulled harder, faster, at the waves, but he gained no ground. And he was tiring.

His frozen limbs tingled with a growing numbness, and it was all he could do to keep his head above the water. He swallowed a mouthful of ocean and spat it out, only to dip below the murky surface again. His efforts grew half-hearted as he hung there, suspended. The black rocks grew farther from him.

The touch of something smooth and solid startled him, and the Demon's wide eyes glimpsed the pale flesh attached to the silvery tail. To most mortals, a glimpse spoke of otherworldly beauty and grace. A fair face with large eyes, flowing hair that shone like satin, and round, supple breasts were the mermaid's superficial traits. The Demon, however, was not a common mortal, and as a creature of magic, he could see the true form behind a being not so different from himself.

Chaotic and murderous, mermaids hunted dark waters for flesh upon which they could feed. Sailors were enticed to abandon their ships when the mermaids sang their songs. The creatures' melodies were wordless, without shape and form, but the sound was so haunting, so alluring, that few could resist their beckon.

Beneath the womanly guise was a monster of the wild ocean. Swathed in Shadow, a mermaid's eyes were fathomless and dark. Her teeth were sharp, and her hands had the strength to tear a man's arm from his body. Folklore said she could read a man's soul, foretell his future...if she was so inclined. The Demon wondered what use it was to learn one's fate rested inside a mermaid's stomach.

She brushed beside him again, pausing to gaze curiously at this fellow creature of Shadow. Her black eyes searched his but found no fear. She reached toward him to graze his face with her long fingers. The Demon blinked, her touch stirring fragments of his past so that they rose like bubbles to the surface of his mind.

He remembered her.

Years ago, when he had sought to escape the islands of his birth, she had been there. She had watched him without malice as he swam for the Human ship. Now she was to witness his demise amidst the dark waters of Secrailoss's coast.

The Demon did not have the strength to fight her as she took his arm. She gazed at him a moment longer before she turned away—still gripping him—and gave a powerful thrust of her tail. She dragged him through the water so quickly that he could not conjure a single thought. In a breath's span, he felt himself reeling, then touching lightly against solid stone. There was a flash of her tail, and that was the last he saw of her.

His claws gripped the rock, and he pushed himself upward. The cool air was liberating, and it rushed into his lungs as he gasped for more. He could not begin to consider why he had been spared, though if not for her, his mission would have been a failure before it truly began. There was no time to theorize; he had a job to do.

The Demon looked up at a precipice not far above him. If he could climb atop it, he could see where he needed to go. He took a deep breath and hauled himself out of the water and onto a narrow ledge that had been worn smooth by the waves. Even on his hands and knees, the surface was slippery and tough to grasp. His shoulder felt as though someone had ripped it from him and then stuffed it back into place, but seeing as he could still move it, he decided that nothing was broken.

He shivered in the chill air and began to scale the rocky wall. His sight did not waver from the precipice, and when he had reached it, he could see that it was more than an overlook. He heaved himself upon the flat surface and lay there a moment, breathing hard as he stared at the dark opening in front of him. If someone was watching him from within, then he or she was waiting patiently for him to make the first move. The Demon hoped he was alone.

When he had caught his breath, he crawled to the threshold of the opening and peered inside. Propped on the wall adjacent to him, there was a long pole with a hook and a length of rope attached to it. The rope was connected to a windlass. The Demon turned his attention to the crates and barrels that filled the vast chamber beyond, catching the scent of spices, wine, and other edible supplies. His empty stomach gave a lurch, and he sucked in his breath. He could eat all he wanted later, when he was safely back aboard the ship.

He slipped inside the chamber and allowed his eyes to finish adjusting to the darkness. There were a few dying torches with green flames affixed to niches in the walls; whoever had been here had not passed through recently. Regardless, the Demon was not ready to take his chances that the room be unoccupied. The solidity of his form melted and darkened into shadow as he slunk along the wall and among the crates. He made no sound as he crept toward the opposite end of the room, where he had spied a ramp and a small cart. There was also a set of double doors near the bottom of the ramp: he could either go up or go out.

As he drew nearer the doors, he could smell the outside air, feel its dankness beyond the barrier. His treasure was within the mountain; he would have to try the ramp. Another dark doorway awaited him at the summit, but over the archway were runes carved into the stone. They glowed softly, casting him in their emerald light as he solidified his form. The wizard had given him special glasses, and he reached within his shoulder bag to find them. They were too big for him, but other than their cumbersome size, they did not hinder his sharp vision.

The Demon stared at the archway through the enhanced glass, and the runes seemed to twist and turn until they were legible. "Temple," they read. He appreciated the simplicity. He kept the glasses on and proceeded through the doorway. He walked along a darkened corridor, also lit with green, glowing inscriptions. These bordered along the walls, providing limited light, but as he discovered, they were not words at all but a pattern. Lines twisted, intersected, and overlapped in a mazelike design as intricate as lace. He had not gone far before the tunnel ended in another archway, though the Demon could see to the room beyond.

Columns of carved stone vaulted to the ceiling. A black carpet spanned the length of the room, beginning at a pair of massive wooden doors and stretching to a dark alcove at the opposite end of the space. There was nothing in the way of adornment, nothing suggestive of familiar forms or images. The temple was vacant, silent, and eerily sterile. A faint odor of incense reached the Demon's nose, though he could not pinpoint its origin. The mazelike pattern continued along the walls, the only source of illumination to be found.

The Demon was ill at ease, as though he felt some unseen presence lurked around him. Quickly but silently he followed the carpet to the alcove, hoping it would lead him to an exit. Instead, he found himself facing an eye. At least, the symbol reminded him of an eye. There was the diameter of a large circle carved into the recessed stone, and at the center of the circle was a round, black mirror.

Like any mirror, it held his reflection: a slight frame shrouded by tattered clothes that were too large for him. From beneath his hood he could catch the glint of his own violet eyes. Something bothered him about this—seeing himself in this dark, foreign object. Could it be that someone was watching him from beyond the mirror?

Unnerved, he started to back away, but he trod upon the carpet he had—until now—been careful to avoid. The circle around the mirror began to brighten with that same green light, and the Demon stared in dread anticipation, afraid he had been discovered. It was too late to fade to shadow, and he would have to escape empty-handed.

But nothing happened. The circle blazed, and that was all. He took a closer look at the alcove, the green light now illuminating something he had not seen before. There was a seam along the edge of the recessed stone. He placed a hand over the crack, feeling the slightest movement of air from behind the wall. It was a doorway after all....

Somehow it would have to open. The Demon searched the alcove for any lever or handle but found nothing. His eyes migrated back to the carpet. Unsure what else he could try, he stepped in the middle of the material, just before the mirror. Almost immediately, there was the sound of scraping stone. The alcove slid slowly backward and then downward, revealing a confined space with three blank walls. He craned his head into the space and saw that it was actually a shaft with a rope and pulley that connected to the floor of the room. Cautiously he stepped inside and gave the rope a forceful tug. The effort rewarded him with the upward movement of the platform upon which he stood. He continued to hoist himself upward, ignoring the pain in his shoulder.

The sound of a distant drone grew louder as he ascended. It agitated his sensitive ears and renewed the dull ache in his head from his injury. He hoped he had not triggered some sort of alarm, but the sound remained consistent and distant enough that he doubted he was its cause. He began to wonder how far the lift would allow him to go when the rope grew taut. As soon as it did, the sound of grating stone began anew, and the Demon dissolved into shadow just as the wall behind him moved away.

The light of the adjoining room was brighter than the green runes of the shaft. It spoke of amber flames unaltered by magic. The room was also warmer and flavored with the scent of burning wood and a savory meal. As strange as this mountain-dwelling seemed, it still harbored a kitchen; people had to eat.

Unfortunately, the kitchen was not empty. A bald-headed man with dark skin was busy at the hearth, but he had not yet noticed the seemingly vacant lift. The Demon quickly scanned the room, sighting two possible exits. One was a stairwell at the far end of the room; the other was an open doorway with runes above it that read, "Divination." He was literate, but he was not so well versed in the common tongue that he knew this particular word.

A distant cry of pain startled him, and the glasses slipped from his nose and onto the platform with a clatter. The Demon was quick to retrieve them, but by now the steward had lifted his head in his direction.

Judging by the confused look upon the steward's face, the Demon knew his shadowy form remained undiscovered. He had only a few seconds before the man would come to investigate, and in that time, he had to decide which way he would take.

Sure enough, the steward began his approach, and the Demon's thoughts raced for a way to slip past him unseen. He focused upon the hearth and the flames within. They wavered as if a breeze had caught them, then they flared violet and reached to snare the handle of a nearby broom. No sooner than the broom was ablaze, the fire returned to its normal hue in time for the steward to witness the "accident." The man gave a cry and set to stomping out the flames.

The Demon fled to the closer exit, the doorway of Divination. He stepped into a large, circular room lit by green flame torches. The dome ceiling was a glowing map of the stars, though at its zenith was the same eye-like symbol he had encountered in the temple. From the eye emanated the drone, and it caused his head to throb with a beat that rivaled his heart. The floor was a smooth basin, and from it came an entirely different sound—the sound of pain.

There was a man with long hair and a beard dressed in white and shackled. He was on his knees before two hooded figures in black robes. One of the figures held the prisoner down while the other sprinkled something into the prisoner's eyes. The prisoner screamed and writhed until he collapsed and lay still.

Sickened by the sight and the sound of this room, the Demon fought the urge set the robed figures aflame. As it was, he felt on the brink of collapsing himself. The noise in his head was like a drum pounding in his ears; he had to leave. Swathed in shadow, he backtracked to the kitchen and found the steward in the midst of cleaning up what was left of the broom. The Demon walked behind him, past him, to the stairwell. The steward never turned his head.

The drone had diminished, but it was not gone. This otherworldly mountain prison with its sickly green light, giant glowing eyes, head-splitting sounds, and torture—the Demon could not wait to leave it behind him. He would sooner set foot on the island of his birth—the island he fled—than visit the Black Mountain of Kirou-Mekus again.

He relaxed his concentration and allowed his form to solidify, clutching his temple as he climbed the stairs, unmindful of the sticky wound beneath his fingers. The stairs twisted a ways before they flattened into a dais. Here there was a corridor with a doorway at its end. Above the door was the same glowing eye. The Demon shook his head and decided to continue his ascent. Wherever the eye was, he would be elsewhere.

He came upon a similar dais, complete with door and corridor. Above this doorway was a different inscription, and he replaced the glasses to see what it read. "Stewards." *Maybe I should ask them where the library is*, he thought with a smirk.

Upwards he climbed until he reached the final step. There were no options here: a door at the end of a dark hall. "Archives." *About bloody time!* He half expected the door to be locked.

It was not. When the handle gave way, he withdrew his hand. From what his ears could perceive, there was someone inside engaged in a quiet activity—the shuffling of papers or turning of pages. The Demon hoped this person was not attentive to the door, for shadows did not move without a source, and that was exactly what he would be: a sourceless shadow. He concentrated to darken his form, though he was still solid enough to soundlessly push the door open and slip inside.

Another bald-headed steward was seated at a desk with a candle, facing away from the Demon. The man was bent over a text, engrossed in whatever he was reading. Several other books were open around him, and occasionally he would glance at one of them. The Demon was satisfied with the steward's level of concentration, and so he passed behind him to stare at a wall loaded with books. With the wizard's glasses, he could decipher the letters upon the spines. He sought two objects: one was a magic stone—a 'Stone of Prophecy', and the other was a luminous journal. In theory, both items were to be found in the archives, though his source of information had never actually beheld either.

After a few minutes, he grew tired of scanning the walls. Nothing here sparkled, let alone glowed, and there were no rocks in sight. He was also growing tired from maintaining his shadowy form. The distant drone in his ears and his persistent headache had shortened his patience. On a whim, he decided to see what the steward was studying so intently. He drew closer to the desk, leaning near enough that he could whisper in the man's ear.

One book was opened to a map of the night sky, another depicted the exterior of a castle. The other books' pages were completely filled with writing. The Demon moved to improve his view and was nearly struck by the steward's fist as he stretched backward and yawned. The Demon's stomach twisted when he glimpsed the corner of a page. *There it is. Under his elbow.* Like foxfire, the faintest aura of blue light shone from a book buried beneath a pile of papers, under the steward's arm. Even more amazing was the palm-sized, egg-shaped stone that held open another book at the corner of the desk. A quick glance around the room betrayed it as the only rock in sight. What were the chances both objects he sought were right there—obvious and easily obtainable?

Then again, if these special items were so special, did it not make sense that both would be actively employed? Maybe this was not so miraculous after all. Regardless, the Demon had at least one obstacle to overcome: the steward.

You look tired, the Demon thought as though the man could hear him. He focused his attention upon the air in the room, giving it a magical shove away from the steward. The candle flickered and dimmed, and the man yawned again. The Demon continued to draw the air away from him, watching with satisfaction as the steward swayed in his chair and rubbed his eyes.

At last the man stood—unsteadily—and turned from the desk. He did not blow out the candle, did not even close the books as he headed for the door. The Demon followed him, keeping the air thin around

the steward's head. He tailed him out the door and down the hallway into the stairwell. There he stopped and watched as the man descended out of sight.

In an eyeblink the Demon raced back to the archives. He dropped his shadows so that he could uncover the luminous book. In his hands, he could perceive the aura better than before, and it tingled in his hands—almost uncomfortably. His fingers flipped through the soft, worn edges of the pages, and his eyes glimpsed drawings, written notations, and neatly printed headings. A journal, to be sure. He slipped the thin book into the bag that had been on his shoulder.

He lifted the rock and found it was deliberately shaped and polished, the bottom of it flat so that it could be set safely upon a stable surface. It was milky-gold in color, but otherwise nondescript. No glow, no vibration of energy, nothing. *So this is the Stone of Prophecy*, he thought, unimpressed. He did not believe in prophecy anyway, so even a radiant boulder would not have raised an eyebrow. The stone was tossed into his bag with the journal.

The wizard didn't lie, he thought, marveling that the bag was no heavier than it had been empty. He paused to rub his aching head, almost failing to hear the approach of footsteps outside the door. Quickly he faded from sight with a silent curse. The drone, the ache—it was all so distracting, and it wore at his wariness.

A different steward entered the archives, and drawn to the sight of the abandoned candle, he went to investigate the desk. The Demon was already slipping out the door when the man noticed the fresh blood stain upon the disturbed papers. The steward murmured something to himself and hurried out of the room, just a few paces behind the Demon.

The Demon stepped out of the way and watched, disquieted, as the steward rushed down the stairs. Something was amiss. He hoped to be gone before he could learn what that something was. He was beginning to feel as unsteady as the lightheaded steward, using the wall to brace himself as he moved down the stairs. The sound intensified as he approached the level with the door and the eye, and he thought his ears might explode. He had spent too much energy in this venture—even without the maddening pain in his head—to continue to function properly.

Above the ceaseless ringing he heard voices calling urgently to one another from the level he had just passed. Several stewards were now in the stairwell. In his haste the Demon stumbled and fell down several steps, landing on the dais below. The voices grew louder, as did the accompanying footsteps. He looked up to see the glowing eye above the door at the end of the hall. His eyes watered at the green light—now searing into his mind with blinding intensity.

The Demon picked himself up and staggered forward. He would have to endure the noise and what lay behind the door, for he would never make it through the kitchen before they would catch him. As he closed the door behind him, he tried to ignore the feeling that he was cornering himself. He needed a place of refuge just for a short while—until he could make his escape. If only he could hide from the noise.

There were doors on either side of the corridor in which he now stood, and each door bore a different symbol—a number. He braced himself against the wall as he hurried along, the floor suddenly less solid, the hallway shifting as though he stood aboard a ship on a choppy ocean. He could not concentrate, could not gather any notion of where he was headed or what he would do when he got there. He just wanted to escape the pain.

The corridor ended at an intersection that branched to the left and to the right. The right hall was lined with more doors; the left was fitted with a board that barred the passageway. On the board the letters read, “Restricted.” Unless his imagination had seized control, the drone from the left passage seemed fainter.

His decision made, the Demon ducked beneath the board and found his observation was correct. There was only one door in this hall, at the darkened end. From the cobwebs adorning the ceiling, he concluded no one had been this way in some time. He took care not to disturb them as he approached the door. If the room beyond was as neglected as the hall, he should be able to hide inside.

He propped himself against the door, his head resting against the wood. Each breath was not enough to push away the advancing darkness from the periphery of his vision. His arms and legs tingled with his growing weakness, and it took great effort and concentration for him to grip the handle. He noticed in a daze that he had at some point dropped his shadowy guise. He pushed the door open just enough to slide inside to the darkness within. The door had barely closed behind him before he collapsed upon the floor.

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The Demon returned from the void of unconsciousness with the acrid flavor of bile rising in his throat. He rolled onto his belly and shoved himself upright just in time to lurch forward and retch on the floor. He did not feel much relief from the action, but he did notice the absence of the head-splitting drone from this room. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and looked up through bleary eyes.

What he saw was a mixture of lines and forms. Half the room had been rendered in chalk—line drawings of trees, birds, fungi, and plants decorated the curved, black walls in a life-size mural of amazing detail and intricacy. Down to the veins on the leaves in the trees, the drawings began at the floor and traced upward to embrace the dome ceiling. A solitary hole near the top of the wall allowed unfiltered light to stream down in a spot upon the floor, and at that spot was a withered, potted plant on wheels that apparently was moved—the wheel marks were worn into the floor—with the passing of the day. There were few places without drawings, and those were areas where real objects were stationed. There was a cot for a bed, several shelves with books and paper, a chair, and a table with a quill, candle, and inkwell upon it. There were cobwebs and dust everywhere.

On the floor, near the cot, sat a motionless figure with so pale an aura around it as to resemble muted moonlight. Long, colorless locks of hair draped like the spiderwebs over the figure’s shoulders and partially obscured its face. Its frail form was slightly bent over something in its hands. A book. Rather, a glowing journal.

The Demon drew a breath and reached for his bag. For the first time, he noticed the pillow that had been placed beneath his head. He blinked and reached into the bag to feel the smooth surface of the Stone of Prophecy.

He stared at the figure, who had now turned to regard him. The way the limited, cool light fell upon the figure's face, the Demon could tell it was a man. Shadows nestled where his eyes and cheeks were sunken, but there was no length of beard, no lines to define the man's age. The Demon suspected that this was a creature of which his brother had spoken—one of the immortals. It was Light, not Shadow, that surrounded the prisoner, and so he could only be an Ilangien. Given how his brother had described the Ilangiel, this one did not quite match the image the Demon had formed of them in his mind.

Again, the Demon's eyes fell to the journal in the Ilangien's hands—the journal he needed in order to make this venture successful. He met the prisoner's gaze, finding he had also taken the wizard's glasses and was now wearing them as he studied the pages. Neither of them moved.

In the silence, the Ilangien spoke in a whisper of a voice. "*Durmorth.*"

The Demon was not sure if he had heard him correctly or if he had spoken in another language. With the quiet broken, he took this as an invitation to approach. He realized how exhausted he was when he stood. His legs felt like blades of grass in the wind, and as he approached, his stomach began to twist and turn. He was still several paces away when he sank to his knees and tried to think of something to say.

"I...I need that, mate," he said softly, feeling like he was taking a child's only toy. He reached for the journal, and the Ilangien closed it and drew back from him. "No, really..." He considered what this object meant in light of his mission, and if he returned without it, there would be consequences. Namely, he would not be paid, and if he did not get paid... "Please." His empty hand was left waiting.

The Demon looked at the prisoner's face, beyond the knowing expression that clearly read that he would not relinquish the journal. Gray flesh formed a mask around a pair of silver-blue eyes. Even in this prison, the Ilangien's eyes had their own light, and reflected in them was the image of a forest, wild and timeless. The Demon's gaze drifted to a thin silver collar around the Ilangien's neck. A collar. A prisoner.

Again the Demon looked around the room, the confining walls that must have taken a long time to adorn in such artwork. "Ow long?" he murmured, not expecting a reply. Himself, he had been a prisoner long enough to understand such confinement. He considered the man he had seen being tortured; that, too, was a memory from his own past that he had tried hard to bury.

But what of the journal? What did he truly know about his mission? He knew nothing about the mountain or its inhabitants. He was told to retrieve two objects, and that was all. Kirou-Mekus was a prison, but it was more than that. What was inside the journal, that he risked his life to obtain it? He had not known or cared about the content of the material he was to retrieve, and now he was starting to regret his limited vision.

The Demon stood and backed away with a sigh. *I need the journal, and he won't give it up. I'm not going to take it from him, either.* He searched for the door. *He could come with me...* The idea was not so ludicrous to be dismissed as impossible. Still, he had struggled just to infiltrate the mountain. How could he escape with a prisoner who probably did not have the strength to stand?

His stomach lurched, and he found the Ilangien was standing behind him. *All right, he can stand...and he's tall.* "Where's the bloody door?" he mumbled in awe, not believing that his eyes could misplace the way he had made his entrance.

The Ilangien moved past him and stood beside a particular chalk drawing on the wall. The Demon shook his head. *Is this a joke?* The drawing was of the door, but that was all it was: a drawing. *Magic.* He sighed and went to inspect the depiction. Just as the Demon started to feel ill, the Ilangien stepped away, and the feeling abated.

Solid stone, chalk drawn atop it. The dust came off on the Demon's fingertips as he traced the lines. He turned to the prisoner. "The door *is* 'ere, right?"

The Ilangien gave a nod.

Last place I want to be is stuck inside a wall. The Demon sighed again and removed the bag from his shoulder. He tossed it at the Ilangien's feet. "Y' won't give me the journal, so y've to carry the bag. Y' better keep up, or I'll take it from y'." He could swear he glimpsed a hint of amusement on the captive's face. If it had been amusement, it was quickly replaced by a hopeful expression—one attentive to the door.

The Demon, too, focused upon the barrier. His next little trick would be difficult and taxing. If it truly was the door, he should be able to pass through. If it was solid rock, he would be forever trapped, keeping the Ilangien company in his mountain prison.

His entire form darkened, and his fingers faded, becoming translucent and insubstantial as smoke. He reached into the stone and gave the prisoner a lasting look as the rest of his intangible body passed beyond the room and through the door that was not. It was like walking through a wall of viscous, sticky mud; as much as he pushed at the solid matter, it pulled at him. The Demon was almost too tired to be relieved when emerged upon the other side, in the familiar corridor. It took all his focus to keep himself together while in his shadowy form, and walking through solid matter was probably the most arduous and dangerous feat he could attempt. He could only imagine the consequences should he make a mistake.

Becoming solid once again, the Demon took a moment to catch his breath and clear his mind. That damn drone made thinking nearly impossible. He did not know how long he had been inside the Ilangien's prison, but he doubted it had been long enough for the mountain stewards to cease their investigation. With a glowing immortal at his side, the advantage of remaining unseen would be useless.

He took a deep breath and opened the door, keeping it propped with his body. The Ilangien stepped outside, and the glowing green runes that lit the corridor blazed bright white. *Sieqa! An alarm!* The prisoner

was already walking quickly down the passage. The Demon had to take a moment to gather himself before he hurried after him, for the sound had become blaring and painful, the light blinding to his sensitive eyes.

They rounded the corner and came upon a steward heading in their direction. He had been carrying a tray of food, and upon seeing the two refugees, dropped it in surprise. He stood dumbly in the middle of the hall, obstructing their passage. The Demon did not hesitate; he raced for the steward and slammed him against the wall. He waited for the Ilangien to run past before he followed close behind him.

They pushed through the door and raced down the stairs, but just as they approached the door to the kitchen, several stewards came to detain them. The Ilangien paused, and the Demon—nearly mad with pain—almost crashed into him from behind.

For all the trouble the Demon had already encountered, for all his urgency to recover the items for his employer, for all the agony he endured now—he was not about to let some bald-headed mountain priests keep him from his escape. Too exhausted to employ his magic, he would try something else—something that only he knew was a testament to true desperation. He flung back his hood, revealing his true form as something other than Human. His violet eyes blazed, and a pair of leathery, white wings erupted from his back. He spread them wide and charged. “Get out o’ my way!” he growled.

Even if the stewards did not understand him, the intent was clear. Sharp teeth bared, glowing animal eyes, long tapered ears, menacing claws, and dragon wings—all this headed toward them in a fury. Terrified of this white demon, they scattered and fled.

Relieved that his ploy had worked, the Demon made straight for the lift that yet remained waiting in the kitchen. From the insistent desire to vomit, he knew the Ilangien was right behind him. He did not have to urge the prisoner inside, but once the two of them were in the confined space, he finally expelled the bile that had been promising to escape him. “Y’ make me sick,” he gasped, weakly gripping the rope and pulling at it, one hand over the other.

The Ilangien frowned. “The sensation is mutual, *Durmorth*,” he said in a frail voice.

The Demon glanced at him but said nothing. The lift took them down until it would go no farther. The passage opened to the temple before them. The space appeared to be empty. The Demon placed a finger near the pulley’s rope, and a violet flame jumped from his clawed fingertip. In another moment, the rope had caught fire, blackening as the flames traveled upward. They quit the lift and made for the exit that would take them to the storage room. They were halfway across the temple floor when the Ilangien froze in mid-stride, the bag dropping from his hand.

The Demon spun to see what had happened. “What’s the matter, mate?” Though his eyes darted nervously around the temple, they kept returning to see the source of the prisoner’s trouble. The Ilangien did not respond—did not move at all—though the thin collar around his neck was now glowing faintly.

He heard footfalls and saw a steward dressed in a black robe approaching them. The man demanded something in another language, and the Demon was not sure if he should wait or flee. The Ilangien was

undoubtedly under the steward's power, but the bag was there—discarded on the floor. He could take it and run.

He met the Ilangien's gaze, knew he could see his thoughts as if he had voiced them aloud. *Just run*, he told himself. *Take the bag and run!* But he did not. Where others might find a need for self-preservation, the Demon's moral conscience decided his course of action. He tensed as the steward drew nearer, his eyes frantically searching for something he could use to his advantage. The green flame torches....

With but a glance, the Demon pulled the flames from the torches to the runner upon which the man stood. Flames flared high between him and them, overpowering the steward so that he fell backward. The Demon nearly collapsed right there from the exertion, but instead he swallowed another round of bile and staggered after the Ilangien, only slightly relieved to see the prisoner had recovered the bag.

They fled down the ramp into the storage room and to the beacon of outside light that streamed through the mountain's wall. The Demon paused before the windlass, studying the end of the rope with the hook attached. He knew their escape would not be easy, but climbing down the rocks was a better alternative to plummeting to the rocks below. If Jaice Ginmon was already waiting in the small boat, then he would be able to draw them in from the treacherous shore.

He picked up the rope, drew a length of it, and ported it outside to the precipice. He stepped past the Ilangien and threw the rope over the brink. He had done a fair estimation of the length he would need, for the hooked end only dangled four or five feet above the water. "I 'ope y're strong enough to climb..." The Demon looked at the prisoner.

The Ilangien was a world away if he was anywhere at all. At first the Demon thought he might have been snared by another spell, for he did not move—even when the rising winds buffeted against him. He stood tall and straight, staring with wide glittering eyes at the ocean. Then he blinked, and the Demon saw the glimmer of a tear run down his ashen face and along the contours of his sunken features. Despite the urgency of their situation, the Demon could not bring himself to press him. Just how long had it been since this prisoner had seen outside the mountain?

Together they stood for a moment, watching the waves crash beneath a cloud-veiled sun. Presently they heard shouts from behind them, and the Ilangien gave a nod. "I am ready," he said and secured the bag over his neck and shoulder. With more grace and agility than the Demon thought him capable, he gripped the rope, eased himself over the edge, and began to scale his way down.

The Demon waited until he was halfway to the water before he followed suit. It was all he could do to keep his hold on the rope, for though he was free of the mountain, the drone, and the light, his head still assailed him with dizzying pain, and a growing weakness made his limbs shakey and unreliable. The voices above him had grown louder, and a glance revealed foreign faces peering down at him from the ledge. They were encouragement enough for him to quicken his descent. He heard the splash of water from below and

knew the Ilangien had quit the rope. So long as he did not drown, the bag would keep the objects safe and dry until they could be delivered. The Demon would be glad to be rid of them.

He felt the rope jerk and nearly lost his grip. His hands had slid several inches, and his palms burned from the friction. He paused and realized that he was still moving—in the wrong direction. The stewards were using the windlass to pull him upward. *Sieqa*.

The Demon looked down to assess the distance. Ten feet, maybe more, to go. He tried to lower himself as fast as he could, but it was not enough, and his hands were tearing open. Even if he opened his wings, the updrafts would carry him straight into the side of the mountain. There was only one choice.

He took a deep breath and let go of the rope. Not a heartbeat later, he hit the water like he was hitting stone. In fact, he had hit stone. His body glanced off one of the rocks, and he plunged under the water. He knew he was reliving the delightful experience he had before his infiltration of Kirou-Mekus...only now he was certain there would be no mermaid to assist him.

The Demon fought his way to the surface and caught sight of the boat. Already Jaice was helping the Ilangien aboard. *If he could do it...* He pushed and kicked against the current, swallowing mouthfuls of salty water. He would dip under as the waves smothered him, but he did not cease his efforts. Slowly he was closing the distance. Something brushed against him, and he started, his thoughts instantly upon the mermaid. It was not her but a rope. Eagerly he took hold and felt himself being hauled through the water.

A strong and calloused hand took hold of his scrawny wrist and hoisted him upward and over the side of the boat. Like a dead fish he lay there with his eyes closed, catching his breath. Something large and thick fell upon him, but the blanket would not quell his shivering.

“Oi, boy-o, don’t die on me,” Jaice Ginmon’s chipper voice reached his ears. “Y’ got what y’ came for and brought a mate with y’. No worries now. I’ll get us outta ‘ere.” A pause. “What, y’ crack y’r ‘ead open?”

“S nothing,” the Demon heard himself mumble. Already he was drifting away in the darkness.