**Fable: Theresa**

**Peter David**

*Does anyone truly know each other?*

The mother who answered the door was incredibly upset, her expression one of pure, undiluted dread. She was practically a woman in mourning, either faced with the worst or anticipating it. A blind person could have told as much. What with my being blind, I know exactly what I'm talking about.

First of all, there was the smell that wafted from her. It has been my general experience that women are more concerned with matters of personal cleanliness than are men. They bathe themselves more often and tend to cover whatever bodily aroma may remain through scented soaps and fragrances. I do not know why it would be this way, but men seem to take pride in their individual stench. Actually, not just take pride: revel in it. They pass gas loudly. They seem to regard water as anathema, either for drinking (alcohol is preferred) or particularly for bathing. I don't see this as being a concerted effort on their part; it's just the way they are.

There are exceptions to this. Royalty, for one. Male royalty can smell as perfumed as any woman.

And then there are Heroes. You can always tell when you're in the presence of Heroes. But the type of smell that comes from them depends entirely on their alignment.

Not all Heroes are the same. That's a popular misconception, that all Heroes are alike. They are very much not. Yes, granted, Heroes as a group tend to try to act on behalf of the commonweal, but they go about it in very different ways. Ways that are sometimes diametrically opposed to each other.

There are Heroes who tend to lean toward a more positive means of tending to their business. When you're in the presence of such an individual, the very air around you smells clean and fresh, even if you're standing in the middle of a sewer. (Why you would be in the middle of a sewer, I couldn't say. It's simply for the sake of illustration.)

On the other hand, there are Heroes who view the ends as fully justifying the means. They have no scruples as to how they go about their business as long as they manage to accomplish whatever it is they set out to do. When you are in proximity to such as these, there seems to be a scent of brimstone in the air.

Actually, I'm generalizing when I say "you." *You,* very likely, will perceive nothing. The reason I'm reasonably sure of this is that in the beginning, when my senses were first becoming honed and I was "seeing" the world in a different manner, a pungent scent would waft my way and I would say to someone near me, "Do you smell that? What a terrible aroma," and they would say, "I smell nothing, and show some respect, woman; a Hero approaches." Or, conversely, I would comment on how sweet the air was and receive a similar comment of confusion but learn that a Hero was nearby. It took me a while to understand why things were the way they were and how only I could discern them.

It was as if only having lost my sight was I truly able to see. There are times when I pity those around me. They rely on their vision, oftentimes to the exclusion of their other senses. I, on the other hand, depend upon the four that remain to me and cannot be distracted by those things that would appeal to those who depend on sight. As a result, in many ways I am more focused upon the world than the poor devils who have to depend on their eyes.

So, as I've made clear, my first clear indication of the woman's distress was the aroma that wafted from her.

Second was what my ears told me. The sniffle in her nose and the hoarseness in her speaking voice when she managed to hold herself together enough to say, "May I help you?" told me that this was a woman who had been crying almost without letup. She had been fighting grief and losing badly.

I sensed the air currents that moved around her, heard the fluttering of her dress, determined where her voice was coming from. Once upon a time, I had had to put these different pieces together to assemble an image in my head. Now I simply "saw" that she was of medium height, about five and a half feet tall, and slender. Her hair was shoulder length from the way it rustled against the cheap homespun of her dress, although I could not determine its color. She had been working in the kitchen recently; the scent of freshly baked muffins clung to her. Perhaps it had been to take her mind off her recent troubles.

"Actually," I said, "I think I might be able to help you. May I come in?"

"I'm sorry ... do I know you?" The angle of her voice had changed; she was tilting her head slightly, no doubt trying to see beneath the hood I was wearing, which obscured my features.

"Does anyone truly 'know' each other?" I said.

"Pardon me?"

"No, I should beg your pardon. Sometimes I'm unnecessarily cryptic. It's becoming a habit with me. I should watch that." I eased back my hood, and she gasped when she saw my face, then immediately tried to take back that gasp because she doubtless thought it came across as impolite.

What had startled her so thoroughly was the revelation that I was sightless. I had a blindfold wrapped around my eyes, obscuring them. She might have found it a bit disconcerting, but I was actually doing her a service. People found my uncovered eyes far more shocking. My appearance was not in keeping with what was traditionally expected of the blind. Rather than twin disfocused orbs that stared lifelessly out at the world, I had nothing but two empty black sockets.

That's what happens when someone cuts out your eyes.

I have lived hundreds of years, and yet even to this day, I can still remember every second of that ordeal. And the very last sight I had before it was taken from me forever was the expressionless mask of Jack of Blades, overseeing the punishment for what he saw as my lack of cooperation. I refused to give him any information about my brother, whom Jack was seeking, and Jack of Blades didn't take well to being defied.

I screamed and kept screaming, and all the time—although it was impossible to see his expression—I'm reasonably sure that Jack enjoyed every moment.

Sometimes I dream about going back to that instant in time, finding my sobbing, newly blinded self, and assuring her that there are many ways to see the world. That there is sight beyond sight, and she will come to know that better than anyone living in Albion. That what she was seeing as effectively the end of her life was actually only the beginning.

Somehow I doubt my presence would have made much difference. With any luck, however, my presence *would* make a difference this time.

"I'm sorry," said Elizabeth—that was the woman's name, "Elizabeth," though she doubdess didn't know that I was aware of it—"I shouldn't have reacted that... I mean, yes, of course, come in." She had been simply peering out through a narrowly opened door, as was often the case when someone was encountering a stranger. Now she opened wide the door; the creak of the hinges and the repositioning of her voice told me so as she stepped back. Yet naturally she assumed I was unaware of it. "I'm opening the door," she said loudly.

The first hundred years or so of my life, it was irksome to me that people automatically raised their voices when initially encountering me. Now I chose to find it amusing. "I'm blind, not deaf," I said as I walked into the small house, barely a level or two above the status of hut.

"I'm sorry the place is such a mess," she said reflexively, then moaned at what she saw as a miscue. "Of course, you can't see it... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said you couldn't see—"

"I was already aware of it, actually," I said dryly. "So it's not as if I'm going to take offense. The best thing you could do for me right now is stop apologizing."

"Am I apologizing too much? I'm sor—" She caught herself and quickly said, "There's some clutter on the floor. Just give me a moment."

"Yes, of course." I didn't bother to explain to her that my perception of the world was such that I could easily have maneuvered around small obstacles. Otherwise, I would have been tripping over things constantly. How does one explain the notion of perceiving the world through sheer willpower, other than to say that the human mind cannot be restrained if it is determined not to be?

I stood there, taking in the entirety of the room as she hurried about, cleaning up various objects. Once she had done this to her satisfaction, she turned to me and, slightly out of breath, said, "How can I help you? Are you hungry? Would you like a—"

"Freshly baked muffin? That would be nice."

She gasped in amazement. "You knew what I was going to say! Are you a seer?"

"Well, yes, actually, although in this case I needed nothing except my nose to smell them."

"Oh. Yes, of course." She laughed self-consciously and brought a chair over to me. I eased myself into it and she hurried to the kitchen, getting me a muffin and also pouring what I could discern from the thick splash of the liquid to be a cup of milk. She brought both and set them in front of me. She did not feel the need to inform me in a loud voice that they were there, so I figured that was progress of a sort. "If, uh ... if you don't mind my asking ... I've heard fables. Just stories, mind you. Going back to when I was just a girl and we would sit around fires late at night and try to scare each other ..."

"It has been quite some time since I was just a girl," I said, vastly understating the facts. "But I recall such activities."

"And one of the stories that was told was about a blind seer, a woman, who people claimed lived forever. I don't remember her name. We just called her Endless Walker."

"My, how poetic a name," I said with a slight chuckle. Then, a bit more guardedly, I went on, "I think beings of legend should remain in storybooks, don't you? When they try to walk the world, things never go well."

"No, they don't. Uhm ..." She paused and then said, "I don't mean to be rude, but... why are you here?"

I had eaten half the muffin and now put it down carefully on the table. "My understanding from the townspeople is that your daughter is quite ill."

I didn't have to see her face to know that it was twisted in disgust. "The townspeople. Fat lot of use they've been. Unsympathetic, frightened sheep ..."

"They *did* seem to lower their voices and speak in whispers whenever they mentioned her."

I heard her lick her lips. I assumed they were dry and chapped. "I suppose I should be charitable. I should understand why they're afraid. But I'm not because all I think about is—"

That was when an earsplitting female shriek came from the back of the small house.

Elizabeth jumped, startled, the legs of the chair she'd been sitting on scratching abruptly on the floor. I maintained my air of calm and detachment. No reason I shouldn't; I had several hundred year's worth of practice at it.

The screech went from a ululating howl to a string of random names cried out, followed by such words as "Darkness!" and "Evil!" and "Corruption!"

"Oh gods, there she goes," said Elizabeth, and she was running out of the room. I stood and followed her, and I could hear her speaking in tones that were desperate attempts to remain calm and soothing. "Shhh, sweet thing, it's all right, it's all right," she kept saying.

I entered a smaller room. The violent creaking of a bed frame told me that someone was thrashing around in the bed. There was a splash of water, and Elizabeth saying repeatedly, "There, there, it's all right, it's going to be fine," and the sounds of wet cloth slapping against flesh. She was applying a soothing wet washcloth to the face of the girl, who was clearly in distress. This went on for well over a minute before the girl finally eased back from her suffering.

"Mother?" I heard a small, girlish voice whisper.

"Yes, Anne, it's me. I'm right here."

"Am I dreaming?"

"Not now you're not, no."

"Make them stop," she said, her voice a broken plea.

I could not discern any details of her appearance, but the stink of sweat was thick upon her. I heard rustling, indicating that she was twisting around in her bedsheets. "Who's that?" she managed to say.

"Hello, Anne," I said as softly as I could. "My name is Theresa." "I'm sorry," said Elizabeth, "I forgot to ask you ..."

"You have a good deal on your mind." I made my way across the small room and sat on the edge of her bed. "Give me your hand, Anne." She did so. It felt small and delicate against mine.

She jolted slightly. She was perceiving something, as I knew she would, but it was impossible for her to separate it from the other images that were clattering through her mind.

Her hand was clammy. I'd been right about that. It seemed feverish and I placed my hand against her forehead to confirm it. The child was ill. I turned toward the mother. "How long has this been going on?"

"She's always been plagued by dreams," said Elizabeth, her voice uneven. "Ever since she was a little girl. She's eleven now, so I think they started when she was about five or so. She'd cry out at night and in the morning tell me things so vivid. And then months later, I would hear tell of events that sounded similar to the tales she told me. But I thought nothing of it. And then ..." She hesitated, working to gather herself. "Then two years ago, she woke up sobbing that a lad, James Leeves, was going to be murdered. I told her to say nothing, tell no one, because it was such an evil thing, but then a week later poor James disappeared and Anne, she ignored me and went straight to the authorities in Ravenbeak—that's the name of our town ..." "I know."

"... and said that she'd had a dream where James's body would be found dumped under the flagstone bridge that runs over a creek two miles away. And it was." "And they suspected that she was responsible," I said.

She nodded. "Yes, they did, absolutely. And then the widow Kayle discovered James's bloody jacket in the drawer of her son, Rudolph, and Rudolph—who was never right in the head anyway—confessed he had done the deed. And Rudolph was hung straightaway, but now everyone feared my Anne because they believed that ill humors had taken possession of her and that she was cursed. She couldn't even go outside anymore without being shunned. And lately ..."

She paused and moments later the slosh of a pitcher told me that she was pouring water into a cup, and from there the contents between Anne's lips. Anne made soft, slurping noises. When Anne had had her fill, she gave a soft little sigh and stopped moving. Her breathing was slow and steady; I could tell she was drifting back to sleep. "Lately she spends most days either writhing in pain from constant headaches or sleeping and being tormented by more dreams. I don't..." Her voice choked. "I don't know what she could have done to deserve all this."

"Bad things happen to good people and innocent people, and if you try to attach 'deserves' to it, you can drive yourself mad. Trust me on that because I know people who *have* done so. And where, may I ask, is your husband?"

"He may well be one of those who drove himself mad," she said mirthlessly. "He fled six months ago. Couldn't take it anymore, I guess would be the best way to look at it. Assuming there's such a thing as 'best' in this sort of situation."

"I'm so sorry."

Her dress rustled. She had shrugged. "People do the best they can in situations. We are all tested. Some of us fail. Some of us remain."

Here I was a total stranger to this woman, and yet she was readily opening up her heart and home to me. She was likely desperately lonely, and the oppressive nature of this situation would have been enough to break many a strong woman.

Anne had fallen back to sleep again. With a faint cluck that sounded like a noise a mother hen would make, Elizabeth said, "Have you ever seen anything like this?" Then her voice caught. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't say 'seen.' "

"It's hardly a profanity. And actually, the answer is yes. I have."

"Really?"

"Yes. In myself. This child, your daughter"—and I rested my hand on her forearm—"could easily have been me. In some respects, she *was* me. She has the same gift that I had at that age: the gift of foresight. She is a seer."

Elizabeth didn't say anything at first. It was as if she was trying to find the words. When she did speak, her words were laced with fear. "Is ... is that how you lost your sight? Were you struck blind by the—?"

I gestured lazily, wiping away her concerns. "No. No, that was good old-fashioned steel that took away my sight. So if your worry is that Anne will be blinded by the visions that are currently haunting her, then you needn't concern yourself." Before she could breathe a sigh of relief, I continued. "However, the intensity of what she is perceiving, the way that her dreams are pounding at her ..." My voice trailed off.

Elizabeth wasn't about to settle for vagueness. "What's going to happen to her?" And when I didn't answer immediately, she herself did. "They're going to kill her, aren't they. These dreams ... they're going to eat her alive."

"There is ... every possibility of that, yes. The visions would become too much for her and part of her brain would burst. She would not survive."

"Oh gods." With a choked sob, she brought her hands to her face. Here I had come into her life with clear knowledge and understanding of what her daughter was enduring, and all I was doing was pronouncing a death sentence upon her child.

"Do something," she said with desperate urgency. "You know of these things. You know how they work. Can you stop it? Can you ... can you make them go away?"

"Rid her of the gift of prophecy, you mean?"

"Gift?" The word was foul in her mouth. *"Gift?* In what realm of thinking is this a gift? Look what it's doing to her! If this is a gift, then it needs to be returned immediately! Can you do that?"

"Can Г? No. I don't have the ability to remove one's visions."

There was a long moment of silence, and she said to me with grim misery, "Then what are you doing here? I mean ... obviously you came here for a reason. Something guided your steps, brought you to my door. It can't be coincidence, it just can't be."

"That would strain credulity, I admit."

"Then why else are you here? Tell me what you can do, please. I'm begging you."

What was I to tell her? That I had felt drawn to this small, middling town by my own second sight? That once I had arrived, I had merely to listen to the talk of the townsfolk and discerned that Anne's situation was the reason for my being here? And that when I had come to her house, been invited in, when I had actually drawn near to Anne and touched her hand ...

At that moment, her future had become clear to me. I saw that she was heading toward an untimely demise. I saw her brain as a dam trying to hold fast against a barrage of visions, and that before long that brain would give way to the stress. It would crumble, it would fall, and just like that, the girl would be gone, a life wasted.

Inwardly I rebelled at the stark unfairness of it all. For all that she had managed to accomplish thus far in her shortened life, what point had there been in the child's living at all?

Yet that was what destiny had planned for her.

"There is nothing I can do," I said slowly, then, before she could interrupt or start sobbing or do something else that would not be especially useful, I added, "But there may be someone who can."

"What?" It was obvious that she felt as if hope was gone, and the fact that I had extended this wisp of a possibility ... I almost felt cruel doing it, since the likelihood was so slender. "There is? Who? Bring him to me. I have almost nothing but I will pay anything ... do anything ... anything." Her desperation was palpable.

"He cannot be brought to you. I would have to go to him. But the way is not easy ..."

"I'll go immediately," she said.

"You would not survive, and who would tend to Anne?"

"Yes ... yes, of course. Are you ..." She was scarcely willing to voice the question. "Are you saying that you would be willing to help? I... I would pay you—"

"You keep speaking of payment. If I did not wish to do it, no amount of payment would prompt me to. If I did wish to, then no lack of payment would stop me. I will help, but"—and I interrupted her before she could waste any of what little time we had with cries of appreciation—"it will not be an easy endeavor. For one thing, I will require the services of a Hero in order to accomplish the task. And Heroes, I regret to say, are not overly abundant these days."

"We *have* a Hero!" she said excitedly.

Even a seer for whom the future is an open book can be surprised every now and then. "You do?"

"Yes! Right here in Ravenbeak. That's the name of our town." "You told me that."

"I did, didn't I?" She was sounding positively giddy with excitement. Newly found hope for a better future tends to do that to one. "I'm sorry, it's just that..." "I understand. You said you had a Hero ...?" "Oh, yes. His name is Elijah Stane."

"And he is a Hero, you say. A Hero of Will? Of Strength? Of Skill?"

That appeared to stump her. "I don't honestly know. He's just a Hero, I guess."

"Just a Hero. All right." I wanted to remain reasonable about it. "Well, can you tell me where I might locate this just-a-Hero?"

"He can usually be found around the Cock and Crow. It's a pub in the center of town."

"Yes, it does rather sound like one. Well then"—and I rose to my feet—"I shall seek out Elijah Stane, and we will see what happens from there."

"Thank you." She came around the bed to me and hesitated. "May I hug you?"

"If it's unavoidable," I said. "But here is the problem. If you do ... something will happen."

"Something—?"

"Most likely you will, through me, have a vision of the future. At the moment, the future is in flux, but if a vision is triggered, it will be set. You may find out, right now, whether your daughter will live or die. If it is the former, then you will have a lifetime with her. If it is the latter, then whatever small hope might sustain you over the next days will be gone forever. Do you desire to take that risk?"

There was a brief hesitation and I heard her step back. "No."

"Very wise."

Then I headed out to the Cock and Crow.

It was not that difficult to find. Ravenbeak was not all that large of a town, and the smell of alcohol wafted from the tavern in a manner that led me right to it. Indeed, the only way I could have missed it would have been if I had a vicious head cold.

I entered the tavern. There was a steady buzz of laughter and chatter, then it slowly tapered off as they became aware of my presence. When I pulled back my hood to reveal the state of my blindness, it brought conversation to a complete halt. I simply stood there, waiting for someone to say something as I knew someone inevitably would.

"Can I help you with something, Miss?" It was a barmaid. She sounded uncertain. They probably didn't get a lot of sightless people in here, and also rare were women on their own. So a lone blind woman must have been a true puzzler for them.

"I'm seeking a man named Elijah Stane. I'm told he's a Hero of some repute."

There was a momentary silence followed by loud, raucous laughter from the men seated at various tables. Then the barmaid said sharply, "Stop laughing at her!" This prompted immediate silence. "Elijah Stane?" she asked tentatively once the laughter had ceased. "Are you, ah ... quite certain?"

"That's the name that I was given."

"Are you sure the person who gave it to you wasn't having you off?"

This did not bode well. "I'm reasonably sure, yes. Was I misled? Is he not a Hero?"

Rather than answer the question directly, she said, "He's out in the back, last time I checked. You can decide for yourself. If you'd like, I can show you to him—" "No, that's quite all right. I'll find him myself, thank you."

I went out the door and made my way to the back of the tavern. The soil around me was soft and spongy, and I had to tread carefully not to slip and fall. Apparently it had rained recently. At least I certainly hoped that's why it felt moist beneath my feet. I couldn't say I was ecstatic about the alternative possibility.

Coming around the back of the tavern, I heard a rough snoring from the ground. The stench of alcohol rolled off the snoring man (at least so I assumed his gender to be) in waves. I was hesitant to speak the next words that were sitting upon my lips, but there was really no way around it.

"Elijah Stane?" I said tentatively. The speaking of the name was enough to cause a disruption in the snoring; apparently on some level he'd heard me. *"Elijah Stane,"* I said once more, this time more loudly and commanding.

This prompted an even louder response and a muttered, "Huh? What?" Everything about the speaker's voice and actions spoke volumes to me. His scratching his chin told me of his beard stubble. His eyes were likely bloodshot; I needed no extra hints in that regard. Then he coughed deeply and spit up a wad of something that sounded extremely unpleasant. I caught a faint whiff of copper.

"Blood in your phlegm?" I said.

"Looks like," he growled then said, "Oh." He must have done a double take, seen that I was blind. "How'd you know?" "Instinct. You're Elijah Stane?"

He slowly got to his feet, wavering from one side to the other as if he were on the deck of a sailing vessel. "I am what's left of Elijah Stane, yes." "You're a Hero?"

He laughed. It was an ugly sound, representative of the tattered remains of an ugly soul. "That's what they called me, once upon a time." "What happened?" "I failed," he said simply. "How?"

He paused and spit out another blood-tinged wad. "Can't say as I see how that's any of your business, blind girl."

"I only ask because I have need of a Hero, and from what I understand, you're the only one around."

"Shows just how starved Albion has become for Heroes, doesn't it, that I'm the best the locale has to offer." Apparently standing and talking had overtaxed him and he sank down to the ground again. "If you have need of a Hero, then I strongly suggest you look elsewhere. I've got nothing more to give."

"She can't wait that long."

He chuckled. "Are you royalty?"

"No. Why would you ask?"

"Because usually only royalty refers to itself in the third person. Calling yourself 'she' like that..."

"It's not me. It's a young girl. And she doesn't have a good deal of time left for me to go casting about for a Hero." Very quickly I outlined for him Anne's situation and how time was not her friend. That every passing day brought her one day closer to the inevitability of her brain's betraying her and collapsing from sheer exhaustion under the weight of her dreams and visions. I would say she has a week at best."

He listened quietly, without interruption, until I stopped talking. Then he said, "And what do you intend to do?"

"I intend to save her."

"The word 'how' comes to mind."

"There's a mountain range not far from here. Two days' journey at most. I'll need a guide and, more important, a protector." "You talking about Ravenwing? A ridge of mountains to the east?" "That would be it."

"Yeah, sure, I know the way." He cleared his throat but mercifully didn't spit anything out this time. "Often wondered what it is about this particular area that everything got named after ravens. Ravenbeak, Ravenwing, Ravenblack off to the west..."

"The reason for it," I said, "is actually to be found at Ravenwing."

"Not exactly following you."

I knelt so that we would be face-to-face, although obviously eye contact was not a factor. "There is a man there. An ancient man. Call him a wise man, or a wizard. Some maintain he is a descendant of gods. His name is Raven, and there are some who claim that he carved this entire area from the mountains and forests that once resided here and fashioned it into someplace that could be populated by humans. And if anyone has a means of curing Anne, it would be Raven."

"And what will be in it for him?" said Elijah Stane. "Nothing comes without a price, blind girl. What will be Raven's price?"

"I don't know. Whatever it is, I will be willing to pay it." "To spare the girl who means nothing to you?" "She's suffering."

"Suffering because of the same 'gift' that you have, yes?" When I nodded, he continued, "And you figure that if you can somehow spare her, then it helps ease the burden that you yourself have to carry. That about right?"

"I carry a blessing, not a curse. What I had to give up in order to obtain what I now have ... it was a fair bargain. A more than fair trade."

"Heh." He seemed to find that amusing. "Not sure how much of that is truth and how much is just the blind girl refusing to see into the one place she still can: herself." Then he lapsed into silence. I waited. I knew he would speak again.

He did. And when he did, there was no trace of humor in his voice. Instead, there was nothing but grimness and depression that an ocean of alcohol couldn't wash away.

"Last time a girl's life was in my hands," he said, "she died. I failed. I failed as her protector. I failed as her Hero. I failed as a man. Believe me, blind girl: I'm not the one into whose hands you want to put another girl's life. Two girls, really: her life and yours."

"Maybe," I said. "But you're all I've got."

"Well then, I think I should tell you that, if that's the case, you are well and truly buggered." I played the only card I had. "Have you considered the fact that—?"

"That if I help you in this, then it might make up for the girl who died in my care before? Yeah. I did. And I still think you're buggered."

"Fair enough. So since I'm going to undertake this with or without you at my side, I suppose the only question is whether I'll have company while being buggered."

And that caused him to laugh so violently that he started coughing. I can't be sure, but I think half of one of his lungs came up with it. When he finally managed to pull himself together, he said, "All right, blind girl. Have it your way, then. I only ask one thing."

"And that would be?"

"Let me finish sleeping off what's rotting through my system at the moment. Otherwise I'll be of no use to you at all. And considering how little use I'm already likely to be ..." "Do as you wish." "Thank you kindly."

Whereupon he slumped over, landing with the heaviness of a newly downed oak tree, and started snoring loudly. Arranging my robes carefully, I sat down next to him and waited for him to awaken.

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"How did she die?"

We'd spent most of the day heading toward Ravenwing in relative silence. Elijah Stane had not asked me much of anything about my past. He didn't even seem particularly interested in how I was able to maneuver as well as I did considering I was using neither cane nor guide dog. I didn't know if he had surmised I possessed some manner of sixth sense, or if he thought I was faking and could actually see perfectly well through my blindfold, or if there was some other conclusion that he had come to.

At one point some would-be bandits approached, seeing what they perceived as simply a blind girl and her grizzled, elderly protector as easy pickings. It was Elijah Stane's first test as my protector, and as it turned out, he was astounding. There were three of them, and Elijah Stane did not even draw his own weapon. One of the bandits came at him with a sword, and Elijah Stane simply slapped it aside as if it were a wooden sword wielded by a child. He removed the sword from his attacker, turned upon the other two, and engaged them. The encounter took only seconds and they were running for their lives.

"Idiots," he said, not even bothering to keep the sword he'd taken off his attacker but instead tossing it disdainfully to the ground.

"Do you have your own weapon?" I said. "When we were attacked, you used our assailants' own weapons against them, so ..."

For answer he drew what sounded like a sword from a scabbard. But it was not a well-oiled sound. "This blade has seen me through many an adventure," he boasted. "It has been a while since it was used, but—like me—it still has some mileage to go upon it."

"It sounds like it's rusty."

"As am I. But as you've just seen, we can both scrape the rust off us as needed. So, then: onward."

We made camp when darkness descended. This was more out of deference to Elijah Stane, since time of day made no difference to me. But even I could not continue without rest forever. We had brought sufficient supplies with us for the journey, except we had opted for different means of quenching thirst. I had a canteen of water; he had what seemed a bottomless flask of alcohol. He drank it sparingly, though, so at least I didn't have to worry that he was going to keel over and I would have to wait a time for him to come back to consciousness.

It was after we had been walking for a time on the second day that I finally asked my question.

At first he feigned lack of understanding. When I pressed the matter, though, he said, "Oh. 'She.' The girl I was supposed to be guarding." "Yes. If you don't mind my asking ..."

"Stupid thing to say," he said with a growl. "If you were really worried about my minding, you'd have asked for permission first." "I suppose you're right."

We walked for a short time more, then he said, "She was the daughter of a merchant in Bowerstone who had fallen on hard times. Fortunately enough, she had caught the eye of another merchant who was far more well-to-do. And even more fortunately, the girl found him attractive as well. A match was arranged that was to the satisfaction of all concerned. The merchant who had been struggling had a last-minute business opportunity, so he opted to send his daughter on ahead. He hired me to escort her. I would have been perfectly happy to do it for free; I was quite the altruistic Hero back then. A bit past my prime, but still with a great deal to offer. So I served as her escort. And ..." His voice trailed off. I made no attempt to spur him on. Finally, so softly that he was nearly inaudible—even to me, with my sharp hearing— he said, "We were set upon by hollow men. Near a swamp. There were too many of them. She died. I donated the money to the poor. End of story. Happy?"

"I don't think 'happy' is quite the word I would have used. I appreciate your telling me, though."

"Glad to be of help."

"I don't think crawling into a bottle was the best way to handle that. I mean, no one—not even a Hero—succeeds at every quest. Bad things do happen."

"You asked, blind girl, and I told you. I would desperately appreciate it if you didn't inflict more of your trite little opinions on me."

"I'm sorry ..."

He had been walking with his back to me, but now he turned to face me. "I'm doing this because I thought it would be a nice change of pace to have someone needing me instead of just being the subject of snickers and derisive looks. But here's the thing about those: At least they're safe. No one's going to die because someone had to step over the drunk to get where he's going. There's danger involved whenever you drag a Hero into things, especially if that Hero is me. And if you're willing to take that risk, then I'm uncaring enough to go with you. But spare me, please, your advice. All right?"

"As you wish, Elijah Stane." I paused, then added in a small voice, "I don't want you to think I'm unappreciative."

"I really don't care what you think."

"Now I think you're lying."

He stepped in close to me and when he spoke, his alcohol-tinged breath washed over me. "You're lucky I don't just leave you here." "Yes. I know."

"Come. The sooner I get you there, the sooner we can be done with this."

We started moving more quickly as he guided me along the path. Every so often he would 21 issue a warning about something that was in the way: a ditch, perhaps, or some fallen rock. I easily stepped over it. I didn't bother to tell him that I could sense the wind currents around them that helped delineate their shapes for me.

We reached the base of Ravenwing Mountain by late afternoon. We stopped there for a time to rest, eating sparingly of the supplies we had brought with us.

"And what does my future hold?" he said abruptly.

"Pardon?"

"You are a seer, or so you told me. The future is as an open book to you. So what does my future hold?"

"The future is an open book, yes, but not every chapter is available to me. Just because I can see some things doesn't mean I can see everything. There is much that is still as much a haze to me as it is to you."

"That's inconvenient."

I shrugged. "I learn to live with it. It's amazing what you can learn to live with, really."

He bit off a piece of salted beef and chewed it thoroughly. He swallowed it as noisily as he chewed it, then took out what I can only think was a flask of infinite volume. Downing a swallow, he capped it. "I notice that you did not actually answer my question."

I didn't say anything.

"Never mind," he said after a moment's consideration. "Probably better that I don't know. I don't think any man should know too much about his own fate, or the time and nature of his demise."

"You cough up blood. I'd think you'd have a clearer idea than many of your demise."

"Oh, there's still plenty of abuse this old body can be put through, trust me." He seemed to be studying me, although it was hard for me to be certain. "What of your own fate? Do you know that?"

"I know enough to know that I know enough."

"You *do* enjoy being cryptic, don't you."

"When the mood suits me," I admitted.

He began packing up our supplies. "To business, then. We are at the base of the main—and, to the best of my knowledge, only—path that winds through Ravenwing. I have walked it on several occasions. I have never encountered anyone with the name 'Raven' in that time, nor any residents or domiciles of any type. I've led you here because it's where you desired to go, and I will guide you through it if you wish. But when we find nothing, don't blame me."

"Did you ever consider the possibility that you found nothing because you weren't looking 22 for anything?"

"No. I never did."

"Well, then," I said, "I suppose we'll find out."

We started up the path. Ravenwing was not a particularly high mountain, but the going was rugged and the footing treacherous. Within an hour of embarking on the sojourn up the mountain, I was breathing heavily and my blindfold was becoming sodden from the sweat on my forehead. Impressively, Elijah Stane didn't sound the least bit winded. I wasn't quite sure how he was managing that, but he was. I think it was sheer stubbornness on his part, that he had no desire to sound weak. It was one of those times where the mind was capable of overruling the body. It was comforting to know that he still had that degree of willpower.

Comforting and also a bit sad.

The mountain passage had become quite narrow by that point. Rocky walls were close on either side. Much farther and we'd have to walk single file, except I knew we were going no farther. He was holding me by the left elbow, guiding me along. I was trailing the fingers of my right hand against the rocky wall alongside. A cooling shadow fell across my face and I stopped walking. He seemed confused when I ceased forward motion. "You need to rest?"

"Here," I said. "It's here."

"How do you know? Is this one of those seer things?" "Yes. One of those seer things."

He looked left, then right. "I think your visions may have misled you. There's nothing here but rock."

"You have to look closer," I said. I brushed aside some dirt that was caked on the rocky surface. "See here?"

He stepped in so he could see where I was indicating and grunted when he did so. "Markings of some kind. What are those?" "Runes."

"Well, I didn't ruin it."

A smile played across the corners of my mouth. It was an unaccustomed sensation, which reminded me of how infrequently I actually smiled. "Runes. Ancient writing."

"I know that. I just wanted to see if I could make you smile." I admit I was surprised. "Well, mission accomplished, then." "What do they say?"

My fingers traced them delicately. "It says, 'Only One with the Blood of a Hero Shall Gain Entrance.' "

"That's easy, then," said Elijah Stane. Raising his voice, he called, "Hello! Hello, in there! I have the blood of a Hero flowing in me! So you should let us in!" No response. Then again, I hadn't really expected one. "I don't believe it's quite that simple," I said.

Elijah Stane processed that and belatedly understood. "Ah. I see where this is going. Actually ... this may be easier than either of us thought. Hold on."

He started coughing violently. I realized that he was forcing himself to do so, but that really didn't matter for our purposes. Within seconds the coughing had turned thick and disgusting sounding, and I could hear from the noises he was producing that he was gathering it in his cheeks. Then, once he apparently felt he had sufficient quantities for his purposes, he let fly with a disgusting noise. The spit smacked against the runes with a sound like a dead fish being struck against paving. It was one of those situations where I was grateful to be blind because I didn't have to stare at the red-laced liquid oozing its way through the curved lettering.

"I'm not sure that's going to work," I said.

"A-yuh. Doesn't seem to have." He made a noise that actually could have passed as wistful. "There was plenty of blood in it, too. I could piss on it. There's blood in that as well." "I'd rather you didn't. Hand me your dagger, please."

He did as I instructed and moments later I was wincing as I drew the blade across my palm. Blood seeped from it and I held my hand against the runes. Moments later there was a scraping of stone. I could hear hidden wheels turning, and seconds after that there was a rush of cold air in my face, which sent a chill through me since I was still perspiring from the exertions of the trip.

"So it looks like I'm not a Hero after all," said Elijah Stane. His tone was both mournful and sarcastic. "Sorry to have wasted your time."

"What makes a Hero comes from within. If you feel yourself unworthy of the title ..."

"I feel myself sick of this entire endeavor. Let's get this over with, blind girl."

We entered the darkness that lay beyond the door and I heard the rock wall sliding closed, sealing us within.

Blind as I was, I could still sense that there was illumination provided. I heard the crackling of flames, sensed the gentle warmth they were providing. "Torches?" I said.

"Yes. Lining the wall. Stay behind me."

I did as he said. I could hear insects, hundreds if not thousands of them, skittering away as we proceeded. And larger things resided in the semidarkness as well. Mice, perhaps even rats. They were watching us.

Fine. Let them.

Elijah Stane was keeping his sword at the ready. That was a good thing. He coughed several 24 times in the narrow passage through which we were moving and his hacking echoed through the tunnel. From the uneven floor and what I touched on the walls, I perceived it to be similar to the rocky exterior from the mountain pass. The tunnel through which we were passing appeared to have been carved right out of the mountain itself. I had no idea who might have had the power to accomplish such a thing, and I wasn't entirely sure I was sanguine about meeting him or her.

"Any idea how far this goes?" he said.

"You would have the better feeling for it since you have two functioning eyes."

"Come on, blind girl. Stop pretending like your lack of eyes in any way means that you can't see. I think you got better sight than anyone I've ever met. Sure better than mine since I'm blind drunk half the time, anyway."

"I think you're overestimating—"

"Wait. Hold on. Something up ahead ..."

I could tell from the flow of air that the "landscape" had changed. We were moving out into what seemed a wide cavern. I called out "hello" tentatively and listened as my voice echoed and reechoed almost ceaselessly for thirty seconds. "This is large," I said more quietly this time.

"That's understating it," said Elijah Stane. "I've seen smaller arenas than this. I—"

Suddenly he cried out. I heard movement in the darkness, and it seemed to be coming from everywhere. There had to be multiple entrances to the cavern, and someones or somethings were using every one of them.

"No," Elijah Stane whispered, "no ... no, no ... fall back, blind girl. *Fall back!"*

But I cried out in pain, staggering, my hands going to my face. Because I was reliving a sensation I knew all too well. Generations had come and gone since that horrible day when my eyes had been cut from my face, the vacant spaces burned with a hot poker, and I had thought I was long over the pain but I was wrong. It slammed into me now, and my face felt as if it were on fire. I shrieked, batting at my face as if it were aflame.

And then I could see.

Just like that.

My eyes had not regrown or something similarly miraculous. But there is more to sight than eyes; there are images that are interpreted by the brain that provide what we would call true "vision," and in this regard suddenly the world lay plain before me. Not the movement of air currents, or the dozens of telltale clues that enabled me to envision my environment to some degree.

Instead, I suddenly had vision as perfect as when I had been sighted. Even in darkness, the world around me was an explosion of details that only eyes could perceive.

I could see our surroundings clearly. The stalagmites and stalactites stretching up and down, and there was darkness in the corners but also light. And swarming forward from the darkness were hollow men.

Hollow men, the ghastly, undead creatures that had been responsible for the death of Elijah Stane's previous charge.

It was impossible to determine how many of them there were, but their gaunt, armored figures were shambling forward in a steady swarm, their weapons drawn, their pale green eyes burning with hatred.

Elijah Stane had his sword at the ready, but his hands were trembling. "Keep back, blind girl!" he called out in a manner that suggested it was everything he could do to keep his terror in check. Seeing him clearly now for the first time, he was exactly as I had "seen" him in my mind's eye.

If bravery is, as they say, the ability to battle when common sense is telling you to do the opposite, than Elijah Stane was as brave as they came. Even had I not miraculously regained my ability to see, I would have known how frightened was Elijah Stane. But it did not deter him. Face to the foe, he suddenly let out a battle cry and waded into the thick of the creatures. His sword circumscribed a relentless arc of destruction. Everywhere he struck, pieces of hollow men went flying: arms, heads, sections of legs, torsos. He proceeded to hack them to pieces, never relenting, never backing down.

But the parts had some fight in them. Their bodies, even dismembered, crawled forward toward him. Unattached arms grabbed at his ankles. Headless torsos flailed in his general direction, trying to figure out where he was.

*"Keep back, Gretta!"* he shouted, and I took Gretta to be the girl he'd lost.

I saw clearly now the torches that were affixed to the cave's walls. I grabbed one in either hand and ran toward Elijah Stane. He saw me coming and his eyes widened as he cried out, *"Here! Give it here!"*

Trying to make my aim as successful as I could, I threw him one of the torches. It sailed through the air, leaving a stream of flame behind it, and it almost flew right past Elijah Stane. Fortunately, he snagged it at the last second and shoved it into the face of the nearest hollow man. The ghoulish creature stepped back and Elijah Stane swept the torch around. I came in behind him, placing my back to his, and for an instant he cried out before he realized it was me.

The hollow men had cut off any avenue of retreat; the only place to go was forward. I guarded our back, and Elijah Stane drove us onward, keeping the torch in front of him, thrusting with his sword. Any hollow man who was struck by the fire ignited like brittle kindling. Within seconds there was smoke all around us as the hollow men kept being set ablaze, then we were through and dashing for the far side of the vast cave chamber.

For all we knew we were running headlong into even bigger problems, since that was where the hollow men had emerged from. But there was no choice, since they were swarming in behind us.

We reached the mouth of our way out, and suddenly Elijah Stane dropped his sword. I had no idea what was happening. With my vision miraculously restored, I didn't know where to look first. I hadn't felt this confused in centuries.

Abruptly, Elijah upended his flask. Alcohol poured out, splashing in a line across the entrance, and Elijah threw his torch down upon it.

Instantly, a wall of fire leaped into existence between us and the hollow men. Several of them were actually brainless enough to try to go right through it, and they went up in flames immediately. What little was left of them fell forward and burned briskly on the ground in front of us. The rest of them held back, hesitant, cannily trying to find a way around it.

Yet rather than pressing his advantage, Elijah Stane stood there, facing them, still trembling, brandishing his sword. "Elijah Stane!" I called to him and, when he did not immediately start moving, I yanked on his arm and shouted again, *"Elijah! Now!"*

It seemed to break him from his spell and together we started running. The ground flew by us, and from that point it was as if we were threading our way through a maze. The branches of the cave paths split off again and again, and we simply kept going left since that seemed to be the easiest thing to remember.

I had forgotten what it was like to depend on vision. It was horrifying. It was as if a cloak had been thrown over my senses of hearing, of scent, of touch. My sight had been restored, but I now felt disoriented and confused in a way that I had not for a very long time. "Stop! Wait!" I called out, leaning against the wall, the sides of my head pounding. The torches had become fewer and farther between. Darkness had previously held no concern for me; now I was frightened. "Just... give me a few moments."

"They could be right behind us!"

"They're not. I can see they're not."

"You can—?" He stared closely at my face. "Are your eyes working?" "No. But I can still see you. I don't know how or why, but I can."

He sagged against the wall. His breath was coming in ragged gasps. Once we'd stopped running, the strain seemed to be catching up with him. "I dislike all of this. The place stinks of magic. If you need to rest, we do so for a few moments, but no longer than that. Here"—and he reached over and took my hand to ease me down onto the floor.

The moment he did, our minds collided, a vision exploding in my mind and his, and there she was, the girl that I knew instantly was Gretta ...

*... and he was standing there, looking at her.*

*And his sword was through her chest.*

*She was staring up at him with a look of total surprise, and blood was seeping from her mouth even as the life fled her eyes ...*

Elijah Stane cried out in alarm and yanked his hand clear.

His voice was little more than a strangled whisper. "You ... you saw ..."

"I did not mean to. It happens." I now had in my mind more than just that image; I knew everything that had led up to it. "Elijah Stane, it was not your fault..."

*"Shut up!"*

For long moments he was silent, the only noises around us being a faint dripping of water and some sort of distant clacking, like rock on rock.

Finally he spoke. Perhaps he didn't know that I had already seen in full what he was about to tell me. Or it could just as easily have been that he needed to say it aloud to someone. To anyone.

"I was fighting against them, that much is true. She was standing too close to me. She was looking to me for protection, and at one point I swung my sword back to take down another hollow man, and the blade went right through her. It felt like nothing, going in; her body put up no resistance at all, as if she were made of butter. I had lost track of where she was, I made a bad move with my sword, and just like that, she was gone."

"It..." I tried to find the words. *It was an accident It wasn't your fault.* I'd already told him that; he didn't care. There was no point in repeating myself.

He continued like a ghost speaking from beyond the grave. "I battled away the rest of the 28 hollow men, and I picked up her body and brought her home, and told her mourning father that the hollow men had done it. I didn't even have the nerve to tell him the truth. Some hero. Some hero am I."

"You mustn't think like that!" I said. "You—"

Abruptly, he cried out, *"Here they come! Behind me!"*

I ran past him, seeing the shadows in front of me, and not feeling any sort of rush of air, not hearing a lack of noise that should have alerted me to matters of greater concern than just getting out of the way of oncoming hollow men.

As a result, I didn't realize that there was a vast, gaping crevice directly in front of me until it was too late. My overdependence on my newly restored sight had betrayed me.

I shrieked and fell forward, my arms pinwheeling desperately as I tried to halt my fall. I failed utterly. I heard Elijah Stane cry out my name, then I struck something hard and blackness took me.

**\*\*\***

*Have you figured it out yet?*

The voice sounded within my head.

I was floating in darkness, looking around in confusion. My newly acquired eyesight enabled me, somehow, to see in the pitch-blackness that surrounded me.

There was neither floor beneath my feet nor ceiling above my head. Blackness stretched in all directions.

And there was someone floating a distance from me.

I could not tell for the life of me whether it was a man or a woman or something in between.

It... for I could think of no other way to describe it... was well over six feet tall, lean and stooped and rail thin. Its clothing consisted of a long, sleek black robe, and its hands were obscured in the folds of its wide sleeves. And its head ... *was* it a head? Or was it a mask, further serving to obscure its gender and true nature? The mask, which is what I decided it was but could still be wrong, was that of a bird. A raven, with sleek black feathers and a pointed beak and eyes that seemed to burn into me.

"Raven?"

*Have you figured it out yet?* The same question.

I had, actually. It was not all that difficult. "Elijah Stane and I are facing that which we most fear. He, the creatures that destroyed his life. And me ..." *Why would you be afraid of sight?* "I don't know. Listen ... I came to you for—"

*Do you fear to see what you have become? Have you come to embrace your blindness because you prefer the wall that it has created between you and the rest of the world?*

"There is a girl," I said desperately. I tried to move toward Raven and was unable to do so. My feet had nothing they could push against. "A girl in desperate straits ..." *Yes. I know. And you knew that I would know.*

"I suppose I did, yes." Desperation was beginning to creep through me. "Can you help her?" *That is not your question.* "Will you help her?"

*Nor is that your question. You have entered my realm. These caves, this entire arena, is of my devising and creation. Reality bends itself to my will, and nothing occurs here that I do not desire. This is my place of power, and here there is only one question that truly matters.*

I nodded. "What is your price?"

*Your silence. Your silence and the knowledge of what will happen next.* "I don't understand."

*My sustenance is the guilt and regret of others. It has been long since I supped on that, and you will provide it to me.*

"I'm still unclear on what you're asking. Listen," I began again, "there's a girl ..." *Tortured by visions akin to yours. The cure you seek is in the folds of your garment. One dose. Just enough for her.*

I reached downward and discovered it was true. There was a small vial in my right pocket. I withdrew it and studied it. It contained a thick brown liquid that seemed to be moving on its own. "She drinks this?"

*Yes.*

"And you require only my silence."

*Yes. Maintain your silence when the time comes. Do not see what you will see and say nothing, and the cure remains with you. Speak, and it will be lost to you forever.* "But... I still don't—"

*You will understand when you are supposed to understand. Say farewell.*

"Farewell?"

And I was gone again.

**\*\*\***

Elijah was still shouting my name when I opened my eyes to blackness. My sight was gone again, taken from me as mysteriously as it had been restored.

His voice was coming from only a few feet above me and it was then that I realized that, although there was a vast drop yawning beneath me, I had in fact only fallen a few feet. I had landed on a ledge that was extending from the wall. The landing had been violent and knocked me momentarily unconscious.

Elijah Stane was extending his hand to me. "Careful as you stand up!" he warned me. I reached up and grasped his hand. He was wearing gloves now so that we would not come into skin-to-skin contact. He wanted to avoid more visions. Wise man.

Seconds later he had pulled me up to safety.

"How long was I unconscious?"

"Couple of seconds at most. You had me ..." He stopped talking and waved his hand in front of my face. "Can you still see?" "No."

"The fall must have done it. You hit your head? Have any hallucinations?"

I felt something in my pocket. Reaching in gingerly, I felt a narrow tube that had not been in there before I'd tumbled into the crevice. "Theresa?"

"Nothing. I saw nothing."

"That's a start. Come ... I have something to show you."

He took my elbow and guided me along the perimeter of the crevice. "Right here," he said after a few moments of treading carefully. "There's a natural bridge over this. We can cross it and get to the other side. And there looks to be another door over there, just like the one that let us in. Same writing on it and everything. Hope you're ready to bleed on it."

But there was something else on the other side of the bridge aside from a door. Something waiting for us. Something horrifying. With my sight beyond sight, it was clear as daylight to me.

Rockmites.

Hiding in the shadows. Half a dozen of them, each of them the size of a small dog. Crablike creatures they were, with hard shells upon their backs that made them highly resistant to attack. Vicious claws extended from their fronts that enabled them, when swarming over a victim, to rip loose long strips of flesh, blood still dripping, and shove that flesh into their hidden maws. They were poised and ready to attack us ...

No. Not us.

Him.

And I was about to say, *Don't you see them? How can you not see them? They're right there in front of us!*

And all Elijah Stane said was, "Come on. Let's go."

He was oblivious to the threat. His eyes were betraying him. The creatures were immobile in the shadows, indistinguishable from any other part of the cave's craggy interior.

"I can't do it," I whispered. I wasn't speaking to Elijah Stane. Instead, my words were addressed to Raven, the mysterious creature that had provided me with the means of Anne's salvation. Yet I now understood the price, and the price was Elijah Stane.

"Of course you can," said Elijah with impatience. "It's wide enough. I'll guide you. I know you're afraid but you can do this."

"I can't... I won't... it's not fair ..."

"Damnation, blind girl. Stay here: I'll show you how easy it is. I'll show you it's safe. Then I'll come back for you."

Before I could say anything, he stepped off onto the natural bridge. I could perceive the 31 creatures on the other side, waiting for him with stomach-churning patience.

Elijah was halfway across and I wanted to cry out a warning, to tell him that his death lay directly in front of him. And I thought about Anne, just at the start of her life, suffering, and Elijah Stane coughing up his blood, clearly in his last days, his real life behind him. Wasn't one a reasonable trade for another? A life that was ending in exchange for a life that was just beginning?

Except who was I to make that decision? For all the many lifetimes I'd lived, who was I really to decide who was to live and who was to die?

A word of warning from me would save Elijah Stane and doom Anne.

Elijah Stane kept walking, and he was almost to the creatures, and they were poised and ready to leap upon him, and that's when I called out, "Elijah!"

He stopped barely inches away from the rockmites, still unaware of the impending danger, and turned to me.

Somewhere in the back of my head, I could sense Raven leaning forward, fascinated to see if I would cry out a warning, ready to snatch the cure from my pocket. "You're a wonderful Hero," I said.

I like to think he grinned at that moment. His voice sounded like he was smiling. You can tell the difference, believe it or not, when someone is smiling as they speak. "Thank you," he said. And then they were upon him.

They swarmed over him as I knew they would. He had his sword out and he swept it desperately through the air, but he didn't even have a target that he could challenge because they were all over him. They tore into him and he staggered and turned toward me. I heard sickening noises, things being torn off him, and thick wet sounds of blood and pieces of him being flung against the walls.

And then he screamed. It was not the inarticulate howls that I would have expected, that *anyone* would have expected.

Instead, he cried out, *"You made the right choice, blind girl! I'd have traded me for the girl any day!"*

And then Elijah tumbled off the rocky path, taking the rockmites with him. They spiraled down, down into the darkness and seconds later had vanished.

Before I could even process that he was gone, cool air was caressing my face. It was only then that I realized the door on the other end had opened.

His blood must have spattered against it.

The blood of a Hero. A Hero redeemed.

And once again, in the back of my mind as I crossed the bridge, I could hear Raven cackling, 32 a bizarre laugh that sounded like a caw. Guilt was seeping from every pore and Raven's beak dipped into my soul and drank its fill.

And I let it.

**\*\*\***

Elizabeth could not stop sobbing in joy, embracing her daughter, who was sitting upright in bed. Anne looked and sounded confused, as if she was having trouble remembering what had transpired in recent days. Clearly she was oblivious as to how close to death she had been. She thanked me because her mother kept telling her to, but obviously she didn't understand why she was supposed to.

After crossing the bridge, I had met no further resistance and found, at the other end of the path, an exit out of Raven's stronghold. Returning to town had likewise been relatively easy, even blind as I was. I could not help but feel that Raven was performing a final service of simplifying my return. Something else to make me feel guilty over. More sustenance for him.

The vial lay empty on the dresser next to her. She had consumed every last drop, which had not been an easy endeavor because her mother had had to cradle her head and ease it between her lips. But she had managed it, and the effect was immediate. Anne had blinked her eyes as if coming out of a lengthy coma and her mother had not stopped burbling.

"Thank you," she kept saying between tears. "Thank you for giving me my daughter back."

"You're welcome."

"And Elijah Stane? Was he of any help? I want to thank him as well." What was I to say? That her daughter's salvation had come at the cost of Elijah's destruction? Why should they have to live with that knowledge? It would benefit Elijah Stane not at all and simply heap guilt upon them. It was unnecessary; the guilt that I was carrying was sufficient for all concerned.

I had been standing near the door. "I will pass your thanks along to him." Before she could say anything else, I was out the door, then out of the house.

I had accomplished what I'd set out to do. But in order to do that, I had perpetrated a great evil. And even though it was done in the spirit of saving another, nevertheless such an action frequently redounds to the detriment of the person who had committed it. There is a reckoning. The scales must be balanced.

And I cannot help but feel that I have set matters into motion that will lead to my own end. Something for which I can only wait...

... and watch.