

*The mountains of Tyrrick rise stark against the deep blue sky on the western edge of the continent. In those mountains is a cave, known to the superstitious locals as the Cave of Spirits. They say an ageless necromancer resides there, scion of a vanished people, and that any who enter the Cave of Spirits will never come out again, for he will drain them of life, and add theirs to his own.*

Deep in the Cave of Spirits, a pair of small lamps burned, lighting the place where the natural rough rock changed into perfectly smooth stone, perfectly polished without a single join to be seen. More lamps lit the stone within, highlighting a long corridor, and then a main room, perfectly round with a flat stone floor and domed roof, with two hallways leading off. Brilliant light flashed out of the left, a short hallway linked to a small bedchamber.

The bedchamber held a single bed, certainly large enough for five or six people to sleep on. At the foot of it knelt a man before a heavy oaken box, pale-skinned and bare-chested, his head shaved except for a long flowing scalp-lock, silvered with age. He wore a pair of tight leather trousers that highlighted his well muscled legs and a sizable bulge at his crotch. His arms, as well defined as his legs, were held over the box, each hand holding an empty glass beaker. After a moment, the light subsided and he stood, no sign of age despite his silver hair.

He turned and walked to a nearby dresser, where a heavy book bound in leather sat. His dark brown eyes perused the page it was on as he set the beakers down beside several others. After a moment, he stepped back to the box, and pulled the lid down, then latched it. Timing for the next step was crucial. He stepped out into the hallway and turned slightly sideways, as though dodging somebody. He continued on as a dim form appeared behind him, female and nude, her breasts hanging down with the memory of gravity, her arms vanishing near the elbows and her body vanishing at the flare of her hips.

“Arakel,” the ghost said in a rich, sultry voice, “why do you always ignore me?”

Arakel continued to walk down the hall to the main room. “Why is it that when I begin my alchemical workings you vanish, Lim,” he countered.

Lim pouted, her generous lips drawing down. “Because if I stick around while you play with your potions, you might try and stick me in a bottle or something.”

Arakel sighed. Though she was a ghost, Lim held every bit of superstition as those who lived in the villages and towns beyond the mountains, believing that a necromancer like himself could simply steal a soul and force it into a material vessel. While he could tear a soul from a body if he wished, it was both difficult and impractical, since he didn’t know the spells needed to create a vessel to hold it. All he would accomplish would be to create more like Lim, annoying spirits who trailed after him and annoyed him.

“What *are* you doing back there in the bedroom Arakel,” Lim asked, pushing her breasts together with hands that were connected to nothing.

“If you would stay like I ask you too, you would likely know by now. As it is, you’ll need to wait until I work on it again,” he replied, walking through the main room and down a second hall until he came to a set of stairs. Wooden hooks protruded from the wall here, and Arakel peeled off his leather pants, revealing that the rest of his body was as hairless as his head. He put the pants on a peg, and then walked nude down the stairs into a room with a large sunken pool. Without hesitation Arakel dove in, swimming to the far end as Lim floated above him, idly kicking shins and feet that, like her hands, were not connected to the rest of her ghostly body. After a bit, bored of watching Arakel swim to and fro in the pool, Lim floated away, passing through the walls to travel straight through the rock and emerge into the dim evening light.

It was raining outside, a cold rain that could shock the dead awake, though the rain passed through Lim without her even feeling it. She often explored the mountains around the Cave of Spirits, usually when Arakel was working his alchemy. Despite what he said, she was certain he was going to stick her in a box, or jar, or something. She had never trusted mages when she was alive, and trusted them less now that she was dead.

She floated down along a nearby path, usually unused unless Arakel was going out and about, or some daring villagers came up to test their nerves in the cave. Since she had met up with him, almost five hundred years ago, nobody had gone more than a few steps into the cave. She thought it was rather boring, and often tried to lead some girls up the path, certain that Arakel could use some solid, but soft, company. However, most of them ran away, and one had even thrown herself off a cliff in an attempt to escape.

It was a change in the all too familiar sounds around her that brought her out of her reverie. She flitted across the path, down through the stone and out to a lower spot, where she saw a man climbing the hill. He was about six feet tall, with shaggy black hair that fell to his shoulders and piercing green eyes. His shirt and trousers were shredded, and he held one hand to his side, where blood slowly flowed over his fingers and dripped down to the path.

Lim flitted across the path to him. “Why are you bleeding?” she asked.

The man flinched back with a startled curse. He stared at the nude, partially formed ghost. “So,” he growled, his voice a deep baritone, “these mountains *are* haunted.”

Lim’s face took on a hurt expression. “I’m not *haunting* anything,” she protested. “I’m keeping a friend company. Why are you here in these mountains, and why are you bleeding?”

The man snarled at her and walked through her, ignoring her protest and question. Lim followed him up the path, floating just over his shoulder. “So you won’t answer me because I’m a ghost?”

“I won’t answer you because the dead need no answers,” the man growled, rounding a bend and passing the stunted tree that marked where the girl had thrown herself over.

“The dead need answers as much as the living,” Lim said, floating through the tree, “it’s not like we learn everything you know.”

The man waved his hand through her, as though trying to fan away a wisp of smoke. “Begone spirit. Leave me to suffer in peace.”

“And why are you here, in these mountains, leaving a trail that any fool could follow up these mountains to my home, Lycan,” Arakel’s voice asked. Lim scooted backwards, all but her head vanishing in surprise as she stared at him. He was still bare-chested, but wore a surcoat of steel links,, his leather trousers and heavy boots.

The Lycan stopped at peered through the rain at Arakel. “Another spirit, or something more solid?”

Arakel blinked once, slowly. “Answer my question, or begone from this place.”

The Lycan bared his teeth, and then his shoulders sagged slightly. “I was guarding a caravan when we were attacked. The rest of the guards were slaughtered and I injured, though I escaped. They had silver weapons, so my regenerative powers are... less than helpful,” he admitted ruefully.

Arakel’s eyes flicked to Lim, and she vanished without a sound. He looked back at the Lycan. “Follow me,” he said grudgingly. The necromancer led the lycanthrope further along the path, then into the rough entrance of the cave. He gestured for the wounded man to sit on a nearby rock. “Sit still, and do not move,” he told the wounded man, stretching his hand out over a pile of rocks. His eyes went momentarily distant, and then the pile of rocks began to shake slightly. From beneath the pile of rocks came a skeleton, somewhat dog-like that stood on four legs, its skull turned to Arakel, the empty eye sockets staring at him. “Clean the path. Alert me if we have any more visitors,” Arakel commanded, and the skeleton bounded off, pausing often to touch it’s nose to the bloodstains.

Through it all, the man simply sat on the rock and watched. “So along with ghosts, there truly is a Necromancer living in these mountains.”

“Yes, I do truly exist, despite what people tell themselves to feel safer,” he said, then walked toward him. “Move your hand, let me see the wound.”

The lycanthrope moved his blood-slick hand clear, and Arakel inspected the wound. “The cut is shallow. It should heal in a day or two. Come into the Cave, and I can give you what you need to tend it. For now you may call me Arakel.”

The lycan nodded and pressed his hand to his side again as he stood. “I am Treck. I will try not to intrude to much.”

Arakel nodded without looking back, his scalp-lock bobbing. “Good. Always remember that necromancy is stronger with fresh blood.”