

# Hypno Anthology - Item

For many years the king of the land ruled with an iron fist over the people from his castle of marble and pearl, the shining walls a mere facade for the dark powers that laid within a ring that remained steadfast on the fingers of that fist. There were many rumors that surrounded it, and while many speculated it was mere conjecture based on the fact that the king always had it on him when he made public appearances there were some that came from the castle itself that told of a dark power that was stored within. They spoke of those that visited the castle being of equal or even greater power than the king suddenly kneeling down and kissing the ring when it was presented to him and that the reason he was able to keep such a powerful hold over this and surrounding kingdoms was through the power he wielded. Many called such stories as just that, fiction created in grumbles and sneers against the king himself, but for one in particular the enchanting lore that was woven into those tales held fast in his mind.

Drathus was a thief that made a simple but decent living as a cut-purse and vagabond; the short, tan-skinned man often ran through the streets on his own finding marks that he could pilfer or take the occasional job that he could do alone. He kept to himself for the most part with only rains or slow business pushing him into the halls of taverns to stay warm and dry while also pinching a coin or two for himself. Often times he would stay to the corner with the hood of his black cloak up over his head, his red eyes peering out into the hall to watch for others as he sat there in quiet contemplation. But when he heard of the first fables of this ring that the king wore and the power it contained he had become drawn to them like a moth to the flame to the point where he had started to pay for information that related to this ring that was always on the right hand of the king.

A few months after his obsession with this ring started Drathus found himself outside the walls of the castle itself, the shiny beacon glinting in the light of the setting sun. That didn't matter to the thief at all however as he clutched the piece of parchment in his hands. It had taken nearly a month of dedicated stealing to the point where he had almost gotten caught several times but he finally managed to bribe one of the castle workers to not only let him in one of the side gates but also gave him a crude map of the chamber where the king kept his ring when not in public viewing. With the lord of the land gone on a rare trip outside of the castle it felt to him as though it were fate, especially when he found out through his contact that the ring was not with him. If he was to make a move it would have to be tonight as he wasn't sure how long he could keep the servant in his pocket before they got cold feet about disobeying their lord.

Even though they had agreed on first moonrise Drathus had arrived at the side gate early after bypassing the main wall that surrounded the main keep. It had been easy enough to do since most of the castle guard was focused on making sure the king was protected and his sojourn outside had also taken a significant number of them with him. After that it was just a matter of sneaking in after distracting the two at the gate with a disturbance of the moat nearby and then clinging to the shadows of the deepening night while the guard were busy lighting torches. After getting through the initial defenses it was just a matter of playing cat and mouse with the guards on patrol until he finally got to the side entrance of the keep where the servants normally came and went to do their duties. After finding a perch that would keep him obfuscated he waited anxiously until finally the appointed time came around, the thief hoping that he wasn't the one that had been stolen from as he stared intently at the door.

Suddenly there was a click and the heavy wooden door opened with the slightest of cracks. It was the signal that the servant had come through and unlocked it, which gave him a few minutes to get down there and sneak inside before they pulled it shut and secured it once more. After looking around to make sure there were no guards about to walk up on him Drathus hopped down and did a small roll before popping back onto his feet and heading to the door. As he was about to make his way towards it though he saw the light that indicated one of the guards was moving towards him and with the entrance a few feet away he had to decide quick to back away and potentially lose his window or rush forward and try to get inside before the man spotted his movement.

With a flurry of movement Drathus lunged forward and pulled the door open, grabbing the handle on the other side as fast as he could and pulling it shut before locking it. He hadn't even had a chance to see if the one that had been bearing down on him had seen the movement but as the moments turned to minutes with nothing happening he breathed a sigh of relief. That had been too close... and he hadn't even gotten into the main vault of the castle yet. Fortunately with so much happening outside most of those that roamed the halls of this place were the servants and maybe a guard or two, though being spotted by either would mean that he would get an escorted trip down into the dungeons instead of the vault.

The absence of the king's presence had a lot of servants retiring to their rooms for the time being until the master returned and as Drathus followed the instructions on the parchment he couldn't help but be in awe at the pearlescence of the walls that were around him. Even in the dim light of the torches they shined brightly and were almost a light source upon themselves and found that the marble continued down even into the corridor that led to the vault. It felt less like a castle and more like a temple that he was wandering through, a sentiment that was made even more pronounced as he turned the corner and found himself looking into a large room with a goddess statue at the end of it. It was... definitely not the sight that he was expecting, and it was made even more otherworldly when he stepped into the room itself and saw that it wasn't the only statue that was there.

"What the..." the words left the mouth of the thief before he even realized it as he saw that the marble and moonstone statue of the goddess was flanked by creatures that were more monstrous than anything, creatures of shadow carved from obsidian that adorned the walls. It was truly a mesmerizing sight and one that was slightly terrifying given the visages of the beast statues, but as he slowly continued to walk forward while being weary for traps he suddenly saw the object of his desires being held in

the palms of the goddess statue's hands. "There you are."

Though he felt his heart skip a beat at seeing the ring his enthusiasm didn't override his rogue sensibilities, especially with the unique nature of the room he was in. Considering the precious artifact was the only thing that was even in this place he was weary of any traps such as pressure switches or the like that could capture or, more likely, snuff out his life. With each step he could feel his heart pound in his chest and by the time he got to the front of the goddess statue he was breathing heavy and sweating slightly. He found himself pulling his hood back and running a hand against his wet black hair before wiping it and his face with his cloak before investigating the hands very closely.

No traps, at least nothing he could discern, but that didn't stop the rogue from preparing to run at a moment's notice as he carefully put his hands against the obsidian ring and plucked it away from the statue of the goddess. As soon as he had taken it every muscle in his body tensed up and he looked around carefully to see if anything had changed in the room. No hidden panels had opened nor alarms went off that he could hear and after several tense seconds he found himself letting out the breath he had been holding. He had done it, he had stolen the king's ring, and as he found the artifact in his own palm instead of the statue a big smile crossed his face.

It was more beautiful than he had imagined; the obsidian ring was studded with sapphires that ran around the entire band and the entire thing glimmered while he brought it up to the torch light. He knew that there would be no way that he could wait until he got out of the castle before he tried it on and as he slipped the ring down on his own finger he felt a shiver go down his form. It was something that he had been practically dreaming about the last few months and it was finally made reality as the cool stone slipped over his digit easily. There was a fear that perhaps his finger would be too big or small to fit the ring over but it ended up being just the right size for him as he held it up and examined it on his hand.

"It's finally mine," Drathus said as he chuckled to himself, the jubilation he was experiencing almost overwhelming as his former plan to run out from the castle was halted by his desire to continue to examine the ring on him. "How jealous the others will be when I show them this, the king's ring on my finger. Perhaps I will have the others in the guild kneel down to kiss it, showing respect to the king of thieves."

As he finally started to step forward to get out of the vault room once he had laid it bare he found that it was darker than he remembered. Perhaps the torches were sputtering, but as he looked around he noticed that they were still burning brightly... just casting less light than they should have been. Suddenly Drathus remembered the rumors of the dark powers that were supposedly within the ring and as he began to glance around nervously he saw that the shadows cast by the otherworldly creature statues were starting to drift in his direction. It was like they were being attracted to him and as he continued to move away he let out a slight gasp as they stretched out even further and started to coalesce around his feet like the eye of a storm.

This was the power he wanted, a voice that was not his own whispered into his ear. It was so close that he thought someone standing next to him but when Drathus spun around he found nothing but the statues that had stood there this entire time. Despite that he still felt like someone was trying to say something to him even though the vault was dead quiet, and it prompted him to extradite himself from the area so that he could appreciate his ring somewhere that he wouldn't get his head cut off for having it. As he got back up to the stairs and began to make his way through the shadows of the halls to the nearest door it felt like he was moving about more easily, finding places to hide that he normally wouldn't have risked and blending in with the darkness.

It felt almost more comfortable to be in the darkness than before, but it was something that Drathus put in the back of his mind as he continued to focus on the escape of the castle. As he got further away from the strange vault chamber however his hands began to feel cold, especially the one that had the ring on it. Was there something on the ring that would punish potential thieves? Or perhaps... he knew nothing of the strange dark powers that lay within the item he had so casually slipped on his fingers, perhaps it was even more powerful than he had suspected.

The momentary fear that the rogue had was quickly abated though when he looked down at his hand while he waited for a guard to pass by. The sapphires felt like they were twinkling in the light and the more he looked at it the more he found himself cherishing the ring that he had stolen. It felt so natural on his finger that he never wanted to take it off, though as he continued to stare at it he found himself looking up to see that the torchlight of guard had long since passed and there was another one coming his way. Damn... his window of opportunity had closed to get to the outer wall and he was about to get pinched if he didn't move somewhere else. As Drathus looked around for a potential exit strategy he found himself looking up and noticed that there were a number of ledges on this side of the building, and while he wouldn't have considered traversing such a dangerous path before he suddenly had his foot on the first jutted out stone and began to climb upwards.

Drathus could feel the wind billowing through his cape as he got up to the ledge of the keep and saw that he had gone up far higher than he had intended, his breath catching in his throat as he looked out over the city that he called his home. It was breathtaking... but as he continued to stand up there he began to see something emerge from the clouds that had covered up the moon. At first he thought that it was just a trick of his eyes but the more he watched the more he could tell that it was some sort of massive black tentacle that was starting to stretch down towards the city. As he continued to watch while held up on that wall Drathus had to press up against the wall as he could feel the maelstrom of power that radiated from it, coursing through his body as the clouds opened up even further to reveal something glowing and purple that turned into an eye that stared straight at him...

The terrifying sight caused the man to step slightly to the side, which as the sound of scraping leather could be heard Drathus began to feel himself falling downwards. He had overextended himself on his perch and as he began to lurch forwards his heart practically jumped up in his throat. There was nothing below him but the solid ground and stone of the bulwark and even if he could make it to the moat beyond the outer wall it wouldn't be deep enough to sustain him from a fall this high. Time seemed to move in slow motion as he began to slowly spin around only to see the window he had been perched on moving away from him with every second.

But suddenly his fall was arrested just as fast as it had started, hanging there from the stone as he looked up and saw his hand had actually somehow managed to catch him. With how fast he had been drifting away from the ledge he hadn't though he would have time to do so but it seemed his reflexes as a rogue had given him a reprieve from the grievous injury or potential death he was about to face. After taking a second to regain his composure he hoisted himself back up, but his movement had not gone unnoticed as he heard cries from below. The guards were onto him... and if they went to see that the ring was no longer in the vault then it wouldn't matter how fast he was, it would be unlikely that he would be able to get past the outer walls of the castle.

In his rush to try and find a means of escape that didn't involve the rapidly mobilizing castle guard Drathus failed to notice the hand that had caught him was starting to blacken, particularly the flesh that was around the ring as that area in particular also began to shine like the obsidian that touched it. The skin was also writhing and pushing out from the piece of jewelry like tendrils that had slithered under his skin while the veins in his forearm turned dark. All that the thief could feel though was the pour coursing through him as he looked out to the areas beyond the outer wall as he pulled himself back up from his perch. Though he knew that he couldn't make it anywhere by running he felt like he could jump to the other side and be fine, potentially with the prompting from the forces inside the ring he took a deep breath and pushed away from the wall as hard as he could.

For the briefest of moments he believed he had just made a mistake as he began to plummet towards the earth, but as he closed his eyes he felt something underneath him push against his chest and almost lift him back up. When he opened his eyes again he found that his entire form was swirling with darkness, causing him to glide from where he had been precariously perched through the night air towards the small lawn that surrounded the castle. With the night itself cloaking him no one seemed to even realize he had jumped as he swooped over the outer wall and managed to just scrape by the stonework before quickly dropping down towards the grass. While he thought about landing in the moat the shadows that had guided him down to the ground also arrested his fall, keeping him from doing little more than rolling a few times on the ground as the dark mists evaporated and left him panting in both shock and exhilaration on what just happened.

Freedom... it was a word that seemed to reverberate through every cell of his being as he quickly got back up from where he had landed and made his way towards the nearby woods. With the ring stolen the guard will likely be out looking for anyone that might have possession of it and he wasn't going to give it up so easily. They would have to chop off his hand... though in all likelihood they would chop off a different part of him if he ever got caught with it. Fortunately no one knew of his plans other than a few stories... and the one that he had bribed in order to get in the first place.

With him having been spotted Drathus knew that they would probably talk to those in the castle keep to see if anyone had taken it first, which meant if the one he had talked to gave him up then it's possible he would have wanted posters with his face on it by the the night's end. But strangely as he got into the darkness of the woods he felt that wasn't a concern of his as he looked down at the ring that he had stolen. Though it was hard to see in the darkness it looked like something was going on with his hand, and as he stretched it out he thought that he might have been bleeding until he noticed the liquid that had dripped off his pointed fingers was an inky black. As soon as he noticed this he suddenly felt a presence in his mind, one that made him gasp with how ancient it seemed to him as the whispers in his mind suddenly grew stronger.

As mental images flashed in the mind of Drathus he quickly realized that the freedom he had gained was not just his own, groaning loudly as tendrils of black goo began to spread up his arm. There was more than just power in this ring... it was a connection to a creature unlike anything he had ever fathomed before, one that had been trapped and used for his power by the mad king all this time. It was more than just the power to influence minds like the rumor had stated and as he was shown a scene of someone kissing the ring he saw blackness curl around the one that was doing it before pushing into their ears and eyes. The king was wielding pure corruption... and the entity had grown sick of the cage that the kind had managed to imprison it in and decided to spread its influence until someone came to the call.

Drathus found his mouth open wide in shock as his other hand clasped against his shirt where the tentacles of shadow were pushing up underneath it. The voice in his head asked him why he was choosing to resist when this was the power that he was seeking all along, the dark energy that flowed through this ring into him was something that he had yearned for to the point of risking it all to steal it, right? The words were almost mocking in his head as he heard a loud rip, the thief huffing as he suddenly felt his arm flex and found his muscle ripping through the sleeve. His eyes widened as he stretched out his arm and saw that it had become swollen with the unholy power, his clawed hands gripping into a fist as his thicker forearm and bicep made him look like he had the arm of some sort of shadow monster.

With the corruption already clearly ingrained in his body Drathus didn't know what he could do in order to counter this. Go to a temple? Then they would know he stole the ring, in fact any situation that involved going to someone would end the same way. Plus as he continued to flex his fingers and feel the power that was literally oozing from his arm he found the whispers asking why he should do such a thing. This was true power; while the corruption was something the king wielded he believed he would

lose himself to it if he allowed it to subsume him, building his entire castle in order to keep the influence of the entity at bay. But there was no such restrictions for this thief that had claimed the ring, which allowed the entity to do the same to him as it whispered how much they could rule if he just gave in and became his vessel...

...his avatar of corruption.

Even though he could feel the tendrils spreading both inside and outside of his body there was something else that was building with it. As he began to breathe more heavily he could feel the same shadows that helped him escape from the castle curling around his form. They were his to control, and with the help of the one that was infesting his body and mind he could become more than just a king. He could be a god among men, a point that was slowly being proven by the feeling of strength that was starting to spread down his chest and over his shoulder.

As black drool began to drip from his mouth Drathus took his heavily mutated hand and reached up to grab his shirt, pulling it away and exposing the flesh underneath. He could see the black tendrils already starting to cover over his pectoral and when he looked down he could see the power pulsating within it as it continued to spread over his body. The ring was corrupting his body at a rather rapid rate and as the black ichor continued to drip down his fingers he found the glass underneath turning a deep purple. The ring was connecting him to some sort of very, very powerful creature, Drathus realized, and while he could potentially stop the flow of the ancient power inside of him by taking it off he found that his still human fingers faltered while hovered over the shiny black clawed ones that his other hand had become.

There was only a moment of hesitation before Drathus found his fingers drifting away from it, which as he did he heard a dark chuckle once more in his mind. He knew that by doing this he was letting his body be corrupted by some entity through the ring, but as more mental images flashed through his mind he found that this creature was not lying with the power that could be brought. It had been tempting enough for him to steal it in the first place, the thief thought to himself as he ran his tongue over teeth that were starting to sharpen while pulsating tendrils started to push up his neck. The kingdom could be his for the taking... and instead of the castle prison that had been built to contain him Drathus could create something that would fully unleash the power of this ancient creature onto the land.

The submission of the human to this power caused him to grunt as there was another swell of growth that hit his upper body. This time Drathus allowed it to suffuse through his system and as he did he felt his arms flex and his muscles grow. More tendrils of blackness curled over the already darkened flesh from the ring that was the conduit of dark power and as he allowed it to continue to influence him things began to shift around him. It wasn't just that he could start to see better in the darkness... he had become the darkness, and as he found himself pulsing with power he knew that he needed to share this as he started to use this new eyesight to examine his surroundings.

Meanwhile on the path through the woods that led to the city there was a group that had camped just near the edge of the hill, which allowed them to see what was going on as they could hear multiple bells ringing and a number of large torches being lit. "What in the hells is going on down there?" the leader of the merchant caravan said as his two guards continued to take stock of the camp. "It looks like they're under attack."

"I used to be a city guard and I can tell you that the response is something that likely happened at the castle," the bigger guard said as the second secured the cart. "Perhaps it was a good thing that we didn't get there before the gates were closed for the night, from the look of it we might have been rounded up if they are looking for outsiders."

The merchant just sighed and sat at the first as he rubbed his temples, looking at the city more while a flurry of activity continued to happen down there. "Hey, could you make sure my partner hasn't fallen and broken his neck?" the merchant said as he looked around the woods. "He should have been back from gathering firewood by now, I swear I thought that this would be the one task that he couldn't screw up..."

As the three continued to huddle around the fire the fourth member of their party, a somewhat portly fellow that was bigger even than the main merchant, continued to make his way through the darkness of the woods with a stack of wood in his hands. He had been told twenty minutes ago to stock up enough sticks that it would last until morning where they would finally venture into the city at first light. Though that wouldn't mean much wood was needed he didn't want to get chastised for being lazy like before in the trip. But as he started to try and wander his way back while huffing and puffing he realized that he was lost, something that caused him to swallow hard and look about nervously.

"Well well well, what do we have here..." a deep, dark voice said, causing the man to yelp and drop the wood.

"Who's there?" the man asked nervously, the shadows of the woods suddenly becoming much scarier as his eyes scanned the horizon. "Show yourself! Is that you Mikahel? This is not funny!"

"Shut up," the authoritative voice growled, causing the man to whimper slightly. "Not much of a spine on you I see... what's your name?"

Though he was about to tell whatever the creature was that was speaking to him to just go away he could feel something strange inside of him, a feeling of something other than fear as he swallowed hard. "Giorgi," the man replied, looking nervously around even though he wouldn't know where to run if he knew where the man was. "What... do you want with me?"

"Everything," Darthus replied as he finally stepped out of the shadows, causing the man to gasp. The creature that emerged was not the same as the thief that had stolen the ring, the black flesh stretching over his chest that had swollen into a thick set of pectorals while the corruption on the side of his face had caused it to swollen to the point the alien flesh had enveloped one of his eyes. "I can sense the corruption in you Giorgi, and you lust for the position of the merchant that you are aiding... which is why you stalled out the trip so that you can have the thieves you hired to ambush the group before first light."

The shock of his reveal had quickly turned to anger as Giorgi's face turned beat red. "How in the hells do you know about that?" The merchant apprentice snarled. "Are you with the guild? Are you here to shake me down for more gold?"

"I already told you what I want," Darthus said as he held out his heavily mutated hand, the fingers merged together into three fingers with one of them holding the ring that had been the source of his transformation glinting in the light. "We will deal with these thieves later, for now though I will be making you an offer. Submit to me right now, kiss my ring, and I will give you all the power and wealth that greedy little heart of yours could ever desire."

Though Giorgi was starting to feel his old cantankerous nature come back the fact that this creature was rather heavily muscled was keeping him in check. Though Darthus had sensed the group as he began to wander through the woods pretty much right away in the short time it took him to get to the location the creature connected via the ring had continued to mold his body. Even as he stood there waiting for the human to comply he could feel his form swelling and morphing, his spine popping a bit as his already larger frame grew even bigger while something began to push out of his lower back. The blackened flesh had also spread down towards his waist where what had remained of his leggings had become ripped and his boots torn at the seams to expose his thickening feet.

But Darthus, and the dark creature that worked through him, needed more, and even before his power fully manifested he knew that he needed to start to spread. That was when he had found the four and as he began to sift through the tendrils of thought that came from the group he knew immediately that the one called Giorgi would be the weakest link to start with. The two guards that protected the group would have been too hard to go up against by himself, their duty to protecting the two overriding whatever tendrils of corruption he could weave into their minds, but having one of them help out would make it more than able.

All that he needed to do was get this one to join him first, and as Darthus waited with the ring extended he knew that he wouldn't have to wait long. He was already willing to allow the thieves to kill those that were around the cart in order to get the goods that were contained within so that he could take the master merchant's place. That made him lust for power... an extremely easy feeling to manipulate, though the irony of it wasn't lost on the former thief. None of that really mattered to him though as he had already found his place in the world thanks to the ring that the human was slowly starting to move towards.

Giorgi still appeared a bit conflicted but the closer he got to the corrupted creature the more he began to see visions in his head that were fed to him by the ancient being. Him surrounded by gold, lovers, not just dictating the merchant's guild but also ruling it. All that could be his if he just did one simple thing; step over to the powerful looking entity that had emerged before him and knelt down, kissing the ring that showed his fealty to the one who wore it. The tendrils of goo that had completely wrapped around the arm and most of the chest of Darthus wiggled and slithered on his body as he continued to wait, his one open eye shining a bright purple with a black sclera that watched the scene unfold.

Though Darthus could have easily made this man do what he wanted there was something much sweeter in having him believed that he submitted of his own accords, not to mention it made his mind so much more open and malleable to him. Even before he got to where he rightfully belonged his mind was being infiltrated and influenced to the point where he no longer saw the creature in front of him. Giorgi just saw this as another means to gain power, unaware of the consequences just a faustian bargain would bring to him as the ring was lowered to him. The partially transformed lips of the thief curled into a smile as the human leaned forward and put his lips to the cold metal, which as soon as he did it caused the writhing tentacles that had engulfed it to dart out and slither around his head.

The man didn't even have a chance to cry out in surprise as the dark lord took him, the thick black tar-like goo quickly enveloping his head while tendrils slithered about and pushed into every orifice. When he opened his mouth to try and shout several had slipped inside while two more invaded his nostrils, and as his hands shot up to try and pull the substance away from his head it only served to transfer it onto his hands while two more pushed into his ears. Almost immediately the man went from terrified to calm as his head was completely flooded with the will of his new master, the eldritch entity imprinting almost immediately on this new man while the power flowed through his vessel. Darthus let out a soft sigh of pure pleasure as he let his master continue to flow into this new body, watching as the black goo immediately flowed down over the head and neck of the man as the shiny goo suctioned into his open mouth and made him look like a monster.

"Let the corruption flow into you," Darthus instructed, feeling the mind of the man quickly being reshaped and molded. The same power that connected him to the dark powers also connected him to this creature that was being formed right before his eyes. The greed and desire that was inside the man immediately became amplified to the point where he could practically hear his thoughts twisting from shock at losing his humanity to glee at having such power flow into him and give him what he wanted.

But as the black ooze flowed down over the human's body, burning off his clothing before it could cover his chest, the surge in corruptive energies also started to affect Darthus too. He had already been rendered inhuman from the power of the ring and while he had embraced this new glorious strength the feeling of his flesh warping was still a surreal sensation. While the ooze that manifested his power had burned away the clothing of the apprentice merchant, his body immediately swelling and growing while the blackness permeated his flesh, his own was still hanging on by the belt and what remained of his legs. In his mind it was representative of his lingering resistance against the full might of the power that he wielded, along with his partial transformation as he let out a groan.

The satisfaction that came with taking Giorgi was immediately tempered as Darthus could once more hear the whispers of the entity, doubling down on the pleasures that were coming from this transformation as he could feel his own corruption creeping more over his head. Give in... remove the trappings of humanity and take his place as the vessel of pure power of darkness. Seeing the human succumb so eagerly and soak in the darkness was such an intoxicating sight that it was enough to keep his own changes going. As the head of Giorgi warped and stretched into something inhuman his own was starting to do the same, though while the former human's new muzzle became part of his featureless visage Darthus became more defined as the blackness crept over his face.

This power... it was filling his mind even more, Darthus putting his still somewhat human hand to the part of his face that was mostly unchanged. His breathing quickened as his first act as the vessel to the powerful forces within the ring weaved new tendrils of thought into his mind. His turning of someone had not only added conduits to the entity but the mind that had been completely converted and corrupted was connected to his own and provided another whisper to the sea of sounds that were in his mind. Though Darthus still had some semblance of humanity that he had been preserving in order to use this power to his own ends even those thoughts were being warped just like the muscles of his back while his new tail grew out from his backside.

Darthus was once more guided to look at the one he had just tempted into the service of the dark power within and when he pulled his hand back there was the visage of a monster that looked up at him with an eyeless face. His clothing had fallen away into tatters around his body and as Giorgi's maw continued to be stretched open in a silent cry of pleasure the shiny rubbery tentacles slithered down past his chest and down towards his hips. With him on his knees it didn't take long for his legs to get completely coated as well and as soon as the manifestation of his power touched the human limbs it caused them to swell so large it nearly caused him to fall forward.

It looked a lot like what he was becoming, Darthus realized, and as their minds connected he could see that the greed and desire of the human had also been transformed. With the power enthralling the man his needs turned from wanting gold and recognition to wanting to spread, letting out a deep growl from his throat as his maw was snapped shut and was completely sealed over. As the creature slowly stood up the strands of alien goo stretched from his thighs to his calves as they swelled to the point of being massive. By the time the new entity had gotten to his feet they had exploded with growth into a pair of heavy alien paws with thick talons while the new tail flopped down onto the ground.

Seeing what was the end result of the corruption of the ring had momentarily caused Darthus pause. The human had turned into a monster; the shiny gooey skin had completely coated the man and the fat stomach that he had sucked in and the mass redistributed to thicken his pecs, arms, and legs. With his claws and talons along with the strength that radiated from this corrupted creature there was almost a swelling of pride that he could feel coming from his own body at this warrior he had created. This had come from his power, Darthus found the voice in his head saying, all he had to do was keep wielding this power and he would have an entire army of darkness at his command...

...but this was only the first step, the first creature, and with huge creature growling and huffing he instructed the new monster on what to do next.

Back at the camp site the merchant continued to wait with increasing nervousness as his apprentice had still not returned from the woods with the sticks that he had been tasked to bring back. Considering it was a simple task the three began to wonder if something more nefarious was happening and finally he had one of the guards go out in order to look for him. The guard sighed and put his armor back on before he went out into the woods, leaving the remaining one that hadn't gotten undressed to look after the merchant. As the two watched the other man disappear they looked to one another and shared the same worried look.

"You don't think he got lost, do you?" the merchant asked.

"I wouldn't be surprised honestly," the guard replied with his usual gruff demeanor while he started to eat once more. "Even this close to the clearings of the farmland bordering the city that one has the direction sense of a broken compass. I should have had myself accompany him earlier, but I didn't think there would be any danger this close to the city."

The merchant just nodded and as the minutes ticked by the two fell into a tense silence, both of them wondering what was going on in the shadows of the forest. It didn't take too long however before they suddenly saw the man in armor stumbling back towards them, their original question of asking where Giorgi was replaced with why he he was suddenly running back towards them. The two quickly got their answer as they stood up when another creature emerged from the darkness, this one a muscular behemoth with shiny black skin and gooey tendrils that were covering his body. The guard on the merchant ordered

him to get behind him as he drew his sword and shouted for the other guard to get ready to attack.

As it stepped into the light of the fire both guard and merchant were shocked to see that this creature had no face, instead it was merely a muzzle that looked vaguely draconic in nature while the rubbery tendrils on his face wiggled in the air. It was a monster unlike anything that he had ever seen before, and as the second guard continued to falter while moving towards their position there was a second one that joined the first. This new creature was much bigger and somehow even more muscular, the last vestiges of Drathus' humanity being overwhelmed and assimilated from the corruption that caused the ground beneath him to become stained black with his very footsteps.

But while the monsters were something that the two didn't recognize the ring that was on this bigger creature's alien hand had caught the attention of the merchant who gasped in shock. "That is the king's ring," the merchant exclaimed in shock. "So it's true, it did harbor dark forces within!"

"Dark forces that he was too much of a coward to unleash upon this world," the beast of corruption stated as his thrall continued to move forward towards them. "I have no such qualms about releasing my master, his corruption will wash over the land and everyone within it just like it had done with me, just like had done with your apprentice here that had fixed to kill you. Just like it had done with the guard that you so foolishly thought was still on your side."

There was a moment of pause between the merchant and guard as they looked over at the one that they had beckoned over to them, both of them seeing the man's body twitching and spasming. Black goo began to ooze out from the joints of the metal armor and before the other guard could react he was pounced to the ground. The smaller thrall that Drathus had created first had charged forward and as the merchant stumbled backwards he watched the second monster pounce as well, pinning the struggling guard to the ground while the metal began to split at the joints. The corrupted guard's face guard pushed out and as the shiny substance oozed out from the slats it eventually cracked the helmet completely to reveal the monstrous head underneath.

As the leather straps on the transforming creature popped and stretched the tongue that had pushed out from the otherwise formless heads of the two creatures immediately pushed their way into the guard, causing the man to squirm on the ground as Drathus moved to encounter the merchant. "You can try and reach the city from here," Drathus explained, his deep voice dripping with sarcasm like the black ichor that drooled from his lips. "Of course if you do that you leave the spoils of your cart behind and will end up with nothing, or you can join us in the new kingdom of darkness."

The merchant stared at the eyeless gooey creature in front of him, then at the three that were near the side of the cart. In the dying light of the fire he could see the one that was pinned under the two twitching and convulsing as more of the shiny ooze pushed its way out of the metal that cracked underneath the two. There were several loud cracks that accompanied the muffled grunts that quickly turned to growls that joined with the other two. With the guards being rather straight-forward in their strength for pay it didn't take much to twist and warp their thoughts, Drathus flexing his powerful muscles as he felt another mind add to the hive that was being created.

Though Drathus could sense that the elf was considering trying to make a run and see if he could get the attention of the guards on the roof he wisely stood down, and as he showed the other man his ring he didn't even need to tell him what to do. With all the power that was flowing through him it was causing even the corrupted thoughts that the former human had to being overshadowed, overwhelmed by the will of the dark forces that were in the ring. As he watched the muscles of the thin creature already starting to swell and tendrils of goo slithering against his skin when he knelt before him the entity that had stolen that ring had been completely reborn.

He was no longer Drathus, the avatar of corruption thought to himself as he watched the groaning man gasp and moan as his skin immediately blackened and dripped with goo... from now on he would be called what the villagers would say when his darkness spread across the land...

He would be Nightmare...

For those in the city the rest of the night passed unaware of what was going on in the woods that surrounded them, instead everyone was focused on the massive hunt that the guards were on trying to locate the king's ring. The fact that it had been stolen in the first place had created all of the gossip for the morning as people tried to figure out why someone would risk everything to take such a precious item. With how recognizable it was there was no way that anyone would be able to profit off of it unless they completely dismantled it, which if they did then it wouldn't be worth the effort to get it in the first place. There were some that said that a cult took it in order to enact some sort of dark and nefarious plan, though even as the clouds thickened and darkness fell early over the city it was regarded as wild speculation.

Even as day turned to night and people sheltered inside in order to avoid the storm that was starting to brew people continued to talk about what was potentially going on at the castle. The news went from strange to downright bizarre as people started to hear that the local thieves guild disappeared in the early morning hours and that there was no one that came into the city that day from the road. From there as night began to fall behind the storm that finally started to rain down on them there was news that the king himself had left the castle once more, this time taking his personal vessel out of the bay and across the lake. That

had surprised the people in the city most of all since it had been ages since the king had left the city and went out on the water with a storm rapidly approaching.

For most that was the way the day ended as the darkness pervaded the city, the combination of clouds, wind, and rain had driven most people into their homes and had put an end to all the gossip. For those that were still out on the wall watching for threats they got to huddle up as the rain continued to pour down on them and the sputtering torches they tried to keep alive. "This is absolute dogwater," the second guard said as they came up to the first one that had been watching out from the small alcove in the wall. "King's not even here and no one is going to attack in the rain, why are we out here instead of tying one off in the barracks?"

"Commander seemed really determined to make sure that we're out here being miserable," the first guard muttered. "Seemed really paranoid about it, I think it was something about the fact that we didn't have any trading today and the thieves guild were not even heard of during today."

"So everyone took a day off because of the storm," the second guard said with a sigh as he looked out at the woods. "I don't understand how we can even see anything in order to know if anyone was going to attack-"

Suddenly the rain that they had been sheltering from just stopped, the two guards looking around as it suddenly went from storming to nothing. They could still hear the rumble of thunder though and as they slowly began to stand up they went to light their torches up, only to find that there was an ambient glow that was lighting up the area. The two found themselves looking up at the roiling clouds that were still overhead and with the new light source they could see that there were other guards that had also been trying to shelter suddenly poking their head out at the quick change in weather. Before the first guard could even ask what was going on the second man had suddenly looked over towards the tree line in shock, prompting the other man to do the same as others seemed to notice the same thing.

With the black clouds overhead roiling it set the perfect backdrop to the entity that had emerged from the woods, the eyeless face of the thickly muscled goo creature looking out over the city that he had come from only days ago. Nightmare surveyed the area and as he clutched the hand that had the ring still prominently on display he slowly rose up his hand. The human thief had long since been corrupted completely and the only thing that remained was the powerful creature that had started to manifest those powers. Within the span of a mere day he had already gotten more than enough for the next stage of his plan as the weather around them showed the coalescing of his newfound abilities.

The guards immediately began to sound the alarm at the presence of this monster that they saw, eventually ringing the bell at the tower to inform everyone in the city that they were about to be under attack. They didn't realize how true that was as more creatures began to emerge from the shadows of the forest, thralls just like the one that stood there slowly forming behind their master. Though Nightmare was an avatar to an ancient power and a vessel to it he was still the master and leader to those that were silently moving about waiting for his orders.

But there was more to his power than just creating thralls, and in order to make things a little easier on the transition to his new kingdom he brought his ring-bearing hand up in the air and caused the clouds to part. Those that were still outside began to shout and scream as something emerged from it, a massive, shiny black tentacle slowly drifting down from the heavens towards the building that was still ringing out the alarm. With a single twist of his fingers he had it coil around the structure and then squeezed, causing the stone structure to crack and crumble with the bell collapsing to the ground. The screams that came up from the city when the source of their alarm had come up was music to Nightmare's ears, and with everyone in a panic he decided it was time to deliver the final blow.

Nightmare dropped his hand and immediately felt a flurry of activity from the creatures that he had just unleashed upon them. Almost immediately the gooey monsters left a trail of blackness that twisted and corrupted the very plant life just like the grove that had been created after they had taken out the thieves guild that Giorgi had hired. Having the group of vagabonds had not only greatly increased their power during that day but also allowed them access to all the secret tunnels and smuggling points that they used to sneak their way in and out of the city. With their minds linked together through the power of Nightmare they all knew that and while some started to climb the walls with their thick claws digging into the walls the others used them in order to get into the city undetected and strike at places like taverns and other areas where people had gathered.

As Nightmare watched the corruption begin to spread to guard and townsfolk alike his eyeless head turned towards the castle, a growl escaping from his lips as he twisted his fingers and directed his power towards it. The walls were created as a beacon of light and a prison for the darkness that had begun to spread more quickly through the city, each person that fell to them creating another in his own new army. He would go from having a couple dozen of merchants and guards that they had taken throughout the day as well as the vagabonds to nearly everyone in the city, the town militia and city guard unable to withstand against the onslaught as those that managed to fend off the outer attack were quickly taken by corrupted townsfolk that were in the middle of mutating.

Several more massive sky tentacles came down from the clouds and all of them began to wrap around the stone structure in the middle of it all. The smirk that was on Nightmare's muzzle grew bigger as he saw the black goo of the tentacles oozing over the normally white walls as they began to crack under the pressure. Several of the castle guard had tried to attack them in order to try and save the structure but as soon as they got close enough to the heavily corrupted appendages most of them began to fall



to their hands and knees. Those that had kept back watched in shock as those that were too close tore off their helmets to reveal the thick shiny substance that was pouring out of their mouth and nose that covered their faces until they were completely featureless.

This was power... Nightmare could feel multiple minds being corrupted and assimilated into their hive as each one became a creature just like those that were capturing them. There would be no quarter or hostages in the city as they took over, everyone would be integrated into this new kingdom of darkness and corruption with him sitting at the top. Once he had watched enough of his power suffusing through the city he decided to go down there himself in order to take his rightful place. The second that he got close to the gates they were opened for him by two thralls that still had their gooey armor on them even as tentacles pushed out from the mouths or ears of the ones that were still transforming.

At this point it didn't even matter if one of his kind had found everyone, the corruption that had saturated the soil was starting to turn people that were hiding within their homes. He could sense every ounce of it and as he passed by a shop that had been closed he could feel the man that was inside of it already twisting and convulsing in pleasure as thick goo sweated from his skin. Those that were in far more direct contact with his thralls were already taken, some still enveloped in the tentacles of the ones that had taken them as the last of their humanoid flesh was assimilated. By the time he got to the ruined outer walls of the castle there was a slight ping inside the mind of Nightmare, remembering briefly his time as Drathus that caused him to chuckle.

While most of the buildings were either destroyed or burned to the ground there was one area that was still relatively intact, though it was missing most of the walls as the servants and guards that had been turned bowed to their master. Though the king had managed to escape from his fate, one that he knew would be inevitable since he had learned of his ring's disappearance, all the finery and loot that had come with the city was still there. Nightmare went to the throne that was still deliberately upright and in the position of power and as he sat down in it the white and gold shifted to a pure black with sapphire just like the ring that pulsed with power. Those that were still in the city let out a loud series of roars as the hivemind had a singular thought that had cascaded through all of them from Nightmare.

The time of the shining palace was over, from this place a new roost of shadows and corruption was ready to take its rightful place among this world soon to be plunged in darkness...