

CAVE OF ANCESTORS

By Derek Paxton

I was lost in darkness, numb to the touch of the rough stone floor I was pressed against. The final skeleton drew closer but his rattling bones dimmed in my ears. All that remained was the burning pain of my body pushed past its limits. I struggled to breathe, but the curse held me tight against the ground.

I willed myself alive. Demanded that my hollow body move. My hands scraped across the floor for my staff, and I realized again that it was too far away.

There was a time before I was born when I was not alive, would it be the same after my death? Was life only a short breath between twin eternities?

There was no magic left in me, my mastery of entropy and dimensions was lost, a brilliant book with the last page turned. My energy had been spent defeating the golem, the blinding aurealis, and the rest of the skeletons. Powerful spells of unmaking and the between. Now I have only enough energy for adepts tricks, to sense the world through the dominions I had mastered.

Dark winds whispered to me. Told me of the skeleton's weaknesses, showed me his brittle bones, his clumsy gait and the predictable swing of his pitted sword. He was a collection of vulnerabilities, but he would still kill me.

If only I had my spellstaff. I spent months binding my spirit to it, investing my energy in the smooth wood so that in times like these I could draw it out. I could see it laying discarded on the floor, its dim blue glow lighting the chamber. I tried to reach it, but my body refused to move. I had rushed through the door to escape the skeleton, missed the rune, and now it bound me to the ground as if chains weighed at each part of me.

Darkness returned and I was grateful I wouldn't bear timid, struggling witness to my own murder.

I dreamed I was again a girl running among the flowers of Litha temple. I could feel the grass under my bare feet and smell the wild mix of flowers that bloomed in the eternal summer of the garden.

The touch of smooth mahogany drew me back, the touch of my staff cupped inside my hand. The skeleton was so close his wobbling knees were all I could see, his sword was raised to strike.

Though my body ignored my demands my will responded and I drew upon the staves power. As a thing alive it reached out of me and swallowed the skeleton. His legs became brittle and splintered, dropping him to the ground. Rust consumed the pitted sword. The skeleton writhed in confusion, caught in the grip of entropy. His bones thinned, his back arched as if in some silent howl, and he fell to dust.

I slipped back into unconsciousness.

I dreamed of the past few weeks. Of my days in Cevedes preparing for this trial. Most suspect a mage spends this time in deep study, perusing ancient tomes or practicing spells. But the days before a trial are too late for the intense study sorcery requires. Instead we spend them in simple comfort, without casting, building our strength.

I spent my days at Epona's Rest, the well appointed inn closest to the Cave of Ancestors and a frequent home to mages preparing for the trial. There are only a few mages per year that take the trial, no circle requires it, and each is treated as a hero. Citizens visited the inn to wish me well, stonewards, foxmen and sapere come to offer blessings and advice. Drinks were bought for me and songs played in my honor.

My nights were spent in my room, which overlooked both the entrance to the Cave and the obsidian archway that was the exit for those that survived it. Garath Per'un, a talented bard with boyish blond curls and a crooked smile, shared my room and we spend many nights entwined upon my bed. If I could not have the thrill of magic, than the throes of passion would suffice, and Garath brought them easily. We opened the windows and lay naked and breathless, allowing the warm summer night air to cover us with the sounds and smells of the city.

The wind woke me. But unlike my dreams, this air was heavy with the odor of ruin and decay. The rune's curse had worn off and though I was sore, I could raise my arms and legs again. My staff still glowed, though it was faint, I had used much of its energy destroying the skeleton. In its pale blue light I could see that the ground was stained with blood. Others had fallen here, but there were no bodies.

Another rune provided the answer to the missing bodies, a necromantic mark on the ceiling. I was unfamiliar with the symbols, but I suspect they raise any killed in this room as a skeleton. I didn't need to look at the rune on the door to know that it was a pull of the earth rune, a common trap I had been a fool to fall for.

The cave continued on. Gradually sloping down as it had since I entered. I had passed through a few rooms like that of the skeletons, but I could only see rough tunnel ahead.

I swore, startled, when I noticed the pale shimmer of a young boy standing in one of the tunnels shadowed recesses. The alcove had been empty when I examined it seconds before. He was a ghost, like a form lit only by a candle surrounded by a world in daylight. He wasn't threatening or sad, he simply watched me. His eyes were wide, his hands nervously straightened the folds of his loose white nightshirt that faded to nothingness at the edges.

"Who are you?" I asked, lowering the tip of the staff toward him both to guard against any sudden movement and to drive the shadows out of the recess. He appeared to be alone.

"A boy." he said. His voice was thin and distant, like the wind through trees.

"Are you here to attack me?" I said.

He held his hands up. His lips quivered and his eyes grew wider. I felt guilty for scaring him, but I had to assume that everything in the cave was a threat.

"No, I am with you. I'm just a boy." he said.

"You are a ghost. Did you die in this cave?"

"I don't know. I don't think so." he said. His eyes welled up with tears.

I lowered my staff. Was I going to fall into another trap? But I didn't want him to cry. He was, at most, six years old. Thin, but healthy for a floating spirit.

"I gave you back your staff. I didn't want the clicking man to get you." he said.

I looked at where my staff had been lying and remembered the feeling of the warm wood sliding into the palm of my hand.

"Thank you, I think you saved me."

He smiled, his hands stopped wringing his shirt.

"Are you here to help mages taking the trial?" I asked.

He shrugged.

"Have you ever helped anyone else?" I asked.

"I don't think so. I don't remember anyone else." he said.

I watched him while I walked down the tunnel. He floated behind me, seemingly content.

"What's your name?" I asked.

He shrugged again. Noticing my skeptical look he added, "I don't know."

"I need something to call you." He didn't suggest anything. "How about Willim?" I asked.

He smiled again, but said nothing.

The tunnel opened to a larger chamber. The rough stone floor gave way to green lichen so thick it almost appeared to be a layer of grass. There was a pool at the center of the chamber, the water was a deep blue and perfectly still. The tunnel continued on the far side of the chamber and the chambers ceiling was lost in darkness.

For the first time I noticed how thirsty I was, and though I wasn't fool enough to drink from the pool, I was tempted. My first step on the slick lichen caused me stumble, but I caught myself and continued carefully across it.

"Do you know anything about this room?" I asked.

Willim looked around, studying the ground, the pool and the darkness above. "The pool is dangerous, many people have died in it. No one has died in the rest of the room."

I was both impressed and concerned by Willim's knowledge.

As I neared the pool a chirping echoed through the chamber. It was like a high pitched bullfrog. Soon hundreds more echoed back. It was impossible to tell which direction the sound was coming from. I hurried across the chamber, as quickly as I could without falling.

Then came the sound of insect wings, an angry buzzing that reverberated through the chamber, and a fat swarm dropped out of the darkness above me. Each of the bugs was nearly the size of a chicken's egg, with a smooth black and yellow carapace, sharp mandibles curved like a Malakim scimitar and six hooked claws.

The buzzing was maddening, and they flew into my hair where I could feel them crawling and searching for flesh. Others landed on my face and arms where they bit through my robes and into my back, chest and legs. I couldn't see beyond the swarming mass of black and yellow.

I slipped again, coming down hard at the pool's edge. I waved the bugs away from my face but dozens of stings on my arms and body made them feel like I was on fire. I cried out as one found the back of my neck.

I was tempted again by the pool, the promised relief from the bugs and the burning. I slid but stopped myself at the pool's edge. I held myself there, staring into the depths where the green lichen disappeared into the blue. Barely visible within the pool's depths I could see two milky eyes looking up at me, waiting.

Taking a breath I scrambled up along the side of the pool. I swung my staff as much to hit the swarm as to shake off those biting my arms. The far tunnel blurred as tears filled my eyes.

I had so little energy left, but I ignored the bites, ignored the buzzing, ignored the kaleidoscope of yellow and black around me and focused as far into the tunnel as I could see. In that instant the bugs covered me like a blanket of swarming carapaces and thin wings, and I teleported into the tunnel.

The bugs collapsed to the floor, for a confused minute the buzzing faded. A bug dropped and fell into the pool. It was quickly pulled beneath by a hooked tendril.

I ran down the tunnel away from the chamber. I was bleeding from dozens of bites on my arms, neck and face. The swarm gave chase, its buzzing was even louder in the smaller tunnel.

The slick floor gave way to smooth, dry stone, the humidity to a dry warmth. I could see the red glow of a furnace ahead. Willim floated after me, the bugs passed harmlessly through him. He looked behind us, eyes wide at the approaching swarm and equally afraid of the wall of fire that blocked our path.

I looked again through the entropic eye. The fire was weak, a thin wall easily put out by a basic water spell. But this was one trap I needed.

"Is it safe on the other side?" I panted.

Willim rushed ahead, a pale blur up into the fire. He came quickly back.

"Yes," he said.

It was all I had time to hear, I jumped through the fire.

Through the flash of heat there was a damp, choking darkness. At first I thought it was a sewer, it was the only thing I could imagine that would smell this bad and my legs sunk nearly to my waist in thick sludge. But there was writhing within the sludge, something licked my ankle. I knew of them from my studies, lemures.

The wall of flame still burned behind me, and I backed up to it in disgust. Lemures are the least of demons, those souls with so little conviction that they spent eternity in pools of their own excrement, releasing and consuming their own waste until they become soft, bloated bags of demonic flesh.

A ripple broke the sludge's thick skin, something moved underneath.

Willim walked through the fire behind me.

"There is a horrible creature ahead. A demon of sadness and misery," he said.

There was a tunnel entrance on the opposite side of the bowl shaped room. Black, greasy walls sloped down into the sludge as if carved out by an underground river.

"Is there anything in the sludge except for the lemures?" I asked.

Willim looked confused.

"The demons in the sludge, they are lethargy spirits, unable to act. Is there anything more dangerous in the sludge?"

"These are the souls of those that have given up. Mages too tired or afraid to continue. But no, there is nothing here except for them," he said.

I started through the pool. I stepped on something thick and eely, it recoiled from my touch and set off a series of ripples and wet shrieks that echoed around the small room. I continued across, staff held above the surface. Though I was willing to risk my legs to the creatures touch, I wouldn't risk the staff.

"What are the symbols on your hands?" Willim asked.

A large mass moved in the sludge and I stopped, waiting to see if it was a single large body moving toward me or several smaller lemures jostling for position. In front of me the sludge was just watery enough that I could see a withered human arm curled up against a bloated form below the surface.

"They are tattoos." I said working around the body floating in front of me. "The one of my right is the starry eye, the symbol for dimensional magic. On my left I have the immundus, the symbol for entropic magic."

The conversation helped me ignore my disgusting task. Willim simply floated above the sludge, as calm here as he was in the skeletons chamber.

"How did you learn about the spirits in these rooms?" I asked.

"The fire and bugs aren't very real to me. They look like shadows. Other things are more real. The screams of those that died in the pool, the spirits of those trapped here."

Willim trailed off, staring into the sludge. I called for him to begin following me again.

"But you can touch some things." I said. "You gave me my staff."

"Yes, the shadows are real, they are just very..." his brow furrowed as he searched for the right word.

"Faint?" I offered.

He nodded.

The floor began rising as I got close to the edge of the pool. I was glad to be out of it, though the bottom half of my carnelian robes were now stained brown. Fetid orange masses thick with purple veins clung to me, and I scraped them off with my staff. I was thankful my stomach was empty as I suppressed the urge to vomit. I almost preferred the comfort of the pool chamber and the biting swarm.

For the first time the rough stone floor of the cave was replaced by terra cotta tiles. They were cracked and ancient near the edge of the sludge, with numerous gaps. As I walked the condition improved until they were uniform and undamaged. The walls gradually became more even, and I wondered if the trial was over. Willim grew more apprehensive as we walked and was wringing his hands in his nightshirt again.

The tunnel opened into a ballroom decorated with mosaics so faded it was impossible to tell what they had once been. A elegant windowed double door was on the opposite wall. A balcony was barely visible through the doors thick and rippled glass panes. From the ballroom four smaller archways opened up to comfortable rooms. A bedroom, a study, a small sitting room and a dining room.

I crossed to the windowed doorway and after checking to make sure there were no runes or obvious signs of a trap I turned the handle, it was locked.

"Can you look on the other side?" I asked.

Willim nodded, then stopped confused as his ghostly hand was blocked by the door.

"I can't." Willim said, his thin voice was higher than usual.

I concentrated on the lock. Adepts assume that the dimension sphere was all about teleportation, as that was its most useful feat. But it is the magic of the between, of relationships, and of binding. Through the starry eye, as my mentor Boann referred to this minor feat, I could see the relationships between objects. Staring at the lock I saw a vision, a brass key with a long crenulated blade and odd triangular teeth.

"We need a key." I said.

I considered teleporting to the other side of the door. I could see enough of the balcony to appear there, but I didn't want to leave Willim behind. I was also worried that a spell that powerful would leave me empty and defenseless to whatever awaited me in the far room.

"Can you pass through the wall beside the door?" I asked.

He ran his hands along the faded mosaics beside the door. "No." The same was true when he tried to pass through the floor.

"Let's search the side rooms for the key." I said.

As I turned back I noticed the wet trail I had left across the ball room. My robes were still soiled by the sludge, and beneath my legs were a greasy brown. A few bugs had bitten shallow wounds on my legs, and they were already inflamed and oozing a thick white pus.

"Has anyone died in here?" I asked.

"I don't think so, but this is a very sad place." William said.

I walked toward the bedroom, then peeked inside. It was well appointed but empty. Like the ballroom it had once been elegant. A layer of dust covered the white and green bedspread, and a dresser had a sheet over its tall mirror as if it was in storage. A women's hairbrush sat on the otherwise bare dresser.

The next archway opened to a small sitting room. A pair of frayed, but comfortable looking chairs sat facing a matching sofa. In the blue light of my staff I could see a figure sleeping on the sofa. I slipped into the room, careful to keep a chair between myself and the figure.

As I got closer I could hear his horse breaths. He wore an open blue jacket with tarnished gold buttons. Beneath his jacket a once white shirt was now yellowed. His considerable jowls hung over a thick neck and his graying hair was pulled back in a simple knot. His reminded me of a goat, except that a goat would be more threatening. His skin was loose and flaccid, his skinny legs supported a round pear shaped body. He wasn't a fit man grown lax in his later years, but a man that had never been fit. And on a chain around his neck hung a brass key with a crenulated blade and odd triangular teeth.

I closed my eyes and focused. When I opened them I could see through the entropic eye. Despite his pathetic appearance there was little weakness in sleeping demon, for now I knew he was no man. Haligfyr, the holy fire that once lit the temples of Bhall, would destroy him. Powerful spells of sanctuary or binding could restrain him. But there was nothing I could do except run from him.

He snorted, nearly choking on his own tongue, then rolled clumsily onto his side and began coughing. Willim fled the room, peeking back nervously into the archway, keeping me in sight but hiding from the coughing demon.

With a face red from the force of his coughs the demon finally noticed me. He went quiet, looking nervously around to see if there was anyone else in the small sitting room.

"Do you have anything to drink?" he asked as he buttoned up his blue coat. The buttons strained against his wide stomach.

"No." I said.

"Then why are you sneaking about my sitting room?" He tried to straighten his hair but only managed to mess it up further. He gave up in frustration.

"I'm traveling through this cave. I need to get through the windowed door." It seemed wrong to be honest with him, but I couldn't think of a lie that would help.

"Oh." he said. He considered as if trying to remember something, then looked up suddenly. "Do you want the key?"

"Yes." I said.

He took the chain off and held it out to me. He stood there, arm out toward me, hand up with the brass key and coils of the chain sitting in the palm of his hand. He yawned as he waited for me to take it.

"It can't be that easy. You're simply going to give me the key?" I asked.

"I'm probably supposed to stop you. Transform into some giant tusked worm and then fight to the death. But I simply haven't got it in me."

"You're afraid?" I said.

He smiled. "No. Your spell staff is dim, you might have enough energy for one more spell. And I assume it wasn't like this when you entered the trial. So you have used it. You wouldn't have done that if you have any energy left yourself. You are nearly dead. I could fight you, I could kill you. But why? I would rather return to my nap."

Tired of holding out his arm the demon walked out into the ballroom. I followed, my staff between us. He walked to the windowed door and put the key into the keyhole.

"Who are you?" I asked.

He considered before answering, "Accidia." Then he stepped away from the door, leaving the key unturned in the lock.

"Who are you?" he asked.

Again I couldn't think of a reason to lie, "Tya Kiri, student of Litha temple."

I stepped toward the door, Accidia yawned again.

Just before I touched the key Accidia added, "You are going to die in the next room. It is the worst of the challenges and those few that survive it go in ready and uninjured."

"I can't go back. Once the trial is started the only way out is at the other end."

"True, true." Accidia said. "But why go on at all? You could sleep here. I have a bedroom, you wouldn't hunger or feel pain. Your boy could stay with you. If you go on further he will die with you. You are so very weak."

I hadn't seen Willim since I came out of the sitting room.

"Willim will remain with or without me." I said. I turned the key and opened the door, quick to find a point to teleport to if Accidia attacked. But he simply stood and watched me.

The balcony was made of the same faded brown stone of the ballroom. A mosaic covered the floor, that of a great black crow with wings unfurled. Beyond the balcony there was only darkness.

I stepped out onto the balcony and Accidia followed.

"The key, please." he asked.

I handed it back to him then walked to the edge of the balcony. There was a chaotic wind in the emptiness, fierce then suddenly calm in no predictable order, as if angry spirits were trapped in the air. Far below the balcony was a distant maze. Most of it was shrouded in the same darkness as the ceiling and walls of this great chamber, if they existed at all, but creatures wandered through the maze, tormented spirits burning with a purple fire. Some were slow, a creature with a hundred arms dragging itself along. Others moved with purpose, a floating eye burning everything before it, a horned figure leading a pack of demonic hounds. If there was an exit to the maze it was lost in the darkness.

"That is the trials last, and most difficult challenge." Accidia said. "Those demons hunt endlessly for the few mortals willing to enter their lair."

I looked back into the ballroom, there was no sign of Willim. The balcony door was still open, so I hoped that Willim had slipped out, even if I couldn't see him.

"Is there a way down?" I asked.

"The most promising use magic." Accidia said, a thin smile momentarily breaking his otherwise impassive face. "A simple task for air, earth or creation mages. A bit more difficult for body or force mages."

A costly spell for dimension mages though. If there was enough energy in my staff I could teleport to any area of the maze I could see. Unfortunately those were only the places that had demons roaming in them. I could throw my staff into the maze and, if it didn't break, it would light up an area. But without my staff I wouldn't be able to teleport to it.

"Come rest, dream eternal and you will never know the touch of death." Accidia said.

There was the white glow of candlelight within the maze. Unlike the fiery purple of the demons this figure was small and pale. There were no demons around him and he waved his arms at me. It was Willim.

How odd that in this moment, as I stood on the balcony with the demon Accidia, looking down into the infernal maze that I was likely to die in, that I would feel joy. And at the sight of a ghost. But I forced myself to be skeptical. This could be another trap. I looked through the starry eye and examined Willim, what was it that bound him to me? What was our relationship?

Then I leapt from the balcony.

Accidia returned to the ballroom, locking the door behind him. Maybe he would try harder to stop the next mage that passed through. Maybe he would turn into that giant tusked worm after all.

I fell through darkness. Teleportation takes more energy the farther you travel. The best way to reduce its cost was to get as close to the point I wanted to teleport to on my own, so I leapt into the emptiness above the maze.

I hadn't expected the winds that buffeted me about. One knocked me aside, nearly into the obsidian wall beneath the balcony, and I twisted to keep Willim in sight and my staff securely in hand.

My eyes were fixed on Willim, both to provide a target for my spell and because of what my divination spell had revealed. Willim's crooked smile, as he happily waved to me, was gone, replaced by a look of horror. My stomach tightened as I considered the fractions of seconds I had left before I released the spell.

Then I was gone. The wind that raged around me was lost, the ground was firmly beneath my feet. I righted myself with my spell and was no longer bound by inertia of my fall. I always did have a flair for dimensional magic. But my spellstaff was dark, the spell had used the last of its magic.

"I... I thought you fell." Willim said.

"I'm okay. But I have no magic left. We have to escape from this maze without running into any of the demons. Do you know how to get out?"

"No." Willim said.

"Then follow me."

William had been standing at a corner with identical hallways going forward and to the left into darkness. Everything was constructed of the same obsidian surface as the wall beneath the balcony. The obsidian was scarred and rough at some points and perfectly smooth at others. These smooth patches acted as black mirrors and reflected corrupted versions of anything before it, or endless inky blackness. As I walked by one I saw myself withered and alone, wearing a drab grey cloak.

I walked ahead, assuming the mazes exit would either be in the middle or on the opposite side from the balcony. Both would be in front of me.

We walked for hours, the hallway slowly curved and I ignored archways to the right and left. I began to wonder if I had been walking around the maze in circles. I stopped and looked around, but any light coming through the windowed balcony door was blocked by the balcony. There was no indication of direction or distance.

Tired of walking straight I turned right at the next intersection. This opened immediately to another passage going right and left or I could continue straight. There was a set of obsidian stairs in the middle of the intersection leading up to just over my head. They didn't lead to anything but empty air.

Down the right hallway a purple fire flared against the wall. Its source was out of sight, though it was coming closer. My eyes were adjusted to Willim's pale light but it only revealed a few meters. Now this entire area was cast in reflections of purple and black.

Willim and I huddled behind the staircase, afraid to run to either hallway for fear the creature would come around the corner and see us.

I could hear the flames and I prayed that whatever was coming would turn and go the other way down the hallway. The purple light faded briefly then went blindingly bright. The roaring flames grew even louder, and in the polished obsidian surface of the far wall I could see the reflection of a great eye spitting wild torrents of purple flame.

Waves of purple flame surrounded us as the demon got closer, setting the ground on fire except for a small patch in the staircases shadow. It was so bright I couldn't see the maze walls. Noxious black smoke choked me, and I struggled not to cough. Willim was quivering next to me. I had only the dead spellstaff in my hand.

The demon floated up above the staircase and the flames began to slip away as the demon peered down the tunnel before it. Then the demon slipped over the edge of the staircase into the air above us and I could see the cracked fissures that covered the bottom of the giant eye.

I held my breath as it passed over us and floated down the hallway. I sat and watched the demon silhouetted by its purple light, urging myself to get up, to run. Finally my stubborn legs obeyed and I ran down the hallway the demon had come from. Willim ran after me.

I turned the corner the demon had come from. I had hoped to see an opening to sunlight or elegant double doors, but it was another hallway leading into darkness. I needed to give my eyes time to adjust to Willim's faint light so I slowed to a walk with one hand against the left wall. We walked for a few minutes in silence until I finally spoke.

"I checked the relationship between us." I said, nearly as nervous as I had been when the demon passed over us. "I brought you into the cave with me, you aren't supposed to be here."

Willim didn't answer. He walked beside me with his hands at his side. He looked older than when I had first met him in the skeleton's chamber, perhaps as old as eight. He was just beginning to trade his face's baby fat for the angular curves of boyhood.

"I'm pregnant." I continued. "You will be... or you are my son."

He smiled, glancing at me as I struggled to keep my face impassive. "Yes." he said, "I am with you."

"I wouldn't have entered the trial if I had known." I said.

We walked for hours through the maze. Willim asked about my home and I told him stories of Li-tha temple, the rosering, the cliffs and beaches of Arune. I told him about my instructor Boann and the bard Garath Per'un, Willim's father. Without any stories of his own Willim was eager to hear all of mine and laughed and asked questions as I told them.

We were so absorbed in talking that we nearly ran into the obsidian wall at yet another dead end. We turned and walked back to the last intersection. We both stopped when we heard the plodding foot-falls of something huge.

I huddled against the wall and signaled for Willim to hide beside me.

The thumps stopped and we heard a great intake of breath, like the air being drawn into a massive bellows, followed by an exhale and then a return to silence.

There was one step, more noticeable by the vibration in the floor than for its sound, and a giant head loomed into view. The head was dominated by its mouth, which was easily large enough to swallow a barrel whole. A flat nose sat atop it and small black eyes that looked comically undersized on the great face.

What was most alarming was the placement of the head, the creature was over twice my height. My brief hope that the head floated on its own, or was attached to some frail thin body were quickly crushed. The giant, which I recognized as a Caducus, stepped into our hallway. His fat naked torso was a cage of flesh, built to contain anyone he swallowed. He would hold them trapped and helpless within his empty torso until he traveled back to hell, where he would barter with the flesh merchants of Dis, the warlords of the Bellobellum, or offer them to Camulos in tribute.

He smiled when he saw me.

"Run!" I shouted, and I was up and charging toward the Caducus. The only way out of this hallway was by him and I ran toward his left side, switching to his right side at the last moment in the hope that he would be unable to turn in time.

He was faster than I expected and his reach made it nearly impossible to stay away from his thick hands. He reached for me and I struck his fingers with my spellstaff.

The Caducus roared in pain and gave up his grab for a punch. The blow struck me in the chest and sent me into the hallway wall. Hitting the wall hurt almost as much as the punch and I fell on the ground dizzy from pain.

"Run!" This time it was Willim screaming.

My vision cleared as I took in the scene before me. The Caducus was holding Willim over his mouth, as I screamed he pushed Willim nearly halfway down his throat and swallowed. I felt a chill go through my body as Willim fell into the Caducus's wide stomach.

I charged the Caducus with my spellstaff ready for another strike. But the Caducus was too fast and it caught my waist in one giant hand. It slammed me into a wall, hoping to quiet me long enough to swallow. The blow stunned me, but I regained my focus as he lifted me over his head and I swung my staff, striking the giant's ear.

The Caducus roared and his grip loosened enough that I slipped out of his hand and onto his wide shoulders. The Caducus ripped the staff easily from my hands, and I fell against his wide head where one tiny black eye glared at me.

The Caducus stumbled back against the maze wall as he tried to grab me. Standing on the creatures shoulder I could see the top of the wall and I leapt for it.

The sharp edge of the obsidian wall cut across my stomach and I pulled myself up and rolled onto the top of the wall in blinding pain. But there was no time to rest, the Caducus's giant hands came over the top of the wall and he began to pull himself up after me.

I looked for anything to use as a weapon, there was nothing. The darkness of the maze was broken by a small sliver of light in a grove two hallways over. A obsidian archway stood alone, but through it I could see the city of Cevedes. I knew the other side of that portal, it sat above the entrance to the Cave of Ancestors, it was the exit for the trial.

The Caducus pulled himself up on the maze wall. Through the gaping holes on his torso I could see Willim, who was still too large to pass through them. Willim was yelling for me, but I couldn't hear what he was saying.

A spasm of pain flashed through me, like a hand had reached into my intestines and squeezed. I stumbled toward the Caducus, unwilling to leave Willim, but unable to do anything to stop the giant.

My decisions didn't matter as the Caducus was on me. He grabbed my leg and pulled me against him. I kicked helplessly. Held up against his body I reached through one of the gaping holes in his torso. I could see Willim, and feel him as he placed his hands in mine.

"You can see the way out." he said. His hands were so tiny in mine, he seemed to be growing younger.

"Yes," I cried "but I can't get there."

"Use magic." he said.

A lucky kick caused the Caducus's to howl in anger. He grabbed my throat with his other hand and squeezed. I looked for Willim through a haze of pain.

"The spellstaff is your life." Willim said, his words growing distant. "Just as I am, use me to cast your spell."

Tears blurred my vision, Willim let go of my hand and I lost sight of him as the Caducus shook me again. Satisfied that I was no longer struggling the Caducus held me to his mouth. I looked around and saw the distant portal light. I searched myself for the life inside me and found it faint and weak. Just as the Caducus stuffed me into his mouth I focused and disappeared.

I could hear the Caducus scream as I stumbled through the portal and out onto the ridge overlooking Cevedes. I collapsed there my trial completed, and cried as I felt the life inside me grow cold and still.