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# Episode 1: Out of This Wood

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From set *Lorwyn Eclipsed*

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“All right, students, the moment you’ve been waiting for is finally at hand,” announced Dina, spreading her arms in a theatrical gesture that managed to encompass the entire glade, students, trees, and all. Letting them drop back down to her sides, she continued, “We have reached the Harrier’s Wood.”

“We would have reached it much faster if we’d been allowed to use the carts,” said a student, lifting one foot off the ground like it pained them to move, “or if you’d told us to wear hiking shoes.”

“An excellent point, Kirol,” said Dina. “Can anyone guess why it may have been important for us to walk instead of taking a cart or skycoach from campus?”

“You were trying to exhaust us so we wouldn’t wander off in the woods?” asked another student, this one a short, blue-skinned goblin whose stature was overshadowed by the size of his collection basket.

“That is not correct, Sanar, but I wish I’d thought of it,” said Dina. “This is the Harrier’s Wood, and this is only the second year that underclassmen have been allowed to come here for sample collection. Can anyone tell me why?”

A slender female student whose yellow-green skin was patterned with darker green stripes, like the scales of a snake, raised her hand and waited for Dina to nod in her direction. “Before the Oriq and their mage hunters were driven back, letting first-year mage-students go to a location that’s an hour from the main campus would have been an enormous risk. Now that the Oriq are effectively gone, we can reopen more remote locations for scholarship.”

Dina nodded. “Very good, Tamira. Because the Harrier’s Wood is an hour’s walk from campus, it’s far enough from the ambient magic of places like Sedgemoor or the Furgyale that the flora here is considered magically neutral. We don’t bring the carts because the artifice that drives them is magically powered, and it might impact the flowers we’re here to collect.”

*I’m not on a Witherbloom study track*, signed a brown-feathered owlin. Her words were broadcast telepathically by her hearing aid only a beat later, echoing in the minds around her. *I’m only taking Introduction to Magibotanical Environments because it’s a prerequisite for Advanced Floral Invocations. I don’t understand why I’m here.*

“Thank you, Abigale, for reminding me that some of you may need a little more information than just ‘Here’s a basket, go pick the pretty flowers.’” The students laughed nervously. Dina reached behind herself and plucked a flower from the vine twining up the tree she was standing closest to. She held it up. “This is a snarlflower,” she said.

Dutifully, the students looked at it. There was nothing special about the trumpet-shaped white blossom. Snarlflowers were a common sight around the university, growing everywhere from the rocky walkways of the Lorehold campus to the moist dampness of Sedgemoor. They were a primary food source for the Witherbloom pests, which chewed them down to the root, keeping the fast-growing

vines from doing serious damage to the masonry. And they were incredibly magically reactive, with a tendency to change color and even perfume depending on where they grew.

All five colleges used them in one way or another. Prismari florists made elaborate displays of snarlflowers, exposing them to different elemental forces to change their shapes and colors, making every flower arrangement utterly unique and breathtakingly lovely. Lorehold historiobotanists planted snarlflowers near dig sites, using the color gradations of the resulting blossoms to map the flow of magic in a specific region, learning much about the spells cast there in the past. Quandrix scholars studied the growth of snarlflower vines to learn how ambient magic affected mathematical probabilities, and Silverquill poets whispered to the seeds until their flowers grew as living poems, perfect and unique.

And Witherbloom mages, naturally, used the flowers as ingredients in teas and tinctures, as well as an endlessly varied source of essence for their workings.

“Snarlflowers like this one, which haven’t been influenced by magic, are notoriously hard to find anywhere on or around campus. Harrier’s Wood is at a minimum distance for collecting ‘clean’ specimens. The flowers you gather today will be going to Witherbloom classrooms to feed a newly conjured litter of pests and allow us to determine whether this changes the essence the creatures produce. It’s not a unique experiment—the professors repeat it every year—but it’s a useful introduction to how essence can be impacted by outside forces. When my class gathered the lab materials, we had to do it by searching campus for flowers that had sprouted in magically neutralized soil. So, you see, the long walk today was for your own benefit. Now you get to enjoy the great outdoors *and* pick flowers *and* get out of your afternoon classes.”

Dina grinned, trying to look encouraging. This was her second year as a TA for this class, and she was going to ask Professor Vess to assign her to something less general next year before she was tempted to drown an undeclared first-year in Sedgemoor. Their dislike of getting their hands dirty was getting on her nerves.

“You have your partners, you have your shears, and you are each expected to gather no fewer than six and no more than ten unblemished snarlflower blossoms before you’ll be allowed to return to campus. If you wind up with extra flowers, you can share them with your fellow students, or you can give them to me. I always need more supplies for tea.”

Dina leaned back against the tree behind her. “Instructions over,” she said. “Get to work.”

The Harrier’s Wood was lush and green, with a thick tree canopy filtering the sunlight so thoroughly that the glade was cast in perpetual twilight, bright enough to let the students moving between the trees see what they were doing while still dim enough to make note-taking and precise measurements difficult.

Dina watched with faint amusement as the students began wandering off to gather specimens, some in their assigned pairs, others on their own. About half of them had clearly never been in a forest on purpose before; they tripped over every root and got their hair snarled in every low-hanging branch. Others had come from more rural communities and moved with ease through their environment but kept getting distracted by berries and herbs they recognized as tasty or useful.

Really, this year’s crop was doing quite well, especially compared to last year’s, when she’d needed to conjure a massive vine and pull three Quandrix hopefuls out of a mud puddle that they had somehow caused to swell exponentially until it threatened to swallow them all whole.

Unfortunately, the students doing well just made the whole situation that much more boring. Dina let her head tilt back until it hit the tree she was leaning against and stared up into the canopy. This was her reward for being a good student: babysitting duty.

Still, after the last few years, there was something to be said for babysitting duty, which might be boring but didn't end with anybody dying or transforming into a horrific amalgamation of flesh and steel that would haunt her dreams for the rest of her life. Dina closed her eyes and breathed in the scent of the forest, listening to the students going about their work. This was a lovely way to spend an afternoon, boring or not.

Groups of students formed and broke apart as they moved through the wood. While there were plenty of snarlflowers, there were also plenty of reasons they weren't right for the assignment. Some had been nibbled by pests or other creatures, leaving tiny holes in the petals. Others had clearly been exposed to magic at some point, glowing strange colors or growing odd clusters of petals and leaves. Only perfect, untouched flowers fit the assignment, and so they kept moving deeper into the trees, trying to find flowers that hadn't been picked over yet.

Abigale was among the first to move out of sight of Dina, following a narrow, desired path deep into the trees. As always, the reserved owlin moved with care, her taloned feet crunching in the leaves that covered the ground. Her hearing aid was of Silverquill design and didn't pick up ambient noise, only intentional speech. She walked carefully, because she wouldn't know if she made the kind of racket that could get her into trouble.

Almost directly overhead, Kirol moved through the branches, shifting their grip carefully from bough to bough as they followed her into the wood. Like Abigale, they had a specimen basket hanging from one arm. Unlike Abigale, they had tucked their shears into the waistband of their trousers, where they would probably impale themselves if they fell. As Abigale stopped to look more closely at a patch of flowers, they swung gracefully into a dismount, landing directly behind her.

Abigale, who was looking straight ahead, didn't notice. She pulled out her shears as she leaned toward the flowers, finally reaching in and snipping off one perfect bloom, which she added to the three already in her basket before straightening, turning, and jumping at the sight of the figure behind her, making a hoarse squawking sound at the same time.

Kirol put a hand over their mouth to hide their toothy smile. "Sorry," they said. "Didn't mean to startle you."

Abigale dropped her shears into her basket beside the flowers and began moving her hands in sharp, declarative gestures, followed a beat later by the telepathic echo. *Kirol, we've talked about this! You can't sneak up on me!*

"But you're so easy to sneak up on," they replied, grinning again. This time, their sharpened canines were easily visible. "Come on. Why are you walking? If I had wings, you'd never see me on the ground!"

Abigale sighed. *I can't hover. Hard to fly and gather flowers at the same time. How many do you have?*

"Two so far," said Kirol. They kicked at a rock. "I don't see how we're supposed to find *perfect* flowers when they've been growing out here in the wild."

Abigale fluffed her feathers out in an exaggerated expression of resignation. *It helps if you stay on the ground.*

Kirol huffed theatrically. They made a gesture with one hand.

The feathered crests at the side of Abigale's head that some people erroneously called "ears" lifted in an amused arc as she signed back. *Close. That was almost the sign for "whatever."*

"What did I actually say?"

*Just don't repeat it where Professor Vess can see you, or you're likely to get a lecture about watching your language.*

Kirol sputtered. "She'd never care about swearing!"

*She'd care that you didn't know what you were saying. I bet she'd call you sloppy again.* Abigale laughed, a high, screeching sound, and turned to go back to studying the nearby flowers. She didn't hear the crashing in the bushes off to one side, but Kirol did; they turned in that direction and watched with some amusement as Sanar came somersaulting out of the brush. The diminutive goblin had leaves and a crushed snarlflower blossom stuck in his hair, and his sampling basket, while still hooked over one arm, was empty.

"Find anything good?" Kirol asked.

"Almost caught an LBB!" said Sanar cheerfully. "It was pecking at the snarlflowers. I think they may be the explanation for how the seeds wind up everywhere."

"LBB?"

"He means 'little brown bird,'" said a new voice, calm, female, and precise in the way that signaled "academic" to anyone who'd spent much time in the halls of Strixhaven. The green-striped gorgon student from before stepped out of the bushes, following Sanar's arc. Unlike him, she was perfectly tidy and composed, with no offending vegetation caught in the serpentine tendrils of her hair. Her basket of perfect snarlflowers was very nearly full.

Kirol tapped Abigale on the shoulder, gesturing to the newcomer. "Hey, Tamira," they said. "Come to hang out with the class clowns?"

"Tam is fine. And Abigale is a perfectly good student when she focuses on the classwork, rather than her latest ode to the color of the sky above the Prismari campus at night," said Tam mildly. "I should have known you'd all wind up in the same place."

"I lost all my flowers," complained Sanar, looking into his basket and then turning petulantly to Tam. "Tam, I lost all my flowers."

"That's why I've been gathering extra: you can have a few of mine," said Tam, offering her basket to him. He took it and began happily selecting flowers from the pile, dropping them into his own basket.

Tam turned back to Kirol. "Have you been trying to sneak up on Abigale again?"

"No," they said. "I've been succeeding."

"It's not polite to sneak up on someone who can't hear you coming." Tam's hair writhed. "Keep this up and I'll have to see how much sneaking you do when you're made of stone."

"You wouldn't. You *can't*. Can you?"

"Want to find out?"

Behind her, Sanar sat up a little straighter on the ground, attention caught by something in the trees.

"Does anyone else see that?" he asked.

Kirol moved to look where the goblin was pointing and stopped, blinking at the small creature in the trees above them. It looked like a humanoid insect, almost—bipedal, with long, spindly limbs covered in shining blue chitin. Its wings were broad and shimmering, like sheets of mica flaked off some larger piece of stone. It turned its unnervingly human face toward them and laughed before taking off into the air.

“Hey!” yelled Sanar. “Wait!”

He leapt to his feet and ran after the fleeing creature—taking Tam’s sample basket with him. Too late, Kirol tried to grab the back of his shirt and almost fell forward as their hand closed on empty air.

“My *flowers!*” yelled Tam. “My *grade!*”

“I’ve got it,” Kirol said and ran after Sanar.

Catching sight of the commotion, Abigale signed something to Tam.

*Should we go after him?*

“Yes!” shouted Tam, signing the word at the same time. Abigale nodded and flapped her wings, lifting off the ground and gliding across the clearing. She had to land then, following Sanar on foot, as there wasn’t room between the trees for her to fly. Kirol ran after her, and Tam ran after them, hair agitated and lashing in all directions as she did.

The four students ran pell-mell into the woods, each focused on their individual goals: Sanar was pursuing the strange creature; Abigale and Kirol were chasing Sanar; and Tam was chasing her sample basket, swearing under her breath every time she saw a flower get bounced loose and fall to the ground. The impact would bruise the petals, leaving them useless for grading purposes.

None of them were looking down.

The tree root seemed to unwind from the underbrush, extending until it ran all the way across the path, unevenly humped and mounded like a sea serpent breaking the surface of the water. Sanar hit it first, his foot hooking over a loop in the root and sending him sprawling. Abigale, who was more graceful in the air than she was on the ground, followed. Kirol tried to stop before they could trip like the others, only for Tam to run straight into them from behind, pushing them over and falling atop them.

The root had been at the top of an unseen rise, and all four students rolled and tumbled through the leafy debris on the ground, straight into a large hole in the middle of the otherwise unremarkable clearing. To add insult to injury, a circle of perfect snarlflowers surrounded the edges of the hole, like the promise of a passing grade.

And then they fell into cascading, prismatic light, and classwork didn’t seem to matter much anymore. In an instant, they were gone.

The strange little creature that had originally caught Sanar’s attention flitted over to hover above the hole, giggling wildly, then dove after the students, disappearing into whatever waited on the other side.

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The four students tumbled through a tunnel of gleaming prismatic light that formed and reformed into impossible geometric shapes, fractals and spirals bleeding off into infinity.



Art by: Alayna Danner

The fall took a matter of seconds. They barely had time to catch their breath before tumbling out of the hole and into the middle of an unfamiliar meadow, the grass growing lush and green, patterned with strange patches of wildflowers that looked almost dull in comparison to the colors of their fall. The flowers grew in spirals that appeared natural, despite their precision, and large, smooth stones patterned with similar spirals dotted the landscape around them. Some of the stones floated a few feet above the ground, seeming to hum with the magic that kept them aloft.

Tam gasped as she looked at the nearest stone, beginning to reach for it.

Abigale made a hard slash through the air with one hand, shaking her head at the same time. *Stop!* she commanded telepathically. She continued, hands moving rapidly: *We don't know where we are. We don't know how we got here. We shouldn't be touching things we don't understand.*

Tam pulled her hand back, looking almost guilty. Sanar pouted. Abigale flicked one wing in the equivalent of a shrug, looking unconcerned.

*Pardon me for trying to keep us all alive*, she signed.

Kirol, meanwhile, was standing with their head back, staring into the sky. Abigale blinked and moved to stand beside them, tilting her own head back. Her beak dropped open.

There, about fifteen feet above them, was a triangular gap cut out of the air, seemingly made of the same flimsy substance as a soap bubble, dancing with the rainbows they'd all seen during their fall. A single sun shone high above that, with the washed-out shape of the moon in the distance near the horizon.

"One of the suns is missing," said Sanar. "Suns don't normally go missing."

"The sun's not missing," said Tam. "It's back on Arcavios where it belongs."

There was a moment of silence as the others considered this statement. Finally, Abigale signed, *If the sun is on Arcavios, we're ...*

"Not on Arcavios," said Tam.

When said bluntly, it was obvious. The Omenpaths near campus had supposedly all been found and charted, but sometimes the mysterious portals to other planes could open without warning ... and vanish just as quickly. Kirol looked at the soap-bubble film above them. “I don’t see how any of us except for Abigale are supposed to get up there. I guess she could fly up and go look for help ...”

*No*, signed Abigale. *I’m not leaving you here. We don’t know where we are, or whether this place is dangerous.*

“Um, everybody?” said Sanar. “I think it might be dangerous.”

The group turned. There, behind where they had landed, was a massive gateway, formed of two tall stones with a third laid across them. All three were patterned in spirals and covered in faintly glowing purple moss. Most unnervingly of all, however, the gateway was free-standing, not attached to any wall or mountain, and yet it seemed to mark a barrier between the bright, beautiful day around them and the very dead of night. Darkness stood on the other side of the gate, broken by patches of glowing fungus and swarms of glittering fireflies, but otherwise infinitely deep.

“That is *not* right,” said Kirol.

“It’s a dolmen gate,” said Tam wonderingly. “They’re usually the entrance to a gravesite or someone’s home.”

“Someone really, *really* tall,” said Sanar. “Do you think they’re here?”

“I think we need to find someone who can help us, and anyone who’s tall enough to have built that gate might be able to boost us up to the portal,” said Tam. “It’s worth trying. I don’t really see any better options.”

“Sure, go through the creepy gate into the impossible darkness; that’s going to help,” said Kirol. “Why not?”

Tam started forward, Abigale close behind. Sanar hurried after them, not to be beaten to the exciting new situation. Kirol sighed and followed the other three, shaking their head all the while.

They stepped through the dolmen gate, and the darkness swallowed them all.

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From the sunlit meadow, the gate had appeared anchored to nothing. Once they were through it, however, they found themselves in a long, gently sloping cave. The walls were covered in splotchy patches of glowing lichen, casting the whole passage in a dim, eerie light. It wasn’t quite enough to let them see where they were going until Sanar made a complicated grasping motion with one hand, and a steadily glowing yellow ball appeared in the air in front of him. He gestured again and it bobbed forward, coming to a stop in the air a foot or so ahead of Tam. She shot an approving look back at Sanar, who stood a little straighter and beamed.

“Look at these,” said Kirol, focusing on the wall. With Sanar’s light illuminating the corridor, they could see the paintings on the stone, blotched with lichen but still perfectly visible. The paintings, stylized and full of spirals, showed two great beasts, each with a long neck, six arms, and vast wings, circling one another. One had a sun for a head; the other, a moon. As the students continued walking, the paintings of the beasts evolved, showing them moving under skies that matched the emblems. The sun-headed creature walked in day, the moon-headed creature walked in night. Finally, they came together, the day creature laying down to sleep and the night creature standing watch. Then they traded places.

The spirals worked into the pictures gave them a sense of stylistic motion, making the exchange of the two creatures strangely obvious.

“Incarnations of the sun and moon, trading places,” said Kirol. “It’s like they were trying to find a way to paint the distinction between night and day. It’s a fascinatingly abstract way to represent it, though—anthropomorphizing the two states as living entities ...”

Their voice trailed off as they realized two things at the same time: first, that they were talking to themselves, the rest of the group having continued onward.

And second, that the others had stopped dead about ten feet away, staring at something.

Kirol turned, blinking, and hurried after them.

When they caught up to the group, they, too, stopped dead, staring at the space ahead of them.

The cave they had followed this far widened out and became a rounded chamber so large that the far side faded off into the darkness, dominated by a spiraling pattern etched into the stone floor. More of those strange carved stones surrounded the pattern, some of them floating, all of them glowing a soft, lambent silver.

And there, at the center of the circle, was the moon-headed creature from the cave paintings. Its hide was a deep midnight blue, fading toward full-moon silver-gold as it neared the head. Its neck was almost impossibly long, and its wings were fused behind its back, creating the impression of a vast, dragging tail. Aside from the wings, it had six ambulatory limbs, which appeared divided into four legs and two arms. As for the creature’s head, it was impossible to see its shape clearly, shrouded as it was in trailing mist that should have read as fog but was somehow clearly a shifting cluster of clouds that surrounded the softly glowing moon.

Its breathing was slow and level, marking it as alive but deeply asleep. The air was filled with strange silence, and with a taste like autumn descending, bonfires in the distance and crisp leaves falling underfoot.

“Whoa,” whispered Sanar, beginning to step forward. Tam’s hand caught his arm before he could cross into the circle, and he stopped, looking sheepishly back at her.

“No,” she mouthed. Sanar looked to Abigale, who shook her head, while Kirol looked silently on, unable to take their eyes off the creature.

Sanar nodded, and Tam took her hand away. As soon as he was released, the goblin started forward again, this time crossing the boundary into the circle before anyone could grab him. He approached the creature with slow reverence, unable to resist the call of long autumn nights bathed in moonlight, silence waiting to be broken by stories around a bonfire, sweet cider on the tongue and all the good gifts of the harvest season welcoming him home ...

He didn’t entirely realize he was going to reach out until it was already done. He pressed his palm against the cool, smooth neck of the creature, feeling soft fur like moss tickling his skin. For a moment, he was suffused with the greatest peace he had ever known.

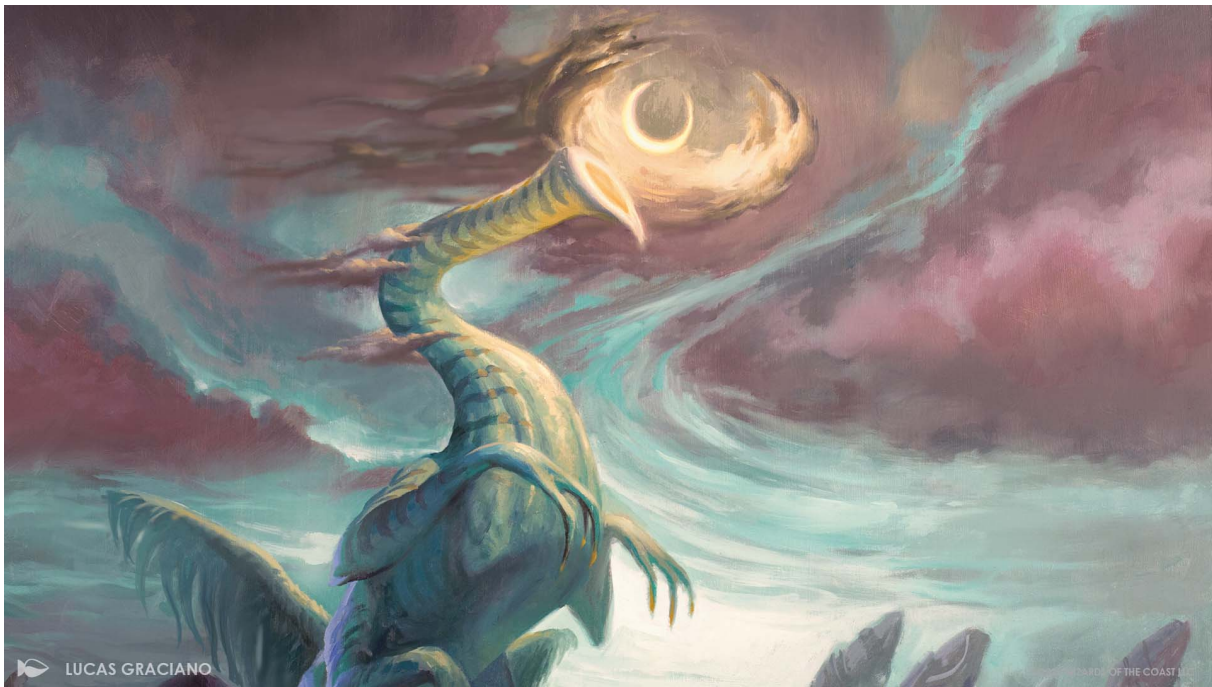
Naturally, that was when the creature woke up.

Its eyes opened, lambent as two smaller moons, devoid of iris or pupil but patterned with the pits and craters of an actual moon. It lifted its head, clouds trailing in the wake of that motion, and roared.

If the presence of the beast had been like bathing in the cool winds of autumn, the sound of its fury was the moment when those winds turned cold and cruel, going from a refreshing caress to an assault. The sound washed over the four students, going on and on, filled with all the terrors of the night, the fear and the confusion and the endless howling of the storm.

Even Abigale cringed away as the chilling fear washed over her, feathers bristling out in all directions, making her resemble a puffball as much as an owl.

Kirol darted forward, grabbing Sanar by the elbow, and yanked the smaller student away from the beast. Sanar, who had frozen in his fear, shot Kirol a grateful look and turned to run alongside them, fleeing from the creature that was even then lumbering to its feet. It continued to roar, swinging its head back and forth in a menacing fashion. It reared up—just a little—and stomped its two front feet, sending a wave of near-solid darkness flowing out from the impact.



Art by: Lucas Graciano

The shadows washed over the students and rushed past them, filling the tunnel and snuffing out the glowing lichen in the same instant. Virtually solid, that darkness flowed onward, out of the tunnel, and began to pool in the sunlit meadow, which was sunlit no longer.

As the darkness flowed across the meadow, it swallowed the sunlight and created brief auroras of color to fade and die in the dark. Those auroras left transformations in their wake. The pooling dark thinned, shifting into more ordinary night, and the sky overhead erupted in stars, the sun becoming a thin eclipse ring of fire in the distance while the moon sprang to sudden, total fullness. The grasses withered and died, the flowers largely following, even as some sprang to greater, glowing life. The spirals remained, some reversing direction, others becoming jagged and broken.

Atop a standing stone stood the little blue faerie that had lured the students to the Omenpath, wings and arms outspread, its blue carapace shining in the last rays of the sun. As the darkness washed over it, it, too, was transformed. The almost-human edges of its face hardened, turning more insectile, while its eyes grew large and golden. Its wings grew tattered at the edges, like fallen autumn leaves. A crest grew atop its head, jagged and front-facing like a crown, and the elytra of its wings spread to form a kind of cape, giving the faerie a vaguely regal appearance.

Most striking of all, the blue bled out of its carapace, replaced by gleaming, gold-flecked green. The faerie looked down at itself and giggled, apparently pleased with what it saw. It flapped its newly tattered wings and launched itself into the air, following the path of darkness. In a matter of seconds, it was gone.

All that remained was the dark flowing out of the dolmen gate, and the distant sound of screams.