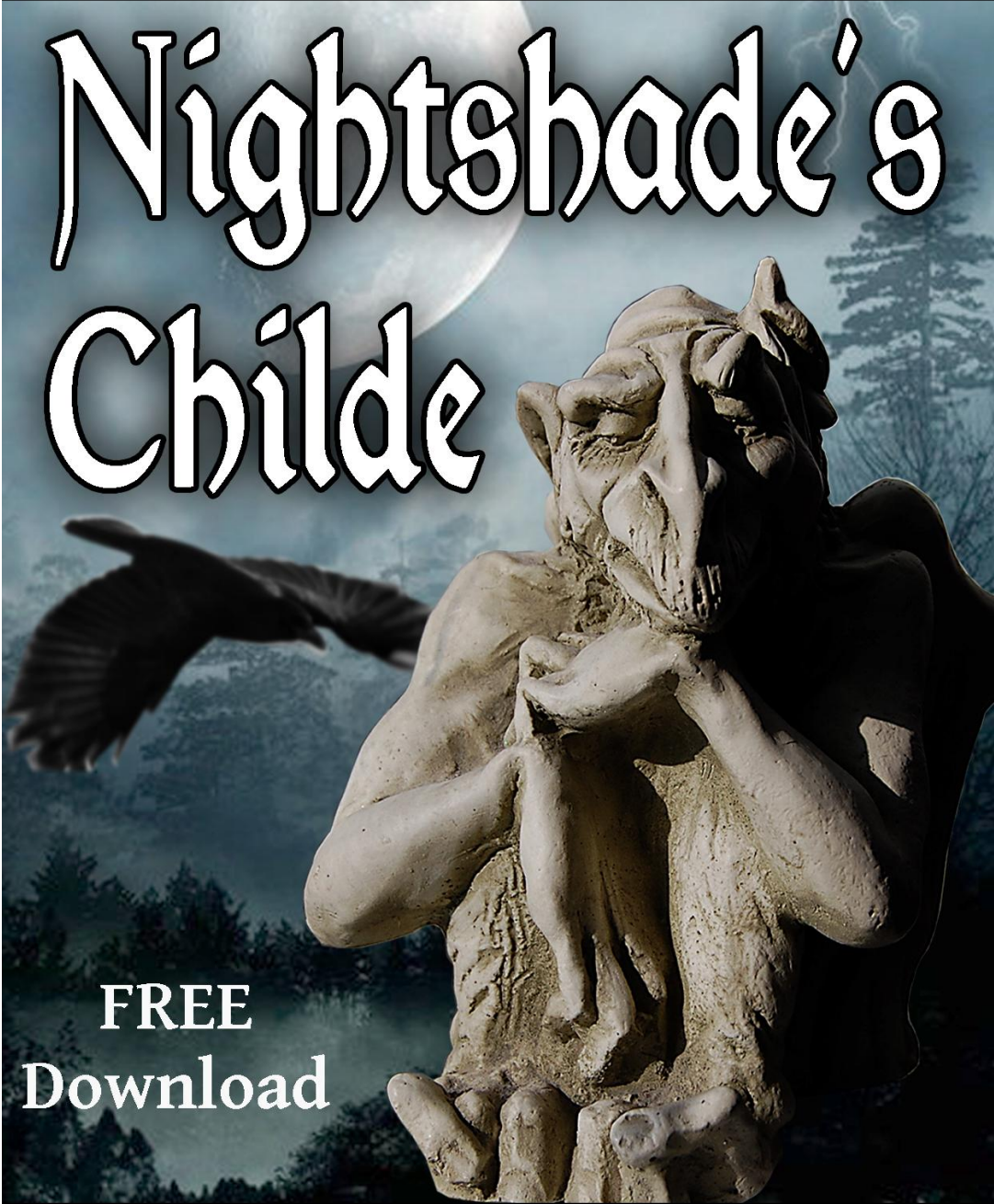


**What happens when Seleni's  
homunculus wants to make  
another homunculus?**

# Nightshade's Childe

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**Merlyn MacLeod**



# nightshade's childe

by **Merlin MacLeod**

Short story sequel to *Priestess of Briares*, also by Merlyn MacLeod

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## nightshade's childe

"Help, please! Please, help?" The skinny homunculus capered before the raven. Bat-like wings trembled anxiously, while sharp, irregular teeth bared in an ingratiating grin.

From his lofty perch atop the bookcase, Corbeau glared down his beak at the petitioner. "You wish me to do what?"

"Spit. Please?" Nightshade stopped dancing under that daunting yellow-eyed scorn. Hesitantly, he extended his bowl clutched in dry, twiggy fingers. "Please?"

"Birds don't spit," Corbeau said caustically. "And I would not, even if I could. It's disgusting." Ruffling his feathers, he hunched away from the proffered dish and the malodorous odors wafting up to him. "What have you got in there?"

"Things," Nightshade whispered, shielding the bowl at his shoulder. "Magical things. Like mistress makes."

"Mistress makes? Oh-ho, so our little Nightshade is trying his hand at becoming a mage?"

"Little magic," the homunculus hedged, leathery wings folded close. "Not bother anyone."

"When Seleni finds out, she'll be furious. Perhaps she'll even dismantle you. Make another Nightshade to take your place."

"Yes! Make another!" The homunculus' grin returned, broader than ever, and he bobbed enthusiastically.

"You *want* another homunculus around here? I certainly don't. One is far too many for me, and I can't understand what Seleni sees in you to begin with. No, another is two more than a bird can bear."

Nightshade's gremlin face screwed up in genuine distress at the raven's harsh words. Tears trailed down his dried-out cheeks. "Nightshade need another Nightshade. Mistress have men-friends, yes. Corbeau have lady-bird, yes. Even big Dark-horse have lady-friend. Have lady-friends many! But Nightshade-ladies, no. Nightshade look and look!" the homunculus wailed, plopping down on the stone floor, with his precious bowl still cradled in his arms. "Nightshade lonely."

"There aren't any more Nightshades to find, you silly thing. You weren't hatched like any normal creature—myself, for example. You were created. I was there when you were made. I saw it all. I'm sorry, but there it is."

The straggle-haired head lifted. New interest lit the dark button eyes. "Corbeau saw Nightshade made?"

"Yes. The spell work is all right there in Seleni's great book." Taking wing, Corbeau lazily glided down to land atop the thick tome sitting on the work table. "Right in here." He pecked the leather binding. "There's a recipe for you, if you please."

"Then make *more* Nightshades!" Scrabbling up from the floor, the homunculus padded over to the table, hopped up onto its broad surface to join the raven. "All in here. Corbeau said."

"No, no. Oh, no." The raven stalked around the book, beak held high. "Impossible. How can you possibly think to recreate such a complicated spell when you don't know the first thing about magic? You can't even read. It's hopeless, you twitty little thing."

Nightshade nodded solemnly. "Corbeau right. Corbeau smart. Very smart. Can read, yes?"

"Yes," the raven said smugly, preening a feather in modest distraction. "I learned long ago."

"Can read book? Big book?"

"Of course I can read this book. I've sat on it for simply years, watching Seleni work."

"Then Corbeau read to Nightshade."

"Yes, I certainly cou—" Shiny black eyes widened. "Absolutely not! The priestess would pluck me bald if I let you meddle with her ceremonies and such. I will not be an accomplice to such dangerous nonsense."

"Corbeau help! Corbeau smart. Nightshade not know how. Nightshade so lonely. Please?"

Cocking his head, the raven studied the homunculus. A tear ran down Nightshade's crooked nose, splashed onto a skinny toe as he swayed back and forth in his misery. The homunculus' wails grew louder as Corbeau tried to ignore him. The tears fell faster.

"Oh, all right," the raven muttered. "Stop sniveling, will you? I'll help you. Goddess knows why, but I will. Likely nothing will come of it," he warned, hopping off of the book. "It's a very complicated spell. Takes a proper magician to do it right, which you," he added, pointing a claw at the homunculus, "are *not*."

"Nightshade have friend then, yes!" the homunculus burred, ignoring Corbeau's warnings. "Nightshade have *two* friends: Nightshade-friend and Corbeau-friend. Corbeau *best* friend!"

"Oh, leave off! I am not your friend. I just cannot abide public scenes, that's all. And turn this back, will you?" The raven pecked at the book's heavy cover. "I can't get the proper angle to open it."

"Nightshade turn, yes! Nightshade good to turn pages." Flapping his wings for leverage, the homunculus seized the cover and began heaving over great chunks of pages.

"There it goes, that page—no, wait. Go back. Go back—the other way!"

Pages flew backward. Nightshade drove his finger into a page full of diagrams and scribbles. "This one? This one make Nightshade-friend?"

"Yes, this one. Or it did, before you lost it. Stop fanning your wings, you're blowing over the pages. Not to mention what your antics are doing to my feathers. Now sit still and listen."

"Listen, yes!" The homunculus squatted down on his haunches, his black eyes fixed on Corbeau with rapt attention.

The raven traced the spell with the tip of his wing. "You'll need a mandrake root, cut at the full of the moon with a consecrated knife. Oh, that's it. It's over. You haven't got a knife."

"Nightshade get."

"You can't. Only Seleni has an athame, and you know how she feels about *anyone* touching her things."

"Nightshade *get*," the homunculus repeated sullenly, hunching his shoulders.

"Beyond that, you'll need blood and semen, horse dung—"

"Got lots horse poop. Dark horse makes lots. Pile in kitchen now. *Big pile!*"

"I'm very pleased for you. But where will you find the rest of these ingredients? Forget it. You can't do it." Pronouncement made, Corbeau flew out the turret's open window and into the sunlight beyond.

"Nightshade find," the homunculus growled after his departing mentor. "Corbeau see. Nightshade get *all* things."

::

Two days later, the homunculus peeked around the turret's doorway, rustled his wings in agitation. "Mistress gone away?"

Corbeau stopped preening long enough to peer down from his favorite skull perch atop the mantle. "Seleni is out with her horses. Why?"

"Gone long time?"

"She always spends hours with her foals. You know that."

"Good." The homunculus offered a wide, toothy grin and waddled into the room. "Have Nightshade root."

"Nightshade root? What—Oh, you mean a mandrake? You actually *found* a mandrake? I didn't think you knew what one was."

"Nightshade fetch many things for pretty lady-mistress spells. Nightshade knows, yes." The thick brown root was tossed onto the table with a thud. The ever-present wooden bowl was shoved up after it, and Nightshade balanced on his skinny toes to peer over the table edge at Corbeau. "Have root. What now?"

"It won't work. That root had to be cut during the full moon—"

"Moon full. Last night."

"Are you certain?" Corbeau demanded. "The moon must be exactly full, and I don't believe it was."

"How Corbeau know? Bird sleep through dark. Nightshade knows moon. Was full."

"It had to be cut with an athame, like Seleni's special knife. If it wasn't, that mandrake root is worthless for your purpose."

"Was cut." Nightshade grinned and shoved a double-edged, ornate knife up beside the root.

"You stole the mistress's.... Oh, my stars and wing-feathers! Do you know what you've done, you stupid little thing? Oh, by the shell that hatched me, she'll kill you. Worse, she'll kill *me* if she finds out that I had anything to do with this."

"Corbeau said do, Nightshade do. Nightshade get good root, yes. What now?"

Corbeau stared down at him. "Now, you go away! I'm not having anything more to do with this. Not one bit! I never dreamed you'd do something so—so—horrible! So improper—"

The homunculus' eyes narrowed into slits. "Corbeau promised help. Nightshade tell mistress, will."

Corbeau shut his beak with a startled click. "You wouldn't."

"Corbeau promised."

The raven considered his very vulnerable position as an accessory to the heinous thievery. Only one option precluded the loss of his position as Seleni's favorite familiar—not to mention the loss of a tail-feather or two. Corbeau narrowed his gaze. "If I help, does Nightshade promise to keep his ugly, sharp-toothed mouth shut?"

The homunculus nodded vigorously. "Nightshade promise.""

"Nightshade not as dumb as he looks."

"What now? More spit?"

Corbeau sidestepped along the mantle before dropping onto to the tabletop and surveying the contents of Nightshade's wooden bowl. "You don't need spit for this. You need the mandrake root, blood, semen and.... Phew! What have you got in there?"

"What Corbeau say get. And spit. Lots."

The raven looked again. "Spit? Whose?"

"Big dog," Nightshade said, referring to the wolf that slept at the end of Seleni's bed. "Spit lots. Easy."

Corbeau shuddered and resolved not to look into that bowl again. "It's supposed to be human ingredients, but.... Oh, well. If a spell fails, that only reflects upon the mage, doesn't it? All right, so you've got spit. What about semen?"

"Easy. Dark horses have *lots* of lady-friends. Have *lots* of semen."

"You went out there while they were—With all that snorting and squealing and stomping?"

Nightshade scowled. "Had lots, won't miss any."

"But they were—Oh, it's so disgusting, so violent. Not at all like the loving of birds." Corbeau ruffled his feathers in distaste.

"*Birds?*" shrilled Nightshade. "Birds not nice! Stand on lady-friend's back, peck her head! Nightshade watch, see!"

"You watched that? You watched *me*? Oh, you horrid little voyeur! See if I help you ever again!" Corbeau lifted his wings to take flight, but as he pushed off of the table, the homunculus grabbed the raven around the neck. Wings fanned frantically, clawed feet scabbled.

"Let go *immediately!*"

"Corbeau break promise, Nightshade tell mistress about book." The threat, delivered nose-to-beak, was difficult to ignore.

The raven's sharp beak stabbed the nearest bony finger. Nightshade let go, and Corbeau dropped to the work table, all feathered outrage. Once the raven had preened himself back into some semblance of control, he sighed and confronted the homunculus again.

"You need blood. And who do you plan to ask for that? I cannot think of anyone or anything in this castle that would voluntarily spill its blood for your wretched little concoction. Why don't you give up now, and we'll forget all about thi—AAA!!!!"

Corbeau whirled to stab his attacker again, only to find a blue-black feather dangling from Nightshade's thin fingers. "That is my tail-feather, you horrid little creation! A *new* feather! I'd only just finished growing it. How *dare* you!"

"New feather, yes. Blood inside, yes?" With a crooked smile, Nightshade dropped the feather into his bowl and stirred it with one long finger. "Nightshade have blood now. Good blood. Smart blood." Withdrawing the finger, he licked it. "What now?"

"Now you go away. I'm not speaking to you." The raven ran his beak over his remaining tail-feathers as though he was counting them.

"Tell mistress, yes—"

Cold raven eyes regarded Nightshade. "It's not enough blood. It won't work. You've failed."

"Will work," Nightshade replied confidently. "What now?"

Corbeau closed his eyes. "Now you bury all of that in horse dung by the full moon and you say an incantation over it and *you don't know the words.*"

Wings fanning gently, Nightshade gathered up his smelly potion. "Corbeau knows. Corbeau help."

The bird sniffed. "I don't fly at night. Can't see properly."

"Nightshade carry. When mistress sleep. Full moon tonight. Nightshade come back." Twiggy fingers tapped the side of the bowl. "Need more blood feathers now. Maybe chicken," he mused, waddling out of the room. "Chickens like Nightshade. Chickens help Nightshade. Friends, yes. Friends, many."

::

That night, Corbeau struggled to maintain his balance on Nightshade's narrow shoulder as the homunculus waddled over the rough forest ground.

"Can't you walk any more carefully?" the raven complained. "I believe you're deliberately falling into holes just to make me more miserable."



"Ground is ground." Nightshade shrugged, making the raven shriek and fan his wings to catch his balance. Sharp talons scraped helplessly across the leathery skin, offering no security. "Bird don't like Nightshade walk? Bird fly."

"I can't see in the dark."

"Not dark. Moon full."

"Moonlight isn't sunlight. I could fly into a tree or a cow or something. I won't do it."

"Ride, then. Nightshade walk."

"If you can call it that." The raven sulked. "Seleni knows how to glide about properly on two feet. I don't know what to call your means of locomotion."

All progress stopped abruptly. Skinny fingers grasped the raven firmly around the throat and pulled him off his wobbly perch.

"Aukkk!" Corbeau squalled. "You horrid little thing! Stop doing that!"

The fingers opened obediently, dumping the abused raven to the ground to land in a tangle of feathers and temper.

Corbeau struggled to right himself. "What is that smell?"

"Horse poop."

"You brought me to the stables? Oh, my Goddess, we're on the dung heap! How disgusting. Here you, get on with it. This debacle needs to be concluded as soon as possible, so I can be off to bathe in the pond and forget all about you."

"Moon full, like Corbeau say." Nightshade nodded in satisfaction. "Horse poops, many. What now?"

"Say the words over your mess and bury it. As quickly as possible, please. You did bring everything you need?"

"Brought, yes." The homunculus' sharp teeth glittered in the moonlight.

"Then repeat after me—"

"Repeat?" Nightshade's brow furrowed. "Need peat? Moss?"

"No, *repeat*. Say what I say, twit."

"What I say twit."

"No! Just listen, *then* say it. Understand?"

Nightshade nodded and waited.

"By the full of the moon, I bury thee." Corbeau paused expectantly.

"Moon full, yes. Bury deep."

"Say what I said."

"Did."

"You didn't. You have to say the same words: 'By the full of the moon, I bury thee.' Now, you say it."

"Moon full. Bury, yes."

"No, no, *no*! The words have to be exactly the same! The way they're written in Seleni's book."

The homunculus scowled. "*Did* say. Said good."

"Oh, by my hatching shell," the raven moaned to the stars overhead. "How did I ever get involved in such a disaster? What did I do to deserve such a fate? I've been a good familiar. I do everything my mistress asks of me. So why am I out here in the stinking darkness, arguing with this illiterate thing?"

Nightshade's lower lip crept out in a warning pout. "Tell mistress, will."

In his agitation, the raven added preening to complaining. "It's because I'm too nice a bird," he mumbled around a beak full of black feathers. "I'm just too kind, and everyone is always taking advantage of a sweet fellow like me. All right," he concluded, nudging the soft feathers back in place along his breast. "I'll say the words, and you bury your box. It will go faster that way."

The homunculus' lunatic smile returned with increased radiance. "Bird talk. Nightshade dig." Leaping onto the side of the dung heap, he sank his fingers deep in the soft muck to send the first handful flying over his shoulder.

"Here now, watch where you're tossing that offal. You nearly hit me."

"Nightshade sorry." He never looked up from his excavations. "Nightshade dig good, yes. Bird *talk*."

"Bird talk. How humiliating. Oh, all right." Ruffling his plumage, Corbeau straightened, cocked his head and began the incantation in a deep, solemn voice. "By the full of the moon, I bury thee. By the full of the moon, I order thee. Grow in sunlight to give you warmth, darkness to give you strength."

The incantation continued, broken only by brief pauses as Corbeau was forced to dodge especially enthusiastic handfuls of manure flung his way. At last, the raven uttered the final words.

"Hole done," panted Nightshade, staggering off of the dung heap. "What now?"

The raven shrugged. "Stuff your—your concoction in there, and cover it up."

Nightshade waddled back to lovingly shove his box deep into the manure cave. Surrounding horse droppings were tucked about it, and with a final pat, the homunculus turned back to his mentor. "What now?"

"Now, we go home," Corbeau replied emphatically. "Absolutely nothing will happen until the next full moon. And probably not even then, I warn you."

"Will. What then?"

"Dig up your mess and pour blood over it. But you'll never get any more blood, so your mandrake will just stay a nasty, foul-smelling lump soaked in horse pee. Forget it now, will you?"

"No. Nightshade wait." The homunculus staggered back atop his dung heap.

"Wait? It's another bloody month before the next full moon. You're not sitting on this heap the whole time? Nothing's going to happen."

"Nightshade wait." The homunculus plopped down in the midden with an air of infinite patience.

"What about the blood? Do you think it will come and find you here? And you can't kill anything, remember? Not without Seleni's permission, and she'll never grant leave for you to hurt anything—not so much as a worm—that lives here."

"Nightshade good homunculus. Nightshade not hurt anyone. Never."

"Fine." The raven sniffed. "Take me back to the castle. But don't touch me. You smell appalling, and I don't want any more of that muck on my feathers." A long moment passed, but the new sorcerer did not move. "Get up, will you? I don't want to linger here."

"Nightshade wait."

"What about me?" Corbeau screeched. "I don't want to wait here for the sun to come up. You have to carry me back."

"Nightshade wait."

The raven paced an agitated circle. "Oh, my teeth and talons! Oh, *pinfeathers*! I'm stuck here with a stupid homunculus. A stupid, stinking homunculus. How do I get into these horrible situations?"

::

The four weeks past slowly, with Corbeau managing to forget about the rotting, mangled magical experiment hidden in the manure. As Nightshade stayed on his dung heap, Corbeau even convinced himself that he'd forgotten the homunculus, but that took a great deal of repeating. All of Corbeau's efforts were for nothing when the little monster returned, crashing into the turret room in the wee hours of the morning, nearly startling the raven off of his favorite ceiling-beam roost.

"Time finish Nightshade-friend! Moon full. Corbeau come. Dig now, yes?" the homunculus babbled enthusiastically, hopping from foot to foot in his excitement.

"Dig?" Corbeau arrowed down to land on the back of Seleni's chair. "You mean you still want to see that mess you created? Listen to me, Nightshade. Nothing will happen. You can dig and dance around it all you want to, but the spell wasn't done right. Nothing will happen."

Nightshade pouted. "Corbeau come. Corbeau know what to do."

"It's too late," the raven protested. "It's dark out there, and—"

"Tell—" The warning in Nightshade's voice was clear.

"The mistress. I know, I know. Very well. One more trek into the wilds, and that's it. It's over tonight, yes?"

Nightshade nodded happily. Shifting the leather bag he clutched, he held up a skinny arm.

"All right, then." Corbeau sighed, stepping onto the proffered arm. "Get on with it. But tonight you bring me back."

"Nightshade promise." He bobbed in a series of raven-rattling nods. "Bring back, promise."

"Stop that, and go on."

Nightshade pattered out of the turret and down the stone staircase.

::

The second trip out was just as unpleasant as the first had been for Corbeau, with the nares in his beak warning him when they drew near their destination.

"Oh, Goddess, why am I here?" he moaned. "I can't help, I can't even see anything. Just put me down and leave me out of this."

"Corbeau see Nightshade-friend." The homunculus sounded petulant. "Magic to do. Blood, yes?"

"Blood? Yes, there must be blood to bring the thing to life, but where would you find...." Corbeau stood taller on the homunculus' shoulder, horror widening his eyes. "Nightshade, whose blood do you have?"

Upending his bag, Nightshade dumped its contents on the ground with a clatter and ominous squishy thuds. "Brought light for Corbeau. Candle, yes!"

Eventually, a candle's flame sputtered forth bravely in the darkness, weakly illuminating the dung pile and the homunculus. Guarding the flame, Nightshade stuck the candle in the side of the manure, out of the breeze.

"Whose blood do you have, monster? Tell me now."

"Magg's."

"Magg's? Who is—The goose? You killed the goose?"

The homunculus twisted his head around to look at the raven on his shoulder, genuinely offended. "Nightshade not kill Magg. Magg friend. Fox maybe kill. Fox always dumb-geese hungry."

"You brought a dead goose out here? And I rode with it?" Corbeau hid his head beneath a wing. "Oh, Goddess, I'm going to be ill."

"Not bring goose. Fox take goose apart. I bring Magg."

Corbeau lifted his head to discover that Nightshade was holding the lolling head of a dead goose. Its limp neck hung below Nightshade's hand, dripping blood slowly onto the grass.

"See? Magg not mind." Nightshade shook the goose-head and watched it roll from side to side, over what passed for his thumb. "What now?"

"Um, d-dig up the root," Corbeau stammered, very glad he wasn't that goose. "And your, ah, your Magg is dripping. You might want to keep the blood safe?"

"Oh, Magg got lots. Is good." Dropping the goose head, Nightshade dove into his muck heap. Flying feces rained for a few dangerous, foul-smelling moments before the homunculus reappeared with a moldering, slimy wooden box cradled against his bony chest. He rustled his leathery wings in an excess of excitement as the box was placed, with great reverence, at Corbeau's clawed feet.

"What now?" Nightshade repeated, breathless.

"Open it." Corbeau's voice was all but strangled by the smell. He twisted his head slightly to one side, in hopes of breathing cleaner air, but his efforts helped little.

Dirty hands eagerly pried off the lid and dumped the box's contents onto the grass. Nightshade wrinkled his nose as he studied his new friend. "Is there. Not look good."

"Blood," gasped Corbeau, tottering away from the rotting offal. "It needs blood sprinkled on it."

"Magg-blood, yes." The goosely remains were snatched up and waved enthusiastically over the lump. "Magg, Magg, Magg," Nightshade sang as he squeezed the last of the blood from the goose's neck. "Magg Nightshade's friend. Magg make Nightshade-friend."

"Oh, spare me," moaned Corbeau. "Oh, Goddess protect me...."

The raven's voice faded away as the bloody lump began moving. Twitching, it uncoiled itself and grew larger in the candlelight. It was black as the night that had birthed it, as black and glossy-feathered as the raven beside it.

Balancing on the edge of the box, the thing stretched to its full height. Fanning new, drying wings, it beat them into life.

"Dear Goddess, what is it? Nightshade, what have you *done*?"

The thing turned its rough-feathered head toward the sound of Corbeau's voice. Its sharp beak parted with a rusty honk. A goose's honk. Bright avian eyes blinked, then gazed steadily at Corbeau with what might have been instant adoration. Leaping lightly to the ground, the thing stretched its horse-like body and headed toward its new master. Clawed chicken feet scraped the ground as it moved. Black raven wings beat in time with its trot, and the creature honked again. Closer now, the creature reached out to touch Corbeau with its chicken, goose or raven's beak—Corbeau couldn't tell which it was in the faint light. Corbeau didn't care.

Shrieking, the raven launched himself into the air. With total disregard for flying blindly in the dark, he headed with all speed back to the castle, to the safety of his turret and its very high, safe ceiling beams.

"*Honk!*" the new homunculus cried mournfully. Untried wings lifted it from the ground, into an erratic first flight. It hovered for a moment, its equine torso and chicken feet hovering just beyond Nightshade's nose. "*Honk!*" it cried again before flapping awkwardly after Corbeau.

"Noooo!" wailed Nightshade. "You Nightshade-friend, not Corbeau-friend. Wait!" Flapping his own wings, Nightshade flew after the creature. "Please, wait? Not go with bad bird. Bad bird not friend! *Nightshade* friend! Waiiiiiittt!"

::

Seleni awoke to pre-dawn chaos. The sun was just beginning to show signs of peeking through the misty clouds at the edge of the horizon, but her household was already fully awake. The shouts echoing off the stones told the priestess that something disastrous was happening up in her tower.

Pausing only to catch up a blanket to wrap around herself, the mistress of the keep ran up the stone steps, ready to face whatever intruder might have violated the sanctity of her private workroom. Throwing herself through the turret doorway, Seleni ordered several lamps ablaze. Two familiars turned their heads and blinked at her in the sudden light. Between them hovered a bizarre guest.

Half-horse and half-bird, it was trying to land next to Corbeau atop the highest bookcase. Feathers ruffled and golden eyes gleaming, the raven screamed in fury and fought with stabbing beak and mantled wings to defend his territory.

Flapping in manic outrage, Nightshade circled the room in his own graceless flight. "Make bad bird give back!" he screeched, soaring over Seleni's head. "Is *Nightshade's* friend, yes! *NOT-FAIR NOT-FAIR NOT-FAIR NOT-FA-*"

"*QUIET!*" the priestess shouted, her voice freezing Nightshade in mid-air, so that he tumbled to the floor in a tangle of arms and legs.

"Not-fair, not-fair," he whispered, righting himself and waddling to her side.

Under Seleni's glower, even the newcomer came to settle without argument. Landing on the work table, it folded its wings carefully to avoid knocking over a stack of parchment, but swished its long black silky tail in irritation.

"What is that?" The priestess pointed at the creature.

"Is *Nightshade-friend!*" came the screech. "Nightshade make, yes, but bad-bird Corbeau steal! Make bad bird give back, mistress, please?"

"Are you telling me that you *created* this...whatever it is?"

Nightshade nodded madly in affirmation, while Corbeau suddenly decided that his tail-feathers were in terrible disrepair and required intense preening.

"My little homunculus made another little homunculus?" Seleni said. "That's unheard of. How did you manage to learn how to do this?" Before Nightshade could answer, Seleni's gaze swiveled to her raven. "Corbeau, can you shed some light on the mystery?"

"Well, I...um...that is, Nightshade and I might have, ah, discussed it. In a purely philosophical manner, or course."

"Of course. Which is why one of my grimoires has claw marks, smudges, and mangled parchment?"

The raven looked away. "I had nothing to do with that."

"Corbeau tell Nightshade how," the homunculus said. "Nightshade lonely, want friend. Corbeau watch Nightshade made. Tell how. Then *steal* Nightshade-friend."

"I didn't steal it!" the raven shrieked, flapping and hopping in place. "I can't even stand to look at it. Take it, take it back, and keep it far away from me. I don't ever want to set eyes on the horrid thing again."

The new homunculus cocked its head and offered a forlorn cheep.

"So the two of you conspired to use my grimoire, cast spells with my tools, and pretty much took magical matters into your own...claws, shall we say?" Seleni speared the raven with a look.

"We meant no harm," Corbeau offered, suddenly humble in his guilt.

"Who read from my tome?"

"Ah, Mistress, ah, I might have repeated...a few words...here and there...."

"Who stole my athame?"

"Nightshade took it," said Corbeau, with an alacrity that had been missing from his previous confession. "I told him not to. *Warned* him, but would he listen? Oh, no. He was headstrong and determined and nothing I said could possibly—"

"Who listed the ingredients?" pursued Seleni. "Who collected the materials?"

"It was a matter of—"

"And who read the incantation?"

"Corbeau read good, yes!"

"Shut up, you smelly little monster!" snapped Corbeau.

"*Honk!*"

"Quiet!" demanded Seleni once again. Silence dropped like a heavy cloak over the workroom. "I now see what you've been doing while I've been busy elsewhere," the priestess continued. "I had no idea that my assistants had such incentive. Or imagination."

She eyed the unique creation on her table. It pricked its equine ears at her and stamped a foreleg, chicken claws scratching the wooden table as it turned its adoring gaze back toward Corbeau.

"Hmm, hard as hooves, are they? Amazing."



"M-mistress?" quavered Corbeau, sidling farther away on the bookcase. "Mistress, what will you do with us?"

"Do with you?" Seleni raked her gaze over the assembled miscreants and laughed softly. "Not a thing, Corbeau. I hope the three of you will be a very happy family. Take good care of your child, you two."

With that, Seleni departed, gesturing the room back into pre-dawn darkness as she left. Her laughter echoed off the stone walls as she headed back to the warmth of her bed.

Lifting off of the table, the new homunculus soared up to land awkwardly beside the raven. Devoted eyes blinked at him. "*Honk!*" the creature offered as it sidled close, leaning against the raven's wing and rubbing its beak against the raven's breast feathers. Corbeau shivered in revulsion.

The sound of leathery wings flapping informed Corbeau that Nightshade was airborne. The smell hit next, as the homunculus settled on Corbeau's far side and edged closer to lean against him. Scraping his rough wings together to settle them, Nightshade looked murderous as the sun began peering over the horizon and the newcomer lovingly burrowed closer.

"Oh, Goddess," Corbeau moaned, looking from one to the other. "Why me?"

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