

The Mountain, The Raven, and The Sea

(Book V of Mage)

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ISBN 1-58495-830-8

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The Mountain, The Raven, and The Sea

(Book II of the Wench of Woe Trilogy)

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Jim Farris

Prologue One - The Ocean.

Calla swept the floor quietly, the last of the day's work. Her hair, once lustrous and black in her youth and worn down at her shoulders, was now streaked with gray and done up in a bun. Hamat, her husband, had left for the smithy hours ago. The storm outside had come and gone, so she knew there would be little to do outside the house - any dirt there might have been to take care of would have been washed away by the rain. With no children left in the house, there was little to do for several hours, until it was time to begin the work of preparing the evening meal for when Hamat came home.

The rocking chair by the fireplace beckoned her, but she gave it a stern look, and thereafter ignored its silent call. There was nothing to do? Then she would *make* something to do. Wash the walls, perhaps. Dust again. Something. She would not sit in that comfortable chair her husband had bought her three years ago, not at least until evening. For when she sat in it during the day, she knew her mind would wander... And she would remember...

Her boys had grown and married, and had children of their own, now. Her oldest grandson, in fact, was a new father, himself. Yes, twenty years had passed since that fateful day, when dear little Sasha...

Calla suppressed that thought with an effort, gripping the broom tightly, and resumed sweeping. She would not think about it. She would not remember that day, nor would she remember the day four years later, when her own daughter, Orissa...

Calla gritted her teeth, flinging open the kitchen door to sweep the last of the dust outside.

'*What is that commotion?*' Calla wondered, looking up at the sound of voices as she finished. There, down the lane, several people had gathered - a small crowd, really. They were quite excited about something, that much was obvious. That they were excited, however, did not matter to her. Even that they were coming her way down the lane really meant nothing.

"Feh. Probably Matran's got a new batch of chickens, or something," she muttered, and started to close the door...

...when a sudden gleam of fire-red hair caught her eye.

'It can't be...' Calla thought, looking down the lane.

Ahead of the crowd, two women strode side-by-side. One Calla did not recognize - she looked quite ordinary, with black hair and tanned skin, she could have been anyone of Vilandia, really. She wore a plain black dress and her feet were bare upon the cobbled streets, but that was all Calla really noticed about her - the woman at her side caught Calla's full attention.

She was tall - quite tall, in fact, and had fire-red hair. Her skin was the color of cream, and she wore some kind of scale armor over her body which fit skin-tight. Calf-high boots and forearm-high gloves completed her garb, and she carried a snow-white lance casually across her shoulder. A warrior-maid, of some kind... Obviously from the East... Probably Arcadia...

"It can't be..." Calla muttered, staring. "It just *can't*..."

"Calla!" the woman called, smiling broadly and waving.

"S-Sasha?!" Calla called back, her eyes wide.

"Yes! It's me! I'm back!" Sasha called, grinning.

Calla stared in shock as Sasha walked up and stood before her, the other villagers gathered round and the strange woman in the black dress standing beside her. "And this is Marilith, my sister."

"You... You have a sister?!"

Marilith smiled. "We are not sisters of the blood, but sisters of the soul. It's quite a long story."

Calla simply stared. A few of the villagers, seeing her expression, chuckled.

Sasha reached out with her free hand, taking Calla's hand in hers. "Calla, where's Orissa? I've come here today to find her."

The villagers surrounding them suddenly fell quiet, watching. Calla felt her eyes misting with tears - and a moment later, she had wrapped her arms around Sasha, and was sobbing into her mailed shoulder. "Oh, *Sasha!* She's *gone!* I don't know where she is! She disappeared four years after you did!"

There were murmurs of agreement from the crowd as Sasha handed her lance to Marilith, then hugged Calla gently. "Calla, it's alright. I'll find her. Do you know what happened?"

"No," Calla sobbed, hugging Sasha for a long moment. Then, she suddenly paused. After a moment, she leaned back, her eyes blazing. "But I'll bet that old bastard *Malik* does! He was behind *your* disappearance, Sasha! The Palomean raiders took you at *his* bidding! Orissa knew! She learned it from Yanar! And she told *everyone!*"

"I know he was, Calla," Sasha said, her face grim. "I already had a little chat with him about it."

"Hah! If you did, you're the first in *years* to talk to that old bastard! He's down the beach to the south, just half a league, but *nobody* visits him anymore! No one talks to him, no one helps him, and no one's

even *spoken* to him in ten years!"

"And that's as it should be," Sasha replied grimly.

Marilith turned her head, gazing off into the distance, as a well-dressed man in the crowd spoke. "Say... Ummm... Do you remember me at all? I'm Absor," the man said, and smiled.

"I remember you, Absor. I see your lip healed," Sasha said, and smiled as some of the men chuckled. Sasha then looked to Calla, and hugged her again. "Calla, can we come inside? I'd like to tell you my story, and try to find out what you might know about Orissa."

"Did you kill him?" Calla asked flatly, looking into her eyes.

Sasha paused. After a moment, she spoke. "No, I didn't. I decided that for what he'd done, he should die alone, with none to tend for him when he's gone. Why, do you want me to?"

Calla was silent for a long moment, then finally shook her head. "I don't know," Calla replied, her voice quieter, but no less hard. "I only know I want him to pay. For you, for Orissa... For everything."

Sasha nodded. "He is paying, now. He has been paying for ten years... Really, he's been paying since Yanar died trying to find me. And he *will* pay to the end of his days, with the pain of loneliness. He will pay with the knowledge that when he dies, no one will even care that he is gone, and no one will even spare a moment to bury his bones."

"Quite delicious, in my opinion," Marilith said, and smiled. "May we come inside, please?"

Calla smiled in return, holding the door open. "Please do."

As Sasha and Marilith stepped inside, the men in the crowd took a last appreciative look at Sasha's scale-covered buttocks. The armor she wore, if armor it was at all, concealed nothing of the shape of her body. Absor suddenly grinned, then looked to the other men around him. "She hit me in the mouth, once."

Calla scowled. "Oh, Absor, shut up," she snapped, then stepped into her house and slammed the door behind her.

Prologue Two - The Raven.

I gazed at the woman in the full-length mirror Taliad had traded to me, what seemed so long ago, adjusting my gloves and smoothing my hooded robe. The half-elf woman in the mirror, the Raven of Yorindar, returned my gaze silently, mimicking my movements. Night-black hair drawn back into a ponytail, highly arched eyebrows, eyes as black as jet... Oh, she was beautiful, yes. But it was not a beauty of simple mortal perfection. She had an eerie, surreal beauty that went far beyond the normal limits of mortal flesh. Her body, forged by decades of the ascetic life of a battle-mage, had received its final forging in the raging, destructive chaos that was the very heart of a *mana*-storm. Her beauty, because of that, was a terrifying, alien and surreal beauty, fitting of who and what she really was. She was, as usual, dressed in the ebon, long-sleeved hooded robes I favored, though with a black waist-belt over it to draw it closer about her figure. Wearing the black, elbow-length kidskin gloves and knee-length kidskin boots that had once belonged to my beloved Dyarzi, she looked every inch what the five ebon feathers she bore beneath her hairband announced she truly was - the Raven of Yorindar.

And she was me.

Even now, over a hundred and fifty years after I had first awakened in this body, it was, at times, difficult. I hardly remembered what I once looked like in my previous life. I knew that once, I was a tall, muscular, bearded hyperborean male, but time had faded my memories of myself. Still, I had not truly reached the point where I could look in the mirror and see that strange, eerie woman gazing back out at me, and truly feel that I was looking at *myself*. I doubted I ever really would. My soul was that of a man, and in my heart I was a man - yet, when I looked in the mirror, I always saw this strange, alien beauty gazing back at me. To me, it was often as though I was dressing and preening someone else, not myself... Much like a mask worn for a play on an old stage in Hyperborea, or perhaps armor worn for battle.

Both were, in a manner of speaking, true. Indeed, the woman in the mirror was a mask, concealing who and what I really was, and she was made for battle. Battle was precisely why the Raven of Yorindar existed. She was Yorindar's pawn in the endless game that was the war between the gods - a war that had begun with the formation of the Arc of Time, countless aeons ago.

The sharp, half-elven ears I'd appropriated a century and a half ago picked up the sound of approaching footsteps on the stair. I could tell by the tread it was Joy, my companion and mate, come to talk to me again. A midget giantess of five and a third cubits in height, Joy could move quietly if she wished - but, she was hardly thinking about it at the moment. She had spent a good hour weeping, working her garden, and weeping some more. There was little to be done for that, however. She, of all people, knew what I was, and what that meant. I could see her in the mirror sitting herself at the table beside the fireplace. I turned away from the mirror and joined her, sitting in my chair and taking her hand.

We said nothing, at first. She simply gazed at me, and I at her. Finally, Joy drew her free hand across her tear-filled blue eyes and damp olive cheeks, then brushed a stray strand of blonde hair from her eyes. "I'm sorry, Old Man. I still want to go with you. I know, I know... You've explained the danger a hundred times. I know there is a very great risk I may die. I don't care. I have thought about it and fought with myself over it and I simply cannot let you go alone."

"Not this time, Joy. I need you here, where I know you are safe."

"Old Man, part of me knows that you are right, and wants to obey," Joy said, looking at me. "And another part of me wants to grab you and tell you that if you don't let me come with you, I'll break every

bone in your little body."

I grinned, despite the seriousness of the situation. But, even that moment of humor did not last, and after a heartbeat or two, I sighed. "Joy, I-"

"No! I don't want to hear it, I just *don't!* You said that the conflicts of the gods were more than physical conflicts, but one of spirit and emotion. You told me that any weakness I may have will be used against me, and you've spent a decade and a half with me, working on each weakness I had. I swear to you, Old man, I will be on guard for anything. And if I sense fear in my heart, I will remember your words, calm myself, and try to remember how you told me to deal with whatever may be at hand. I will not die, Old Man. I will live, for you." Joy squeezed my hand, gazing into my eyes. "I love you, Old Man. You are everything to me. You have given me my childhood dreams and my fondest hopes, twice. And you did it not because you were commanded to do it by the gods, or even because you took pity on me. You did it out of the kindness of your heart. I swore to you that I would repay you, and your heart would never be lonely again. And I swear to you, Old Man, it never shall be. I will not die, Old Man. You will never be lonely again, from now until the end of time."

I felt my heart catch in my throat, and I was silent for the longest moment, unable to speak.

I wanted to tell her no. I wanted to turn her down, despite everything, and go without her, leaving her here where I knew she would be safe. But, in the end, I said the only thing my heart would let me say.

"I love you, Joy."

"And I love you, too, Old Man. More than you know," Joy replied, reaching across the table and hugging me tight for a long moment. I hugged her in return, patting her back in silence.

"So, I can come?"

I smiled. "Yes, Joy. Though this body can heal broken bones rather quickly, it is somewhat painful to

do, so I really have no choice, do I?" I replied, and she and I shared a chuckle.

After awhile, she leaned back, and kissed me once, passionately, then let me go. I looked her over and smiled, then reached for the pitcher, washbasin and washcloth I'd placed on the table. "Come, dear - let's wash your face and brush your hair a bit. They'll be here in a little while, and you won't want to look like you've been crying all day."

"Particularly since I have," Joy replied, and smiled wryly, reaching to the washbasin.

"No, no - I'll do it, love. Just relax."

Joy smiled, resting on her elbows on the table as I pulled off my ebon leather gloves. Once I'd poured a bit of water into the basin and wet the towel, she let me stroke her face with the dampened cloth. "I'll be careful, Old Man, but I want you to be careful, too."

"I will be," I replied. "The fate of the world rests on it."

"That's not what I meant, Old Man."

"I know. And I'll be careful in that regard, as well."

"You'd better be," she replied, her voice trembling. "For I'll be *watching* you, Old Man."

I dipped the towel in the water again as I considered my answer. "Well, bear in mind that what happens depends on several things I've no control over, Joy. If all goes perfectly, one would hardly notice we'd gone. A few minutes, perhaps, and we'll be done. If things go less than perfectly, perhaps a few days... Perhaps a week or two." I did not mention what might happen if all went poorly. Joy already knew that. It was why she had been weeping, and why she would not let me go alone. Joy was, in the

end, a Giant, and they took love quite seriously.

"And all this because of Marilith's mistake..." Joy growled, growing angry again.

"Indeed. But don't be so harsh on her, dear. She's still young for her kind, and she didn't spend the last two thousand years or so learning and growing like others her age, she was imprisoned. There's an enormous difference between knowing the gist of the Divine Compact, and actually understanding the underlying mathematics of it. If I'm interpreting Yorindar's numinous phrases correctly, this is all a part of their *Forging*, Joy. The Ocean is to be Yorindar's ally, and that means the Ocean's pawns must be forged well for her purposes, or all will fail. My own forging in the heart of a mana-storm for Yorindar's purposes was, perhaps, a bit more dramatic than your own forging for the purposes of the Gods of the Giants, but it was all quite necessary," I said, then smiled. "Besides, she hasn't truly made the error, yet. If I'm careful, she might not make it at all."

"And she might even be *required* to make it despite everything you may do, for everything to turn out alright - and you won't know whether you're to help her or stop her until she makes her decision."

I smiled again. "See? You're grasping the elements of Paradox quite well already."

Joy smiled wryly. "I've been listening to your dry little lectures for decades, Old Man, something had to sink in eventually."

I raised my nose disdainfully. "I do not lecture," I sniffed.

Joy giggled a bit, then smiled. "You've been a teacher and scholar for two thousand years, Old Man, you most certainly *do* lecture. It's when you *don't* lecture that I know something's gone *quite* wrong!" Joy laughed, then reached out, taking the cloth from me. "Oh, *give* me that, Old Man. You're just wiping my face and dripping water on my dress, that won't help." Joy wrung out the cloth, then wet it again. "Go and get my brush, it's right there on the dresser. You can do my hair while I try to smooth my face."

I nodded, not even bothering to get up, merely drawing the brush to leap telekinetically to my hand with a slight effort of will, using the enchantment on the ring of my left middle finger. Joy pressed the damp cloth to her eyes and cheeks several times, then wrung it out again to repeat the process. "You've really no idea how to do this right, Old Man. That pretty little face Yorindar stuck you with never looks out of sorts."

"Well... That, and in my first life I had a full beard and moustache, like most Hyperborean men. You don't put water on a beard unless you've gravy spilled on it or something, damp beards never look very good," I replied, grinning as I brushed her hair a bit.

"Old Man... You said this was part of their forging, even as you were forged. Yet, you've also told me that as much as you serve Yorindar, I serve the gods of the giants. That leaves me curious... What was my forging? I do not remember any single event in my life that changed me."

I smiled. "As I am the Raven of Yorindar, you are The Mountain of the Giants, Joy. You may be tiny for a giant, but your heart and spirit stretch far above and beyond any of your people. But stone is not forged in a single effort, Joy, it is shaped and carved over time. Your forging was the years you spent in childhood enduring the taunts children cast at a midget giantess, then as Darian's Queen, his wife, and the mother of his children. The most important part of it was to have the strength to do what no other giantess could have done after Darian's death - to accept that you had another destiny, and to live instead of die."

Joy started, then sighed, thinking. "I never could have done that without you, Old Man," she said, and resumed working on her face. "Your kindness, your gentleness... When Darian died, I so wanted to take the route of *baishanto*, and starve myself to death, that I might join him in the Afterlife. And yet, you held me when my heart was broken, and in time, I healed. Then, my heart found Soft-hand, and I fell in love again - my dream of being a true Giant-Wife had come again. And, it was still impossible, as I was still tiny. But, you made that little bracelet of mine, and gave me my dream again. Oh, Old Man... That day I sat with you and told you I carried his child... I could see in your heart you were lonely again. And again, it was slowly killing you. The White Mountain Healers had left you alone for months, they did not understand you... *Could* not understand you. They, like Arella before them, could never understand that the darkness of one lonely night after another slowly stole your heart, your hope, and your life. I was just a friend, and nothing more, then. But, I was your only companion... I was all you had left. And you opened your heart, and let me go," she said, and paused a moment, sighing.

"Oh, Old Man... That day I looked at you, the day I saw in your eyes that you had let me go despite everything, and lived a life of loneliness thereafter... My heart melted for you, Old Man. Truly it did. I told you then, Old Man, and I tell you again, now... I lived my life with Soft-hand for *you*, Old Man. I lived my

life with Softhand, the life you never were able to live with Dyarzi. I danced for him. I sang for him. I loved him in the darkness of the winter nights. I bore his children, and raised them into proper adults who made their father proud. And when he died, I mourned him, as a proper giant-wife should. And all the while, I visited you, and shared with you what happened, each and every day. In this way, I wanted to share with you the life you were not able to have... A life denied to you by the Gods, and a life you gave to me twice, out of simple friendship and the nobility of your heart. Old Man, I swore on that day that when Softhand was gone, I would return to you, and you would never be alone again. And I shall keep my word."

My heart went to my throat again, and I found I could not speak. It was a long moment before I could resume the silent task of brushing Joy's hair - I had to pause to wipe my eyes with my free hand, for my vision was misted by a tear.

Joy glanced at me over her shoulder as she worked on her face, then paused, a wry grin lighting her lips as she saw my expression. "I suppose you're right, Old Man. My time with Darian was my 'forging', as it were. I find I'm very different now from that young midget giantess who walked ever so far to reach you and beg you for a cure, a hundred and fifty years ago. I still sense her, inside me - the younger part of myself. That's the part of me that weeps when I think of you being in danger. But the part of me that was shaped by my time as Darian's wife and Queen of Larinia... Ah, that's the part of me that says *'break his little leg if he tries to go without you,'*" she said, and laughed. I grinned despite myself, then joined her in laughter for a moment.

After a few moments, Joy set the washcloth aside and turned around in her chair. "Well? How do I look?"

I smiled, looking her over. "Like a tall, blonde goddess. You are beautiful, my dear - truly beautiful. Each time I look at you, I feel truly blessed by the gods."

Joy grinned. "I meant my face."

I smiled again, picking up my gloves and slipping them back on. "So did I. Now come - they'll be here in a bit. We'll want to have a pot of *byallar* ready, and you'll need to pack your things in my hidden sanctuary."

I took Joy's hand to help her to her feet, but instead she knelt suddenly and wrapped her arms around me. I smiled, enjoying her embrace, and hugged her back. There were no words between us. We had, in truth, said all that was needed to be said, and had said most of it over the course of the last hundred and fifty years. So, in our room at the top of my tower in the middle of the ruined and blasted lands of Hyperborea, we stood and held each other silently for a long moment. And I knew in my heart that no matter what happened in the future, no matter what challenges the gods placed before us, we would never be parted again.

Prologue Three - The Owl.

"I beg your pardon, dear Captain, but may we speak a moment?"

Torgrim, Captain of the *Sea Hawk*, turned from his first mate and looked to the sound of the voice behind him. There, on the dock at the foot of the gangway, was an old man with a young woman standing beside him. His round ears proclaimed him as human, but his pale skin proclaimed he was not a Vilandian. *'Likely an Arcadian priest... He's dressed as a mendicant of Yorindar,'* Torgrim thought, looking him over. The old man looked ancient - at least eighty, perhaps older, and leaned on a weathered oak staff. He wore a plain gray robe, trimmed at hem and sleeve in black thread - the embroidery was Arcadian letters that spelled out the name of Yorindar over and over as they went 'round the cloth. The young woman at the old man's side was, in truth, only young in comparison to her companion, as she appeared to be in her late thirties. Torgrim could see little of her face, however, as she held her head bowed, and the crisp wind coming off the shore from the west had blown her long ebon hair across her face and neck. Both were otherwise ordinary looking to Torgrim, however, and had they not called out to him, he certainly would never have noticed them on the busy docks of Soldan. "Eh? What is it you want?" Torgrim called to them.

"Passage, Captain," the old man replied, and smiled, showing a set of strong, white teeth. "The dockmaster says you are bound for Arcadia. That is where I need to go, as well."

Torgrim shook his head. "Impossible. We've three cabins, and all three are booked and paid for this trip."

"Err... But, Captain," the first mate said, "Latros Cardan, the Duke's agent... He hasn't shown up yet."

Torgrim snorted. "The fat oaf will probably make an entrance at the last moment, it's his style."

The old man smiled again. "I sincerely doubt that, Captain. The word we heard passing through the city was that Latros Cardan choked on his breakfast this morning, and has died. As he ate three roast chickens every breakfast and has for years, it seems quite likely to me that the beleaguered chickens of Vilandia prayed to their chicken gods to deliver them from utter extinction at his hands, and had their prayers answered."

Torgrim burst out laughing, and was joined by the first mate and several nearby sailors. "You've a cruel wit, friend, but a true one," Torgrim said, catching his breath. "Well, the cabin's paid for this journey - if you and your... Err... Granddaughter wish to come, simply pay for her passage and I'll let the two of you have that cabin."

The woman looked up to Torgrim, and curtsied briefly, smiling, then drew her hair away from her face and neck. She was, Torgrim noticed, quite a lovely woman - and about her neck, she wore the slim steel collar of a slave. "With respect, Captain, I am not his kin, I am his servant and slave. This is Father Patience, a sorcerer and priest of Yorindar from Arcadia."

"Eh? I thought they didn't permit slavery in Arcadia," Torgrim replied.

The woman smiled again. "They do not, Captain. When we arrive, I will legally be free, should I choose. However, I do not. I have served Father Patience on his travels since I was a young woman."

"Hrm..." Torgrim replied. "You have her papers, priest? I'll not be stopped in Arcadian waters by one of their coastal vessels and arrested for breaking their laws, now."

"Yes, Captain, I do," the old man replied, producing them from a sleeve and holding them out to the captain.

The captain examined the papers for a long moment, then handed them back with a nod. "Well, then come aboard, priest. We sail with the tide, and that isn't long from now. The wind is good, as well - with luck, it will be good all the way to Arcadia."

"There will be little luck to it, Captain. You will arrive - the Ocean favors your journey," the priest replied, putting the papers away again.

Torgrim grinned. "Let's hope you're right, priest."

The slave woman reached out to take the old man's elbow, steadying the old man as he walked up the gangway. For his part, the old man leaned heavily on his staff, and walked with the trembling step of great age. The slave herself handed Torgrim the small payment for her passage. Once done, Torgrim ordered the first mate to show the two to their cabin. As they left the deck, Torgrim cast his eyes upon the sea. Fickle, ever-changing, the Goddess could be alternately kind and cruel, seemingly at whim. Yet, perhaps with a priest aboard, the trip would go smoothly - even if it was a priest of the foreign gods of the Arcadians.

The first mate returned to the main deck, and Torgrim nodded. The tide would turn soon - it was time to make ready to sail.

The Ocean - One.

"What is it?" Marilith asked, looking over my shoulder. "It looks like it was some kind of bird..."

I sighed, putting the tiny little skull back in the grass, then pulling my gloves back out from my belt. "Yes, it was a chicken. I can't tell which one it was, though. Probably Tiki, she was always getting out of the pen, she'd have been the one most likely to have escaped and survived awhile on the grasses before a fox or cat finally found her, I suppose." I gazed over the weed-ridden fields for a moment, then pointed. "Over there is where my house used to be."

Marilith nodded, looking it over. "Well, at least you know the cow was alright."

"Yes, yes..." I replied, still saddened. Calla had told me what became of my farm after I'd been abducted. Malik had, as I'd expected, tried to simply take over my father's farm using his powers as Village Master, and sell it off. Unfortunately for him, the row over my disappearance was a bit much for him to smooth over with a simple explanation and a quick sale of my animals. Several of my neighbors snuck onto my farm and stole Mimi, my cow - and grabbed as many chickens as they could in the bargain. Not to steal from me, of course, but to keep it all out of Malik's hands. A good portion of my personal belongings also were taken - though, of course, not everything. Mementos and personal things that had sentimental value to me had none to my neighbors, and they had been left behind. Now, decades later, everything I had treasured as a child was gone. Even the various pots and pans and tools of mine had broken or been lost over the years by their new owners. A lightning-sparked fire ten years ago had finished the rest, and all that remained of my farm was a few bits of stone in the grass that once was my house, and a broken-down stone wall that marked the edge of my father's land. I was sixteen when, by Malik's connivance, the Palomean slavers had taken me away. Now, I was thirty-seven, and not a trace of my childhood remained. "It's just sad to know that it's all gone..."

Marilith had dropped her transformation spell that had given her a human's appearance, and was in her primary form - an ebon-furred equine humanoid. Her head was that of an ebon horse with red, glowing eyes, and her legs were basically those of a horse. From the neck to about the rump, her body was much like that of a human woman, though covered in an ebon pelt like the rest of her, and having a long horse's tail, as well. Her other form was that of an ebon mare with glowing eyes, but Marilith preferred this form, as she had hands in it. She also preferred her humanoid form because she rather liked the black silk garments she'd been given by Joy, the giantess and companion of Eddas Ayar. The garments were quite simple, as befit Marilith's style - a band of black cloth she wore tied tightly across her breasts, and a simple loincloth of the same material, a small hole cut in the back for her horse-like tail and the ends hanging down to about her knees. Marilith had utterly loathed having to hide her true appearance with sorcery while in the village, however - "It makes my skin itch," she grumbled. She could, I suppose, have hidden her true appearance with some sort of illusion, but she said that illusions can be penetrated by those who are perceptive, and it was not worth the risk. She wanted my homecoming to be a happy one, she said, not one where the villagers ended up chasing us out of town with torches and pitchforks.

As a Nightmare, she once would have shifted her body's appearance with a simple act of will. Now, however, she could not. Though still the body of a Nightmare and a demon of hell and still able to assume either of her two basic forms at will, her body was no longer the ductile dream-warrior's body it had once been, but now was bound to this plane like that of any other mortal or immortal of this world, and subject to it's laws. Or, so she and the Great Mage, Eddas Ayar, had said. I didn't understand it well, myself, as I was still a mundane with no real grasp of sorcery. Despite the magic belt the Mer-Magi gave me having transformed me into what was essentially a red-haired mermaid who could form legs and scales of steel as she wished, I remained ignorant of the Laws of Magic.

But, no matter - Marilith was here because she loved me as a sister, and I her. Over decades of hearing her voice and she mine during my youth, quiet mental whispers over thousands of leagues, we had bonded. I couldn't imagine spending even a moment of my life without her - and she often said the same to me. She was, despite everything, a sister of my soul, and I hers.

Marilith reached her arms around me, and we shared a hug. *"Well, the Goddess provided for the animals - I suppose that's the best one can ask. Even little Tiki probably enjoyed herself more darting about and eating bugs in the wild than she would have as just one brood hen among many in your neighbor's farm. As my people say - 'You can't return to your childhood nexus,'"* Marilith said, and sighed quietly. In her normal forms of either horse or equine humanoid, her voice was feminine, yet hollow and unearthly. But, it was just something you got used to once you got to know her.

"Or, as we say here in Vilandia, *"You can't go home again,"*" I replied, and we shared a smile. Of course, for Marilith, that was more than literally true. I, at least, could return to my father's farm. She

couldn't do the same - her agreeing to remain here on the mortal plane with me meant that she literally could never return to her home dimension again - and she hadn't seen her home in almost two thousand years. "I'm sorry - here I am moping over the farm, and you have a bit more to mope about than I do, I think."

Marilith sighed for a moment, and we held hands while she gazed off into the distance, her lambent eyes misting slightly. *"Well, yes... I miss many things about home... The Temple of Pain is on the sixty-ninth level, and that's just a short hop away from my Clan-house. I used to visit there often as a child..."* she said, then grinned wryly. *"Oh, I was quite a religious little girl, let me tell you!"*

"Err... The Temple of Pain? It doesn't sound terribly pleasant. Why would anyone go there? Do some of your people... Err... *Enjoy* pain, or something?"

Marilith laughed. *"Oh, no! You don't go there to receive pain, or anything like that. You go there to have your pains removed... Pain of the body, and pain of the spirit. Not just injuries to the body, but anguish, angst, sadness, disappointment... Any pain of the body or soul. The High Priest, Moblith, eases your pain, taking it onto himself. He's also very handsome, I was quite taken with him as a little girl!"*

I laughed, as well - I should have known. Though humans and others of this plane saw Marilith's people as universally evil, they weren't, really - they were simply different. Like any other people, some were good, some were evil, and some merely misguided. They were often as different from humans as night from day, yet, there were still commonalities which rang true, despite the differences. "Handsome? What's he look like?"

"An absolutely darling mass of multi-hued flesh that constantly writhes and twitches, endlessly forming pseudopods tipped with eyes, claws, teeth, and other appendages he needs at any given moment," Marilith replied, and I tried not to giggle - what demons considered handsome and what humans did was not precisely the same thing, apparently. *"He's really a wonderful being, I used to chat with him quite a bit as a child. I even briefly considered becoming a priestess, myself."*

"Oh? What made you change your mind?" I asked, curious.

Marilith scuffed her hoof, looking down to the ground in a blush. *"Umm... Well, that whole 'celibacy' thing... Err... Well, it was a bit disenchanting,"* she replied, and I burst into giggles, despite myself. Marilith grinned back at me for a moment, then sighed again. *"Of course, I suppose I don't have much choice, now. It's not likely I'll meet a male demon here on the Prime Material..."*

"I'm sorry," I replied. Marilith had stayed out of love for me, but now there was no way home for her.

Marilith just grinned and shook her head. *"Don't be, silly. I want to be here with you, my soul-sister. I guess I was just making a point, really - no matter who you are or where you are, you can't go home again. Instead, you have to make your home where you are. And for me, my home is wherever you are, Sister."*

"For me, too," I replied with a broad grin, and we shared a hug for a long moment.

We gazed at each other after that in silence, holding each other's hands, I watching the twin coals of her luminous red eyes, and she gazing back at me. Eddas Ayar had once said that our words for "demon" and "hell" really weren't very descriptive of the reality - that demons were far more than simply hostile, otherworldly beings, and hell was far more than a place of torment for the damned, and might even be some sort of cosmic rubbish bin for the souls of failed worshippers. It was, Eddas said, all a part of a vast game the gods played among themselves, the bodies and souls of mortals and immortals alike as their pawns. He had also said that gazing at Marilith and I, he could sense the greater reality between us, that of a Pawn of the Gods... Perhaps this was true. But, it mattered little. I only knew that before me stood my soul-sister, a woman who had guided me since I was sixteen years old, and had a heart I knew to be full of good, not evil. That, to me, was all that mattered.

Marilith tossed her mane, looking around the farm. *"Well, Absor said that legally the land reverted to the village in communal estate years ago, but none have staked claim to it. If everyone has left the land alone since then, as he and Calla said, perhaps we may find something here, yet."*

"I'm not quite sure I understand what you intend. Can you explain it to me?"

"Well, it's somewhat difficult to explain. My own magic is still that of the Will and the Word, but being bound to this plane, I have to follow the Laws of Magic, which are part of the Divine

Covenant between the gods which formed the Arc of Time and underlies all the structures of this plane and much of the universe in general. Before I was bound here, I could have just willed the essence of the land to speak, and give me the knowledge I seek - the location of Orissa, or at least a direction to follow. But, by the Laws of Magic that govern the Prime Material, that would run straight up against the Law of Taintivity. A direct warping of mana-energy that served only immediate, concrete needs and had no abstract application? A human sorcerer who tried a spell formula like that would find the drain impossibly high, they'd simply die in the casting. For me, I couldn't possibly muster the energy and strength of will required to bend the mana-energy and make it happen, it would take the will of a god to even attempt something that directly contrary to Taintivity."

"Err... I see... I think," I replied, not really understanding very well.

Marilith nodded. *"Well, barring that, all I can do is use my own astral perception, and assense the area to try to seek an area she last touched that was not touched much by others, and try to detect her trail much like a wolf might sniff out the tracks of an animal which had passed."*

"Assense?"

"Err... Yes. Assense. To perceive astrally."

"But it's been decades, how would there be a scent left?" I wondered, blinking in confusion.

"Well... I don't know if I can explain it well to you, you're a mundane. Still, it's not a physical scent, but an astral emanation. As you walk through the land, you leave a mark upon it on the astral much as your feet leave tracks upon the ground, in accordance with the Law of Contagion. If she walked through here, her astral presence left a mark. The astral plane, to my perception, is much like a glowing, vaporous existence overlaid upon that of ordinary reality. I do not sense it with my eyes or nose or ears, however, I sense it with my mind - and a human mage would perceive it differently, because the whole experience of perception is different for your people to begin with, so it's even harder to explain to you..." she replied, then tossed her mane in dismissal. *"No matter - the strength of that mark is inversely proportional to a logarithmic function of the amount of time that has passed since she last passed this way - and it's been over a decade, nearly two. If any sign of her passage exists, it will be remarkably faint, and I might not be able to assense it at all. I am merely a lesser demon, Sister, not a Great Mage."*

"Is it even possible, then?"

"Perhaps. The strength of the initial impression is directly proportional to the emotional involvement of passing through a particular area, and from what you told me, you and Orissa shared many happy times at this farm. After you were gone, Calla said she visited here many times, alone, and would weep often. Emanations like that are very strong when first laid down, and there is a slim chance that faint traces of them might be left today."

"I see. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Yes - take a seat on those stones, there, and let me work at it a bit. And try to be quiet and remain calm, Sister. Your own emotions and mine leave their own astral residue, and make the work even harder."

I grinned. "In other words, sit down, shut up, and let you concentrate."

Marilith laughed. "Yes, sorry!"

"It's alright - I don't understand exactly, but I understand enough to know you need to concentrate." I hugged her again, grinning, then sat down on a bit of the stone rubble that once was my fence, and tried to be quiet.

Marilith knelt on the grass, closing her eyes, and simply sat there for the longest time. I did not know what she was doing... Trying to relax her mind? Opening some sort of inner eye I did not possess? I did not know. She simply knelt there quietly, breathing in through her nose, as though meditating, or perhaps asleep.

After the longest moment, however, she slowly opened her eyes, and rose to her feet, her glowing gaze locked on a small section of the tumble-down fence nearby. With an intent expression, she walked over to the fence, gazed around, then stepped over it and began striding off down the road that led past my farm. Summoning my magic lance to my grip with a thought, I scrambled to my feet and began trotting after her.

"A strong emanation, Sister... And an old one... One of misery... Deep sorrow... Anguish... A young girl... Almost certainly Orissa..." Marilith muttered, following a trail invisible to me. As we grew farther from the farm, however, her steps slowed, and her gaze became lost in the nearby trees, casting her head about as though searching for something. Finally she stopped about half a league from my farm, and after a long moment, she sighed. *"It fades below the background aura of the astral plane about here."*

"You can follow it no farther?"

"No, Sister. Countless thousands of beings, animal and human, have passed this way, and the emanation was already faint with decades of age. Had she traveled this way many times, and her heart filled with the same emotion each time, then perhaps..." she said, then sighed again. *"But, no. I sense only that she walked off in this direction, to the south, many years ago... And did not return."* Marilith hung her head. *"I am sorry, Sister. I have failed you... And the Goddess, who asked us to find your childhood friend."*

I smiled, and gave Marilith a hug, which she returned after a moment. "Now, now. You've given us a direction, at least. That's better than nothing - and perhaps you'll sense more as we follow that direction."

"Only if something tremendously joyous or incredibly dire happened to Orissa years ago, Sister. All I can tell you is she went this direction, almost twenty years ago, and she was not taken by force. Beyond this point..." Marilith replied, and shrugged. *"Anything could have happened. She could simply have wandered off in the wrong direction, intending to head northwards to your village, became lost and starved in the wilderness."*

I blinked. "Wouldn't that be dire enough for you to sense it?"

"No, Sister. Many ordinary creatures starve to death in winter, and the pain of their slow deaths marks the astral just as surely as that of any human or elf. The emanation is not quite as strong, as their spirits are not as strong, but there are many, many more of them. It is not likely I would sense an ordinary death such as that after this length of time. Only something truly extraordinary. And, of course, if she did not die at all, I could not sense beyond the background glow unless her emotions were quite strong - great joy, or great misery. I am only an equilibranche, Sister - a lesser demon. In this, I am equal in strength and skill to an accomplished mortal wizard. It would take a greater being than I to be more precise from this point onwards. A greater demon, a dragon, or a Great Mage... Or, perhaps, one of the Witch Women of Hyperborea. The astral vision of the Witch Women is far keener than that of any demon, though our senses extend beyond the astral and are not entirely limited by our physical location."

I considered it. "Hmmm... Well, we met little Kyrie years ago, she's one of the Witch-Women. She'd be fourteen, now, but I think she'd still remember us. Do you think she might help?"

"We could ask," Marilith replied with a shrug.

I nodded. "Can you take us there?"

Marilith grinned wryly. *"I can, but I don't know if it would be wise. Of all the Witch Women, we have only ever met Kyrie and her mother. To the rest of them, you and I are strangers - and as they are in Hyperborea, it is early evening there, now."*

"It is? But it's day, here!"

"As I told you once before, Sister, the world is round, like a ball, and the sun like a candle shining light on one side. The ball is about eleven thousand leagues in diameter and it's flattened a bit at the top and bottom, but it's essentially a ball. They are a good three thousand leagues to the east of us, Sister - the ball turns, making day and night for each part of the world. We are on the light side, presently, and they just entering the shadow - for us, it is still two hours to sunset, but for them, it is well into night."

"Ah, I see what you're getting at. A lesser demon and a strange warrior-maid none of them have met

suddenly appearing in their village in the night-time shadows might startle them, and cause them to attack in self-defense."

Marilith laughed. *"No, no! That's not what I meant. Their astral vision is uncannily keen - they would know simply by looking at us that we meant them no harm, simply because they could see it in our auras,"* she giggled. *"What I meant was that we are strangers to virtually all of them, and they are likely asleep. Each of them is a powerful mage in their own right, Sister, and their race was fathered by a Great Mage. And more, their culture is one that highly prizes politeness, respect, and civility. We should treat them with the utmost civility and respect, and not go tapping at a stranger's door after they've gone to bed in hopes of finding one among them we might know to ask them a favor. We should at least wait until dawn."*

"I see..." I replied, thinking.

"And we should bring gifts."

"Gifts?"

"Yes. Gifts of friendship. We only truly know Eddas Ayar - and he is an Ancient One, Sister, a true Great Mage. He is tremendously powerful, quite involved in his own work, and unless Yorindar, the god he serves directs him to assist us, he really has little reason to help us other than perhaps kindness. The gods have their own plans for him, and we are likely not any part of that. As for the Witch-Women, his daughters... Well, we only have befriended Kyrie, and then when she was just a child of ten. We can hardly call upon that now, when she is fourteen. Her mother would likely object to us wanting to take her daughter off gallivanting about a strange land three thousand leagues away to help near-strangers search for someone she does not know and cares nothing about."

"Hmmm... A good point, that. If I were Kyrie's mother, I can't say as I'd necessarily let her go, either."

"So, we must bring gifts," Marilith concluded firmly. *"Friendship-gifts, to renew our friendship with them and improve the chances that they will aid us."*

"What could we possibly bring that they might want? Gold?"

Marilith shook her head. *"The Witch-Women of Hyperborea have little need of gold or silver - in that regard, they are much like their father, Eddas Ayar. Their civilization lies in ruins about them, Sister, and they work to build a new one on the ruined stones of the old - but there still are no shops for them to spend gold in. Besides, by Hyperborean culture, a friendship-gift of money would be considered quite tacky."*

"Well, what *should* we bring, then?"

Marilith paused, thinking. *"Well... I watched their culture of old, Sister, ages ago before my imprisonment. Eddas Ayar lived in those times, and in many ways his heart is quite unchanged, today. The Witch-Women are something new, from my perspective, and their culture is still developing. I do not know what they might consider a good friendship gift... But, as for Eddas Ayar, he would still see gifts the same way the rest of his people did, eighteen or nineteen centuries ago. Each type of gift has a particular meaning and nuance - knives were never given, for instance, as a knife was a symbol of death or separation. Swords, on the other hand, were symbols of respect and power, and were occasionally given to curry the favor of nobles or kings... Well, but that wasn't truly a friendship gift, swords are far too expensive. Food and drink were the most common gifts of friendship."*

I shrugged. "Well, we'll bring food and drink, then."

"Ah, but the type of food one gave was quite important, Sister. Wine, for example, symbolized cherished companionship, and the finer the wine, the more cherished the receiver is in the eyes of the giver. Cake symbolized love, while pastry symbolized laughter. White bread symbolized trust, while black bread symbolized reliability. Cheese symbolized admiration, generally speaking, but this varied a bit by the type of cheese-"

"Enough!" I interrupted, my head already spinning. "Can't you just use your magic to conjure whatever would be appropriate?"

Marilith shook her head. *"No, Sister. Conjured food and drink might be fine for a mundane, but to a Great Mage such as Eddas Ayar or to any of the Witch-Women of Hyperborea, it's origins would be obvious at a glance. Conjured food and drink was considered quite tacky."*

"And we don't know how the Witch-Women would consider any of it, anyway - all you've said only would apply to Eddas Ayar, right?"

"Right," Marilith agreed, nodding.

"Hmmm... Well, I still have quite a bit of goat-cheese back home on Round Island," I said, thinking. The herd of wild goats back on the island of my mer-folk clan was relatively tame, and a little cave near the freshwater lake in the center of the island had been made into a little cheese-cellar decades ago by the island's original inhabitant, a marooned Vilandian sailor named Barro. Barro was now mere bones buried nearby the shack he'd built, but his cheese-cellar remained, and was used by me to supplement my diet with tasty goat-cheese. "Perhaps a wheel of it would be alright?"

Marilith shrugged. *"It may, for Eddas Ayar."*

"Well, perhaps if we can get on his good side, he can then ask the Witch-Women to help us."

"Assuming our not visiting him in four years hasn't put him completely off. If it has, we'd basically be like anyone else coming to a Great Mage to ask them for a favor. Lacking anything they want or need, we'd have little left but to throw ourselves to the ground and grovel at his feet."

I sighed. "Well... Orissa must be found. If the gifts don't work, we'll try that."

Marilith laughed. *"Sister, I was joking!"*

"But I'm not. We must find Orissa," I replied, then held out my hand. "Come - take us back to the island, and I'll select the best wheel of cheese I have. Then, when it's morning there, we'll go to Eddas Ayar's tower."

Marilith nodded, taking my hand, then gestured. The world blurred, and we were gone.

The Ocean - Two.

The next morning, Marilith brought us to Eddas Ayar's tower, a wheel of cheese in my arms. The cheese-molds Barro had made decades ago were quite large, and the wheel of cheese I was carrying was two hands thick and a cubit across. It was actually somewhat heavy as well as bulky, but as I had the strength of a mermaid through the magic belt the mer-magi had given me, I hardly noticed. Marilith carried my lance, as the cheese was quite an armful - I asked her if she wanted to carry the cheese, but she said she was afraid she might get black hairs from her pelt on its cloth wrapper. We had nothing to wrap it or box it in, and as we wanted the gift to be perfect, we took few chances.

Of course, we'd prepared as best we could. I'd brushed Marilith's pelt and mane until it looked perfect, and she in turn worked on my hair, styling it as best she could. My boots and gloves were clean as a new knife, and I wore one of the better lavender dresses that Joy had made for me four years before. Living among mer-folk half my life, I'd gone without clothes for many years, wearing nothing but my scales, and was quite used to it. Joy, Eddas Ayar's companion, was actually a little giantess, and apparently giants were a people of quite conservative ways. She had been utterly shocked to learn that the scales I wore all the time weren't armor, but were actually a part of my skin I could extend or conceal

as I wished - in truth, I had been naked most of my life. Joy had made several dresses, blouses and skirts for me to wear during the time we were with them, four years ago, which I had accepted with enormous embarrassment. Marilith also had no real concern for clothes one way or another, being a demon, and the simple loincloth and apodesmos Joy had made for her was hardly near the modest garments Joy had made for me. Still, it apparently satisfied Joy's giantish sensibilities, as she apparently didn't expect a demon to dress better anyway.

Marilith didn't take us directly to the base of the tower - she said it would be more proper to walk down the road, as she had been able to see people at the base of the tower by the time we were ready and appearing suddenly in their midst might surprise them unnecessarily. Her demonic vision, amazing in its scope as she could perceive something like that at a tremendous distance, was still limited. It was not precise enough for her to tell *who* was at the base of the tower when she was standing in our little house on Round Island. Really, she couldn't even tell me how *many* people were there, though she guessed no more than two or three. Thus, we appeared just beyond the bend in the road to the north of the tower, and began walking.

It was truly a lovely day - the neat rows of *byallar*-trees nearby were all in the full of their spring blossom, covered with countless tiny white flowers that filled the air with a sweet, almost heavenly fragrance. I could see the top of the white-marble tower with its golden dome poking above the tops of the *byallar*-trees as we walked down the road, and was quite nervous. "I hope we look alright," I muttered quietly.

"We look as good as we can, for now," Marilith replied, my lance over one shoulder. "Remember, after we give our gift, we wait until an appropriate moment in the conversation before we begin talking about what we really need. Politeness was quite important to the Hyperboreans of old, as I remember from watching them, and I'm quite sure Eddas Ayar hasn't changed."

"I still say you should have used your magic to conjure some finery for us."

"Eddas Ayar is a Great Mage, Sister, and an Ancient One. He would not have been impressed by such frippery. I think Joy will be pleased to see us wearing the garments she made for us, and her impression of us will probably count more. Remember, inside that little half-elf body he wears, Eddas Ayar is a man - and, Joy is his wife, after a fashion. If Joy is happy with us, Eddas Ayar will be more pleasantly disposed to us. If she dislikes us, however, things may be extremely difficult."

"Ack! Why did you say that?! Now I'm *really* nervous!"

Marilith laughed. *"I'm sorry, Sister, it's merely my nature - I'm sure everything will be fine. Now smile, Sister. Your face looks positively dour when you frown."*

Slowly we rounded the bend in the road, and the base of the tower came in view. Beneath the lone *byallar*-tree that grew at the base of the tower, Eddas Ayar sat, a small table beside her. Eddas Ayar, of course, still looked as I last saw her - a small, black-haired half-elf maiden who dressed in robes of deep black. She (or rather *he*, as he was, in truth, an ancient man trapped in the body of a woman) seemed quite absorbed in some tome that lay across his lap, and did not look up as we approached. Eddas Ayar's situation was still quite confusing to me, at times, and I often wondered how Joy dealt with it.

I forced a smile to my face, and kept walking with Marilith.

"Hello!" a woman's voice called. It was Joy, coming out of the tower with a chair in each hand. "I saw you approach from the top of the tower and brought some extra chairs - come, sit with us! Eddas and I are quite pleased to see you again."

"Thank you, Joy," I replied, smiling broadly.

Eddas Ayar closed the book in her lap, setting it upon the table and rising to her feet. "Good morning, Sasha, Marilith. What brings you two to my tower today?" Eddas called, bowing.

"Friendship, mostly, Master Eddas," Marilith replied smoothly as she curtsyed. *"We've brought a small token of our affection for you, as well."*

"Yes... Ummm... I hope you like it, I made it myself," I added, hoping I hadn't forgotten Calla's lessons in curtsying when I was a child as I tried to imitate Marilith.

"You make cheese?" Joy asked as she and Eddas took their seats - judging by the cups on the table, they were apparently having a quiet cup of *byallar* and enjoying a pleasant morning when we approached. The strange black concoction, made from the roasted and ground seeds of the trees about us, was rather bitter to my tongue, but quite interesting with a drop of milk and a dash of honey.

"Well, yes. There are many goats on Round Island, and they're all very tame. I hunted out the ones that weren't over the course of a decade or so. When I'm there, I milk the nannies, and make the milk into cheese," I replied, blushing a bit.

"You can put it down here, if you like, Sasha," Eddas said, gesturing to the table she sat beside.

"Thank you," I said, laying the cheese down on the table.

"Hmmm... It smells quite interesting," Eddas said, producing a small knife from somewhere in her robes and unwrapping the cloth from the cheese. After cutting off a small bit, Eddas popped it into her mouth. As we sat, her eyes went wide. "Oh!"

"Is something wrong?" I asked, a bit worried.

"Joy! You must try this!" Eddas yelped, cutting another small slice and handing it to Joy.

Joy tried it, and nodded. "It's quite nice, actually. Much better than that dwarven cheese Mungim brought by the other year. I know you like dwarven cheese, Old Man, but it was a trifle bitter for my taste, and all those holes in it look quite odd. This is much better. A little sharp, a little sweet... Quite nice."

"Joy, you don't understand! This is *precisely* like Rhendish White! I used to *love* that! I haven't had it in... Gods! Two thousand years! Oh! Oh, Joy! It's incredible!"

"Err... Rhendish White?" I asked.

"Yes! There was a cheese shop in Dhobari that my cook, Kylinae, used to visit once a month and buy cheese for my larder. My absolute favorite was Rhendish White! Kylinae made many fabulous dishes with it, but I loved it best just as it was, sliced thin and with a nice hot cup of *byallar*! Kylinae also made a scrumptious fondue with it that Dyarzi used to love, and... Oh, my..." Eddas replied, then sighed, lowering her head.

I started to open my mouth to say something, but Joy simply smiled, holding a finger to her lips. She then looked to Eddas, reaching out to pat her shoulder. "Good memories, Old Man?"

"Yes," Eddas replied, her head still down.

"Shall I wrap it back up and put it in our larder?"

"Please," Eddas replied, wiping her eyes with a gloved hand.

As Joy walked off, the wheel of cheese in her hands, Eddas Ayar stared quietly at the ground at her feet. Marilith was smiling, and she reached across from where she sat to squeeze my hand. I smiled back, not quite certain what to make of it all. Eddas had told me a brief version of her story four years ago. I knew her soul was that of an ancient man from a long gone civilization, and it seemed obvious that our little gift had brought back memories of times and people long gone. Yet as I sat there, watching her, I could see both happiness and melancholy in her face, and I wondered if our simple gift had truly been the right thing to do. Yes, my childhood home was long gone, now. But Vilandia still stood - and by my side was my soul-sister, Marilith, whose voice I had heard since I was sixteen years old. And, of course, my home since the age of sixteen and all my clan, the mer-folk of Round Island, still existed. There wasn't really a true sense of disconnection from my past, for me. My childhood farm was gone, but that wasn't quite as dramatic a loss, really. Vilandia still existed, my old village was still there, and the people there still remembered me fondly. But for Eddas Ayar, everything and everyone he ever knew was long gone, and would never return. I wasn't quite sure I could be strong enough to take that, were our situations reversed.

Finally, just as Joy was returning from within the tower, Eddas Ayar looked up, and smiled. "My dear Sasha... My dear Marilith. You two have given me a priceless gift. I cannot possibly thank you enough."

"You're welcome," I replied, blushing.

Marilith smiled. *"It was nothing, Master Eddas. Your healing of me was far more than we could ever repay,"* Marilith replied.

"Now, I realize you're pressed for time, as you're almost certainly trying to accomplish something for the Goddess of the Ocean, so why don't you simply come out and tell me what it is you need from me?"

I blinked in astonishment, and Marilith gasped.

Joy refilled her cup of *byallar*, watching us silently, while Eddas Ayar smiled. "Come, come. Out with it," Eddas said.

"But... But how did you know?!" Marilith gasped.

"My dear, you forget, I've been around awhile, and the dealings of the gods are not unfamiliar to me. Yorindar hinted in a dream three years ago that you were coming - he hints a lot, rather than speaking directly. He has little choice, it has to do with Paradox and basic temporal theory. Be that as it may, however, I knew you were coming. And last night, I received this sign," she said, pointing to one of the raven feathers tucked beneath her hair-band. "That's when I knew I would be involved, and it would begin immediately. Whatever the Ocean intends, it's obvious you need my help in doing it. I received this sign a few hours after sunset - likely after the two of you had made a decision that inextricably involved me."

"Really?!" I gasped, amazed.

"Yes, quite."

"Forgive me, Master Eddas," Marilith said, bowing her head in a blush, "but I fail to see how our decision to ask for your help would mark a moment of significance."

"It wasn't an **Event**, no. An **Event** is a moment the gods work towards specifically in the future. Making an **Event** happen or fail to happen is the crux of their conflicts - they're the focal points of what they're attempting to do. But, your decision to ask me was significant, nonetheless. The decisions of ordinary mortals carry a lot more weight in the universe than you would think, Marilith. Such are the elements of basic temporal theory, which describes the Arc of Time. We key pawns carry even greater weight than that with our decisions, as the gods are working through us, often directly. The gods themselves are immune to Paradox - they can place event or cause willy-nilly in any order they like. Only *after* they have acted are they limited by Paradox - they cannot un-do what they have done, even though what they have done may have been to put event before cause rather than cause before event. We, on the other hand, have a far more complicated series of limitations which are described by the Laws of Paradox and temporal mathematics. Spatio-temporal existence and perceptual loci play a critical role for us in limiting what we can and can't do. For example, an ordinary mortal may read a book of prophecy with no consequences, even if every prophecy they read is an **Event**. Standing in the present, they can know the future their gods intend and tell anyone they wish, and this is not Irrevocable Paradox because they are mere mortals, and their perceptual loci regarding the future is that of possibilities, not certainties. It is Paradox, yes, but not Irrevocable Paradox. We, however, are Pawns of the Gods, and cannot do the same. If we read the same book of prophecies and the prophecies were true and described **Events**, one of us speaking of an **Event** in the future while standing in the present holds the possibility of creating an Irrevocable Paradox of event before cause. And an Irrevocable Paradox will shatter the Arc of Time and bring the universe to an end, restoring it to the non-causal chaos that existed prior to the formation of the Arc of Time under the Divine Covenant."

"*I... I see...*" Marilith replied. Gone was her earlier confidence and self-assurance, replaced by the same insecurity that we both had experienced the last time we were in the presence of Eddas Ayar, four years before.

"I'm afraid I don't," I said, shaking my head and not feeling any more confident than Marilith did. Just trying to follow what Eddas Ayar had said made my head spin.

Eddas smiled. "Well, Sasha, I'll spare you the boring mathematics of it, but the gist of it is that the sign

I received - this raven feather - could not be given to me until you actually made the decision that committed yourself to coming here, because both you and I were involved. For you and I, standing in the present, event must always follow cause, never the other way around. You see-

Joy smiled, sipping at her cup. "Spare them the lecture, Old Man, you're making them dizzy. You tried to explain Paradox to me two years ago and I thought my head would burst."

I giggled, but Marilith simply shook her head silently. Eddas Ayar chuckled at Joy, then looked back to us. "Well, alright, I'll spare you the lecture for now. Just tell me what it is that brings you here, today."

"Well, when I was a child, I had a friend in my village - Orissa. Marilith heard the Ocean whisper her name. It's become obvious to us we're to find her. Yet, when we went to my village to do so, we discovered she was nowhere to be found. Apparently, she disappeared a few years after Malik sold me to the Palomean slavers."

"How many years ago was this?"

"Over sixteen, Master Eddas," Marilith replied, looking up. "I tried to follow her trail by observing the astral from the point where we know she was last at Sasha's family farm, but it faded beneath the background aura of the astral plane about half a league down the road from where it began."

Eddas Ayar stroked her chin with an ebon-gloved hand. "Hmmm... A bit too long to use an Invisible Hound to find her, the trail would be far too faint, even if we had a drop of her blood. One of my daughters or granddaughters might do better, but unless your friend Orissa is waiting by the roadside just a few leagues on or was dragged screaming and kicking in unrelenting agony all the way to wherever she is now, it's not likely they'd be much better. That's quite a long time for any astral residue to remain, only something tremendously dramatic would be noticed."

"So she cannot be found?" I asked, my heart sinking.

Eddas smiled, setting her cup on the table beside her. "Oh, I didn't say that. There's quite a few options available to us," Eddas replied, and stood. "Come - take me to this farm of yours, and I'll have a look about."

"I'll come, as well," Joy said, also standing. "If you'll give me a few minutes to put everything away, that is. I've never been to Vilandia before, I find the notion of a visit quite interesting."

"Certainly, Joy!" I replied, smiling.

With Eddas helping, it didn't take long for Joy to put away the small table, chairs, *byallar* pot and the cups. The small fire in the stone-lined firepit they'd been heating the pot of *byallar* over, Eddas doused with a gesture, and they were ready. Marilith handed my lance back to me, then took my hand and Eddas' in hers, while Eddas took Joy's hand. "*Alright - here we go!*" Marilith called. The world blurred, and we were gone.

The Ocean - Three.

While Marilith, Joy and I sat on the rubble of the stone fence, watching, Eddas Ayar strolled back and forth across the weed-strewn lands that once were my farm, her intent gaze locked on the ground. What she was looking at, I had no idea - but I suspected she was examining the same things that Marilith had examined the day before. Her hands she held clasped behind her, and her ebon staff she had simply tucked under one arm. As for me, I had tucked my boots and gloves back into the little magic bottle I wore on my wrist, and now just wore my lavender dress as I sat beside Marilith. Certainly I knew I looked far more impressive wearing just my steel scales, but it hardly felt right at the moment. Eddas Ayar knew that my scales were not armor, but a part of my skin. Right now, I felt like I was very much like an ignorant little girl compared to Eddas Ayar, and I didn't want her looking at my scales and

knowing I was silly enough to stand before her naked.

Eddas Ayar had said during the time she healed Marilith that there would be times I would seem a burden to her, and she to me. Now was, indeed, one of those times. I knew that I was merely a mundane, with no ability to do sorcery at all - and as such, utterly useless in this situation. Even walking around or getting anxious about their task somehow made their task harder, in a way I simply did not understand. I so *desperately* wished I could be more useful. But, there was literally nothing I could do. Both Marilith and Eddas Ayar were not only dealing with forces I did not comprehend, they were apparently now also dealing with forces I could not even detect. It was much like I was somehow blind, and they could see. I leaned over to Marilith, and whispered as much into her furry ear, sighing again.

Marilith nodded, her eyes on Eddas Ayar, and whispered into my ear. *"I know how you feel, Sister. Eddas Ayar is so much more powerful than I, and has so much more knowledge... I feel just as you do. I want to help so much, but I cannot. I am merely a lesser demon, and as such, my powers and abilities are but a shadow of those of a Great Mage such as Eddas Ayar. There is literally nothing I can do that could help in this task. Once again I am left feeling much as I did four years ago, when we were at his tower - it's as though I am but a child in need of diapers compared to him, even though I am several centuries older than he. It's quite upsetting, really."*

"Stop that whispering, you two, you'll distract Eddas," Joy muttered, smoothing her dress from an idle breeze.

"Sorry," I replied sheepishly, and both Marilith and I held our tongues.

After a long moment, Eddas Ayar paused, still gazing at the ground. "Ah, there's something," she said, straightening up. She dropped her staff into her left hand and leaned on it, stroking her chin with her right hand as she examined the ground. "Hmmm... Scattered a bit, though, may not be possible... Hmmm... Well, let's try it." Then, to my surprise, Eddas Ayar straightened up with a smile and began to hum softly, gesturing with her free hand.

It was a wordless melody that meant nothing to me, but the notes seemed to enchant Marilith. Marilith tipped her head as she watched, captivated. *"Oh, my..."* she whispered.

"What is it?" I whispered back.

"You cannot see his astral aura, Sister, but... My word... This is incredibly beautiful to watch, for me."

I wondered what Marilith might truly be seeing, when suddenly there was a twitch among the grasses and weeds. Little bits of white leapt and skipped from the grass, bounding and rolling together to a central point at Eddas Ayar's feet. After a moment of shock, I realized they were *bones* - and shortly, the bones had assembled themselves into the skeleton of a small chicken. Eddas Ayar smiled broadly. "Hello, my little friend!"

The skeletal bird flapped its wings with a clatter of bones, its beak clacking as it made some kind of reply.

"My, yes, that's quite interesting. Now, I have several questions for you that may be a bit difficult, so pay attention."

I blinked, utterly astonished. "You... What have you done?! What is that?!"

Eddas Ayar smiled. "It's a chicken, dear."

"Well, I can see that, but how-"

"I called to it, and animated it with UnLife energy. It's a rather complex little enchantment, much like the Spell of Communication with the Dead - though I've had to use a bit of my own powers as the Raven of Yorindar to alter the basics of it, as that spell doesn't work on animals. Currently, the bones of this little creature are inhabited by an essence of UnLife, which thinks that it is the chicken that once owned these bones. It's quite an excitable little creature, and it's currently babbling on about eggs."

"Err... Eggs?" I asked, blinking in confusion.

"Yes, quite. Eggs form the main focus of any female bird's life, particularly with chickens, as we've bred them to lay eggs constantly. This little thing doesn't really know it's dead, or that it should be afraid of me if it was alive - the spell normally allows a human or humanoid skull to be filled with a very low-grade essence of UnLife energy, which reads the patterns impressed on the skull by the spirit that once housed it, and can answer any question from that person's life. I'd have just used that spell, but it doesn't work on animals, as they've no language per-se. So, what I've done here is a bit more complicated than the Spell of Communication with the Dead, as we're dealing with an animal carcass and it needed to be filled with a somewhat higher UnLife essence to be able to communicate at all, but the end result is similar. Understand?"

"Well, no, not really, but don't let that stop you," I replied, grinning wryly.

Joy shook her head. "I've almost gotten to the point where that doesn't send shivers down my spine, Old Man. Only the tiniest bit of a shudder, that time."

"We'll have my musicians play for you a few more times, then, and you'll have it," Eddas replied, and grinned as Joy made a *moue'* of disgust.

"*Do carry on, Master Eddas,*" Marilith said, gazing at the skeletal bird with interest.

"Thank you," Eddas replied, smiling, then turned back to the skeletal chicken. Eddas appeared to be listening to the little creature as it flapped and hopped and clacked it's beak, then would mutter to it quietly, then listen again. "I do believe you knew this creature when it was alive, Sasha," Eddas said after a bit.

"Well, yes, that's probably Tiki. She was always getting out of the pen when I was a girl. After I was sold to the Palomean slavers, she probably escaped before my neighbors came by to collect my animals and survived for a bit on her own."

"That's what she appears to be saying. Apparently she died during the first winter that followed."

"Aww... Poor little Tiki!" I said, sighing.

"Don't worry, dear, I can tell you she was quite happy all the way up to the end. The first snow apparently caught her sleeping, and she froze before she really knew what was happening. She apparently missed you quite a bit once you were gone, however."

"Err... She missed me? Tiki seemed just as skittish of me as any of the other chickens. More so, really."

"Birds don't display affection like a dog or cat, Sasha. Besides, once you were gone, the free food stopped," Eddas replied, then gestured at the ground briefly, causing a small clod of topsoil to flop away from the ground. "Come, come! In we go!" Tiki's little skeleton stepped over to the small hole, and settled herself down into it like a hen settling onto her eggs in a nest. "Rest," Eddas called, and the bones collapsed into the hole. Eddas flipped her hand, and the little clod of dirt flapped back over Tiki's bones, covering them completely.

"Well..." I said, somewhat taken aback. "That was... A bit startling."

"You should try living with him," Joy replied, and Eddas chuckled.

"Were you able to learn anything useful from the bones, Master Eddas?" Marilith asked.

Eddas tamped the edges of the tiny grave down with the end of her staff as she replied. "Unfortunately, no. That animal died the same winter Sasha was abducted. That meant she couldn't have seen anything the day of Orissa's disappearance four years later." Eddas paused, stroking her chin. "Hmmm... I should

probably get a few chickens for you, Joy. An egg or two for breakfast in the mornings might be nice."

"The cackling of the hens would drive you to distraction, Old Man, and hens won't lay unless a cock gets them started. And the first time the cock woke you up an hour before dawn with it's crowing, you'd probably blast the lot to a cloud of feathers."

Eddas snorted. "Certainly not, I've a bit more patience than that. I'd manage to endure it to at least the third or fourth time, almost certainly," she said, then winked as Joy and Marilith giggled.

I was still somewhat taken aback by the whole experience of watching Tiki's skeleton, but managed to press on. "What now, Master Eddas?"

Eddas Ayar shrugged. "Well, my next thought would be to ask your father, but-"

I gasped. "My father? Ummm... But Master Eddas, he's dead!"

"Yes, quite. What, did you think my powers only extended to chickens?"

Marilith giggled while I blushed. "Well, no, I just meant... I mean, I don't know if I could handle seeing my father's skeleton dancing about, I'm sorry."

"His skeleton would be useless, dear. If I remember your story correctly, he died when you were fourteen, two years before you were abducted. That would put his death about six years before Orissa's disappearance. His bones could tell me nothing. His ghost might have been far more useful. However-"

"Ummm... Master Eddas, I don't know if I'm quite ready to see my father's ghost, either."

"However," Eddas Ayar said more firmly.

Marilith touched a finger to my lips. "*Sister, you're interrupting.*"

I blushed again. "Sorry, Master Eddas."

"However, I can tell that his ghost no longer roams your farm. It did for a bit after he died, but it's since moved on to the Afterlife, and likely less than a year after he died, once it became obvious you were doing alright without him. While I could sing him a path from the afterlife, again, it's not likely he saw anything that would be of any use to us."

"Oh. Well, alright," I said, rather relieved. The more I gazed at Tiki's tiny little grave, the more unnerving the whole memory of watching her skeleton dance about became.

Joy saw my expression, and shook her head. "Dear, if you think *that* was startling, you've really no idea. If Eddas thought speaking to the ghost of your father *would* help, that's precisely what he'd do."

Eddas nodded. "Indeed. And there's another thing I'm obviously going to need to tell you, Sasha - and you, too, Marilith. I want both of you to listen, and listen well."

I looked up, and saw that Eddas Ayar was gazing at the two of us quite sternly. "Yes, Master Eddas?"

"Yes, *Master Eddas?*" Marilith echoed.

"You two have a greater destiny, as I've told you before. You are to become a tool of the gods. The

conflicts of the gods are not the same as the conflicts of mortals. Mortals war with sword and spell across bloody battlefields. The gods war with souls and paradox across the Arc of Time. Their battles have physical dimension, yes. But, they are also battles of spirit and emotion. You shudder to see that little chicken skeleton flap and hop about. That, Sasha, is *nothing*! You shudder at the thought of seeing your own father's ghost. That, too, is nothing. If what you've told me before of your story is true, your father loved you very much while he was alive. Were I to summon him to us after dark that we may see and hear him properly rather than his ectoplasmic form being weakened and dissolved by sunlight, you'd probably learn that he's very happy to see you've grown into a strong, beautiful woman, and have a loving sister at your side. What weaknesses you have, the enemies of your goddess will use against you in a heartbeat, to your doom. And ghosts and the undead, Sasha, are the most trivial of threats ones such as us face."

Eddas then drew herself up to her full height, pulling her hood to shade her face from the sun. She glowered at us ominously from within the shadows of her hood, pointing an ebon-gloved finger at us, and spoke again. "Hear me, Sasha of Woe, for I am the Raven of Yorindar, God of Wisdom. You may think that you see before you a mere half-elf woman of no consequence. But, you would be wrong. I am a tool of a god, forged in the heart of a mana-storm to be forever what you see before you. The time of your forging approaches, Sasha of Woe - both yours and your sister's. It may be a gentle time of learning, or it may be a forging as harsh as my own. Either way, it is a time of forging. And like the forging of a blade, you will either be strengthened by it, or destroyed by it. In the end, the choice is yours - you retain your Free Will, in accordance with the Divine Compact. You can choose to succeed and become strong, or choose to fail, and die. The choice is yours. But if you choose to allow fears of petty things like what you've seen this morning to affect you, then you have chosen to fail. I, the Raven of Yorindar, have spoken."

"And this search for Orissa... It's part of our forging, a test for us?" Marilith asked, her hollow, unearthly voice showing she was quite nervous.

"Exactly," Eddas replied in a voice as unearthly as her own, and I felt a chill run up my spine as she said it. Marilith, however, apparently saw something in Eddas Ayar at that moment that I did not - she gasped, then trembled in fear for a long moment, her eyes wide and startled.

For a long moment, Marilith and I gazed at Eddas Ayar in silence, our hearts filled with awe at her. And, as I gazed at her, I realized that the powerful being we saw before us, a tool of the gods, was what we were destined to *become*. That awesome destiny left me speechless for many moments.

Then, Eddas Ayar pulled back her hood again, and smiled at us. "Now - we've still quite a bit of work to do today, and it's apparent that part of my duty here with you is to teach you what I can. I will do so,

later. For now, lead me to the spot where Marilith went yesterday, where the trail she followed faded below the background aura of the astral plane. Perhaps there, we shall find more clues to work with."

"Y-yes, *Master Eddas!*" Marilith stammered, hopping to her feet from where she sat beside me atop the wall. Marilith took my hand in a trembling grip, and tugged me to my feet. "*Come, Sister. Let's not dally,*" she said. I rose and followed, stepping with her over the broken stone wall and following her to the road. Joy and Eddas Ayar followed behind us, Eddas' eyes again searching the ground for clues I could not see.

"*What did you see?*" I whispered to Marilith.

"*A fierce and terrible raven, dark and powerful. My clan-father is not half as strong. Truly,*" she replied, and trembled again.

It wasn't long before we reached the same spot in the road we'd stood yesterday. Eddas Ayar cast her gaze about for quite some time, searching the bushes to the side, gazing into the trees, and generally making me quite curious as to what she might actually be seeing - and what she might be looking for. Finally, she walked back to the road, stroking her chin, obviously lost in thought. Joy stood behind her, waiting silently.

"Ummm... Is there anything we can do?" I asked hopefully.

Eddas shrugged. "Not really, Sasha. I know you told me the story already, and that story eliminates many things that we *could* do. Calla, you said, is a meticulous housekeeper and she did not gather any hairs from Orissa's brush or bedding. We could search her house carefully, but it might be months before we found a hair or fingernail paring that came from Orissa - assuming we found anything at all, which I doubt. That eliminates the possibility of summoning Orissa to us from wherever she is. This road itself is not heavily traveled, but it's traveled enough by both carts and animals that the astral emanations of your friend from that day are most definitely obscured. That eliminates any real possibility of trying to follow her trail now, sixteen years later. Perhaps she sought someone in a town to the south - or, perhaps, she simply wandered off in misery and something dire happened to her along the way. Either way, we are out of options as far as sorcery is concerned. Since her trail was not simply random wandering but stayed right on this road, it seems likely she was going somewhere along it - or, at least, she thought she was at the time. Our best option at this point is to follow this road, and make inquiries along the way with any villages or inns we run across. Marilith, you can still assume your equine form, yes?"

Marilith smiled. "Yes, *Master Eddas*."

"Well, if you don't mind, Sasha and I can ride your back. Certainly it will draw a bit less attention than me riding an invisible steed, after all."

Marilith grinned, then shimmered - in a moment, she'd shifted to her quadruped form, a powerful and ominous black mare with glowing red eyes.

I hiked my dress up and hopped onto Marilith's back immediately, but Eddas shook her head as she looked me over. "Sasha, don't ride like that."

"Ummm... What do you mean, Master Eddas?"

Joy rolled her eyes. "You were right, Old Man. Spending half her life living naked among naked mer-folk has robbed her of anything even *remotely* resembling modesty," she said, and crossed her arms.

Eddas nodded to Joy, then looked to me. "Sasha, we're going to be dealing with a lot of ordinary people. You should get used to it, as we major pawns do that rather frequently. When you're riding astride your sister's back like that, anyone looking at you can see your legs from the middle of your thighs on down - and if your sister gallops at any kind of speed, the wind will lift your dress and they'll see everything from your waist on down. I realize you spent much of your life living among mer-folk and you've gotten used to being naked, but ordinary people find the notion of a half-naked woman riding down the road to be somewhat startling."

I blushed furiously, and Marilith burst into giggles. It took a few moments, but finally I had pulled my legs together, then worked my dress down over my legs to something more respectable. "Well, I can sit like this, but how will I stay on her back?"

"Normally with a side-saddle - it has a stirrup for your left leg and a padded hook you put your right thigh into. However, as we've not one right now and I sincerely doubt your sister wants to wear a saddle, you'll just have to keep your balance. I assume your sister will be considerate enough in her movements so as to not toss you off?" she said, looking at Marilith.

"Of course, Master Eddas," Marilith replied with a smile.

"Good. Now Marilith, you'll have to use an illusion to conceal your eyes. Huge black horses with glowing red eyes tend to frighten ordinary people a bit. People who are frightened of us will be somewhat less inclined to have a pleasant conversation about a lost young girl they may or may not have seen sixteen years ago, and rather more inclined to show us how swiftly they can run," Eddas said, and I suddenly found it was my turn to giggle. "Try making them a bit more ordinary," Eddas continued. "Black would do."

Marilith nodded, and shortly her eyes looked more normal. *"How is this, Master Eddas?"*

"That will do," Eddas replied, nodding. "Try not to talk much, either. For some reason, mundanes find horses that can chat with them equally startling." Marilith and I giggled in reply. I thought I might have to reach out my hand to pull Eddas up behind me, particularly as she was much smaller than I and Marilith was a rather large horse in this form, but Eddas hopped up onto her back with an ease that showed many years of practice. She sat sidesaddle, as I was, and seemed far more comfortable doing so than I was atop Marilith's broad back. "I'm afraid there's not quite enough room on Marilith's back for you, Joy," Eddas said.

Joy grinned. "I'll be alright, Old Man. I walked across a continent four years ago, I don't think a short walk to the next village will bother me much."

Eddas smiled back. "Good. Let's be off, Marilith."

Marilith started off at a slow walk, apparently making sure Eddas was secure on her back, then slowly picked up her pace a bit to match Joy's long, easy strides. *"Are we alright back there?"* Marilith

asked, looking over her shoulder.

Eddas pointed to the road ahead. "Watch where you're going, dear, we can take care of ourselves. Remember, trees always have the right-of-way."

Marilith laughed. "*Yes, Master Eddas.*"

We rode in silence for awhile, and I found that once I was used to riding like this, it was actually quite easy. Eddas Ayar was right, and it was merely a matter of balance. Of course Marilith was being very careful with us - I was quite certain we'd have fallen off the back of an ordinary horse long before now. Or, at least, *I'd* have fallen off. Eddas Ayar seemed quite comfortable perched on Marilith's back, and didn't even need to rest a hand on Marilith to help keep her balance, as I did. Still, I greatly enjoyed riding my sister's back, and I'm certain she enjoyed finally being able to do something useful to advance the quest the Goddess had given us.

After perhaps a quarter hour, Eddas finally sighed. "Is something wrong, Master Eddas?" I asked, looking over my shoulder.

"Yes, Old Man - what's the matter?" Joy asked, taking Eddas's hand in hers as she walked beside us.

"Ah, nothing, I was merely thinking. Marilith is bound here now to the Prime Material - and, I know, it's what both she and Sahsa wanted, and it's part of your destiny. But, if she were still one of the Independents, we'd already have Orissa. As one of the Independents, she could simply have willed the earth of the farm to speak, and tell her where Orissa went. She could even have slipped back in time to that day, and peeked in on what was happening to find out the truth of the matter."

"*Oh! I can still do that! I can do that now!*" Marilith exclaimed.

"*Marilith, no!*" Eddas shouted, but it was too late - an instant later, the world exploded with a mighty crash, and I found myself plunged beneath the waters of the sea.

The Ocean - Four.

I shifted to my mermaid-form without even thinking about it, and instinctively searched for the surface. The water was quite cold, but I adapted to it with a brief thought directed towards my mer-magi belt. In a few moments, my head broke the surface of the waves, and I looked around. Eddas Ayar was treading water nearby with Joy, their hair sopping wet, and Eddas looking frantic. "Master Eddas! What happened?!"

"There's no time! Find your sister before she drowns!"

I dove beneath the waves, now just as frantic. In a few moments, I saw her - she was still in her equine form, floating limply beneath the waves on her side. Wrapping my arms around her neck, I swam upwards, then struggled to hold her head above the water. "I have her! Over here!" I shouted, though I'd completely lost track of where Eddas was.

A splashing behind me - I turned, and saw Joy and Eddas swimming towards me, both of them blinking from the salt water in their eyes, and Joy sputtering as waves washed over her face. "She's fainted! Joy, help Sasha hold her head out of the water!" Joy did so, wrapping an arm under Marilith's neck. Eddas reached out, muttering a short incantation, then tapping Marilith's head. "*Wake!*"

Marilith's eyes opened, and she spat out a startling amount of water from her mouth and nose before

taking a shuddering breath. She started to struggle, all four hooves flailing in the water, and let out an eerie, hollow whinney of fear.

"Marilith!" Eddas shouted, grabbing hold of her neck along with Joy and I. "Control yourself! Look around for the nearest land, and take us there, now! It doesn't matter where it is or what it looks like, just take us there now!"

"Yes, *Master Eddas!*" Marilith gasped, then the world blurred for a moment. When it steadied, we were standing on a bare, rocky beach. Or, at least, I was standing for a moment - Marilith shuddered and began to fall to her knees while I, in my mermaid form, fell backwards into the sand. Eddas Ayar quickly gestured, holding out one hand, and Marilith's fall halted. Marilith's head hung limply, and her eyes were closed.

"Easy, now," Eddas said, more calmly, letting Marilith slowly down to the sand. "Let's not break a bone, healing you is somewhat problematic." Joy, standing in her dripping dress, reached out to me, and helped me sit up.

"What happened?!" I yelped.

"Hush. Not now," Eddas replied, running her gloved fingers over Marilith's sides. Finally, she nodded. "Bruises and a bit of muscle strain, that's all. It's bad enough for her, but she won't die. Sasha, take off your dress, wad it into a pillow, and place it beneath your sister's head, just here. Joy, help her."

I nodded, shucking my soaking wet dress with Joy's help and folding it up quickly. Eddas lifted Marilith's head with a gesture, holding it up somehow with her magic, and I laid the folded dress down on the sand. Eddas nodded, lowering Marilith's head so it rested on the folded dress. "In this form, she's much like a horse, and that means she has a nerve that runs along the side of her face, just there. If it gets compressed against the ground too long, it can paralyze half her face. Not dangerous, of course, but quite uncomfortable when she wakes. Now, do you still have those crystals Marilith's clan-father gave you?"

"Yes!"

"Good - pull them out and get to work. And shed that tail, Sasha, we're not going back into the water just yet."

I shifted back to my human form, then reached to the little bottle that dangled at the end of its silvery chain about my left wrist. "Ummm... Oh, my... Which one is for bruising and such? I'm so frightened I can't remember!"

"Pull them all out, Sasha, and let me see," Eddas replied, sitting down on the sand and setting her staff beside her. Joy sat down beside her, shivering slightly. I pulled out the crystals from my little magic bottle, and Eddas looked them over, her gaze becoming unfocused for a moment. Finally she blinked, then pointed. "The pink one is a tissue knitter, the blue one is a liquigogue. Use the pink one all over her for the bruising, then the blue one over her lungs, she's got a bit of water in them. Take your time, she's not dying, she's just fainted because she's very, very tired. Calm yourself."

I took the pink crystal - which was, like the others, half a cubit long and as thick as my wrist - and began carefully stroking it over Marilith's body. "What happened, Master Eddas?"

"Your sister made a mistake," Eddas replied, and sighed, gazing at her dripping robe.

"A rather large one, I'd say," Joy added, shivering in her soaking-wet dress.

"Umm... What kind of mistake? I don't understand! Why has she fainted?"

Eddas shrugged. "Well, that part's a bit difficult to explain to a mundane, but I'll try to use an analogy. About twenty years ago, my daughter Lyota and I were in Iron City. It's a dwarven city - quite nice, but built by dwarves, and the ceiling beams are a bit low. She stood from her chair but didn't think to duck the ceiling beams, and gave her self a rather painful goose-egg."

"Ummm... That doesn't help me much."

"Well, what I'm trying to get at is that your sister didn't take a moment to consider what she was doing, and didn't realize that there was a hidden cost in what she was trying to do. If she was still an Independent and did that, her own innate nature would have shifted her slightly out of phase with the rest of the universe, and she'd have had plenty of time to examine what she wanted to examine without moving anywhere at all. It's extremely taxing for a lesser demon like her to move about in time, but doable for short periods. However, she's not an Independent anymore, and she has to follow the same rules you and I do. And under the rules you and I operate under, she can't just *look*, she has to *go*. And the going, for us, involves a stupendous risk, and a tremendous toll on the endurance which goes up exponentially for others you take with you. It costs little to begin to move, but once she moves, she can't stop until she gets there, and the strain goes up the longer it takes to get there. It's quite fortunate she didn't kill herself doing that. An ordinary mage who tried the same thing would have died," Eddas said, and sighed.

"But-but where did we go?"

"Into the past. That's where she was taking us, at any rate. Where we ended up precisely, I don't know yet. That's a question it will probably take me a bit to answer. Since we're alive, the answer probably isn't going to be pleasant."

"But... But why did we end up in the sea?!"

"A good question, Old Man," Joy said, trying to wring out her hair.

Eddas sighed again. "Sasha, the world is like a ball-

"I know that much, Master Eddas, I've swum 'round it," I replied, growing a bit annoyed. I was growing to loathe feeling like I was a child before her.

"Well, good, that shortens the lecture a bit," Eddas replied sarcastically, glowering at me. "Now, did you know that the world turns to face the sun and make night and day?"

"Well, yes," I replied, still irritable.

"And did you know the world follows a circle around the sun, making the years?"

I paused. "Well, no, I didn't know that."

"And did you know the sun follows a circle around the galaxy, marking the aeons?"

"Err... Well, no, I didn't know that, either," I replied, suddenly feeling a bit nervous.

"If you remember, your sister mentioned all this movement before, four years ago, when she was trying to re-learn how to walk. You should remember, you were there helping her orient to the world."

"Ummm... Err... Well, yes, I remember that."

"Good. Now, keeping all this movement in mind, do you really think this world was in precisely the same spot sixteen hours ago, much less sixteen years ago?"

I blinked in the shock of sudden understanding. "Oh, my! We could be anywhere!"

"Yes. Fortunately, we ended up somewhere, rather than nowhere. The void between the stars is extremely and almost instantly hostile to life. Had we ended up there, we wouldn't be having this

conversation here, we'd be having it in the Afterlife."

"Oh, my!"

"And even more fortunately, we landed in water. The fall was nothing for us - fortunately, it wasn't far. Marilith's much larger than us in this form, however. For her the drop was far enough that hitting the water was a stunning blow, but fortunately nothing more. We were *very* fortunate, Sasha. The drop could just as easily have been a league or two in the air, or we might simply have appeared a league or two beneath the earth," Eddas replied, then paused a moment. "Of course, it might not have been simple luck - we *did* land in the sea, after all. The Goddess of the Ocean may have acted to protect you."

I simply stared, my mind spinning.

"I see by your expression you finally understand, Sasha. Yes, it's theoretically possible for a mage like me to transport themselves to the past or future. However, no mage who has tried has ever returned. They simply cast the spell, and vanish."

"Vanish?! What happens to them?", I asked, worried about what might happen to us.

"That, Sasha, is a matter of temporal theory and mathematics. I've explained the movement of the world - this is something that has to be calculated before the spell can be cast. It requires incredibly exacting calculations to know precisely *when* to cast the spell, and astoundingly perfect timing to cast it at the precise moment necessary for you to not end up dead in the void between stars or dead deep beneath the earth. And since all our knowledge of the movements of this world through time are only approximations of speed, it's virtually impossible to get it right. That's the second of five errors that gets temporal experimenters killed. They just cast the spell and vanish, never to be seen again."

"The second?" I asked, still stroking Marilith's limp form with the crystal.

"Yes, Sasha. The first is what I told you already - there's a hidden cost to the caster. It doesn't take

much to get one moving in time, but once you start, you can't stop until you get there, and the strain goes up dramatically the longer it takes you to get there. The third is that you can't control precisely where you go when you go into the past. The past doesn't exist as a physical place you can walk to, it exists as a prior state in spatio-temporal analysis. That's another reason for extremely precise calculations of the world's movement - you can't go to a specific time, you just have to hope you hit somewhere near it. The farther off you are, the greater any errors in your calculations of the world's position become."

"So, we could be *anywhere* in the past?"

"Well, no, we'll be relatively close to where she was trying to go, in reference to the age of the world. The problem is that the age of the world is immense, Sasha. The entire history of the elves covers a period of tens of millennia, but even that is merely an eyeblink compared to the age of the world. A mage who attempts to travel even a few moments into the past can end up hundreds or thousands of years in the past, instead. Thus, even if they survive, they will not live long enough to return to the present," Eddas said, then pointed at Marilith. "Keep working, Sasha. Use the blue crystal, now."

"Yes, sorry!" I replied, and picked up the blue crystal, then resumed stroking Marilith's unconscious form. Each draw of the crystal up her ribs brought a small amount of water out her mouth.

"The fourth is the reverse of the third - it's almost impossible to travel to a specific time in the future. In temporal mathematics, the future literally does not exist until it happens - the Arc of Time hasn't formed there yet. It *does* exist in actuality, but from the standpoint of mathematics, it doesn't - instead, it's a collection of alternate and sometimes conflicting realities that have yet to come into being and as such do not exist. If you were in the past, it's theoretically possible to go back to the present, but from the present, there is no future to go to - it doesn't exist until it happens. So, when you try to travel to the future, you simply disappear until the future moment you were traveling to comes about. If it ever does. Usually it doesn't. Changing the future is at the crux of the game the gods play with themselves, Sasha. The future is not set. Only the past is."

"Really?" I asked, amazed.

"Yes. Which brings us to the final error that gets temporal experimenters killed: Paradox. We are not gods. The gods can travel freely into the past and do as they wish, because the ordinary constraints of Paradox do not apply to them - they have other limitations instead, the one that looms largest being that once they have changed something, they cannot un-do that change. We, however, exist under the Arc of

Time. For us, event must always follow cause, and the past is set. When looking at the future in temporal mathematics, only *Events* are important, as the future does not exist until it happens, if ever. When looking at the past, however, literally every causally-related occurrence from the fall of a feather to the death of a butterfly is of consequence. As such, traveling into the past causes you to run into an effect similar to the Law of Integrity - you never make it, you literally bounce off the Arc of Time like a ball tossed at a stone wall, then fly off into the Void, never to return. The only way it's possible is if the gods are involved - but if they are, your actions become a part of past history, and are already done. A paradox, yes, but that's why it requires the involvement of the gods to permit it in the first place. Only the gods can casually violate Paradox, Sasha. They have their own rules, however, which are just as firm."

"Oh, my..."

At that point, Marilith groaned, and began coughing. Eddas, water still dripping from her robes, reached out and patted Marilith. "Marilith, shift to your humanoid form. Come, now. You can do it."

Marilith nodded, and a moment later, it was done. Marilith coughed a bit more, then lay there on the sand, gasping.

"Help her up, Sasha, then put your crystals away. That's right - get her sitting up. There we go," Eddas said, and once we had her up, Eddas looked Marilith over for a long moment. After I put the healing crystals Marilith's clan-father had given us away, I looked her over, as well. My sister was a mess. She was soaked in seawater and dripping, her mane plastered flat to her neck and shoulders, and had sand clinging to half her body and face. "Well, that's got the damage healed, at any rate," Eddas said. "How do you feel?"

"Very tired, Master Eddas. And hungry, as well."

"The first is expected, the second is a good sign. We'll deal with both shortly. Before that, however, I have something I need to say to you."

"Yes, Master Eddas?"

Eddas Ayar rose to her feet, her expression quite calm. The surf rolled quietly on the rocky beach - the tide was going out, so far as I could tell. Eddas was dripping wet, and had sand plastered in various spots on her robe where she had sat on the sand. She really looked quite bedraggled. But, she then reached up and gestured, flicking away the water and sand from her garments. In a moment, she was dry, except for her hair and the sodden feathers under her hair-band. She did the same for Joy, flicking away the water from her clothes with a gesture. When she was done, Joy nodded her thanks, and spread her hair over her shoulders to dry. Eddas then turned back to us. Her expression was still deadly calm. Finally, Eddas looked straight into Marilith's eyes, and scowled. *"You are an IDIOT!"*

Marilith flinched, her equine ears flicking low in a blush, but said nothing.

"I have seen stupidity in my days, but you truly go beyond anything even humanly imaginable! You risk your sister's life and your own on a spell you gave perhaps all of a *heartbeat's* thought to?!

Unbelievable! If I didn't know your mother breathed you out her nostrils a thousand years before I was even a twinkle in my father's eye, I'd swear you weren't even two days past your first metamorphosis!" she screamed.

"I-I'm sorry, Master Eddas!" Marilith wailed.

Suddenly, Eddas' gaze turned cold. "If your clan-father knew what you have done..."

Marilith threw herself to the sand and was wracked with sobs. *"Oh, Master Eddas, I'm so sorry! I didn't think! I... I didn't think!"*

"That, Marilith, is precisely the problem," Eddas replied with a voice like ice. This only made Marilith wail in misery.

"Do let me know when you're through, Old Man, I'd like a turn, myself," Joy said, gazing at Marilith in annoyance. "If you hadn't spent all those weeks last summer teaching me to swim in the river, I'm quite sure I'd have drowned."

"Precisely why we did it, of course," Eddas replied, and Joy nodded.

I hugged my sister tight, and looked up to Eddas Ayar. "Now, Master Eddas, I understand you're upset, but-"

Eddas looked to me, and spoke calmly. "Sasha, stay out of this for now. Your sister has a few critical things she needs to learn, and this is how she's going to have to learn them."

"But, Master Eddas, really - she's already quite miserable, I think that's enough!"

"Not hardly. Marilith, tell your sister what would happen if your clan-father knew what you've done?"

"He-he would disown me utterly, m-m-my name would b-be stricken from the Great Roll, and I would be cast into the chaos of the Hadean Vortex to dissolve into nothingness forever!" Marilith sobbed.

"Wh-what?! Why?" I asked, surprised.

"W-we are the Independents, Sister. We are not gods, we existed before the gods were born! We still possess the Will and the Word, as the gods do, but we do not have their limitations, we have our own! In exchange for our status and our freedom, we agreed to never touch the Arc of Time! That was our part of the Divine Covenant!"

"And now, you have broken it," Eddas replied coldly.

Marilith simply wailed in misery.

"But-but Master Eddas! You said yourself it was a *mistake!*" I yelped, hugging my sobbing sister tight.

Eddas Ayar looked at me calmly. "Indeed I did. Marilith, is that an excuse?"

"No! Some mistakes must never be made! The very survival of my people is part of it! It is our duty, our responsibility! The Arc of Time must never be touched!"

Eddas nodded, her eyes still on me. "You may find it interesting to learn, Sasha, that all the beings in the universe have limitations on their behaviors. Dragons, Demons... Even you and me. I told you before that if we stand in the present and create an Irrevocable Paradox with the future regarding an **Event**, this can break the Arc of Time. Do you remember?"

"Yes, Master Eddas," I replied, still hugging Marilith.

"Well, this is because when you are standing in the present, the past behind you is set, but the future remains unformed. By standing in the present and creating an Irrevocable Paradox, you set the future, denying the Free Will of countless billions and billions of individuals throughout the universe. This violates the Divine Compact, and breaks the Arc of Time. Understand?"

"Actually, I think I do. It's all about allowing us to have free will to determine our future, yes?"

Eddas smiled slightly. "Yes, Sasha. But not just our future in the sense of destiny or something far ahead in time, but also the immediate future, such as knowing the water will boil in a few minutes when you put the kettle on the fire."

"I... I actually understand that!" I replied, amazed.

"Good. Now, what your sister has done is to move us into the past. Where, I don't know, but we'll figure that out later. Regardless, when you attempt to travel to the past, your existence in the past creates an Irrevocable Paradox, because the event of your suddenly coming into existence in the past would predate the cause of your casting the spell in the present. We live under the Arc of Time, and events must *always* follow cause, for us. Traveling to the past is, in essence, taking an action that is trying to change events that have already occurred, and cannot be changed. Thus, unless the gods are involved to permit the paradox to occur, the universe ejects you into the Void to correct the error. This is the danger your sister has put us in with her mistake. Understand?"

"Well, yes, but can't you forgive her? I mean, it was just a mistake, and we can go right back as soon as she's feeling better."

"Sasha, I hardly think we'll be lucky enough to land precisely in the present again and neatly where we were. We'd likely die. We nearly did just then, you know."

"I... But..."

"And more than that, whether or not you and I forgive Marilith for her mistake has nothing to do with anything. She has to come to grips with the truth of The Independents, and herself. And so should you, for that matter."

"Well, now I don't understand again," I said, and sighed.

"Sasha, The Independents operate under different rules, and all the **Events** of all the gods which form the structure of the Arc of Time are meaningless to them. If you or I create Paradox while standing in the present, we violate the Divine Compact and shatter the Arc of Time. The Independents can stand in the present and create an Irrevocable Paradox with the future and nothing happens, because the **Events** they act against do not apply to them. We cannot go into the past and create Paradox as the Gods do - if we try, the universe spits us out like a bad *chappa*-berry and we cease to exist, because the past is set for us. The Independents *can* go into the past and create Paradox - they are not limited by the same constraints we are. But if they do, the Paradox they create can shatter the Arc of Time and bring

the universe to an end. They are not gods, Sasha. Only the Gods can create Paradox without consequences. Hence, the Independents agreed long ago that they wouldn't do that."

"And Marilith broke that agreement," I said, finally understanding.

"Inadvertently, yes," Eddas replied, then looked to Marilith. "Sit up, Marilith. Sasha, help her up."

I did so, and looked her over. Marilith was still quite damp from the sea, and sand was plastered into her clothes and fur from lying on the beach and sobbing. Even now, she still sniffled, her head hung low. She looked utterly miserable, but I didn't know what to do about it.

"Good. Now, Sasha, you wanted me to forgive Marilith. But, my forgiveness is irrelevant. What's more important is that she understand she can forgive *herself* - and why. That is where you come in."

"Me?!"

"Yes. I've already told you what happens when an Independent chooses to view the past - which was what she was trying to do. Do you remember?"

I shook my head. "No, I'm sorry, Master Eddas, it's all a bit much for me to grasp."

"Well, you're a mundane, I don't expect you to grasp temporal theory all at once. I *do* expect you to *learn*, however - understanding your Sister is going to be critical to your survival in the future, just as her understanding of you has been critical to your survival in the past. So, I'll try to lead you through this," Eddas said, and looked to Marilith. "As I said before, if Marilith was still an Independent and did that, her own innate nature would have shifted her slightly out of phase with the rest of the universe, and she'd have had plenty of time to examine what she wanted to examine without moving anywhere at all. That's what she was trying to do. It's extremely taxing for a lesser demon like her, but doable for short periods. But, she's not an Independent anymore, and she has to follow the same rules you and I do. And under the rules you and I operate under, she can't just *look*, she has to *go*. So when she tried to take us to *look*

at the past, we couldn't - we all *went there*, instead."

"But... But the gist of what you're saying is she's not an Independent anymore," I replied after a moment.

"Correct," Eddas replied, gazing down at Marilith. "I told you that four years ago, if you recall. It's something Marilith should have accepted by now, and hasn't. That's why we're here - and why we all nearly died."

"But that means all those terrible punishments she mentioned don't apply!"

"Correct again," Eddas replied, tugging at her gloves. "She made this mistake because she was still thinking of herself as an Independent, perhaps one trapped on this plane. She is not. She *chose* to live her life with you, her soul-sister, here on the Prime Material. As such, she now lives under the Arc of Time, just like you and I, and has been for the last four years."

Marilith sighed, her head still down. *"Sister, I have been a fool. Eddas Ayar is right, I was still thinking of myself as an Independent, and I acted without thinking. The powers of magic are not minor things, and we of the Will and the Word can literally do nearly anything we put our will to. A child of my people grows and matures slowly, over the course of many centuries, because the powers they will wield as an adult are vast, and can inadvertently do great harm if used unwisely. Though I am nearly three thousand years old, it is as though I am a child again - I must learn to perceive myself not as I was, but as I am. My perception of myself shapes my Will, and the Laws of Magic now apply to me in ways they did not apply before, Sister. A human mage could never have made my error - it would have taken them years to develop a spell to travel through time, and the risk of almost certain annihilation would have been obvious to them long before they completed it. I simply exerted my Will, and nearly destroyed us all. I understand what Eddas Ayar is trying to teach me, Sister. He is trying to get me to understand that now I must think about myself and how I do magic differently, for it is not just my life which depends on it, but yours, as well. I didn't think, and foolishly put your life in danger. This was wrong. I am truly sorry, Sister."*

I smiled, and hugged Marilith. "I forgive you, Sister."

"And I forgive you as well, Marilith," Eddas replied, and sighed. "In truth, I feel it's partially my fault - I did mention it first, after all. Joy says I do ramble a bit, and it seems she's right. How she puts up with me, sometimes, I've really no idea."

"I grit my teeth a lot," Joy replied, grinning.

Eddas chuckled, shaking her head. "Well, regardless, this was obviously a lesson you needed to learn, Marilith. Joy told me of the incident in the garden four years ago, and what she said then is still true. You must always think before you use your powers. You can survive a mistake you make - usually. Your sister, however, might not."

Marilith sighed, and hugged me back. *"Thank you, Sister. And thank you, as well, Master Eddas. But, I shall not forgive myself quite yet, I think. I think I shall not forgive myself for quite some time, so that I will remember this mistake, and never make it again."*

"Very good," Eddas Ayar replied with a nod. "This isn't something you should *ever* forget, Marilith. If we all survive this little misadventure, I hope it's something you'll remember all the days of your life."

"Yes, Master Eddas," Marilith replied, bowing her head.

"If we survive?" I asked, a bit nervous.

"Yes, Sasha. I've no idea where we are in the past - and that, I must know *precisely* before I can even begin to consider how to return us to the present again. Not just the month and year, but the *exact moment*, measured from the foundation of the Arc of Time, aeons ago. Also, as I told you, it is impossible to travel into the past for us without the intervention of the Gods, as only the Gods can create Paradox. It is obvious that Yorindar and the Ocean both have a reason for us to be here. What that may be, however I do not know. Yorindar hinted to me in a dream that this little misadventure might be a possibility - but, he could only hint. Paradox limits how much he can tell me."

"Yorindar speaks to you in dreams? The Ocean whispers directly to us, when we are near her. Marilith can hear her."

"Likely that's the largest reason you are sisters," Eddas said, then looked around the rocky beach we were on. "Let's head inland, and look around. The first thing we'll need to do is to try to figure out our spatio-temporal coordinates - where we are and *when* we are. We'll have to be careful not to interfere with anyone, for the moment, until we have a better grasp of our location. Marilith, you'll want to assume your equine form again, and conceal your eyes again. Sasha, you'll want to call your lance to your hand again, it's probably sitting on the bottom of the sea somewhere. Oh, and you might want to dress again. I think a naked woman walking about the countryside might attract a bit more attention to us than is wise."

I blushed deeply as Marilith and Joy burst into giggles. In a moment, I had willed my lance to my hand and extended my scales again, then donned my boots and gloves from my magic bottle. My lavender dress was an utter mess, so I wrung it out as tightly as I could, then tucked it into my bottle to deal with later. "I'm sorry, Master Eddas. You're right, I've lived among mer-folk so long... Well, I didn't even think about being naked before you."

Joy rose to her feet, standing beside Eddas. Eddas Ayar didn't even look at me, however. Her gaze was still on the inland shore, where the rocks were larger and rougher. "It's alright, Sasha, we had other things on our mind just a bit ago, it's quite understandable. For you, however, clothing is something you'll have to keep in mind, just as much as Marilith will have to keep her own appearance in mind. We major pawns deal with ordinary people quite a bit at times, and it's really not a good idea to startle them overly much. And trotting about naked before them does tend to startle them somewhat."

Marilith laughed, rising to her feet and shifting to her equine form. I gave her a flat glower, but she only laughed louder.

A little while later, we had managed to pick our way between the larger rocks at the top of the beach, and found some wooded scrub-lands. Eddas Ayar cast a brief spell of some kind to determine which way was north, and told us that the beach was to the west. Turning south, we walked along the top of the beach, keeping the ocean in sight. There were many large rocks scattered about among the trees and bushes, gray and granite-like, much like those on the beach. I thought they were rather interesting, but Eddas Ayar gazed at them with an expression of growing discontent.

Finally, we topped another rise, and before us to the south lay a walled port city surrounded by

farmlands. I was amazed - it was tremendously large, easily several leagues from one side of the city walls to the other. Stone roads led in and out of the city, and a lovely castle lay in one corner of it. On a small island in the harbor, an elegant lighthouse stood, its fire damped to a black trickle of smoke as it was about noon. Many ships lay in the harbor, though they were not of a design I had ever seen before in all my life. In all, it was a strange yet beautiful city, viewed from the hill we stood upon several leagues away. To my surprise, however, Eddas Ayar did not have the same reaction I did in seeing it. Instead she gasped, then stood there for many long moments, swearing.

"Damn! Damn, damn, *damn!*"

"*Master Eddas, what is wrong?*" Marilith asked, echoing my own thoughts.

"Old Man, what is it?" Joy asked, concerned.

"That," Eddas replied, pointing, "is *Tholonir city!*"

"No!" Joy gasped, her face showing she was deeply shocked.

"Yes!"

"Err... Well, alright, but what's wrong with that?" I asked, confused.

"Sasha, Tholonir city is a city of my people, the ancient Hyperboreans. It was destroyed eighteen centuries ago in the Great War of Devastation by the Invaders, and the wooded hills you see there beyond it to the south are gone in the present, replaced by the blasted wastelands of the Seventh Dead Zone. And seeing as how it looks very much as it did in my living days, if not larger, we may be very near the end of the Hyperboreans. We are in Hyperborea, at least eighteen centuries in the past, and we may be in danger of being destroyed in the coming Great War of Devastation."

"Oh, my..." I said, and hugged my sister's equine neck very tight.

The Snake - One.

The small stone chamber that was my room was bare as a nun's cell. Cot and dresser, tinderbox and candle atop the dresser. That was all. I allowed myself only one other object in the room - the statue of Slithiss.

I knelt nude before the little idol now, as it sat atop my dresser. Not real, my master had said. The halfling races have no gods, for they awoke by the hand of man, not god - the hideous fury of *mana*-storms birthed us, not the touch of a deity in the time before time. I smoothed my hair back over my shoulders, then bowed my head, closing my eyes. "Please be real... Please be real..." I muttered.

Ancient wizards and witches, my master had said. That's what the halfling races once were. Ancient wizards and witches at the dawn of the Hyperborean civilization. The Rune Singer, the Rune Weaver, the Cabalist, the Ayurvedician, the Ecognostic, the Necromancer, the Shaman, the Illusionist, the Noetecist, the Summoner, the Sciologist, the Elementalist... A hundred different schools of magic, scribing their theories in clay tablets with a stylus of bronze, each claiming to be the only 'correct' theory, denying all the others... The Hyperboreans have always been a people of honor, my master said. A small slight, followed by another, then another. A small skirmish between two schools grew into a vast and deadly war between them all. Sorcerous energies crackling, raw power colliding with raw power... And the first *mana*-storm spawned. Roiling, whirling devastation, leaving behind survivors that had changed, bonded with their specializations. Over a thousand different creatures, some beautiful, some horrid. Thousands of years ago... Most died of old age, lacking an identical mate to create progeny with. Some survived, and

became known as the Halfling Races.

"Please be real, please be real..." I whispered.

But there was no reply.

Slowly, I opened my eyes. In silence, I gazed upon the coiled, rearing snake that was my little idol. A thing of glazed and fired ceramic, it was hollow. Much as my heart was, now.

Slowly, I opened my third eye, and gazed upon it's astral emanations.

It's outer aura glowed with the cool blue-white of the inanimate, steady, without even the barest hint of a flicker. It's inner aura was the faint brown of the lifeless, without even a single shadow. There was no contrast with it's inner aura and it's outer. There was no contrast with it's outer aura and the astral environment. There was, in fact, no difference between it and the dresser it sat upon.

This was, of course, just as it had always been.

'You must choose a god, someday,' my master said. I had seen the temples of his people. Their gods were real. The auras of the statues flickered, the inner auras were colored ever so faintly... They were real. The gods listened, watched... And sometimes acted. Our god was not real. It was a dream... The quiet hope of a people that had forgotten their origins, over time. The fervent prayer of a dying race.

I closed my third eye, reaching for the little icon. I rose, then sat on my cot, gazing at it. My hair, responding to my focus, turned, a dozen heads focusing their gaze on the idol, forked tongues flickering, the rest gazing about me idly. My vision wrapped around the idol, and encompassed the room around me. Heat-pits pointed, tongues flickering... I could smell it... Taste it. It had the scent of earth. Baked, dead earth. It did not have the scent of power. It was a lump of glazed, baked clay. A simple idol, made in the hope that someone... Anyone might be there, and care.

Even after seeing the idols of my master's people, even after scenting their power, even after assensing their auras with the gaze of our third eye, we still tried to convince ourselves our god was real. We lied to ourselves... Sweetly, endearingly... But we lied to ourselves.

Several locks of my hair began to gape silently, fangs extended, reflecting my thoughts. I hissed as I raised the idol, then threw it at the far wall as hard as I could.

My hair writhed with the anger I felt in my mind. Even gazing at the shattered pieces of the idol gave little satisfaction. A waste... All a waste. Thousands of years of hopes and prayers... All a waste. There were so few of us, now... Fifty, in my tribe. A generation before, there had been a hundred. We were not lamias, after all. We could only have children one way - the same way the Dryads had learned. The Seed of Man gives life. Without it, we slowly die out. Unfortunately, we were hardly dryads, either.

Oh, a few of us were successful. Those that could cast aside their honor and dance the dance of seven veils in the taverns. Tossing the hips, wagging the shoulders to make one's breasts dance... Flirting, cajoling, arousing despite our reptilian skin... Or, really, perhaps because of it. Pretending to reluctantly agree to couple with them, in exchange for a handful of gold coins or merely a few silver... And, of course, the promise not to use the deadly gaze of our third eye or the deadly bite of our hair upon them. Yes, then they left, crowing to their drunken friends of their 'conquest,' as though it was the brave deed of some legendary hero, their manhood a mighty sword that had laid the beast low, and left her panting with desire.

Little did they know.

But, I could not do that. In truth, none of my tribe could, nor could the majority of us. I supposed what my master had said was true - we truly were Hyperborean women, at heart, and possessed a sense of honor.

Or, perhaps, we had just enough self-worth remaining to hope that there might be a better way.

I had trained all my life in the traditional skills of my tribe. Worked and studied and learned and trained to reach the point I had reached, today. Hoping and praying to a worthless clay idol, hoping against hope I would be able to provide my daughter the ability to hold her head high, and say "*That* was my father - an honorable, noble man." Not some drunken sot who might be beguiled by the flash of hip or the bounce of a breast, and willing to believe I might be convinced for a handful of coins. I wanted to give to my daughter what my mother had given me, a hundred years ago - a father I could think upon with respect, and honor. I might not carry any of my father's germ plasm within me, but my life was sparked by the seed of a noble, honorable man. That was what I wished to give my own daughter, if I could.

I had thought, at last, I had found him in my master. He was old, yes. But that meant little. He was a powerful mage, and an honorable man. Gentle, wise beyond measure, kind... Yes, he was all I could possibly have wished for...

And then, of course, he died before I could ask him.

Our god was not real, and no one in the heavens cared if my people lived or died.

The door to my cell creaked open. I lifted my head, four strands of my hair focusing to match my gaze.

A frail, black-robed skeleton stood at my door, his bones bare and white in the flickering sconces of the hallway behind him. The bare skull of his head tipped in curiosity as he gazed at me with empty eye-sockets, the grinning face of his skull taking the sight of me in.

"*Haifa?*" he called, his voice a hollow echo from beyond the grave.

"Yes, master?"

"*I heard a crash. Are you alright?*"

"I am fine, master. Forgive me, I broke my idol."

His head turned, taking in the fragments on the floor. *"That, Haifa, hardly looks an accident,"* he replied, and chuckled hollowly.

"No, master, it was not," I replied, and rose to my feet, then bowed. "I'm sorry to have disturbed you, master."

"You did not disturb me, you merely aroused my curiosity. When you sleep, it is rather quiet here in my tomb," he replied, the bones of his shoulders shifting as he shrugged. *"No matter. Come, Haifa. I shall need to dress properly. I am called, Haifa - our circle has been asked a question, and it is one that apparently only I can answer best."*

"Yes, master. I'll get your wrappings," I replied, walking swiftly to the door, intending to step past him.

My master reached out a hand, and I instantly paused so as not to jostle him. He was delicate, now, his bones dry. *"There is no hurry, Haifa. Take a moment to dress, yourself. I'll meet you in my chamber."*

I bowed my head briefly. "Yes, master."

He looked me over for a long moment, then chuckled. *"Hmmm... It is apparent I shall have to buy you a nightgown, Haifa. Had I a heart, the curve of your hip would certainly have stopped it."*

I smiled at his joke. Even dead, my master was still a sweet man. "Thank you, master. I'll be there shortly."

The Ocean - Five.

Eddas led us back a bit so that the city was concealed from view by a hill, then sat in the shade of one of the gnarled trees scattered about us. I could tell she was immensely upset, but I didn't know what I could do about it. I sat nearby, thinking, while Marilith stood behind me, still in her horse-form. Joy sat beside Eddas, but said nothing. Of course she, like me, was a mundane, and as this was a problem obviously of a sorcerous nature, there was little she or I could really do to help. Finally, I decided it was at least best to talk about it - I may have been a mundane and not really able to offer much, but perhaps Eddas and Marilith could come up with some solution if they discussed it long enough. "Umm... Master Eddas?"

"What, Sasha?"

"Well, I think it might be best if you and Marilith discussed the possibilities. Perhaps you two could come up with a solution."

Marilith chuckled. *"Sister, Eddas Ayar is a Great Mage. I am nothing compared to him - a child in diapers, at best."*

"Not quite," Eddas replied, smiling slightly. "Marilith, your people have a tendency to overestimate or underestimate themselves, based on your social status. Either you are the best, or you are subservient to

the best - like a pecking order, really. It's part of your culture, I know, but there it is. You need to reach the point in your mind where you can accept being an equal. Not superior, not inferior - an equal. Yes, I know more of the Laws of Magic than you, and I'm your superior when it comes to sorcery. However, this does not mean you are weaker than me in everything. You *do* have a mind, after all, and it's quite sharp on those occasions you choose to use it."

Joy nodded. "That's a lesson it took me quite some time to learn, but it was a necessary one, for me. Eddas' powers are vast, and I am merely a little giantess. Yet, he needs me - and together, in our hearts and minds, we are equals, partners in our future. If you are to learn to work together with your sister and do well, Marilith, you must learn to accept that you can be equal to her, despite the differences in your abilities."

Marilith grinned. *"This I know, to some extent, Joy."*

I rolled my eyes. "Oh, don't be silly! Marilith taught me everything I know, she even taught me how to read and write! She's a hundred times my age, and everything I have is because of her! I'm nothing compared to her!"

"And yet, Sister, without you, I'd have died in the Temple of the Sun years ago," Marilith replied, and lowered her head to nuzzle me. *"Joy and Eddas do not mean we are equals in power or knowledge, Sister. He means we are equals in our relationship with each other, in our hearts, and in our minds. In the reefs surrounding Round Island, the stripe-fish and the anemone live together as one, but they are not physical equals. The stripe-fish can swim freely and swiftly - the anemone is rooted in place. Fish which try to eat the stripe-fish die to the deadly touch of the anemone, which harms the stripe-fish not at all. Yet, the anemone cannot defend itself from the feather-fish, which ignores the anemone's poisons and gobbles it down. Only the stripe-fish can save the anemone, as it is faster and more nimble than the feather-fish - it attacks and drives off the feather-fish with relative ease. Hence, they live together as partners, and together they are stronger than each is individually. Thus it is with you and I, Sister. For each weakness I have, you have a strength. For each weakness you have, I have a strength."*

I grinned. "So which of us is the stripe-fish and which the anemone?"

"I think we take turns, depending on the situation. Right now, I am feeling very much like an anemone - just wriggling about and not really knowing what to do."

I laughed. "No, that's me, right now. I'm definitely feeling wiggly and confused. You need to be the stripe-fish, now, I think. You and Eddas need to talk, and figure out what we can do to get out of here."

Marilith grinned, and nuzzled me again. "Yes, Sister," she replied, then looked up to Eddas. "*Master Eddas, what do you think?*"

Eddas shrugged, pulling off one of her gloves. "I think Joy is more often the stripe-fish in our relationship," she said, and winked as Marilith and Joy laughed. "Be that as it may, however, our first step is to summon my Hidden Sanctuary. Within it I have ink, parchment, and a comfortable chair - I'll need to try to see what I can do to get us home again, and that will take some study. There's also food and drink, which Marilith needs right now and I'm sure Sasha will enjoy, as well," Eddas replied, pulling a long knotted rope out of a ring on her thumb (which was quite surprising to watch), and coiling it on the ground at her feet.

"Food sounds good, but what's a Hidden Sanctuary?"

Eddas muttered briefly, then cast the end of the rope into the air. To my surprise, it didn't just fall back down, it extended to its full length and the upper end clung in the air at about ten cubits of height, the rope dangling to the ground. Once this was done, she glanced at me and spoke, slipping her glove back on. "It's a pocket dimension created by the Spell of the Hidden Sanctuary. I built a little room of stone about eighteen centuries ago, then cast the spell to separate it from our reality. Further castings realign it with my current spatio-temporal coordinates so I can climb in and use it again," Eddas said, and scrambled up the rope like a spider. She poked her head into *something* at the top of the rope - I could see nothing, yet her head and shoulders seemed to just... Vanish into thin air. Suddenly, Eddas pulled herself up, vanishing completely from my sight. Joy followed, pulling herself up with far more difficulty. Once she reached the top, though, I saw a pair of ebon-gloved hands reach beneath her shoulders, and shortly she vanished, as well.

"W-what happened?"

Suddenly, Eddas' head poked out of the air, her ponytail dangling down towards the ground. "Climb up, you two! There's food in here I left from before. Marilith, my brazier's lit, too, as I last left it. You're

probably still very hungry, and the coals are nice and hot. Come!" she called, then pulled her head back and disappeared again.

"Mmmm, hot coals! I am starving!" Marilith yelped, shifting back to her humanoid form and grabbing the rope. It was a bit of a struggle for her, as she had human-like hands but a horse's legs - I ended up reaching to her bottom to boost her up. She put her arms out and grabbed *something*, then was drawn up and vanished into thin air.

"Well, I suppose that just leaves me," I muttered, setting my lance on the ground and rising to my feet. The knotted rope made it fairly easy to climb, and as I neared the top, I felt Marilith's hands reach beneath my shoulders - a moment later, she pulled me up.

The Ocean - Six.

I found myself in a small, circular room with a small glass window to one side. It was carefully packed with many small pieces of furniture - a large folding cot, a small table and chair, several boxes and chests of various sizes, a low brazier, and a few leather sacks that hung from hooks on the walls and ceiling-beams. Joy had a sheet in her hand with little brass grommets along one edge, and was in the process of hanging it across some of the hooks to partition off part of the little room. Eddas Ayar was already sitting at the little table beside the window, spreading a sheet of parchment before herself and dipping a quill in an inkwell. She had both her gloves off again, and the many rings she wore flashed in the light that came through the window. A large, thick tome was laid upon the table beside the parchment, and after opening it and turning a few pages, she stopped and began writing on the parchment. "Bring your lance up, Sasha, no reason to leave it behind," she said, still writing on the parchment. "Oh - and pull up the rope, I'm not in the mood for curious visitors."

I summoned my lance to my grip, then leaned it against the nearby wall. The rope was tied to an iron ring bolted to the circular opening in the stone floor, but it was an odd, smooth knot I'd never seen before, with no obvious way of releasing it. "Umm... Do I untie the rope?"

"No, just pull it up and coil it on the floor. You couldn't untie it anyway, the knot is held fast by the same sorcery that supports the sanctuary."

"Here, Sister - Master Eddas has a bit of cooked meat," Marilith called. She was sitting next to the brazier, and was holding out the carcass of a small bird, impaled on a skewer.

I took the bird from Marilith and sat next to her. While I was tearing off a piece with my fingers, Marilith reached to the brazier, picked up a glowing coal with her fingers and popped it into her mouth. Marilith chewed for a few moments, then swallowed, blowing a long puff of smoke from her nostrils. *"Mmmm... Delicious!"*

"Mine, too," I replied with a grin. "But when did you have time to cook this?"

"I didn't," Eddas replied, not looking up from her writing. "That's a wood-quail I shot last fall with the blunderbuss I got from the dwarves. I cleaned it, pulled the shot with sorcery, cooked it then and put it in here before I dismissed the sanctuary. Objects in here are held in stasis between times I summon it, no time passes for them. Marilith, don't eat all my charcoal, I need it and it's somewhat difficult to replace. Besides, you'll just get fat."

Marilith nodded. *"Yes, Master Eddas - just a bit more, then I'll put your pot and tripod back over the brazier."*

"Is there anything to drink?" I asked, looking around.

"We'll have *byallar* as soon as your sister is done. The cups are in the small green chest beneath the bed."

"I'll get them, Old Man," Joy said, turning to the bed. "Did you put that hamper I told you to get from Mungim in here?"

"Yes, it should be beneath the bed towards the right."

"Ah, I see it. Good, this dress has sand in it, I'd rather not just put it in the clothing chest until I've had a chance to clean it. I'll put it in the hamper later," Joy replied, pulling out a green chest from beneath the bed.

Awhile later, I was patting a satisfyingly full tummy and leaning back against a bare spot in the wall, sitting on the floor next to Marilith. Joy was still standing behind the little partition she had hung, changing clothes - though what she was changing into, I did not know. Eddas Ayar had only paused in her scribbling to pour herself a cup of *byallar* and slip the cover to the brazier over it to smother the coals, then she went back to work. What she was doing, I had no idea - but, I didn't want to interrupt her. Instead, I looked to Marilith. "What is she doing?" I asked quietly, nodding towards Eddas.

"Master Eddas is working on a formula that might explain what he sees, Sister. As I told you before, the magic of humans is based in mathematics, and is quite scientific. They have learned to quantify observations in mathematical terms, and express these numbers in formulas which they can apply to predicting the outcome of both Mana-energy and mundane forces. Temporal mathematics is a rather complex subject, and I never had much time or reason to study it. Our magic is that of the Will and the Word - we invoke our will or speak a known Word of Power, and the sorcery happens. It takes us ages of practice to master our abilities, over the course of the several centuries to a millennia or two it takes us to reach adulthood. For Eddas Ayar, sorcery is a complex and intricate subject firmly based in mathematics. It is faster to learn because the elements of reality are codified in a series of mathematical models that one can memorize, but requires a highly trained mind to master."

"Alright... Now, I'm really very curious about this place. She said it was a pocket dimension? What's that? Is it a tesseract, like my little magic bottle?"

Eddas glanced at me briefly. "No, a tesseract is a hyperdimensional space. This is an extradimensional space - a pocket dimension. Now hush, you two, I'm trying to concentrate," Eddas muttered, still intent on her work.

"Sorry," I replied quietly. I leaned against Marilith, and she snuggled against me. It was a rather cozy little place, if a bit crowded with supplies and boxes and bags and such. It had a warm and pleasant feeling to it, and I found it quite nice.

While we waited, I decided to occupy myself with my damp dress. Once I had it back out of my bottle, I spread it across a bare spot on the stone floor to dry, and worked on brushing the sand from it. Marilith saw what I was doing and helped with her magic, smoothing the dress out and brushing off the dampness and the sand, and soon it was dry and clean again. I knew it was a small thing - trivial, really. But, it was the only dress I had with me, at the moment, and I rather liked it. By the time I had it folded up again and tucked back into my little magic bottle, Joy had finished changing, and was taking down the sheet she'd hung up. She now wore the same armor I'd seen her in when we first met, four years ago - sturdy leather boots and gloves, finely-wrought chain that fit her like a second skin, and a metal cuirass that came to just below her ribs.

"Joy, if you'll give me your dress, I can clean it and get the sand out of it," Marilith said, smiling.

"Ah, that would be nice, thank you," Joy replied, and once she'd put the sheet away again, she handed the folded dress to Marilith. Joy took a seat on the bed, and Marilith spread the dress across the floor and began working on it. About the time she was halfway done, Eddas Ayar was leaning back in her chair, holding up the parchment she'd been writing on and studying it. "Hmmm..."

"What is it?" I asked, seeing nothing but numbers and strange equation markings I didn't understand. "Have you figured out where we are?"

"No, unfortunately. I've only the ordinary theorems and formulas of temporal mathematics in my works on sorcery, I'd never had need of more than that before. One can theoretically view the past with moderate difficulty, and even dimly view the future with far greater difficulty, but a fifth-year *journeyman* learns that physical travel through time is an impossibility, I'd never put much more study into it than any other master. As such, I literally don't have enough here to just cobble something together quickly, it will

take study and research. I *have* looked at the theorems again, however, and confirmed what I remembered - we're here because we were allowed to be."

"Ummm... Allowed to be?"

"Sasha, we're here in the past because the gods permitted it. Our simply being here is Paradox, and as we live under the Arc of Time, we cannot create Paradox in the past. The only way it's possible is if the gods permit it - and once they do, your actions become a part of the past. We are here because the gods need us here to do something. It may appear to be Paradox, but it isn't - we cannot act to change the past as we know it. By being here, we are already a part of it. What we will choose to do and what will happen to us from *our* point of view remains to be seen - we still have our Free Will. But, from the point of view of the absolute present, it is already done."

"Ummm... I'm afraid I don't really understand. Does that mean you could go outside now and warn your people, maybe save them?"

Joy looked at me sharply, as though I'd said something shocking, but Eddas simply shook her head and was silent for a moment, her face looking remarkably sad. Finally, she sighed deeply. "No. If I tried, something would stop me. Maybe I trip and break my leg. Maybe my appearance causes a city guard to shoot me. *Something* would happen. My perceptual loci is that of someone who already knows that the Great War of Devastation happened, and my people were destroyed. Since I know the Great War happened and I know I am in the past, it's obvious that regardless of what I may think of to try in my perceptual future, nothing I decided to do was able to prevent it in the absolute past. If I decide to try, *something* will stop me, and the harder I try despite all the obstacles that appear, the more likely it is that what will stop me in the end is simple death. The past is set, Sasha. Thus, I will not try, no matter how much my heart aches to think about it - we have other things to do here, apparently."

"Alright. So what do we do now? How do we get back?"

"Well, from what I can tell, we are here because the gods wanted us here. There is something they need us to do here, though I don't know what. They couldn't *tell* us what they need us to do, because of Paradox - though this is the past and our actions are essentially already a part of history, for us, it's effectively the present, and it would be paradox for us to know what we have already done."

"Ummm... That just makes my head spin," I said, very confused.

Joy rolled her eyes. "If you think you're a bit muddled now, wait 'till he gets going. He's got a really long lecture on Paradox and Temporal Theory that will make your brain hurt."

Marilith snickered, and Eddas grinned at Joy for a moment before continuing. "Well, regardless, I will need to devise a spell to take us back. Marilith might be able to do it, but I doubt she'd succeed. And, to make that spell work, I'll need a precise measurement of where we are in time - and I mean *precise*, measured from the moment of the formation of the Arc of Time, several aeons ago."

"Will that be hard?" I asked.

"Yes, unfortunately - that's what I've just discovered, now. I originally learned temporal mathematics as part of my studies to become a Master. I expanded what I had learned in my quest for Dyarzi, as I thought that perhaps she might be drawn through time to me - it couldn't be done that way, but that's neither here nor there. Regardless, all the formulas I have here simply do not apply. I have never researched the actual formulas necessary to specifically measure the Arc of Time and travel through time, because I never needed to. It would take me years to devise the spells to take the correct measurements I need, several more to devise spells to measure subsequent time flow accurately, and several more years to create the spell we need to return."

"Years?!" I yelped, startled.

"Yes, Sasha. I can't do it in less time than that. I'll need help."

Marilith hung her head in a blush. *"I am afraid my own knowledge of temporal mathematics is not sufficient to help, Master Eddas. If it was, I would hardly have put us into this situation to begin with."*

Eddas shook her head, setting the parchment down on the table and pulling off one of her gloves. "Not from you, Marilith. I need to talk to Master Kairatin, of the Algrassian Circle in Wilanda City. He lived during my time, and he was alive at the time of my death. Quite a famous theoretical researcher, and he was very knowledgeable in spells of temporal measurement. He was famous for one spell in particular - you cast it on a sundial and pedestal in one location, then remove the sundial from the pedestal and carry it away with you. Thereafter, the light and shadow you see on the sundial is not that where you are, but rather is the light and shadow falling where the pedestal is."

"Ummm... What good is that?"

"For ordinary people, none at all. For a sailor or surveyor, however, it's incredibly useful," Eddas replied, rolling up the parchment and tucking it into a little compartment in her thumb-ring - I imagined it worked much like the little magic bottle I carried. She then reached to a small bag that hung on a hook, opened it, and extracted a few coins. After putting the little bag back on its hook, she slipped her left glove back on, and tucked the coins beneath it.

"Aaaah! Measuring longitude! That would be much more accurate than dead reckoning," I said, suddenly realizing what Eddas meant. One can't grow up in Vilandia and not have *some* familiarity with the sea.

Eddas slipped her right glove back on, nodding. "Correct. Now... If we've landed sometime during my later years or following my death, we'll be able to find him and he'll have developed the spells we need. If not, however, we'll have to ask around for another expert - though I don't know of any others who were as good as Master Kairatin, we could certainly make inquiries. If the Invaders hadn't come to our shores and destroyed us, we might have ruled the seas with his spells..." Eddas said, then sighed, shaking her head. "No matter. Whatever it is the gods want us to do here, we'll likely discover it along the way," Eddas finished, rising to her feet and pointing to a small chest against the wall. "Joy, I've a couple extra robes and waist-belts of mine in the clothing-chest. Marilith's garments won't do, in Hyperborea - a loincloth and apodesmos are *not* public attire. She could probably just conjure something, but it would be easier for her to wear one of my robes. Could you help Marilith change?"

"Certainly, Old Man," Joy replied with a smile, kneeling and dragging the chest over to us.

"Thank you. Now, Marilith, you'll need to alter your shape to look like a woman of Hyperborea, as well - Joy can help you with the details," she said, then kicked the coiled rope down the hole in the floor.

"I'll wait for you three below. We should get moving while there's still daylight, so don't take too much time. There's a few people we'll need to chat with in Tholinir city, and then tomorrow we can follow the King's Road to Wilanda city." Eddas then turned and climbed down the rope as nimbly as a spider while Marilith and I were left to scramble to our feet.

Marilith had already removed her top and loincloth by the time Joy was holding out the robe for her, and Joy and I helped Marilith slip the robe on. It hung a bit short on her, but not overly so. "She can't just-" I started, then stopped, shaking my head.

"Mmm? What, Sister?" Marilith asked, pulling out waist-belt.

"Oh, I was going to ask why she couldn't just stay in here while you changed, then I remembered it's not *she*, but *he*. It's sometimes hard to keep that in mind."

"You should try to remember that, Sasha," Joy said, helping Marilith put on the waist-belt. "Inside that little half-elf's body is the soul of a man. An ancient and honorable man, from an ancient and long-gone civilization. And now, he is home again, that dead civilization alive again. As much as we need him to get home again, I think he will need us to keep his heart from breaking at the tragedy he knows is impending for his people, and is powerless to prevent."

Marilith nodded, then gestured, transforming herself into an olive-skinned human woman with black hair, essentially the same form she used when visiting Calla. "*How does this look, Joy?*"

"Mmmm... No, that looks like a Vilandian, if I remember how Eddas described them. Hyperboreans had curly hair, dear, not straight. The hair needs to be very curly. And the skin needs to be a bit darker."

Marilith gestured again, and her hair wriggled a moment, becoming long ringlets that dangled past her shoulders. A moment after, her skin darkened a bit more.

"Better," Joy said, nodding.

Marilith smiled. *"Thank you, Joy. Come, Sister. Let's not keep Master Eddas waiting."*

I nodded silently, slipping down the rope, lost in my own thoughts.

The Ocean - Seven.

The walk to the city was a fascinating one, the landscape like nothing I'd ever seen before. There were many stones scattered about the ground to each side of the road as far as the eye could see, ranging in size from small pebbles to huge stones several times larger than I was tall. Eddas Ayar explained that the area here and the small harbor had been made by a glacial flow many aeons ago, and we were actually on the northwestern coast of Hyperborea. The whole of the city had been built with the stones we saw about us, yet there were countless more beneath the ground - the people of the city long ago had turned to fishing as their main source of food, as farming in such rocky ground was far more effort than it was truly worth. The balance of their diet came from sheep, herded by quiet shepherds along the grasses that grew between the rocks of the nearby lands. Joy told us that she grew up in this area as a little girl - and in our time, the present, the giants raised goats, sheep and cattle here, but still fished the sea, as well, wading out into the surf and casting huge goat-hair nets into the waters.

Eddas intended to enter the city quietly, make some basic inquiries and buy some supplies before we proceeded down the road to the south. She had explained carefully what we must say and do while we were anywhere near her people - Eddas had covered Joy an illusion to make her appear to look like an ordinary woman of Hyperborea, dressed in plain black robes - Marilith had done the same for me. Joy's change I could see readily, but I could see no difference when I looked at myself. Eddas explained that

one can never see the effect of an illusion when it is upon oneself, and said I now had olive skin, brown eyes and curly black hair. For Joy's part, the illusion only made her look shorter and changed her hair and eyes - her skin was already about the right hue. My lance was tucked inside the little bottle I wore at my wrist, as Eddas said that women of Hyperborea rarely carried anything larger than a dagger, and certainly none would carry a six-cubit long monodont-tooth lance. Thus, Marilith, Joy and I were (we hoped) concealed from anyone we might encounter.

Eddas Ayar, however, was not concealed. She explained that the mana-energy which maintained her body as it was might hamper any illusion cast to change her appearance. Though an illusion cast by her or Marilith would likely conceal her from the eyes of a mundane, it would also likely be easily pierced by the gaze of any sorcerer we ran across - which would make them suspicious of us. It would be easier and far safer for her to present herself as 'Raven', a name she had used many times before and was quite used to, and simply pose as an elf. A keen and experienced eye would pick her out as actually being a half-elf, Eddas said, as elves were more slender and willowy, and one who was widely traveled among the elves might realize that she had the appearance of a dark-elf, as well. Yet, Eddas said that the majority of her people had never seen an elf aside from the occasional trade caravan from the east, so it was a likely ruse. Eddas warned us that there were countless things that could go wrong with this plan, however, and both Marilith and I needed to try to remain quiet, and let Eddas do most of the talking until we had left the city again. Marilith and I both promised to hold our tongues for now, and I tried to remember that if I had to speak, I needed to address Eddas as 'Raven' so she might maintain the ruse.

Soon, we walked onto the stone road that led into the city from the north, Eddas leading the way down the road and to the city. The road fascinated me - made of countless carefully carved stones that interlocked, it seemed to have no mortar at all holding it together - just the shape of the stones, themselves. "Mast-" I began, then paused catching myself. "Ummm.. Raven, I mean... This road is quite fabulous. We've nothing like it in Vilandia."

"Vilandia doesn't exist yet, Sasha," Eddas replied. "At this point in history the Vilandians have only recently mastered bronze, though they'd formalized their system of writing several centuries ago, and they're only now beginning the long process of eliminating the catoblepas, leucrotta and other fell beasts that infest their lands. They did quite a smashing job of it, too - the leucrotta is entirely extinct that I know of, and if it weren't for the Hyperborean Eurayle, a maneless version of the catoblepas with larger horns, that species would be gone as well. It will be another thousand years before the last of the fell beasts of Vilandia are dead and King Vilan establishes his rule, however, so Vilandia literally does not exist yet. There are none near, now, but you must watch things like that when there are."

"Yes, sorry," I replied, feeling very stupid.

"It's alright. This road is part of the network of roads that was finished about three centuries before I was born. Despite the various wars and such the kings of Hyperborea had with each other, the one thing they could all agree on was that a network of sturdy roads between the cities would be for the benefit of all. Not only does it speed peaceful trade, it also speeds the deployment of troops to one's borders when necessary. Of course, no king could have a poor road while their neighbor had a well-made one, that would be quite a blow to their prestige. So all of them were made with the highest quality, using the best stonemasons available back then - and thereafter they were maintained well, funded by various small taxes travelers who used them were required to pay."

"Err... You mean we'll have to pay someone for using this road?"

"Yes, quite - and several times, as well, as we travel through the various kingdoms. I've a few coins with me, don't worry."

"Oh, alright." A million questions flitted in my head, seemingly all trying to get out at once. When I finally spoke again, however, I found even I was annoyed at how inane my next question ended up being. "Ummm... I was told when I was a child that only humans have round ears - yet, you and Joy both said she's a little giantess, and she has round ears. Why is that?"

Joy rolled her eyes, and I blushed. I suppose it was just the strangeness of our situation that was making me nervous and asking silly questions - yet, somehow, I always seemed to ask silly questions when I was in the presence of Eddas Ayar.

"As an old Hyperborean saying goes," Eddas replied, glancing at me, "for every rule, there's an exception. Giants are the exception - their ears are round, much like humans. Lamias and Gorgons are another exception, incidentally - they don't have external ears at all, just little pits in the sides of their heads."

"I see," I said, blushing.

"Someone's coming," Marilith said, looking behind us on the road. Changed into human form as she was, her voice sounded quite normal, but was still recognizably her own. I looked around - faintly, behind us, the sound of a horse and wagon came to my ears.

"Yes, I hear it, Marilith," Eddas replied, but did not stop walking. "I've been listening to their approach for several minutes. Try to hold your tongue, you three, and let me do the talking."

Slowly, the sound grew louder, until from over the hill behind us, I could see a low wagon approaching us, drawn by a stout bay stallion at a firm trot. The driver was a young, olive-skinned man who wore a green silk tunic, green tights, a sturdy pair of black boots that reached above his knees, and a green capelet whose scalloped edges draped dashing past his broad shoulders. He also bore a strange sword at his side, one with a curving blade and a rounded, bell-like hand-guard. He was a bit darker than the men of Vilandia, who were the only men I'd seen as a little girl growing up on father's farm, a dashing moustache and goatee setting off his flashing grin, and his hair hung in ebon ringlets and curls that draped down to nearly his shoulders. As he neared us, I could see him better, and realized he was *quite* handsome. I was rather embarrassed that I had nothing other than an illusion to wear and beneath that merely my scales, and resolved to do my best to say nothing, lest I make a fool of myself.

The driver slowed his horse as he neared us, and soon he was alongside. He gave me a gaze that I'd not seen on a man's face since the day of the Spring Dance when I was sixteen, and I found myself blushing wildly. "Good day, dear lady," he called warmly, and gave me an absolutely dazzling smile that quite took my breath away for the longest moment. The bracelet Eddas Ayar had made for me four years ago allowed me to understand him, but I couldn't bring myself to say anything in reply.

"Good day," Eddas Ayar replied, glancing over her shoulder and nodding.

The driver looked to Eddas, then looked again in a double-take of surprise. "My word!" he exclaimed, "an elf!"

Eddas simply smiled, saying nothing, and continued walking towards the city.

The driver transferred the reins he held so both were in his left hand, then bowed. "Forgive my rudeness, gentle maiden, but I've seen only a few of your people in my travels. Most that I've seen are traders who visit the eastern cities. Vaddan, gentle maiden, at your service."

"Raven, kind sir, at yours," Eddas replied with a polite nod. Eddas then pointed to Marilith and I. "This is Joy, this is Marilith, and this is Sasha. All are my students, traveling under my protection."

"Oh? What do you teach, gentle maiden?"

"I am a sorceress, kind sir. Where I come from, I am considered equivalent to a Master."

"Really?! My word!" Vaddan replied, and grinned broadly. "You know, I've always found sorcery and magic quite fascinating, really. But, I've no ability at it, myself - not a lick of the *Talent* at all. So, instead, I've had to make my living with more mundane skills. I'm a trader, gentle maiden - I go from town to town and trade things here and there to sell in other towns for a profit. It's not quite as exciting a profession as having the powers of the universe at one's fingertips, of course, but I've managed to stave off boredom anyway," he replied, and winked.

Eddas smiled, pausing in her walk, and Vaddan gently pulled back on the reins to stop his horse. Eddas looked up to Vaddan, bowing with a brief touch of her fingertips to her forehead. "Ah, you endear yourself to me, kind sir, for I have in the past spent decades alone on my lands and for many years relied on a few friends who are traveling merchants among the dwarves and elves for my company."

Vaddan returned the bow, touching his forehead briefly with his right hand. "We of the Road are often brothers in spirit, gentle maiden. I am glad to see my brothers have treated you well."

Eddas smiled again, brushing at her nose for a moment, then gesturing with her free hand as she spoke, rapidly, but appearing almost idly. "Far better than life itself has treated me, at times, but I shan't bore you with my tale, friend."

"I see..." Vaddan replied, and made a short gesture with his hand. "The weather has been passing fair this week, I think. Have you experienced the same?"

Eddas made an idle gesture in reply as she spoke. "We were about to find out, but I've no reason to

suspect yet it might not be."

"Ah, but there is the occasional jackdaw here and there. Quite annoying little birds," Vaddan replied, the gestures of his right hand now rapid, but still appearing to be idle gestures one might make in conversation.

"Oh, I've no worry about them," Eddas replied, again gesturing idly with her free hand.

I leaned over and whispered in Marilith's ear. *"Why do I get the feeling that I'm missing about half this conversation?"*

"Possibly because we are, sister," Marilith whispered back. "They are signing to each other with their hands - but what they are saying, I do not know. My powers allow me to speak and read the words of any language, but that is not a language, as it has no words. I can tell they are communicating, but that is all."

I nodded - the little amulet Eddas Ayar gave me four years ago allowed me to understand any language, but apparently it also did not work with languages that did not have words.

Eddas and Vaddan chatted on for a long moment about utterly trivial things, it seemed, yet all the while each gestured with their free hand. The gestures seemed meaningless and idle, to me - just the ordinary waving about of the hands that people often do when chatting. Yet, their conversation was utterly pointless, even banal. They talked of weather, mostly, though in a disjointed manner of speaking that left me quite confused. I wondered what was really happening, but decided to stay quiet. Joy simply stood, watching the exchange. Whether she understood their signs or not, I could not tell.

Finally, Vaddan nodded, lowering his hand to his lap. "They can be trusted, I assume," he said, glancing to Joy, Marilith and I.

"Implicitly, though they are young," Eddas replied.

Vaddan nodded, then held out his hand. "Well, come on up, then, little sister. It's a good two leagues to the city, we'll spare your feet the walk."

"Thank you," Eddas replied, taking Vaddan's hand, and he pulled her up to sit beside him on the wagon. Eddas then looked to Marilith, Joy and I. "Come along, you three, we haven't all day, our friend Vaddan is a busy man."

Marilith, Joy and I clambered up into the wagon, and seated ourselves upon a pile of sewn burlap sacks Vaddan had neatly arranged in it - judging by their feel, they were full of grain, probably for his horse. The rest of the wagon was full of carefully arranged boxes and small barrels, but they did not look quite as comfortable to sit upon. Vaddan flicked the reins in his hands, and shortly we were proceeding towards the city at a trot. "You speak the '*Cant*' like my old master," Vaddan said, once we were underway.

"It's only because I learned the '*Cant*' quite awhile ago," Eddas replied.

"Oh? Who taught you, may I ask?"

"My betrothed, a guild-member in Wilanda city - a Hyperborean, like you."

"You're to be married? Gah! Another beauty slips through my fingers - likely by a matter of days," he said, and winked.

Eddas smiled in return. "No, no. This was long ago. The wedding never happened, my betrothed was killed a month before the wedding by my enemies. I've since gained my revenge, but..."

"Ah - sorry, sorry. I did not mean to make light of it," Vaddan replied, looking quite abashed.

Eddas waved the notion off. "You couldn't have known, I'm not offended."

"You say you're just passing through Tholinir city, though?"

"Yes, we've business in Wilanda city. I need to make a few inquiries at the tower of the Mordovian Circle, and then we'll continue on."

"You'll need horses, little sister, it's a bit far to walk."

"No, no, we've no need of horses - though I suppose we should buy a bit in the way of supplies. I've a spell that can summon a steed I'll be using later. It's really just supplies we need - and there's no worry there, either. I've a few coins, we should be alright."

"You'll need more than a few, little sister. You're an elf, the merchants will squeeze you for every coin they can get, I'm afraid."

"True, true. I hadn't really thought of that. What do you suggest?"

"Let me trade for you," Vaddan replied with a smile.

Eddas smiled in return. "Ah, but I can't ask you to do it for nothing."

"You most certainly can ask. I'd rather you didn't, but you most certainly can ask," Vaddan replied, and winked, causing Eddas to burst into laughter.

Eddas shook her head, still grinning. "Shall we say a tenth cut?"

"Aye, a tenth would be good. But don't spread it about that I went that low - people will think I can be swayed by a pretty face, and that would just ruin my reputation."

"I swear on my honor I shall not breathe a word of it to any soul, living, dead or undead," Eddas replied formally, then winked, and she and Vaddan shared a laugh.

Finally, we neared the north gate of the city, and I gazed in awe at what, to me, was the massive metropolis that lay before us. It was far larger than any other city I had ever seen or heard of, even in the lands of Palome. The city walls were stout granite blocks reaching quite high overhead, and tendrils of ivy and other creepers climbed their sides, betraying the city's true age. Near the gates to the city, a small line of travelers had gathered, each briefly inspected by the guards and apparently ordered to pay a small road tax before they were allowed in. The guards wore rather sturdy looking scale armor and simple steel helms, and bore halberds - thanks to my time with Master Buntaro, I could tell by their stances that each was well trained. I was quite glad that both Marilith and I looked like ordinary, olive-skinned women of Hyperborea, as the guards did not look like they were going to be willing to put up with any long explanations for our normal appearances. As I watched, I noticed that a small, fat little man sat at a narrow desk by the gate. As the guards inspected each traveler, he made notes in a ledger with a quill and ink, a small fee was paid, and the travelers were allowed entrance into the city. It wasn't long before it was our turn. Vaddan drove the wagon over while the little man was making notes his ledger.

"Your names?" the little man called, then looked up. "Oh - it's *you*, Vaddan. You scoundrel! What are you doing back here?"

Vaddan smiled innocently, bowing from where he sat. "Just trying to make a living, Clerk Jorgan."

"Bah, so you say. And who are these women? And who is this elf?"

"Just travelers I picked up on the road, Jorgan, and decided to spare them a bit of wear on their feet

as we were headed to the same place."

The fat little man shook his head, and wagged an ink-stained finger at us. "You women should flee now while you've still a few coins in your pockets! Vaddan is an utter wretch and a scoundrel and he'll rob you blind - and make you think you got the better of the deal while he does it!"

"Really?" Marilith asked, looking Vaddan over with an expression of surprise.

"Yes, quite," Jorgan replied.

"What an interesting recommendation! I am liking you already, Vaddan," Marilith replied, and grinned at him.

Vaddan laughed, but the clerk simply rolled his eyes. "I can see you've already corrupted them, Vaddan. Well, no matter, let's get on with it," he said, and waved to the guards. Vaddan hopped down, and the brief inspection began. There was little to it - the guards examined the wagon briefly, saw that it was only full of sacks of grain and small boxes, then their leader called back to the little clerk. "Just the five of them, sir."

"Alright, that will be five pence," the clerk said to Vaddan.

Eddas started to reach for her glove, but Vaddan waved her off. "It's nothing, gentle maiden, I'll take care of it." A moment later, he'd handed five tin pennies to the nearest guard, who then passed it to the clerk. The clerk dropped them into a small iron box on the table beside him, and Vaddan climbed back aboard the wagon.

"Go on, get moving, Vaddan," the clerk called, waving us onwards. "And as for you women, I'd strongly suggest you heed my words and flee that scoundrel while you've the opportunity."

The city behind the walls was truly impressive, to my eyes. All the streets and alleys were paved in cobblestones, which I had heard of but never seen before. The buildings of the city were not only beautiful, but also very tall, most having at least two floors. Most also seemed very old. The walls of the houses were again granite bricks and the roof of each house was done in slabs of slate. I marveled as I gazed around at the city - I couldn't imagine the number of stonemasons it would take to make an entire city this large and grand entirely out of stone. "This place is incredible!" I said, amazed.

Marilith nodded. "This is, indeed, a fascinating place." Joy, unlike us, managed to hold her tongue, though I could tell by her expression she was equally impressed.

Vaddan looked at us in surprise. "What, have you never seen a city before?"

Eddas smiled. "No, they haven't, but that's rather a long story."

"Ah - country girls, yes?"

"In a sense, yes. As I said, the story's a bit long, so I shan't bore you with it."

Vaddan smiled. "Well, we'll need to keep a close eye on them, then. Tholinir city's a rather quiet place, but there are still some unpleasant individuals one can encounter in dark alleys here and there."

"Well, we shan't be here long, really. I need to make a few inquiries with the Mordovian Circle here, then we'll be moving along to Wilanda city."

"Ah, looking to place your students for more advanced training?" Vaddan said, turning the horse down another street and flicking the reins to bring it to a trot. "I've been told the law prohibits a mage from training beyond the apprentice level if they are not part of a recognized Circle. You'll have some trouble though, I think."

"Oh?"

"Aye. I've never heard or seen a circle that allows women, I'm sorry. Well, wait, there's one... A circle of healing mages, led by the White Witch of Iolo mountain. But Iolo mountain's quite a distance from here, I'm afraid."

"We'll leave that as a last resort, then," Eddas replied, nodding.

"I understand. The tower of the Mordovian Circle's just down this street, I'll drop you off there and then be about my business."

Eddas smiled again. "You are too kind, Goodman Vaddan."

"It's nothing, Goodmaid Raven," Vaddan replied, and flashed that dazzling grin of his that very nearly took my breath away. It was *quite* annoying to know that such a heart-fluttering smile was not in any way directed towards me.

I felt somewhat flustered as we rode along the busy streets. Here Eddas was, chatting with perhaps the most handsome man I'd seen in all my days as easily as though they were two old friends, and yet I'd been asked to try to hold my tongue. I really wasn't quite sure what to make of my feelings, and even if Eddas hadn't asked Marilith and I to try to remain quiet, I wasn't sure I could think of anything to say. Finally, I decided I just *had* to say something.

"Ummm... Vaddan, how do they get the stones to fit together so neatly?" I asked, and then blushed at how trivial the question was. Unfortunately, it was all I could think of to say.

Vaddan smiled at me. "Well, I'm no stonemason, Goodmaid Sasha, but the basics of it is they use a

pattern. They carve the stones to fit the pattern, and then the stones fit together without mortar. For the streets, they use cobblestones - mostly river stones, set in mortar. It's cheaper than using carved stones, though it requires a bit more work to keep it maintained. Ah - there's the tower of the Mordovian Circle," Vaddan said, pointing.

"Oh... Ummm... Thank you," I replied, desperately wishing I could think of something else to say. Ahead of us, an enormous gray tower of granite loomed over the city streets, and it was apparent that our destination was near. I wracked my brain, trying to think of something to say to prolong the conversation, but could think of nothing. "Ummm..."

Marilith smiled. "Goodman Vaddan, as it seems we may part soon, I was wondering where you might be headed after?"

"To the marketplace, to trade for the supplies you need - and, perhaps, to make a few coin on the side," Vaddan replied, and smiled back at her. "As I said before, I trade a few things, pick up a few things, buy a few supplies, then move along to the next city. It's not much of a living, I admit, but it keeps me busy."

"Perhaps we may be able to travel together, then?" Marilith asked, looking to Vaddan and Eddas. I could see Marilith knew I wanted to spend more time with Vaddan, and I was immensely grateful for her help.

"We'll see," Eddas replied, cutting off Vaddan's reply. "Goodman Vaddan, we need a stone or two of pressed charcoal, preferably in palm-squares, and a half stone of ground *byallar*. Oh - and a stone of *wanda*-powder, a quarter stone of raw *wanda*-beans, two ears of *nupta*, and a few wheels of cheese. Rhendish White, if you can get it, but I'd settle for Calloman Green or *Naktari*. Can you get that for us?"

Vaddan smiled. "Certainly, gentle maiden. How long do you think your business here will take?" he asked, nodding at the tower before us.

"An hour, perhaps two."

"I'll return then," Vaddan replied, hopping down from the wagon and offering his hand to help Eddas down. A few moments later, we stood on the busy street beside the ominous granite tower, watching Vaddan drive away. I gazed after him longingly - I couldn't help myself.

"Sasha," Eddas said, once it was clear Vaddan was well out of hearing, "try to remember we have other things to do."

I blushed under her gaze. "Yes, sorry."

Eddas then turned to the door of the tower, and raised her ebon-gloved hand to knock... Then paused, gazing at the door.

Joy looked at Eddas, reaching out to touch her shoulder. "Old Man? Are you alright?"

Eddas lowered her hand, and leaned on her staff for a moment. "It's just... I need to ask them a few questions, and try to get the calendar date, then we move on. And yet..."

"Yes?" Joy asked.

"Part of me wants to... I... Joy, these are my people, and soon..." Eddas sighed deeply, then shook her head. "Nevermind," she said, then raised her hand and knocked on the door.

We waited quietly, and I cast my gaze to the people walking by on the street. Dozens of ordinary people walked here and there, their garb archaic and quaint, and all very endearing. Yet, I knew that this city was leagues wide, and tens of thousands called it home. And this was only one city of many. Countless thousands, perhaps even millions of ordinary people, all living their lives, never knowing that they were all doomed. And they were all Master Eddas' people.

I suddenly felt very ashamed - here I was thinking only of how handsome Vaddan was, and how nice it would be to perhaps get to know him better, as though this was a mere holiday visit to a strange land. Meanwhile, the bitter truth was that even being here was tearing at Eddas Ayar's heart in ways I could never truly comprehend. I brushed away a tear, and decided that I would do my best from now on to be of more help. Perhaps I could do nothing to actually get us back home again, but at least I could do my best to not make Eddas Ayar's time here more miserable than it was already going to be.

At last, the door opened. A young olive-skinned lad gazed out at us, smiling in greeting. He wore a slim circlet of silver about his head, which I noticed was shaven smooth, and he appeared to be perhaps sixteen or seventeen. "May I help you?"

"Good day, Apprentice," Eddas Ayar began. "I am Raven, and I would like to speak with the masters of your circle."

"I'm afraid they're quite busy, Goodmaid Raven," the boy replied. "Do you have an appointment?"

"No, but I think they'll make time for me," Eddas replied, and smiled. "Unless it's a rather normal course of daily affairs for you to have elves come to visit your tower?"

The boy grinned. "Well, no, it's not, I suppose that's unusual enough to see if they might want to talk to you," he replied, and held the door open. "Come on, then."

Eddas looked to Marilith and I. "You three stay here, I'll try not to be too long," she said, and walked inside. The apprentice closed the door, leaving Joy, Marilith and I to wait outside.

"Ummm... We're just going to stand here for an hour or two?" I asked aloud.

"So it seems, doesn't it?" Joy replied, and leaned against the wall of the tower, crossing her arms.

Marilith smiled, leaning close and cupping a hand to my ear, then whispering. *"Sister, consider what you really look like beneath that illusion, and what I really am. These are not ordinary people, Sister, they are battle-mages - the most powerful sorcerers mankind ever produced in all your long history. Eddas goes to speak with the masters among them, as well. The illusion I have covering you, they would likely see through - and Eddas would have quite a difficult time trying to explain a tall, red-headed woman to them, as the Hyperboreans had never before met humans of other nations in their history. As for me, Sister, I am a lesser demon. Though my sorcery changes my shape, what I am might still be detected by a master mage by examining my astral aura. And as difficult as it might be to explain you, it would be a thousand times more difficult to explain me - assuming they did not immediately attack in self-defense."*

I blushed again. "Sorry, I hadn't thought of it like that. I'm so used to you, it doesn't really occur to me that others might be frightened of you."

Marilith smiled as she leaned back. "This is, perhaps, another part of the learning we must do. Here - I'll conjure some chairs with sorcery. At least then we won't be standing on our feet all the time we wait." Marilith concentrated a moment, then gestured - three simple wood chairs appeared in the street, against the wall of the tower.

"Ah, thank you, Marilith," Joy said, and immediately sat. "He's only doing what he must do, I'm sure, but I wasn't truly looking forward to standing on my feet that long, any more than Sasha was."

I sat down and grinned at Marilith as she took a seat next to me. "It still amazes me how you do that."

"Mine is the Will and the Word, Sister. It takes me a bit longer than it used to, as I have to form my Will in accordance with the same Laws of Magic which apply to any other spellcaster here on the Prime Material, but it gets easier with practice. I have not tried any of the Words of Power my people use, however, so I am not certain if they are similarly limited."

"Oh? Why haven't you tried them?"

"Sister, Raven asked us to be as quiet as possible. Were I to use one of the Words of Power my people use, that would cause such an immense flow of *mana* it would be sensed by anyone with the *Talent* for leagues around. It would be, to their senses, as though I sounded a huge gong - the ringing would be heard for quite some time thereafter, as well. I hardly think Raven would be pleased with me if I did that."

I grinned. "No, I suppose not." As we sat there, my thoughts turned to Vaddan, and I found I was blushing again. "I... I want to thank you. For trying to help with Vaddan, I mean."

Marilith grinned. "Isn't that what sisters are supposed to do for each other?"

I grinned back. "Well, yes."

Marilith nodded. "Good. Now, if we find a cute *bufotibranche* anywhere around here, I want you to remember to return the favor," she said, and we both giggled together for a long moment.

Joy, however, shook her head. "You two need to remember this is not some holiday trip. Yes, I saw him, and yes, he's quite handsome. Even so, as Eddas said, we've other things to do, here."

"Yes, Joy. Sorry," I said, blushing again.

Time passed slowly while we waited. The people passing by on the street gave us a respectful berth, as we were all dressed in black robes and sitting at the foot of what was apparently a tower of mages, but otherwise paid little attention to us. The garb of the passers-by utterly fascinated me. The men, for the most part, dressed in various tights and tunics of many colors and in a style that seemed very odd to my eyes - archaic, yet possessed of an elegance of style that was quite interesting. Women, for the most part, wore close-fitting dresses with several layers of different colors, the outer layers having openings at the sides or back or along the arms to reveal inner layers. Upon their heads, they wore a burlet, consisting of a long kerchief of sheer material, held in place by a padded head-rail that encircled the head. The head-rail was covered with a padding made of two contrasting fabrics, spiraled together and usually matching the color of the clothes they wore. It was all so terribly enchanting, and even the most ordinary of them made me feel quite drab in comparison. And, as they hardly spared Marilith and I much more than a glance as they passed, I supposed we looked rather drab to their eyes, as well.

"Err... Joy, I find I'm quite curious... Did you see those little gestures Vaddan and Eddas were using as they spoke, at first?"

Joy nodded. "It's the '*Cant*. Eddas taught me, he learned it from Dyarzi. She was a rogue and thief, and Eddas loved her dearly, but I've often thought she really was trying to corrupt him by teaching it to him," Joy said, and winked. Marilith and I giggled as she continued. "It's simple once you learn it - words you speak act like a framework, and you hang gestures on them to show what you really mean. It can also be used without words, but it's more limited, then. Eddas said it would be good for me to learn, if I ever needed to say something to him silently and others were around. You can ask him about it sometime, if you wish, he wrote a book on it that he's got in his library."

"Ah, look!" Marilith called, pointing. "Vaddan is returning."

I looked down the street, and saw he was. Marilith and I rose, and I waved to him madly. Shortly, he had drawn his wagon up before us, and was gazing down at us in curiosity. "You wait outside?"

Joy nodded. "Yes, Goodman Vaddan. Raven asked that we wait here while she talked to the masters. I think-"

But Joy's words were suddenly interrupted by the opening of the door to the tower. Eddas staggered out into the street from the shove of a pair of man's hands. "And stay out!" a voice called contemptuously, and the door slammed shut.

I blinked, astonished - and judging by the expressions on the faces of Vaddan, Joy and Marilith, they were no less surprised than I.

"Err... Raven? What happened?" Joy asked, mindful of Vaddan's presence.

"What happened?! What *happened*?! I was a *fool*, that's what happened!" she replied, her voice an angry snarl of rage. "They told me the date - I needed to know that, and pretended to have lost track while we trekked through the wilderness. I... I couldn't help myself - to be here, now, with everyone alive again, all as it was... I couldn't help myself! I told them the *truth*! The Invaders are coming, and the Great War of Devastation is at hand! Within a year, perhaps less, all of this will be *gone*, ruins and blasted stones! I told them the truth, despite everything! And it didn't matter! *They didn't believe me!*" she screamed, then spat. "I was a *fool*, Joy! I imagined a hundred possible things that might stop me from changing the future, but the one thing that I never imagined is that they simply wouldn't believe me *because I am trapped in the body of this half-elf woman! Impudent, ignorant bigots !*" she shrieked.

Vaddan shook his head. "I do not pretend to understand what you are talking about, Goodmaid Raven. However, I can tell you that not all my people are prejudiced against your people."

Eddas looked up, suddenly noticing Vaddan. Her face flushed with obvious embarrassment, though what she had to be embarrassed about, I did not understand. "I... I'm sorry, but I-"

Vaddan smiled. "It's nothing, gentle maiden. Truly. Now come - if you've annoyed the High Master of the Mordovian Circle, we'd best be leaving town. High Master Kassan has a great deal of influence in Tholonir city, and it's widely known he has Duke Bagar's ear. He could make things... Somewhat unpleasant for you, and rather quickly. I'd rather not see that happen to you, so let's be on our way." Vaddan held out his hand, and smiled again. "Come, Raven. It's alright."

Eddas nodded, taking Vaddan's hand and pulling herself up to sit atop the wagon's seat. Marilith, Joy and I followed, and Vaddan flicked the reins. "Hup!" he called to his horse, and in a moment, his wagon was rattling away from the tower and down the cobblestone street at a fast trot.

The Snake - Two.

As a *yal'onca*, a bodyguard of the dead, much of my task was simply to keep ordinary things from damaging my master. Preventing him from being jostled to where he might fall, guarding him from tripping and other ordinary dangers that were nothing to the living, but quite dangerous to a liche. And, of course, there was always the risk of assassins or thieves. Of the former, they were few - my master had few enemies, mostly those who were enemies of his circle. Of the latter, they were more numerous. After extracting my gear from my dresser, I sat on my bed, and began to dress.

Knee-high boots, then metal greaves over them. Elbow-length gloves, then vambraces over them, and sheathed fighting knives strapped over that. Apodesmos, then loincloth, then my robe, the flare below the waist wide enough to allow me to kick as high as my head. Holding the robe in place, a simple waist-belt. I tightened the belt in place, then lifted my arms over my head to give myself enough room in the robe to fight, if I needed to. After stretching a bit, I nodded - I was as ready as I could be, should my ultimate services be required. It was time to dress my master.

When I entered my master's chamber, I saw he sat in his favorite chair beside his tomb, his gaze resting on the wolf-statue by the opposite wall. I bowed my head briefly in respect for his god, then strode over to his dresser, extracting the wrappings he would wear.

His body, unfortunately, no longer healed. Inspecting, cleaning and anointing his bones with special oils to keep them from becoming too brittle was part of my duties. The pale white wrappings themselves helped, keeping dirt from getting into his joints. They were also enchanted to provide him some slight armor against ordinary bumps and wear - and, of course, they were enchanted to be invulnerable so they would never wear out, themselves. Gold thread was laced through and along one edge in a delicate pattern, and if one could ignore what they were for, they were actually somewhat attractive to look at. I slipped the satin slippers from his feet, laying out the tight rolls of his wrappings beside me, and began working on wrapping his bones.

It was a slow process. His bones had to be wrapped in such a way as to protect them from ordinary dirt and grit, and yet allow him to move freely. It was, of course, part of the skills I had trained for when I was young, my mother carefully explaining the process of working from toe to foot to ankle, then up the

legs. The knees were a bit tricky, as the wrappings had to allow both movement and protection, and also encompass his knee-bone. The ends of the femurs were very important, requiring careful wrapping to protect them from both the ordinary wear of walking, and support and protect his bones should he fall. Once all was done, I then slipped his walking shoes upon his feet - soft kidskin slippers that laced tight.

Each hand then had to be wrapped, first the longer bones in the back of the hand, then each finger, and again the back of the hands. This gave him a hand he could more easily grip things with again, and protected the bones when he held his staff. My master wore eight rings, each enchanted with various spells. Each had to be removed to prevent the metal from being rubbed against his bones during the wrapping, then slipped over the wrappings once I was done, the sizing enchantments in the rings adjusting them at his thought. From there, I worked upwards, to his shoulders, carefully finishing his arms.

The last was his spine, which had to be very carefully wrapped from his pelvis to his skull. The bones of his spine no longer had the little pads that protected them from each other as he walked, so instead I now carefully inserted pads of soft velvet, then wrapped his spine to hold them in place. At the top of his spine, the wrappings now went about his skull, holding a broad, thin pad of velvet in place atop his head, then were carefully tied in place at the nape of his neck. Lifting his steel skullcap from the table nearby, I placed it upon his head atop the protective layer of wrappings, then looked him over. "How does it feel, master?"

I held out my hand to steady him as my master rose from his chair. He stretched, experimentally tilting his head from side to side and turning his head to look around. He then looked to me, and nodded. "*Quite nice, as usual, Haifa, thank you,*" he replied.

And then, without warning, he lifted his hand and uttered a rapid incantation, and blasted the little wolf-statue on the other side of his chamber to bits with a stroke of lightning.

I leapt back, badly startled, the strands of my hair writhing as my ears rang with the blast. "M-master?! Are you alright?!"

"*Sorry to disturb you, Haifa. I've broken my idol,*" he replied, and chuckled hollowly.

I gaped, profoundly confused. "I... I..."

He held out his hand, his staff appearing in his grip at a thought. He then held his other hand out to me. "*Shall we go?*"

I nodded, reaching out to pull the hood of his robe into place, then pulling my own into place. "Y-yes, master," I replied, and held my hand out. My master nodded, taking my hand, then gestured with his staff, incanting a brief spell. The world blurred, and we were elsewhere.

The Ocean - Eight.

We rode in silence for several hours, heading directly out the city's south gate. I could see that Joy wanted to speak, to say something, but Vaddan's presence made that impossible. I knew how she felt - I so wanted to say *something* to comfort Master Eddas, but I couldn't imagine what I might say that might help. Marilith, too, seemed at a loss - she took my hand and squeezed it silently, but said nothing for herself. Vaddan, however, kept his eyes on the road, alternating his horse's pace to give us the best travel time he could while we had light remaining. Finally, the sun neared the horizon, and the sky started to tinge with the warm colors of sunset, and the rocky lands about us had given way to a light forest.

After we had traveled through the forest awhile, Master Eddas finally sighed. "I owe you a tenth cut, I believe," she said quietly.

Vaddan smiled. "It can wait, gentle maiden."

Eddas shook her head, reaching for her glove. "No, I-"

Vaddan placed his hand over hers, stopping her. "It can wait."

Eddas nodded silently, and Vaddan pulled his wagon off the road and in among the trees. Without a word, he hopped down from the wagon, and began attending to his horse. The four of us climbed down from the wagon, and watched. I held Marilith's hand - I really did not know what to do.

Eventually, Vaddan had his horse freed of the harness, and was brushing him down. The horse, for his part, seemed to greatly enjoy the attention. Vaddan saw us all gazing at him, and grinned wryly. "I find it difficult to believe that watching me brush down Champion is really that fascinating, gentle ladies. I think perhaps it might be wiser for you to spend your time gathering wood for a fire, that we might have a warm supper."

Eddas smiled. "That we can do. Come Sasha, Marilith," she called, and strode off into the forest, Marilith and I following close behind.

An hour later, we sat around a cheery fire while the night-owls hooted in the quiet forest. Vaddan had a large stewpot hanging from a chain on a tripod over the fire, and what we'd sampled from it so far was quite delicious. "Mmmm!" I exclaimed, looking over the bowl of thick, brownish-green stew. "What is this?"

Vaddan blinked, then looked at me strangely. "You've never had *wanda*-stew?"

"It's a type of pea, Sasha," Eddas said, sipping at her own soup-spoon. "The *wanda*-peas are powdered, mixed with a few other dried and powdered vegetables, a bit of dried and powdered meat... Lasts quite a bit when traveling, as all you need do is add water and bring to a boil."

"Well, yes," Vaddan said, looking at the three of us strangely, "but it's also common as dirt. How could you *not* have had it before?"

Eddas sighed, shaking her head at me for a moment before looking back to Vaddan. "That, my friend, is a long story, and not one I'm sure you'd rather hear."

"Ah," Vaddan replied, then sipped at his soup, his face showing he was thinking. Finally, he finished his bowl, and set it aside. "Well, Goodmaid Raven, I do believe I shall take my tenth cut now."

Eddas nodded, setting her own bowl aside and reaching for her glove. "Alright - how much do I owe you?"

"One story. Preferably the one you told High Master Kassan," Vaddan replied, and grinned.

Eddas paused, looking at Vaddan. After a moment, she smiled back. "That's a bit more than a tenth cut, I think."

Vaddan smiled. "I suspect that may be true, gentle maiden. Let me show you the color of my coin, however, that you may judge for yourself," he said, and rose to his feet. "The three of you travel down the road with no horses, yet the fact that you are an elf tells me you have traveled quite far. It seems to me very unlikely that you would have traveled entirely on foot from the lands of the elves all the way to here, the northwest coast of Hyperborea, without any horse at all. The names you gave me for each of you have a foreign ring to each - I have never heard of any woman in all my days named Marilith, Sasha, or Joy. I once met a giantess named Joy while trading in their lands, as the giants often give simple names like Joy, Felicity, Constance or Hope to their girl-children, much as they give names like Blue-eye or Strongarm to their boys, but never have I heard of a woman of Hyperborea with such names as these women bear. You speak the '*Cant*' like an elderly master, yet I've never heard the tale of any murdered rogue who was betrothed to an elf. Elves are quite rare in our lands, and as you've discovered for yourself, our people are often quite strongly bigoted against you. Oh, we treat you politely enough - honor is of great importance to a Hyperborean, and even our enemies are treated with politeness. Indeed, it is considered sweet and cutting justice to treat one's most deadly enemy with more politeness than one treats one's own kin. Still, bigotry against your race does exist, gentle maiden, and the notion that I would not have heard of such a betrothal, even as an anecdote, seems quite unlikely. This leads me to wonder who might *really* have taught the '*Cant*' to you. Meanwhile, you said they were your students, apprentices in sorcery. But, that one," he said, pointing to me, "does not walk with the stride of a simple

apprentice mage. That one has the stride of a well-trained warrior. And that one beside her," he said, pointing to Joy, "also has a stride that shows training, though of a different sort, and she carries herself like one who is much taller. But, it was in the studying of them as I drove up beside you earlier today that I noticed the first, truly odd thing. You see, that one there," Vaddan said, pointing to Marilith, "looks normal enough, but the other two, my eye keeps slipping from each time I gaze upon them. It is as though my eye was trying to tell me there was nothing important to see, despite my mind's wish to examine them more closely, to try to guess what fighting school they might have learned from. That, to me, is a sure sign of an illusion concealing their true appearance. Then, I heard your stories, and I was convinced something was up. Lastly, when I left the four of you behind at the tower, I noted that the rump of one of them had dented the sacks of grain I had in my wagon quite a bit more than one would expect from the slender ladies I see before me, now. One of those two is quite a bit larger than she appears - though which, I've no idea. I would guess that one," he said, pointing at Joy, "as she walks with the step of one far larger than she appears."

Joy rose suddenly to her feet, but Vaddan simply smiled again. "Now, now. I mean you no harm - and I'm certain you mean *me* no harm, as well," he said, and reached to his neck, withdrawing a small silver amulet on a chain from beneath his tunic. The amulet was in the shape of an owl, and gleamed in the firelight as it dangled at the end of his fingertips. "You see, I've a little amulet I purchased from an elf several years ago. Quite a useful little item, it cost me an entire sack of gold - but, it's been worth every tin penny of that over the years. With it, I can sense the character of an individual I look at. In all three of you, I sense a good-hearted nature, just as I sensed when I first laid eyes upon you. In yourself, I sense deep honor and nobility - more nobility than in most nobles I've seen, in truth. In the one you call Joy, I also sense an honorable person, and also one of deep compassion. Between the two of you, I sense a strong and long-standing bond, much like that of matrimony - despite how impossible that may seem from your appearance. Between Sasha and Marilith, I sense a deep bonding of sisterhood, though they do not look like sisters at all."

Eddas stared at the amulet, her face showing surprise - Joy, too, stared, but her face looked somewhat frightened, like she'd seen a ghost. She sat down slowly, and trembled slightly as she gazed at the glittering silver owl.

Vaddan shrugged, returning the amulet beneath his tunic. "I'll throw in my own story, if you like - though somehow I doubt it will be as interesting as your own."

"Alright," Eddas said, rising to her feet, "but remember, you asked." Eddas brushed a bit of grass from her robes, then gazed at Vaddan. The light from the fire flickered eerily off her face, and suddenly, I saw her completely differently. She was, in truth, very beautiful - but more than that, really. It was a perfection of form that went far beyond ordinary mortal beauty. I had never seen an elf before her, and did not know if this was normal for them. Nor, really, had I ever paid much attention to her appearance before, or really to the appearance of any women in my life, as I found men far more interesting. Yet, as I looked

at her, the firelight casting odd shadows upon her face, I realized she had an alien, surreal beauty that bordered on being frightening.

"My friend, my story is not one you will probably believe. Yet, I will tell it to you anyway. My name is Eddas Ayar, and beneath this garment of flesh, I am a man of Hyperborea - and a man from far in your future. In my time, a future two thousand years from now, the civilization of Hyperborea is long gone, destroyed in a cataclysmic war known in my day as the Great War of Devastation. I was born in Wilanda city on the fifth day of summer, in the first year of the reign of King Darrak II, when the moon was eclipsed. In your time, that would be one hundred and nine years ago, almost to the day. In my youth I displayed a strong talent, and was accepted as an apprentice by the Dyclonic Circle when I was twelve, entering the Black Tower to begin my training. As a master, I cast the Spell of Hidden Life, and upon my death at eighty-nine, my soul entered my animuary. While I slept, war came to my people, and my civilization was destroyed, lost to the dust of the ages. Sixteen centuries later, a half-elf female entered my tomb, and I possessed her body. This body was nearly dead when I took it, however, a blow to the head having caused its owner's spirit to have fled just at the moment I took it. By the strength of my will alone, I forced this body to live where its previous owner's will could not. Unfortunately, I fainted thereafter from the wound, and the part of the sorcery which would have allowed me to reshape the body into my own transpired without effect, lacking my will to guide it. As it turned out, however, this was all in accordance with a plan of Yorindar, a god of the humans of the Southlands, who are the descendants of survivors of the Great War of Devastation. To that end, this body received its final forging in the heart of a mana-storm, and is permanently as you see it today. Thus, I am Eddas Ayar, a Hyperborean battle-mage - and, in this body, the Raven of Yorindar."

"And what of the others?" Vaddan asked, surprisingly calm.

"Well, as for Joy, she is a giantess - though a very small one. She's covered by an illusion at the moment, but her normal height is about five and a third cubits, and is her natural, full growth. I have given her enchantments which allow her to assume the full-size of a giant, as well as a few other things which are not important to this explanation. Joy has been my friend for over a century and a half and my constant companion for the last fifteen years or so, and we are closer than man and wife. Sasha and Marilith, here, are servants of the Ocean, just as I am a servant of Yorindar. They are also sisters of the soul, Sasha having gained the powers of a mermaid and the training of a warrior during her youth, and used them to rescue Marilith from an imprisonment that lasted nearly two thousand years. Yet, they are still new to their powers, and Marilith still unused to life here on the Prime Material plane. She is, in fact, a lesser demon, who bound herself to this plane through her love of her soul-sister, Sasha."

"But how did you get back here, in the past?" Vaddan asked, still surprisingly calm.

"That, unfortunately, was due to an accident on Marilith's part. She cast a spell which tossed the four of us back through time - and though we were lucky to survive that accident, we would not be likely to survive a return trip in the same manner. Thus, I must try to find another way to return us to the present. I had hoped to meet with Master Kairatin, of the Algrassian Circle in Wilanda city, to try to find a way to return us home. He specialized in spells of time and chronology... But, having now learned the date, it is not likely he is still alive. If he is, he would easily be in his nineties... It's far more likely he is dead. Even if he passed of old age and has slipped into the existence of a liche, it's not likely the Algrassian Circle will allow a strange elf they've never met to chat with an Ancient Master, they're too valuable a resource to risk like that. That is, in truth, the largest part of what angered me outside the tower of the Mordovian Circle, not just their rude treatment of me. I am a Hyperborean, Vaddan, and I already knew that we'd had little contact with other civilizations aside from a bit with the elves and dwarves and the halfling races, and had never encountered other human cultures at all. I already knew we were bigots," Eddas said, and managed a small, wry grin.

"Err... Halfling races?" I asked.

"Yes, Sasha - dryads, naiads, centaurs, fauns and satyrs, minotaurs, gorgons, lamias... They're called the 'halfling' races because they appear somewhat human in varying degrees, and they all have human origins in the *mana*-storms of the Fell War, some twelve thousand years ago."

"You won't mind if I ask for a bit of proof of all this, I hope?" Vaddan said, still remarkably calm. "That she wouldn't know of the halfling races is interesting, but not quite proof enough."

Eddas shrugged. "Marilith, let Vaddan see you and your sister as you really are."

"Are you sure that's wise, Master Eddas?" Marilith asked.

"Yes, quite sure."

Marilith nodded, and let her sorceries drop. In the twinkling of an eye, she had resumed her equine humanoid shape. Her eyes glowed red in the darkness, and she smiled at Vaddan, tossing her ebon mane. For my part, I felt nothing change - Eddas and Marilith had explained that one cannot see an illusion when it is cast upon you. Yet, I could tell by Vaddan's expression that I now appeared as myself

- a tall red-headed woman with fair skin, of apparent Arcadian extraction.

"And what of her?" Vaddan asked, a bit shaken.

Eddas gestured, and Joy suddenly appeared as she truly was - an enormously tall, blonde woman in chain armor.

"I see..." Vaddan said, then after a moment, he smiled again. "Tell me, though - you and Joy seemed quite surprised to see my little amulet. Why is that?"

Eddas nodded, seating herself again. "I... I know a man who will be born in the future who wears that amulet."

"He was once my husband," Joy said, her voice hushed, "and that amulet now rests on the chest of my grandson."

"Well, it's nice to know I'll eventually have offspring," Vaddan said, and smiled again. "You wouldn't happen to know who my wife might be? It would make the courting quite a bit easier, I think, if I know who I should focus my attentions on. As it stands, I'm already spending my efforts on at least two dozen women in as many cities, to no avail. Quite tedious, really."

Eddas smiled while Joy, Marilith and I giggled. "No, I'm afraid not, friend Vaddan. Your life transpired after my death and before my reawakening, and before the birth of my companions. We've no idea who your wife might be."

"Ah, a pity," Vaddan said, and seated himself again. "Well, I said I'd share my story with you in turn, and I shall - but, as I told you, it's hardly one you'll find as interesting. I was born thirty years ago in Kadarak city, my father a merchant in the weaver's guild. But, as I was to discover growing up, this was merely a cover for his true identity as the head of the Thieve's Guild. I was taught his true profession, and eventually joined the guild myself. But, wanderlust overtook me - the sight of the nearby hills outside the

city left me to wonder what might lie on the other side of them. And when I saw that what was there was more hills, I wondered what was on the other side of them. I eventually became a traveling merchant - though my childhood training is sometimes used to my own advantage, I am more or less honest with those I deal with. After all, if I am not, they'll not deal with me again. I've had a rather eclectic education - my father taught me to read and write, and I've purchased books on various subjects that interested me over the years, or taken time to train with teachers of subjects that interested me. From swordplay to cooking, I've a rather broad education, though admittedly one with a few gaps - it seems the old saying is still true, *'The more you learn, the less you know.'* I've had good fortune and been rich at times over the years, and had poor fortune and been poor at times, as well. At the moment, I am currently somewhere between those two extremes," Vaddan said, and smiled again. "As I said, not quite as fascinating as your own story, but there it is."

"It's still quite an interesting story, Goodman Vaddan," Joy said, and smiled.

Vaddan grinned. "I rather think it's only gotten interesting now, myself. The tale of a vagabond merchant and rogue who now travels with a demon, a mermaid, a giantess and the liche of an ancient sorcerer? Why, if I was a troubadour, I could make a fortune with it!"

Eddas laughed. "It lacks a love interest for a proper troubadour's song, though."

"And given that by your story, you're in truth a man beneath the garment of flesh I see before me, it seems that element will remain lacking," Vaddan said, and laughed. "Such is life, I suppose!"

The others laughed in return, but I found I could not laugh myself. I wanted to say *something*, but did not know what to say. Vaddan was, to me, astonishingly handsome, but he didn't look at me with even the slightest bit of interest. It was, in truth, quite depressing.

Vaddan looked to Marilith and I. "I find I do have a question, however. What do the names 'Sasha' and 'Marilith' mean, in your own languages?"

Marilith smiled. "*Marilith, in my language, means 'Sea-stone,' or 'Stone of the Ocean.' A rock the sea washes over harmlessly - irresistible force meeting immovable object, yet both surviving and living in harmony. It's a name that, to us, is one of peace and strength, but also can mean*

'stubborn,'" she replied, her voice again the unearthly, hollow voice she normally possessed. Marilith then laughed. *"And, I suppose, it was rather prophetic, though my clan-father did not know it at the time."*

"Quite," Eddas agreed, nodding.

Vaddan smiled, looking at me. "And as for 'Sasha'? What does that mean, in your language?"

I blushed again. "Ummm... I really don't know, I'm sorry. It's just a name."

Marilith smiled at me. *"It means 'Defender of All People.' And considering what you did for our clan on Round Island against the Orcas, your father's choice of a name for you was rather prophetic, as well - though I doubt he knew it."*

"Oh?" Vaddan said, looking at me. "What happened?"

I blushed even deeper. "Well, it was nothing, really."

Marilith rolled her lambent eyes. *"Oh, it was hardly nothing, Sister,"* she replied, then looked to Vaddan. *"You see, when she was sixteen, she was shipwrecked on Round Island - it's an island to the west of us, where mer-folk live. She was fully human at that time, but the mer-folk accepted her as one of their own. In any event, a large pod of orcas came by-"*

"Orcas?" Vaddan asked, growing interested.

"Err... A large sea-mammal... A whale, actually, about the size of a draft horse. They eat meat, and have a maw of sharp teeth two palms long," Marilith explained.

"Ah - we call them 'Killer Whales.' Do go on, the story sounds fascinating already," Vaddan said, grinning. Eddas and Joy also seemed very interested - and this only made my blush worse.

"Well," Marilith continued, *"the mer-folk were trapped on the beach. They couldn't go into the water, lest the orca attack them while they were on the shore before they reached the waves. Orca can wriggle fairly swiftly on the beach, and they're quite vicious once they decide to kill. The mer-folk are deadly in water, but on the beach, they're as helpless as a man with no legs. Sasha had no armor or weapons - back then, she didn't even have clothes. A naked, sixteen-year-old girl living among the mer-folk on a distant island, with no one to help her. Well, she borrowed a lance from Yanar, the brother of her friend. The lance was a long shaft, the tooth of a monodont - that's another kind of whale, it grows a long tooth from the front of it's jaw like a spear."*

Vaddan nodded again. "I know of them - we call them Tusk Whales."

Marilith smiled. *"Well, all the nearby mer-folk envenomed the lance with the poisons from their thumb-claws. Then, Sasha lured the orcas onto the beach with the help of some mer-boys. The first one came, and she lanced it - the poison killed it fairly quickly, but the blood washed off the poison after. While it was dying, a second came onto the beach, riding a wave. She danced about it and lanced it over and over, leaping away when it snapped at her. Over and over the beast swiftly wriggled towards her, snapping it's mighty jaws to rend the life from her - yet again and again she leapt out of the way, darting about to it's sides to lance it again. Oh, it was truly an exciting battle! Finally, the beast collapsed, and my dear sister was victorious - she had slain two titanic beasts from the sea with little more than a lance made from a whale's tooth! She was very brave - and only sixteen, at the time,"* Marilith finished, and looked at me with pride.

"Err... Well... I only did what had to be done," I replied, wondering if it was possible to die of embarrassment.

Eddas Ayar nodded. "That is all any hero of legend ever really did - merely what had to be done," she replied solemnly.

Joy grinned at me. "And saved your people in the bargain - a wonderful story, I think."

Vaddan grinned. "Ah, now I truly wish I *were* a troubadour rather than merely a rogue. With that story alone I could feed myself easily for several years. Quite impressive, my lady."

"Thank you," I said, my ears burning.

"Well," Vaddan said, "let me see if I truly understand this, friend Eddas - feel free to correct me if I've missed something."

"Yes?" Eddas said, an eyebrow raised.

"If I understand your story correctly, and what you shouted after the mages of the Mordovian Circle tossed you from their tower, you are a Hyperborean mage from the future, trapped in the body of a half-elf woman by a quirk of fate and the gods."

"Yes," Eddas replied with a nod.

"And there's a great war coming to Hyperborea. One that our people will not survive."

"Yes," Eddas replied again.

"That leaves me with but one question: When?"

Eddas opened her mouth to reply, but suddenly Marilith turned her head, her ears flicking. "*What was that?*" she asked, her hollow voice sounding startled.

Eddas Ayar rose to her feet and turned to face north, gazing off into the gloom of the shadowed, night-time forest.

"What was what?" I asked, not hearing anything of note.

"There! There it is again!"

I shook my head. "I hear nothing."

"Nor I," Joy said, rising and looking to the north.

"I hear it," Eddas replied, and tapped her ear with an ebon-gloved finger. "These ears are a bit sharper than yours, though likely not as sharp as Marilith's in her current form. It's a sound like distant thunder."

Marilith nodded. *"Yes, exactly."*

Vaddan rose to his feet. "I would say it's nothing *but* thunder, as it's the season for it, but I've a feeling you'd disagree."

"Quite," Eddas replied, then looked to Marilith. "Marilith, cast your vision back to Tholinir city, and tell me what you see."

"I cannot see individuals at that distance, Master Eddas, I-"

"I am aware of how your perception works, Marilith. Just do it."

Marilith nodded, and was silent for a long moment before speaking again. *"Ships... There are many of them, a vast fleet just off shore, outside their harbor. Flares of light... Explosions... Sorcerous weapons, of some kind... The ships attack the harbor, and are sinking the ships sent out against them. They move by both sail and oar, yet no hand or hardened thews ply the oars, but sorcery... Many ships, Master Eddas. Hundreds, perhaps... More. I cannot count at this distance, but can only sense the essence... Large ships. I sense many aboard the ships... Thousands, perhaps. There is an aura of desperation... Of great need... And an unwillingness to bargain. There is no food aboard those ships, though there once was. It has been eaten over the course of a long journey, both by men and rats, and those aboard starve. They seek survival through conquest. And they will have it. The greater reality overlying them is clear, even at this distance - the city is doomed."*

"It appears, friend Vaddan, that the answer to your question is 'now,'" Eddas Ayar said, dryly.

Vaddan looked shocked. "There is nothing you can do?"

Eddas Ayar shook her head. "I have the power, yes. I am a Great Mage, and the powers I wield surpass your wildest imaginings. I might even have the power to defeat their entire invasion fleet, and change the future. But, if I tried, I would fail. Even if it were possible, it's not possible."

"Eh?" Vaddan said, blinking.

"The city is fighting now, but the truth is that the event is already past, Vaddan. I could go there and try to help the city defend itself - but, I would fail. The past cannot be changed."

"But... But it's not the past, it's the future! They still could win, with help, perhaps!"

"Yes, it is the future. Your future. Our past."

Vaddan shook his head. "I don't understand - you speak in riddles."

"And I've little time to elaborate, I'm afraid," Eddas replied. "Yes, their victory is in your future. But, it is my past - and mortals cannot change the past."

Joy looked to Vaddan. "It's paradox, Vaddan, and you haven't seen the half of it. He gets *really* confusing once you get him started."

"Perhaps," Eddas replied, ignoring the jab, "but for now, we must be away from here."

"Now?" Vaddan asked, still very upset.

"Yes, quite. From a military standpoint, it would be best for them after capturing the city to immediately set up patrols of the surrounding lands. And as I remember, their war-machines can move at the speed of a galloping horse. If they capture the city before midnight, they could have the first of their patrols here by morning. We must be long gone from here by then," Eddas said, then looked to Vaddan. "Pack your wagon, Vaddan, and I'll tend to your horse. I know he's tired and quite ready to rest, but I'll do my best to refresh him with sorcery so he can continue on. Marilith, Sahsa, Joy, help Vaddan get packed."

"Yes, Master Eddas," Marilith replied, and took my hand, pulling me to my feet. "*Come, Sister, let's not dally. Master Eddas is right - from what I can see at this distance, we do not wish to be here come the dawn.*"

"It's that bad?" I whispered, following her as we walked over to help Vaddan pack his belongings.

"Worse, I think, but it's difficult to tell at this distance," Marilith muttered in reply.

As Joy, Marilith and I helped Vaddan pack his tent and bedroll again, I paused at the sound of song. Eddas Ayar was quietly singing to Vaddan's horse, stroking its pelt with a gloved hand as she did so. The horse nickered in obvious pleasure, and I was distracted for several moments by the quiet beauty of the song until Marilith nudged me with an elbow.

The Ocean - Nine.

We rode through the night, Vaddan driving the wagon as swiftly as his horse could manage, and made camp come the dawn. Vaddan's horse, Champion, could simply go no further - he was completely exhausted, and Eddas Ayar said that to try to push him further, even with sorcerous assistance, would likely cause his collapse. He needed rest, not sorcery, and he needed food. In truth, all of us needed rest and food - save, perhaps, for Eddas Ayar. Her eyes were still alert, on the horizon, watching behind us as we made camp at dawn. Once Champion had been unhitched from the wagon and allowed to graze nearby, Eddas simply told the rest of us to get some sleep, saying that she would keep watch. Vaddan nodded silently, and did not bother to set up his tent again. Instead, he simply unrolled his bedroll on the ground beneath his wagon, slipped off his boots and sword, and rolled himself into his bedroll. As for Joy, Marilith and I, Eddas pulled out her rope from her thumb-ring again, and conjured her hidden sanctuary again for us to sleep inside.

Sleep did not come easily, despite cuddling up to my sister's back like a spoon. My mind was filled with a thousand doubts and worries - and dancing through it all was thoughts of Vaddan. What would happen to him? Would he survive the war? Eddas Ayar had said that the nation of Hyperborea had been destroyed - but did that mean that *all* the people had died? I did not know. And, I hesitated to ask, for fear of what the answer might be.

Marilith lifted her head at my sigh. "Mmm? What is it?" she whispered.

I sighed again, snuggled up to her back spoon-fashion, and whispered into her long ear so as not to awaken Joy. "Vaddan."

Marilith smiled. "He's a sweet one, isn't he?"

"Yes... But what will happen to him?"

Marilith sighed, and said nothing.

"You know, don't you? You were here, then... Or now... Oh, I don't understand it all, but... Well, you said you watched his people, when you were in the Temple of the Sun!" I hissed quietly.

"No, Sister. I watched Eddas Ayar's people before my imprisonment, not after, and my imprisonment began a few decades before Eddas Ayar entered his tomb. For the first two centuries of my imprisonment, all I could do was scream with pain. By the time I had adapted to my situation and was able to look about outside the tower, the Great War of Devastation had come and gone, and all that was left of Hyperborea was ruin. And, as you know, my vision at great distance is not a precise thing, it is a thing of essences. Only through my bond with you was I ever able to see clearly at great distance - and then, only that which was around you, as though I was standing in the same spot as you."

I sighed. "Marilith... I... I think I love him."

Marilith nodded, reaching back to pat me with a hand. "I know."

"How do I tell him? Or should I even tell him at all?"

"Ahem," Joy said, lifting her head from where she lay on her cot. "Could we have less talking and more sleeping, please?"

I started to apologize, but Marilith shushed me with a hand, and smiled. *"Yes, Joy. Sorry. You're right, sleep is a good idea right now,"* she said, then reached back to take my hand, pulling it tight about her. *"Sleep, sister."*

I sighed, closing my eyes. I didn't know if I even could sleep, but certainly there wasn't anything else that I could do at the moment. All I could do was hope everything would turn out alright. But, given what little I knew already, I had a feeling it wouldn't, in the end.

The Owl - I.

Torgrim smiled as the deck-hands made fast the ship to the dock. Seeing the old priest and his companion, he nodded. "You were right, priest. The Goddess was with us. That's the smoothest voyage I've had eastwards across the Bright Sea."

Father Patience smiled as he hobbled near, the hooded slave-girl at his elbow, helping him. "I can't take credit for it, Captain, it was the work of the gods. Still, I am pleased to see all is well, as you are."

Torgrim grinned wryly. "We'll be here a good week, trading, then it's back to Vilandia again. What can you tell us of the return trip?"

The old man shrugged. "It will be much as a hundred others you have done in your life, Captain. A storm here and there, fickle winds... Nothing you've not experienced a hundred times before."

Torgrim chuckled. "I suppose I can't tempt you to sail with us to perhaps gain the favor of the Goddess again?"

"No, Captain. The Ocean favored your voyage here because she works with my god, Yorindar. But my destiny is not to be a convenient passenger to smooth your voyage, my friend. I have another destiny - as does every mortal of this world."

"I knew as much, but I thought it couldn't hurt to ask," Torgrim replied, and chuckled again. "Tell me, friend - where to, from here? To some great church, perhaps, to assume a place in the hierarchy?"

The old man smiled. "No, Captain. We have two orders among ourselves - the Parochials and the Mendicants. The Parochials wear brown robes, and they are the ones who establish churches and tend to the needs of the laity. They are the ones among us permitted to handle money, which they need to do to pay for the various mundane needs of the church. I, however, wear the gray robes of the Mendicant. We do not touch money, and we only own what we can carry."

"Ah, I see - so your slave handles money for you, when you need it?"

"Yes, Captain. However, to answer your larger question, from here we shall head north, beyond the Great Wall, to the lands of Hyperborea."

Torgrim blinked, startled. "What?! It's madness to go there - suicide! If all the tales are true, those lands are ridden with goblins, ogres, trolls, giants, dragons and fell beasts galore!"

The old man nodded. "The legends are true indeed, Captain. Far more true than even you may think."

"Then why go at all?!"

"It is my destiny, Captain - and hers," the old man replied, nodding to his female companion. He then looked back to Torgrim, and smiled. "Worry not, Captain. We shall be quite safe. Yorindar watches over us."

Torgrim shook his head. "I don't even know how you'll get there from here. This is Greenhaven, friend, and it's many weeks walk to the Great Wall."

Father Patience nodded. "I know where we are, Captain. I know this city very well. I've lived here for a long, long time," he said, his expression mysterious, but then he suddenly smiled. "And as for the distance, again, please don't worry. I've traveled farther in my life. Much farther, in fact."

Torgrim shook his head again. "Well, I doubt I can talk you out of it, friend. All I can do is pray the Goddess watches over you."

Father Patience smiled wryly. "Yorindar guides me, Captain, just as the Ocean guides you from time to time. And now, we must go. Farewell, Captain," Father patience said, and the slave-girl at his side curtsied politely.

Torgrim watched the two walk down the gangplank, and away across the docks, headed towards the city. For a long moment, he wondered what the true story of the priest and his slave-girl companion might

be. Somehow, in watching them walk away, he could feel that there was so much more happening, just beyond his perception... As though he had been but a small piece in a larger game he was only barely aware of.

Torgrim shook his head. There would be enough time for idle daydreaming later. For now, they had cargo to unload, and berthing fees to pay. Torgrim turned to his crew, and bellowed his commands. The day was young, and there was much to do.

Unnoticed by Torgrim, the old man and the woman at his side slipped away into the bustling crowds on the busy docks, and vanished from view.

The Ocean - Ten.

I ran through a dark and forbidding forest, the sounds of hounds baying behind me. Who was chasing me? I didn't know - I only knew they were dangerous, and I had to escape... Escape... Tree limbs like clawing skeletal hands reached for me as I ran, gnarled roots reached for my feet, tripping me, slowing me... Escape...

Suddenly, Marilith was at my side, trotting casually along. The embers of her glowing eyes reflected mirth. *"You have some interesting dreams, Sister. What's chasing you?"*

"I... I don't know!" I panted, still running. "I think... I think it's that army... That army Eddas talked about! The war... The Great War of Devastation! Do you remember? It's coming! It happened... It's coming!"

Marilith chuckled. *"My, my... Well, let's stop, and let them catch us."*

"What?! Why?!"

"Doesn't standing and fighting sound better than running and running forever in a dream?"

"A... A dream?"

"Yes, Sister. This is a dream. There is no one chasing you but your nameless fears," she said, catching my hand and slowing me to a stop. *"Stand with me awhile. Let's wait for them to catch up."*

"Catch up?! But they're right behind us!"

"This is the Plane of Dreams, Sister. Distances are entirely relative and subject to flux," she said, gazing off behind us.

"Ummm..." I replied, staring into the dark forest. I could still hear the hounds, but they did not appear from the trees.

"Hmmm... Looks like your fears are pretty distant. You don't really understand what you're afraid of at all."

"Well, no, I don't!"

"Well, we've little time to resolve this. Let's have a bit of light," Marilith said, and gestured. Suddenly, at her fingertips, a glowing orb of light appeared. The light from the orb played across the trees of the forest, revealing them as sickly, dead things - weak, brittle, and harmless. *"And now let's see what's actually chasing you,"* she said, and gestured again. A pack of hounds appeared from the shadows of the trees, themselves made of shadows. They flickered weakly, their growls faint and fading in the light. *"Feh. Id-dogs. They're nothing, Sister, just nervousness, personified in your mind,"* she said, then the orb of light in her hand became a piercing beam of energy, lancing through the shadowy hounds. *"Shoo! We've no time for you, now!"*

As one, the shadow-dogs were transformed to gossamer sheets of dark paper, which puffed away in a gentle breeze.

"How did you..." I asked, amazed.

Marilith smiled. *"I am an equibranche, Sister - a nightmare, a Dream Warrior of my people. This is my realm, the Plane of Dreams. It interacts a bit with the Astral Plane, and exists everywhere dreams exist."*

"I... We... This is a dream?" I asked, my mind muddled.

"Yes, Sister. I know it's a bit difficult for you at the moment, your mind is asleep," she said, and squeezed my hand. *"We are body, mind and spirit, not just mind or body or spirit, Sister. What you perceive as consciousness is your body, mind and spirit functioning together. When you rest, the body is recuperating from the day's exertions, your brain asleep. Your spirit roams the Plane of Dreams within your brain, driven by your mind, and the emotions and experiences of the day. Do you understand?"*

"Ummm... Well, no, not really," I replied, shaking my head.

Marilith smiled. *"You will later, when you wake up. For now, just hold tight to my hand,"* she said, and reached out with her other hand, drawing an arc. Her fingertip left behind a glowing line of fire, which resolved itself into a door. *"Come! We've not much time, you're human, Sister. Dreams for you seem to last hours and hours, but they're really only a few minutes of your sleeping."* Marilith reached out, opening the door with her free hand, then pulled me through. *"Come on!"*

I looked around on the other side of the door, and stared in amazement. *"That... That's you! And me!"* I said, pointing.

Marilith nodded. We were inside Eddas' hidden sanctuary, the magical retreat she had conjured. I could easily see myself, snuggled up against Marilith, and both of us had our eyes closed. Nearby, I could see Joy, as well, and her eyes were closed - but my view of her was dimmer, as though I was seeing her through a fog. *"Joy?"* I called, reaching for her.

Marilith stopped my hand. *"No, Sister. You do not have the power to enter her dreams, and even if you did, we have other things to do."*

"Where... Where are we?" I asked, my mind still muddled.

"This is the part of the Plane of Dreams that borders the astral, Sister. Technically, you're astrally projecting - but mortals do that occasionally in their sleep, don't be alarmed. Come!" she called, and tugged me down through the opening in the bottom of the sanctuary.

A moment later, we had floated down to the ground. I looked around, amazed. *"What... What's that, in the sky?"* I asked, pointing at a glowing orb that flickered and shimmered.

"That's the sun. That's how it appears on the astral plane," Marilith replied, tugging me along towards the wagon.

"And what's this... This fog, everywhere?" I asked, looking around at the day-lit, foggy forest that surrounded us.

"That's the astral aether. Or how your mind perceives it, at any rate. I'd describe how I perceive it, but we don't have that much time. Ask me again when you're awake."

I shook my head. "I almost never remember my dreams after I awake," I replied ruefully.

Marilith paused, then gestured briefly. *"There. You'll remember this one. Vividly. Now come - we must hurry!"* she said, and resumed tugging me towards the wagon.

"Hurry? Why?"

"Because Vaddan is human, too, and like you, his dream-state doesn't last long. If we don't enter it before it ends, we can't enter it at all," she replied, pulling me under the wagon. There, before us, Vaddan lay sleeping. Marilith reached to him, touching him in the middle of his forehead...

...and suddenly we were in a darkened room, the walls and floor made of oak. A small fire burned in a nearby fireplace, casting eerie shadows around the room. The details were murky and dark, but the room had an odd feeling to it. Vaddan sat at a table nearby, speaking in muttered words to a man before him in a hooded robe.

I shook my head. "Strange... I've never been here before, but it feels..."

"Like home?" Marilith asked, smiling.

"Well... Yes."

"You're feeling what he feels. This place is home, to him. Or was, a long time ago. That man is his father... Well, he considers him like a father, I think it's actually his old guildmaster in the thief's guild."

"What's he saying? I can't understand a word!"

"Neither can Vaddan. This is one of his nightmares - to ask a question he must know the answer to, but his master answers in a way Vaddan cannot understand. He's had it many times, by the feel of it. Look. Watch closely. See the master's form shifting?"

I nodded. The change was gradual, but noticable. The master's robe was growing darker and darker, and their form was growing slimmer and slimmer. "He's starting to look like Eddas."

"He will look exactly like Master Eddas in a few heartbeats. Vaddan feels Eddas knows the answer to what is happening around us, but he can't understand what Eddas explained. Which, of course, is absolutely true."

"What can we do?" I asked, wishing I could clear my thoughts, somehow.

"We wait for a transition point. One is coming, I can feel it. Yes... The patterns are building. I don't know if you can see it... Probably not. But, the master is going to raise his hands and reveal he is Eddas. We have to catch Vaddan right before he sees that and is startled awake... Now!" Marilith yelled, leaping forward. I was dragged along by the grip of her hand - though, in truth, it was likely far more than a physical grip. Marilith caught Vaddan's shoulder in her free hand, spinning him around...

...and suddenly we were on a beach, the ocean quietly lapping at the shore in the background.

Vaddan blinked, staggering. "What? Where...?"

Marilith smiled. *"Vaddan... My sister loves you."*

Vaddan looked to me with an expression of utter confusion. "Err... You do?"

Marilith squeezed my hand, and I grinned broadly. "Yes, I do."

Vaddan blinked for a long moment, then slowly smiled. "Well... I'm not quite certain what to say... I... Well, I only met you just yesterday."

"She has come from almost two thousand years in the future, Vaddan, across time and space, to give you her heart."

Vaddan smiled broadly. "I accept, and gladly."

"Ah, but it's not quite that simple, Vaddan. To win my Sister, you must also win my heart, as well. It's a two-for-one deal, little rogue."

Vaddan looked at me. "Err... It is?"

I nodded. "Most definitely. I'd never let my sister be alone and unhappy. You have to be able to accept both of us, or neither of us."

Vaddan grinned wryly. "So... I'd be sleeping with the both of you?"

"Ummm..." I replied, then blushed. "Well... Yes."

"He means that in more than the sense of resting, Sister," Marilith added, grinning wickedly.

"Ummm... I... Err... I've never lain with a man, before..." I replied, now blushing furiously.

"Nor have I, Vaddan," Marilith replied, smiling.

Vaddan stepped closer, his desire evident on his face. "I promise the both of you, my dears, I will be quite gentle."

Marilith's garments puffed into nothingness, and I felt the same happen to my own - yet, when I looked down, I saw that my form was somewhat blurry and indistinct. "Ummm... Marilith? Can we... Err... Can we do this, in a dream?"

Marilith smiled wickedly again. *"Mmm... Yes... And it's quite fun..."*

"Ahem," a deep bass voice called.

"Eh? What?" Marilith said, blinking and looking around.

An enormous raven stood nearby, gazing at the two of us. I felt chilled meeting the gaze it gave us, and it seemed to literally radiate an aura of power. "Marilith, if you please, leave him be," the raven said, its voice a deep *basso profundo*. "You know you don't get much actual rest when your dreams are affected by a nightmare or nightstallion, and he'll need to be as rested as he can be so we can move on."

"Err... You can see us?"

"No. I am standing next to the wagon, looking on the Astral. I can see him beneath the wagon, asleep, and you two hovering over him - but I cannot see the dream directly. I heard him moaning like he was in the grip of a night-hag or equibranché, and knowing that I had an equibranché with me, deducing what was happening wasn't much of a leap. I gazed at him with the spell of Astral Sight, and saw you two flickering over him on the astral, shrouded by dream-auras. I've had quite a bit of experience on the Astral, asserting myself to where you can see me was no great feat." The raven pointed at Vaddan with his beak. "Let him go, Marilith. And Sasha, too - she needs her rest, as well."

"Err... Well, he's already formed two dream counterparts of us, Sister, and judging by the giggling, what's likely to follow will be rather intimate. Interrupting at this point will just cause confusion, and snap him awake. Master Eddas is right, we should leave."

I looked, and was astonished to see mirror images of myself and Marilith, snuggling and kissing Vaddan (though Marilith was looking suspiciously more and more human as the seconds passed). "Ummm... Oh, wow! I didn't know people could even *bend* like that!"

"Err... Well, they can, but it takes a great deal of practice," Marilith replied, her ears flicking down in a blush.

"Marilith," the raven called sternly in its deep voice, "I've little time for this, and you and Sasha are invading his privacy. Later on, you and I are going to have a *long* chat about this particular event. But for now, *let them go.*"

"Yes, Master Eddas. Sorry!" Marilith replied, and released my hand.

With a sudden startling jerk, I found myself awake in the bed, still snuggled up to Marilith. "What? Where-"

Marilith interrupted me by reaching back to place her fingers over my lips. *"Shhh. Joy is still sleeping."*

"Oh... Right..." I whispered, my mind still whirling.

We lay there in silence for awhile longer, and finally, Marilith sighed. *"Master Eddas is going to be quite cross with me. He is right - altering someone's dream does cost them rest. It is an imposition of will upon their sleeping mind,"* she whispered, and sighed.

I hugged her. "I didn't even know you could do that. That was... Truly wonderful," I whispered. "I want to do that again!"

Marilith looked over her shoulder and grinned. *"You can do it yourself, with practice. It's called 'Lucid Dreaming', and many mages learn to do it to protect themselves from dream-predators. I can teach it to you, if you wish. Dream Recall, Lucid Dreaming... Even the limited form of Astral Projection that mundanes can do. The largest limitation is that you are human, and mundane - you cannot enter the dreams of others like I can, and your astral form is weak and relatively powerless."*

"No, I meant I want to dream *with* you again," I replied, smiling.

Marilith smiled broadly. *"Then go back to sleep, and I'll meet you in your dreams."*

I grinned and closed my eyes, and did just that.

The Owl - II

"We're being followed," the young woman said, glancing behind her as they walked down the streets of Greenhaven.

"I know," the old priest replied calmly, ignoring the dark-haired man behind them. "Pay him no mind, for now."

"I can't, he makes me nervous," the young woman shot back. The dark-haired, clean-shaven, pale-skinned Arcadian man following them was dressed in a black leather doublet and breeches, black leather knee-boots, a long black puffy-shirt and short, fingerless gloves. He also bore a sword at his left hip, the scabbard hung in the sling of a duelist's sword belt, and a crimson sash about his waist and over the belt itself. He did not close the distance, but merely followed, watching... Yet, everything about him seemed to shout danger, to her.

"Yorindar is watching over us. Have no fear," the old priest replied.

The woman shook her head. "You've said that for years, and never been wrong. But, I fear that just once, you will be."

"One day, I will. And on that day, I likely will die," the old priest replied, then smiled, glancing at her. "However, that day is not today. Ignore him, for now."

The woman shook her head again. "Even without him, I'm still worried. A good horse will cost us at least two gold at the market... I've only nineteen Vilandian silver crowns, and some copper. That may not be enough."

The old man started a smiling reply, but was interrupted by a harsh voice from a nearby alley. "If nineteen silver isn't enough for you, lass, then why not give it to us?"

The old man and his companion paused, turning to face the speaker, and saw three rough-hewn men leering at them. Casually, smiling, each drew a weapon - two drew crude knives, while their leader drew a well-worn broadsword. "Come, come, lass. We can see he's a mendicant, you're obviously his companion. Give us the money you carry for the priest, and there will be no trouble."

The priest gazed at them, and let out a quiet sigh. "It is my duty to warn you that you oppose the will of Yorindar. Turn away from this path, my child, or the future holds death for two of you, and permanent maiming for the third."

The leader of the ruffians laughed. "Not from you, priest! Everyone knows a mendicant takes the Vow of Peace - you cannot injure us, even if you had some sorcery within that feeble body of yours to do so. As for the woman... She hardly looks a threat. So who is it that will kill and maim us, old man?"

A whisper of steel was heard from behind them, and the strange man in black stepped forward. "That would be me," he replied calmly, a strange, curved sword with a bell-guard in his fist. The weapon looked ancient, the length of the blade engraved with unknown runes, the edge and point razor-keen.

"There's three of us," the leader spat to his companions. "Take him!" he called, and leaped forward, his companions following.

What followed, to the woman's eyes, happened so fast it was nearly a blur. In an instant, the stranger in black took a step forward, his blade slashing, and lopped off the hand of the dagger-wielding thug to the left. Like the fluttering wings of a butterfly, his blade kept moving, slicing out to the thug on the right, and doing the same to him. A third stroke, met by a clumsy parry, and the leader staggered back, his sword falling from his fist as he clutched at his face. "My eyes! You've blinded me, you bastard!" he shouted, blood running from beneath his fingers.

"Terribly sorry, you moved as I cut. I meant to behead you," the man replied, wiping his sword on the trailing ends of his sash. "Perhaps wandering the streets as a pitiable blind beggar the rest of your days will change your attitude towards others," the stranger replied, and sheathed his sword as the other two thugs ran, blood streaming from the stumps of their wrists.

The old man sighed over the agonized moans of the blinded thug. "Those two will die - they will bleed to death."

The man in black shrugged as the blinded thug dropped to his knees, his hands to his bloody face. "With regret, priest, I cannot dole out sword strokes like an herbalist doles out doses of his medicines."

The old man smiled. "It was not an admonishment, my son. I am grateful to you. I merely regret their pain," he replied, and held out his hand to the blinded man, touching his head briefly as he muttered quietly. The man's moans of pain and horror faded, and after a moment, he collapsed, the blood having stopped flowing from his ruined eyes.

"You heal him with sorcery, now?" the stranger asked.

"I can, but will not. He has fainted, I have merely stopped the bleeding and sealed the wound, so he will not die of infection, later. Your curse remains, and he shall wander the streets of the city as a blind beggar. It was his destiny, my son. Perhaps he will learn what he needs to learn, and another of my order will heal him. Perhaps not. It matters little - he chose his path in life years before, my son, and this is its culmination."

"You speak as though you knew this was going to happen."

"I did. I've known it for several years, now. Yorindar revealed their fate to me in a dream. As the old saying goes, *'The Gods speak to us in dreams, if we will but listen.'*"

The stranger smiled, his blue eyes flashing. "I am Corvid, Priest. Come - let us away from here, before the city watch comes, I see little reason to bother with them over those three roaches."

"Aye," the priest replied, and his companion reached out her hand, taking his arm. As he began to hobble away, leaning upon his staff, he smiled again. "I am Father Patience. It is a pleasure to meet you, Corvid."

"And who might your lovely companion be?" Corvid asked, smiling at the woman.

She smiled back warmly, but drew her hood closer about her face. "I am no one, noble Corvid. I am merely Father Patience's servant and slave."

"Slave?" Corvid asked, an eyebrow raised at the priest.

Father Patience smiled disarmingly. "A legal convenience, while I was in Vilandia. I needed a companion, and she was whom the gods presented for me. But, I feared she might be harmed - raped, perhaps kidnapped and sold into slavery. As a slave already, she had a measure of protection under their laws. A collared slave in Vilandia is equivalent to a horse, legally. And the penalty for stealing horses is death by hanging, there."

"But this is Arcadia, and here she is free," Corvid said, looking at her.

"If she so chooses, yes," Father Patience agreed.

"I do not so choose," the woman replied quietly. "I have my own task that the Gods have given me, as do we all. And for now, that task is to be the companion of Father Patience, and to accompany him to the lands of Hyperborea."

Corvid blinked a moment, then smiled at the two of them. "You know the journey is madness, yes? It is easily seven hundred leagues to the Great Wall, and beyond lie horrors undreamed of. Giants, dragons, ogres, fell beasts to devour one's flesh... Madness."

Father Patience smiled again. "We are aware of the dangers. Yorindar watches over us, we will be quite safe."

"And how will you even get there? I beg your pardon, but I cannot imagine one as aged as yourself walking that great a distance."

"We intend to purchase a horse," Father Patience replied.

"And even if you make it to the Great Wall, how will you pass it? The guards let no one through the gate either way, save for agents of the King."

Father Patience shrugged. "I don't know. I only know from my dreams that this is where Yorindar wishes me to go."

"Dreams, again..." Corvid muttered, shaking his head.

"What is it, my son?"

"I had a dream, too, Father. A dream that I, myself, would have to go to those forbidden lands to finally resolve my quest. And that I would be accompanied by an old man and his female companion."

"Your quest?" Father Patience asked, gazing at him.

"Yes. You see..." he began, then paused, and shook his head. "Nevermind. I followed you when I saw you today because you matched that dream, the dream I've had nightly for over a month. If the gods speak to us in our dreams, my friend, than one of them was apparently screaming at me," he said, and laughed. "Come - save your money on the horse, you won't need it. I've a small skiff left to me after I sold my ship yesterday. We'll buy some provisions and supplies, and sail along the coast, beyond the wall."

Father Patience stopped, facing Corvid. "The coastline of Hyperborea is no less dangerous than it's inland reaches, my son."

"Aye, so I've been told. But I'm a sailor, Father Patience, and the sea is what I know," Corvid replied, then grinned. "It's an amazing coincidence that I met you at just the time you needed me to meet you."

"There are no coincidences when the gods are involved, my son," Father Patience replied, and his companion nodded silently.

The Ocean - Eleven.

We awoke again in the late afternoon - Joy was already up and outside the hidden sanctuary, and it was a few minutes before Marilith and I joined her. Vaddan was awake again, tending his horse. As for Eddas, she knelt quietly near the campfire Vaddan had lit, sipping at a bowl of *wanda*-stew that Joy had made for her. With her hood up and facing away from me, she looked terribly small. And, in truth, she was - I was at least a good head taller than her. And yet, I remembered the gigantic raven I'd seen in the dream-state, and it's deep, booming voice. I remembered the story Eddas had told me four years ago, when we rescued Marilith from the Temple of the Sun. Inside the body of that little half-elf woman was the soul of a man, an ancient and powerful sorcerer. And yet, to my eye, she was just a little half-elf. I wasn't entirely certain what to think, anymore.

Vaddan... Oh, he smiled at me, now, but his smiles seemed nervous. He had been told that Marilith was a lesser demon, and he had not only seen her in her true form (or one of her two forms, at any rate), he had now experienced her power. Marilith and I had hoped to spark some interest in him. And, it seemed we had. Yet, behind that, I could see in his eyes that there was also nervousness - and I worried that nervousness was due to us. Marilith had told me that it was best not to mention the dream we had given him, and simply let his feelings develop normally. I wasn't entirely certain she was right - but, lacking the confidence a dream inspires, I was too unsure of myself to think of anything I might say, anyway.

"Better, Old Man?" Joy asked, kneeling beside Eddas.

"Yes, thank you, Joy," Eddas replied quietly. It seemed somehow odd to hear a woman's voice emanating from the hood of her robe.

"You need sleep," Joy said, looking Eddas over.

"Yes, I do. But resting with meditation will have to do, for now."

Vaddan placed his horse-brush back into a box on his wagon, then looked over to Eddas. "Are we to go soon, Goodmaid Raven?" he asked, and looked up to the sky. "We're only a few hundred paces from the road, but night will be falling in perhaps two hours."

"No. We're out of the immediate area of danger. Here, we wait awhile. We'll move on in the morning."

"Wait? Wait for what?"

Eddas paused, then shook her head. "Refugees, friend Vaddan."

"Err... Refugees?" Vaddan asked, an eyebrow raised.

"Yes. No army can completely seal off an area that large, particularly given the way they arrived and how they attacked. There will always be those who fled once the fighting started, and those who fled once the city was taken, before they sealed the gates. I must know what is happening. And, somehow..." Eddas said, and sighed. "Somehow, I must help them."

"Help...?" Vaddan said, and I could see his face screwing up in anger. "Help them?! *Help them?! But you refused to do anything* when they needed help the most! You said you were a Great Mage, wielder of tremendous power - and yet you did *nothing!*"

"There was nothing I could *do*, it has already *happened!* It is the past!" Eddas yelled.

"Yes, it's the past *now*, but last evening, it was the *future!*"

" Your future. My past. I cannot change my past. I *tried!* I *tried* to warn them at the Mordovian Circle! They called me a *fool!*"

I could see Vaddan struggling to control himself. After a long moment, he spoke again, his voice level. "Perhaps I am merely a mundane, and not privy to what you know. But I do know that despite them, you still could have acted."

Eddas shook her head. "No. It's impossible. I already *know* the war happened, and I know they won, and our people and civilization were destroyed. I cannot change that. That is my past. To change it would literally mean changing my past. That which happened to me, would not happen - and, perhaps, everything I have done would be un-done. Ellysande Northstar would never have entered my tomb, because the nation of people that birthed her and raised her would not come into existence. Joy would not be here, for she would have had no reason to leave her little village of giants to seek a cure for her tiny size - she would have been born a normal giantess instead of a *mana*-storm spawning in one of the future Dead Zones, brushing her mother and altering her germ plasm. Even if through some fluke she was born a midget anyway, I would not have been there without Ellysande Northstar, thus there would have been nowhere to go to seek a cure to begin with. Without me, Darian's people and kingdom would not exist, and as such, Joy's marriage to Darian never have happened, and their children would never have been born. She never would have had reason to travel to the ruins of Dohbari to meet the giants there, for there would *be* no ruins there nor giants, thus she never would have met her second husband and her giant-children never would have been born, either. Sasha and Marilith would not be here, for I would not have been at the Temple of the Sun to help Sasha rescue her soul-sister from bondage and death - Marilith would simply be dead, and likely Sasha would have died trying to fight Brionnach by herself. If I or any of us were able to change the past, we literally would not exist here and now to be able to change the past," Eddas said, then shook her head. "No, Vaddan. This is *my* past, and I cannot change it. If I was able to change it, I literally would not be here to be able to change it."

"But..."

Eddas rose to her feet, then threw back the hood of her robe to glare at Vaddan, her face a mask of fury. *"Don't you think I WANT to?!"* Eddas suddenly shrieked. *"Don't you think I WANT to go over there now and try to crush their armies?! Inside this body, I am still ME - Eddas Ayar, a man of Hyperborea and a battle mage, risen from the grave as a liche seventeen centuries from now to possess this little body you see before you! These are my people! YOU are my people! But in my time, nearly two millennia from now, our nation and people are GONE! Everything is in RUINS! Don't you think I WANT to save my people from extinction?!"* Eddas shrieked, waving her hands in frustration. *"I CAN'T! If I could, I'd already have done it, and if I'd already done it, I wouldn't be here to do it!"*

Vaddan blinked. "I... I don't understand..."

Joy placed a large, gentle hand on Eddas' arm, then looked to Vaddan. "It's paradox, Vaddan. As I told you before, Eddas can get truly confusing once you really get him going. You're only seeing the tail of the oiliphant - the bulk of the beast is even larger. Eddas doesn't know what will happen in your future. He doesn't know what we will do together. He only knows what we *didn't* do. And what we *didn't* do is save the people of Hyperborea. If we had, he would already know that it happened, and know how he did it, because it would be in his past and he would remember it."

"And..." Vaddan said, hesitating. "And what you're trying to say is that if you *did* save our people... Then the things that happened later... The things that brought you here, now... Never would have happened. And you wouldn't be here to save our people in the first place."

"Correct," Eddas replied, and flicked the hood of her robe back in place, hiding her face in shadow. "Such is the nature of Paradox, Vaddan. I cannot un-do what has been done in my past, even though from your perspective, it has not happened yet. Our people are doomed."

"So what *can* you do?" Vaddan asked, sighing.

"I don't know. I only know what I intend to try."

"What do you intend, then?"

"I told you. I am going to wait here until dawn, to see if any refugees following the main roads on foot pass our way. And I am going to try to help them, if I can. Tend to their wounds. Feed them. Speak with them. Learn as much as I can about the enemy, and what is happening. Then, come the dawn, we will move on, towards Wilanda city."

"Where you intend to try to seek a way back to your time," Vaddan finished.

"Yes."

"And what of us? You say you are one of us. What happens to our people, Eddas Ayar?"

"They die, as they already did, centuries ago in my time," Eddas replied, quietly.

My heart sank at those words. Vaddan... I loved him. Truly I did. And yet, he was doomed to die, nearly two millenia before I would ever be born. Nothing I could do would change that.

'Or would it?' I wondered, thinking.

Vaddan stood quietly, also thinking. Finally, he shook his head. "No, my friend. Eddas Ayar, you say that you are one of us. But if you truly *are* one of us, then you know that this is not our way. To simply... Give up? To lie down and die when death is inevitable?" Vaddan shook his head again. "No, my friend. As the old saying goes, *'It is far better to die on one's feet than to die on one's knees.'* Perhaps this... Paradox you speak of, which I do not understand... Perhaps it prevents you from truly succeeding. But this does not mean you should not *try*. It is the way of our people, Eddas Ayar. And if you are one of us, you know this in your heart."

"*Stupid male Hyperborean code of honor...*" Joy muttered, glaring at Vaddan. "Don't you *dare* try to get him to do something stupid in the name of honor, Vaddan!" Joy snapped, wagging a thick, gloved finger at him. "I've spent *decades* trying to break him of that stupid male Hyperborean habit of going off and getting himself killed just to preserve his honor!"

Marilith giggled, and Vaddan grinned wryly. "We are Hyperboreans, Goodmaid Joy. As the saying goes, we are what we are."

Eddas, however, simply shrugged. "I know what you're saying, Vaddan. But what can I do? These three need me to get home again. I cannot abandon my duty to them, and there is nothing I can do to change the past."

"Isn't there?" I asked, suddenly, the glimmering of an idea forming in my mind.

Eddas looked to me, a finely-arched eyebrow raised. "What do you mean, Sasha?"

"Well... I realize you know a lot about this and I don't, but..." I said nervously. It took me a moment, but I finally screwed up my courage and just blurted it out. "What if you're wrong? What if the past *can* be changed, and thus the future changes? What if time isn't like a rope or a bridge, with a single beginning and a single end? What if time is like a root of a tree, with thousands of little rootlets that split off into thousands of alternate pasts? What if the future is like the branches of the tree, splitting off into thousands of different possible futures?"

Eddas smiled. "It was, before the Divine Covenant and the formation of the Arc of Time. In the beginning, the past was infinitely malleable - a thousand different pasts could have been true, or all of them at once, or none of them. Before the Arc of Time, the universe was semi-causal and non-causal chaos, where literally anything and everything could have been true at any given point in time. Today, the existence of the Arc of Time means that there is only one past, leading to the Universal Present. From there, an infinity of possible futures have theoretical existence - but in the end, only one future will actually come to pass, as the Arc of Time grows to reach that point. What the gods fight over is *which* of the theoretical futures will actually come to pass. The past itself, once set, does not change. It cannot - it's one of the basic elements of the Arc of Time. There are a finite number of universes which sprang into being at the formation of the Arc of Time, out of the various alternate realities of time that existed in the non-causal chaos of the beginning. But, the formation of the Arc of Time means there are no more to be formed. We call our reality - this universe you see around us and all the planes and dimensions connected to it - the Prime Material Plane. Theoretically, there are other, separate universes with their own planes and sub-dimensions connected to them, all a part of the greater reality which floats above the Void, the greater reality we call the Multiverse, all of which sprung from alternate pasts and alternate underlying physical laws and were separated at the dawn of the Arc of Time."

I blinked. "Ummm... Theoretically?"

"Yes. This world, what you see around you and all the planes and dimensions which connect to it, form one universe, with the Arc of Time governing it from it's early days to now, and stretching forward into the future. But, theoretically, there could be many separate universes, each with their own peoples and their own underlying physical laws, all likely as different from each other as night and day. It's even theoretically possible that each has it's own Arc of Time - or perhaps a different construct entirely, each construct suited for the physical laws of each individual universe. This greater theoretical reality of

multiple universes overlying the Void is called the Multiverse. But, these separate universes are completely distinct from this universe, so from the perspective of hyperdimensional mathematics, they are treated as being nonexistent, as there is no interaction between them. Like islands in a sea of infinite size, the various universes which comprise the Multiverse are floating in the Void, and as such are separated by infinite distance within the Void, and do not interact. And, there are no more universes to be formed from the Void unless one of the Gods attains dominance, which will grant them the power to speak the WORD as the Creator did, and spawn another universe from the Void to their liking. That was the purpose of the Arc of Time, Sasha - to apply order to the infinite Chaos of the Void, and allow life and free will to exist."

"But how do you *know* that's true?" I asked, not willing to give up the point. "How do you *know* that a new universe doesn't spring from events going one way or another, creating an alternate universe?"

Eddas shrugged. "Basic temporal theory and hyperdimensional mathematics. The foundation of the current understanding of the universe as a whole is based upon these theories, which were developed by Master Dyclon of the Dyclonic Circle several centuries before I was born. It was also independently developed by the elves ages before him, and their understanding of temporal and hyperdimensional mathematics is identical. In short, the personal flow of time can be manipulated - I can use a spell to make time pass faster or slower for you, making you move more quickly or more slowly relative to the rest of the universe by altering your personal temporo-spatial constants. But I cannot affect Universal Time, because the Universal Present is a dimensionless constant. And, as I've explained before, the structure of the Arc of Time and the universe as a whole makes time travel itself forward or back from the Universal Present suicidal, at best."

"But what if your theories are *wrong*?" I persisted. "How do you really *know* until you've actually *tried*? What if even the tiniest of actions can cause a new future to come about... A separate universe where things happened differently? Winning a war... Or maybe just whether or not a glass of wine is spilled? Perhaps even the smallest of things can cause a new future to come about?"

Eddas smiled. "You are talking about relativistic time. That theory is discredited, because it requires the new universe to form from *something*."

"Err... I don't understand. I already said it would form from actions that differed..." I said, confused.

"No, no. Think for a moment... Think of everything you see around you. Vaddan, the cart, the horse,

your sister, Joy, myself... The trees, the forest, the grass, the world... All the people in the world, and all the creatures on other worlds and other dimensions of our universe... Picture it in your mind. Picture putting everything - all matter in all dimensions, everything - on a titanic set of scales. It has weight, yes? A tremendous amount of weight, but it has weight, yes?"

"Well... I suppose..."

"Now, picture that spilling a cup of wine or not spilling the cup of wine causes another universe to come into existence. Now your mass doubles. Where did the extra mass come from?"

"Ummm... The Void? Everything sprang from the Void when the Creator spoke the WORD, yes? Even the Gods?"

"Yes. But we are not the Creator, and spilling a glass of wine is hardly equal to speaking the WORD and forming a new universe from the infinity of the Void," Eddas replied. "And even if it were so, this means that new matter is being drawn from the void infinite times, over and over again, as time passes. The mass of the total number of alternate universes grows exponentially, as their timelines branch and branch again, like the branches of the tree you mentioned earlier, until finally they reach infinity in number. All this would have to come from the Void. And while the void is infinite, if you draw from an infinite pool of water with an infinitely large bucket, you end up with nothing - infinity minus infinity is zero. In time, the void would be exhausted, and the Arc of Time, which is formed of the Void itself, would cease to form, and this universe and all the other infinite alternate universes on infinite alternate timelines would all just suddenly... Stop," she said, snapping her fingers.

Marilith smiled. *"Sister, the basic theory of relativistic time is that it is major incidents that cause splits in Universal Time and form alternate Universal Presents, not trivial incidents like the spilling of a glass of wine. But Master Eddas is right - the universe is extremely old. If the theory of relativistic time was true, then eventually, all the universes will come to an end as their number approaches infinity, and draws the infinity of the Void down to zero."*

I wasn't willing to give up on Vaddan quite that easily. "Maybe... Maybe not. Maybe it wouldn't stop. Maybe beyond a certain point, new universes stop forming. Or maybe it's not just major events... Maybe it's specific events. Things the Gods work towards making happen, or not happen. But whether it was or wasn't, how would you *know*?"

I expected Eddas to immediately shrug off my reply again, but she did not. Instead, she stood there, thinking and stroking her chin. After a moment, Marilith did the same, thinking about what I'd said.

After a long moment, Eddas lowered her ebon-gloved hand and looked at me. "By experiment. There is no other way. The only way to prove or disprove any theory is through experiment - any theory that cannot be proven or disproven through experiment is not a theory, it's a philosophy. A successful experiment would cause an alternate future to come into existence - one where Hyperborea was not destroyed in the Great War, and my people did not die. Having traveled to the alternate future, we would then be standing in an alternate Universal Present, having come from the original one. Then, spells that permit travel between alternate universes by opening a gateway to the original Universal Present could be developed, further proving the theory. We would return to where we came from, and the new universe, where the Hyperborean people and civilization were not destroyed, would continue on separately."

Marilith nodded. *"I agree. The only way to prove or disprove any theory is through successful experiment. And we are currently in the best position to perform such an experiment, as we are currently in our past."* Marilith's long ears flicked. *"Someone is coming, Eddas Ayar. From the sound of it, a small group of people, on foot."*

"Conceal yourself and your sister as you did before, and I'll conceal Joy," Eddas replied, gesturing. Moments later, Vaddan stood beside what appeared to be three hyperborean women in black robes, and Eddas.

"So you will try?" Vaddan asked, grinning at Eddas.

Eddas nodded. "Yes, my friend. I will. I cannot guarantee I will succeed. Everything I know of temporal theory tells me this experiment will fail. But, I will try anyway. You are right, of course. It is our way," she said, then pointed. "Come, Vaddan. I can see the refugees there, between the trees. Let's go to them, and lead them here. Then, I'll conjure food for them."

Vaddan nodded, and he and Eddas began walking towards the forest nearer the road. Once they'd gone out of earshot, Joy glowered at me for a long moment in her illusory disguise as a Hyperborean woman. Finally, she walked up to me, and growled at me quietly. "So, you think you've been smart, now.

You've called upon his weakness for research and knowledge, and Vaddan has called upon his honor."

"Err... Joy, I-" I began, but Joy simply interrupted me with a hostile hiss.

"Your little experiment will require him to fight and win a war he already *knows* is lost, and a war that reduced a large portion of Hyperborea to *barren wastelands*. If he *dies* performing your little experiment, Sasha, I will *smash you flat*," Joy hissed, then looked to Marilith. "And don't expect *you'll* be able to protect her either, Marilith. This is *your* fault, too, and if he dies, you'll share your sister's fate," she hissed, then paused, swallowing back a sob. "*I hate the both of you!*"

I watched mutely as Joy strode over to the cookfire, and plopped herself down beside it to silently weep. I didn't know what I could say - or, really, if anything could be said. But I had to try to save Vaddan in any way I could. I loved him - I couldn't just let him go.

I felt Marilith's arm wrap about me for a hug, and I hugged her back. "*I had to do it*," I whispered.

"*I know*," she whispered back. "*I had to, as well.*"

Interlude I - The Raven.

I paused before yet another of the refugees, casting a quiet spell to heal the minor bruises and abrasions they'd sustained fleeing the city and traveling through the wilderness for a night and a day. Joy was furious with me, naturally, but there was little to be done for it. There were several hundred refugees in all, most fairly bedraggled from a night and a day of fleeing with little food or water. There were likely hundreds more, I discovered after talking to them, and these were merely the ones that came our way. Marilith, Joy, Vaddan and Sasha had spent the remainder of the afternoon and on into the evening distributing bowls of food and pitchers of water that I had summoned. Now, with most of them fed, I saw our little group gathered around the central camp-fire. Joy, naturally, sat apart from Marilith, Sasha and Vaddan, and she was apparently sulking. I sighed. There was much I wanted to tell her - but there wasn't any way to say it.

I paused in my work, gazing at a young man in gray robes who sat in the grass of the night-time forest, near our central clearing. As I gazed at him, he reached up to pull the hat he was wearing down a bit, hiding his face. "I know you..." I said, recognition dawning.

The young man said nothing in reply, simply gazing at the bowl of gruel he'd been given.

I reached out, taking his hat in my hand, and lifting it from his head - revealing that the young man's head was shaved bald. It was him. "Greetings, Apprentice."

The young man sighed. "Greetings, Goodmaid Raven."

One of the other refugees nearby looked up. "A sorcerer? This one was a battle-mage?! Why is he here, and not back there, fighting?!"

"No sorcerer or battle-mage," I replied, reaching over to pat the one who'd spoken on the shoulder. "Merely an apprentice of the Mordovian Circle - a child, in terms of sorcery, and hardly capable of fighting the Invaders."

The apprentice seemed to bristle at that, but only for a moment. "Yes, Goodmaid Raven. I am Barag Kaid. Merely an apprentice - though my journeyman's examinations were to be next month, when I turned eighteen. I stayed and helped as long as I could, until the Masters ordered the surviving journeymen to get the apprentices out of the city," he said, then let out a dry laugh. "Masters. They hardly earned the name, I think. I watched you conjure food for two hundred, just now. It would take all the masters in the circle to manage the same, no single master has that much strength."

I gazed at him coolly, keeping my face impassive with the skill of an expert *chatto* player. "Once you've mastered the Deep Magic, conjuring food is trivial, Apprentice."

Barag gaped at me for a long moment. "The Deep Magic? But such knowledge does not exist... The masters of my circle said it was lost, ages ago..." he said, then shook his head. "And yet, it seems they were wrong. *Again*," he said, and sighed again. "The masters cast you out as a fool, because you were an elf and a woman. It was they who were fools, I think. You warned us, we ignored you - and now, here we are."

"Indeed," I replied, and leaned on my staff, gazing at him. "These others... They're ordinary mundanes, with not even a lick of training in combat. You, however, are not. What can you tell me of the enemy, Apprentice Barag?"

Barag shook his head. "They're strong, very strong. They have large machines... Semi-golems, I think, much like our ornithopters. But they do not fly, they walk. They're larger than ogres, and nearly indestructible. Eight of our masters and twenty journeymen blasted one with lightning at once as it came down the street towards our tower - it only staggered, then slew them all with a blast of fire. They can be slowed, like giants, by turning the ground to mud beneath them, but their pilots are skilled. If the mud is not turned to stone immediately after, they crawl out swiftly - faster than one might imagine looking at their lumbering gait."

I waved a hand, interrupting him. "I know of their machines, I fought them before."

Barag blinked, astonished. "You *did*?!"

"Yes. And won - but this isn't important, now. What I'm most interested in is the remainder of their

troops. What are they armed with? What armor do they wear?"

"Well... What I saw of them, they wear armor of metal plates. No chain at all, just... Articulated plates, everywhere. The armor gleams the same bronze-gold as their machines..."

"Orichalchum, yes. Their machines are made mostly of highly enchanted orichalchum. Go on."

"For weapons, they use primarily pole-arms. Err... I don't know what to compare them to, we've nothing like them. Like a halberd, I suppose... The staff is perhaps seven and a half cubits in length, and at each end is a double-bitted axe, with a thrusting tip. The blades gleam bronze, as well... More orichalchum, perhaps?"

"Likely so, Apprentice," I agreed with a nod. "What else can you tell me? Did you see what they look like beneath their armor?"

"Well, no. Their armor covers them completely, from head to toe. Their helmets... They have slits in them... Apparently that's what they see through. But it was dark, I couldn't see what they looked like beneath them. Their armor is strong, but our masters were able to fell their warriors with strokes of lightning. Their machines, however, we could not fell."

I stroked my chin with a gloved hand, thinking. "Hmmm... That much orichalchum tends to imply they lack steel, where they came from... Otherwise, they'd be using mithril, or even adamant. Interesting..." I said, then looked to Barag again. "What of missile troops? Archers? Crossbowmen?"

"Only a few - I saw one with a strange crossbow... Judging from it's size and effect, it was a siege crossbow, many stone in draw. It had a box of bolts beneath, and re-cocked itself after it was fired, very swiftly... *Thump-thump-thump-thump*. When the bolts were gone, the warrior reloaded with extra boxes he carried at his waist and hips. Some of their war-machines fired bolts, as well, and they fired just as swiftly. Of course, their soldiers did not need ranged weapons, for the most part, they simply charged and melee'ed. Arrows and crossbow bolts from the city guards did nothing against their armor, they simply bounced harmlessly."

"Really?" I asked, amazed. "Interesting... An articulated suit like that could not be enchanted as a whole, you'd never be able to open it to take it off. The only way that could work is if they used the same invulnerability enchantments on their machines to each plate of their armor... Incredibly tricky and costly work, but it would protect them against ordinary missiles and make them nearly unbeatable in melee..." I said, thinking, then looked to him again. "What of battle-mages? Did they have any?"

"None that I saw or heard of. It was simply the forces of the city against their halberdiers and their machines. But, they crushed us fairly handily, despite everything our circle and the city guards could do. They may have them anyway, but simply did not call upon them as they were not needed."

"Hmmm... Given what you saw, however, they have a high demand for mages... It seems more likely their people focus entirely on enchantment, not battle-magic... A possible weakness, perhaps..."

Barag shook his head. "No weakness, Goodmaid Raven. One of their machines is more than a match for a dozen masters, and three or four easily a match for an entire circle. Even if you *are* a Mistress of the Deep Magic, they are likely a match for you, as well."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. I think-" I began, but was interrupted by a firm tap on my shoulder. I turned to see Joy, standing behind me, concealed by her illusion as a Hyperborean woman. Even through the illusion, however, the expression on her face was quite clear.

"Old Man, we need to talk," she said, in a voice that showed she'd brook no objections.

"She looks neither old nor male, to me," Barag said suddenly, and burst out laughing.

Joy glared at the apprentice fiercely, and after a few moments, his laughter became nervous, then he coughed twice, and fell silent. Joy held her commanding gaze. "When I want *yapping* from you, puppy, I'll let you know."

"Yes, madam," he replied, bowing his head. Joy could have that effect on people. I supposed it came from several decades of life spent as a Queen.

I smiled - a pleasant smile sometimes worked with her. "What did you want to talk about, Joy?"

"Not here. In your sanctuary. I want some privacy."

I nodded, suppressing my reaction, and began pulling off my glove to reach my thumb-ring. "Of course, Joy," I replied.

Awhile later, after I'd set up my hidden sanctuary and Joy and I had climbed into it (vanishing into the air, much to the astonishment of the mundane refugees surrounding our little camp), Joy turned to me. "Old Man, you will *not* die."

"I've no intention of dying, Joy."

"You do if you intend to try to win this war!" Joy snapped. "And just exactly what do you think will happen if you *do* win? The nations of the Southlands will never come about - Darian will never be born, you will never have arisen from your tomb, *none* of this will happen!"

"I'm quite aware of that, Joy."

"Maybe Sasha is right, and a new universe spawns... But that means your daughters and granddaughters, my children and grandchildren... None of them will exist! And what if we can't get back to where they are?! What do we do then?! And what do we do if you're *both* wrong?!" Joy reached out suddenly, grabbing my left forearm in a painful grip that was, in truth, only a fraction of her strength.

"Both wrong?" I asked, wincing slightly under her grip.

"Yes! What if both you *and* Sasha are wrong? What if the future *can* be changed, paradox be damned?! What then?! My children... Your children... They would all be gone!" Joy glared fiercely at me. "I love you, Old Man. More than life itself. But I will *not* let you kill both your children and mine before they're ever born!"

"Joy, two things..." I said, now wincing greatly, as Joy's grip squeezed the bones together in my arm and was slowly making my hand go numb.

"What?!"

"First, I have no intention of doing anything that will cause my children or yours to cease to exist. Second, if you squeeze any harder, you're going to break the bones in my arm. I know you threaten to do that often, but I think if you actually did, you'd be very upset afterwards - more than you are right now. Please let go."

Joy released me suddenly, her eyes wide. "I... I'm sorry, I never meant to..."

I shook my arm a bit, my hand tingling. "Joy, it's alright. I've had ogres rip off my arms and legs and eat them and yet I healed from that, this body can regenerate from almost anything."

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to hurt you, Eddas! I love you!" Joy sobbed, opening her arms to me.

I smiled, and we exchanged a hug for a long moment as Joy sobbed. "I love you, too, Joy. Very much."

It was quite awhile before Joy had control of herself again, but finally she did. Joy sighed, hugging me silently, then leaned back. I watched as she struggled to glower at me. "If you love me, too, Eddas, then

you should listen to me."

"I do, Joy. Always. You are a Child of the Mountain, a giant. In the terms of the great game the gods play for dominion of the universe, you are just as much a tool of the gods as I am - in your case, the gods of your mother and father, and all your ancestors; the gods of the Giants. To me, however, you are my mate, my beloved, and my own personal mountain - my rock, to hold me steady on the course of life. I always listen to you. I don't always *agree* with you, but I always listen to you. But, in turn, there are times you must listen to me - and this is one of them. Come - sit with me, here on the cot. Come," I said, gesturing.

We sat on the cot, and Joy wiped her eyes. "If you intend to try to talk me into agreeing, Eddas, I'll tell you now, it won't work. Those are my children we're talking about."

I nodded. "And mine. Which is why you now must listen, Joy. I ordered Vaddan to continue on, driving his horse to near collapse to get as far away from the city as we could. And yet, when we turned off the road, I saw the road-marker, and knew where we were. I know where we are, and I know what happens here, Joy," I said, and gestured to my bookshelf. A slim book floated down and into my hand through the telekinetic power in the ring of my left middle finger, and I opened it, paging through it for a bit. I stopped, my finger on a certain page, then held it to her. "Read it."

"Ummm... This is Gorol's diary... The diary of your old friend... You were reading it the day Sasha and Marilith came to ask us to help them..."

"Yes. Yorindar hinted in a dream the night before that the words of an old friend would have greater meaning than he thought. *He* thought, not *she*. All I could think of was Gorol's diary, and that's why I was reading it. And now, I know what Yorindar meant. Read here."

"Ummm... It describes the work of his friends, Master Barad and Master Kardak..."

"Yes. Now read there," I said, pointing.

"Oh... Oh, my..." Joy said, her eyes widening.

"Exactly," I said, and felt a chill as the word fell from my lips.

Joy shuddered as she heard me speak as the Raven of Yorindar, then looked up to me. "How long have you known?"

"Since this morning, when we finally stopped and turned off the road to allow Vaddan's horse to rest. I saw the league marker on the road."

Joy gaped at me. "Then *why?! Why did you agree?!*"

"For two reasons - the first, of course, being what I already said: The proof of the theory is in the experiment. I cannot prove that I am right to her or you or anyone else without trying to prove I am wrong, and without proof, I'm simply spouting a philosophy. Second, because it dawned on me that this is part of her *forging*, Joy. This is a lesson she must learn."

"Lesson?! *What* lesson?!" Joy yelped.

"The same lesson I was taught by a very old pixie - and the same lesson you learned the day you turned to me and asked '*Can't, or won't?*'"

Joy flinched back as though slapped, her eyes wide. A moment later, she bowed her head, then sighed. "That was a hard lesson, Old Man. Very hard."

"Yes, it was," I replied, taking her hand in mine and squeezing it gently.

We sat in silence for a moment, gazing at each other. Finally, Joy sighed again. "Does Marilith know?"

"I think she does, yes. She just doesn't know how to tell Sasha, yet. That, too, is part of her lesson. Don't judge her by how she acts around me, Joy. She sees me as being superior to her, and she owes her life and health to me. In the end, she's still a demon - that means she acts subordinate to me, and her instincts tell her to question her judgement when she's around me. It's how they survive, Joy, it's a part of their culture and who they are, at heart. What she must learn is that she is now part of our world - and here, she is my peer. Perhaps not my equal in raw power, no. But, in some areas, she is superior to me, so the net is that she is a peer. This is something she has yet to adapt to - so, don't judge her by how she acts around me. She is still two thousand, eight hundred and six years old, Joy. Even though she spent most of that time in a sorcerous prison, she is still an Ancient One, as much as any dragon."

"Or as much as yourself," Joy said, a smile at the corner of her lips.

I smiled wryly. "Yes."

"I should apologize to them."

"No, you shouldn't. You should let it go, for now. We have other things to concern ourselves with - and soon. Likely tonight."

Joy shook her head. "No, you don't understand, I *must* apologize. I threatened to stomp them if their foolish plan got you killed, and-

I silenced her by placing my gloved fingers over her lips, then tapped a pointed ear with a finger. "Joy, you forget - I heard you. These ears are sharper than your own."

Joy blushed. "I... I'm sorry, Old Man."

"I'm not. It pleased me to know I was believable - and it pleased me to know you still love me."

Joy grinned. "*Still?! Always, Old Man. Always!*" she said, and hugged me again quite fiercely.

At last, she let me go, and I grinned at her. "Good. Now, please feel free to object to me at every turn, it won't do to have you suddenly happy and agreeing with me. Besides, it will still be dangerous, I need you to keep me constantly on my toes and thinking about everything that might go wrong - and thinking about things that might go wrong is something you're quite good at, my dear. And things *can* still go wrong, Joy. The fate of Hyperborea is set, but our personal futures are not assured."

Joy nodded. "I understand, Old Man. All those lectures *do* eventually sink in, in time."

"I would expect so, you're at least twice as smart as I am, your only problem is you weren't raised with the same education I was," I replied, rising to my feet.

Joy laughed. "Me?! Twice as smart as you?! Oh, hardly, Old Man!"

"Oh, really? Between the two of us, who was it that managed to learn to speak passable Larinian in just two months?"

"Well, yes, but-"

"And who was it that was queen for forty years, handling dozens and dozens of various problems of rulership with Darian, and yet somehow managed in between times to raise two children, both of whom were half-giants and strong as oxen before they could even toddle?"

"Well, yes, that was me, but-"

"Oh, and *how* many times have you had to drag me back from the brink of my own stupidity, like that time I simply sat there in despair and let myself starve because I was so abjectly lonely?"

"Err... Well, not *that* often, but-"

I reached back to my ponytail, adjusting the raven feathers beneath my silver head-band. "Dear, I love you, and you're actually quite intelligent, far more so than myself. If you continue to disagree with me on that point, I'm likely to become quite cross with you, so shut up."

Joy clapped her mouth shut, then grinned at me silently.

"Thank you. Now, how do I look?", I asked, brushing my robes free of dust and grass with a cantrip.

"Like the Raven of Yorindar," Joy replied, smiling.

"Good. I've been hearing at least one of their machines approaching for the last ten minutes, I really loathe going into battle looking a mess. Petty, perhaps, but it's a personal point of honor, with me."

Joy started, then looked to me. "What... What shall I do, Eddas? Shall I fight with you?"

"Not this time. Later, yes, but not this time. Now, I need you to stay here and pull the rope up after I'm gone. There's nothing you could do at normal size, and at the size of a giant, you simply become a target. Stay here, with the rope up. You'll be safe, and I won't have to worry about you. Later you'll be needed, but not right now."

"Master Eddas!" Marilith's voice called from below. *"Someone is coming! It's the Invaders!"*

"Be careful, Old Man," Joy said quietly.

I nodded. "I will, Joy. For you," I replied, and climbed down the rope, the power of Dyarzi's boots and gloves making me nimble as a spider on a thread.

The Owl - III

"First sign of clear beach-head we've seen in days..." Corvid muttered, his hand on the tiller of the swift little skiff. Nine days of sailing had passed with good weather - a crisp wind blew from the west, giving Corvid's little skiff a beam reach wind each day so far. Yet, the closer they'd gotten to the Great Wall, the rockier and rockier the coast had become. Beyond the great wall, the rocks had thinned some, and narrow strips of beach had appeared again. But, the shores were still too dangerous to attempt a landing... Until today. Now, two days sailing north of the Great Wall, he could finally see pristine, clear beaches, with scrublands beyond.

Father Patience nodded from where he sat nearby. "Yes, my son. The coast is extremely rocky near the Great Wall - that is why King Darian chose that location for the seaward edge to end, a century ago or so. Here, it is smoother, we will be able to make landing here."

"Heh. The beach looks too smooth, too gentle... Almost inviting. Some other danger must await, eh?" Corvid said, flashing a wry grin.

"Quite so, my son. As the old saying goes, *'Here there be giants.'*"

"And here," the slave-woman called brightly, holding out a bowl of fish to Father Patience, "there be lunch," she finished, and laughed.

"Thank you, child," Father Patience replied, smiling, and took the bowl from her. He began eating quietly with his fingers, his eyes on the nearby shore.

"Will you have some, friend Corvid?" the slave-woman asked, holding a bowl out to him.

"I've got to keep my hand on the tiller," Corvid replied, smiling. "I'll eat later."

"Eat now with your other hand, I'll hold the bowl," she replied, smiling back at him.

Corvid nodded. "Alright," he said, reaching to the bowl of fish with his left hand and plucking a portion of it. He ate in silence for a moment, then spoke again. "What of you?"

"I am fine, friend Corvid, I have already eaten."

Time passed quietly, and soon the meal was done. The slave-woman held out a bowl of water for each man to wash their hands in, then gave each of them a mug of the grog Corvid had packed aboard. As she was cleaning and packing away the bowls again, Father Patience pointed. "There, my son. A giant."

"I see him, Father," Corvid replied. His voice was calm, but he felt a clench of fear in his gut. The creature was enormous - easily sixteen cubits tall, possibly more, and dressed in garments of cowhide. In his hands the giant bore a tremendous net, apparently intending to do some fishing. Upon seeing the little skiff, however, he dropped the net, and reached to a sack at his side. "What's he doing?"

"Likely reaching for a stone to sink us with, my son," Father Patience replied. "They can cast a stone as large as your head several hundred paces, and they guard these waters well - for these coastal giants, fish make up a large portion of their food supplies, and they consider the waters and fish much the same as a shepherd considers his fields and flocks."

"I'll turn us back out to sea, to stay out of his range, then," Corvid said as the slave-woman came and sat nearby them. "Mind the boom, I'll be turning," he called.

"No, my son," Father Patience replied, reaching out a hand to stop him. "Merely tack the ship so that you need not hold onto the tiller for a moment, and can have both hands free."

"Err... Both hands free?"

"Yes, my son. Do it now, please, we've little time."

"Alright," Corvid replied, angling the ship slightly, then grabbing a loose painter line and tying it about the tiller to hold it steady. "Now what?"

"Stuff your fingers in your ears, my son," he replied, and began to gesture as the giant finally managed to extract a rock from the pouch at his hip.

The slave-girl did so without being bidden, but Corvid simply blinked in confusion. "Err... Stuff my-"

he began but was interrupted when Father Patience took a deep breath, then *bellowed*, his voice amplified to the level of a thunderclap by the spell he'd cast.

"Gah!" Corvid yelped, immediately stuffing his fingers into his ears.

The old man shouted at thunderous volume for several moments, in a language Corvid did not understand. Then, he fell silent, waiting. After a long moment, the giant shouted back, his own voice muted by distance. The exchange of bellow and reply continued for several long moments, then finally the distant giant shouted again, and returned his rock to the pouch at his hip.

"Is... Is that all?" Corvid asked, tentatively pulling his fingers from his ears.

"Yes, my son," Father Patience replied.

"What now? Sail on past him?"

"No, my son. Sail straight for him, and beach the ship at his feet. Once we're safely ashore, he'll move the skiff off the beach and conceal it for us."

"Err... What?" Corvid said, blinking. "Why would he do that?"

"Because I asked him to. I announced who we were, and told him we come in peace. I told him where we were going, explained that we were only passing through the territory of his clan."

"Err... That's all you had to do?"

"Yes, my son. Simply speaking their language earns a measure of trust, and telling him what god I serve clinched the deal, as it were."

"Heh. You've not told *me* where we're going, though I know what God you serve."

"We go to the tower of Eddas Ayar, the Raven of Yorindar. As I am a priest of Yorindar, it would ill-behoove the giants to block my passage. Yorindar is allied with their gods, and this alliance goes back many, many centuries."

"Heh... The Great Mage, the Ancient One..." Corvid said, loosing the tiller and then steering for the giant on the beach. "Rumor has it in the south that Eddas Ayar is more like a dragon than a man, Father. Ancient... Inhuman... Deadly."

"He is all that and more, my son. And yet, at the same time, he is nothing like that at all," Father Patience replied. "As the saying goes, my son; truth is sometimes stranger than fiction."

"Really?" Corvid asked, expertly slipping the skiff between the waves, and riding them to the shore. "What is the truth then, I wonder?"

"He is an elf-friend, a dwarf-friend, and a giant-friend, my son. He is even a friend of dragons - and more. The goblins and their kin fear him as a liche, an undead thing, an ancient battle-mage of the long dead Hyperboreans, risen from beyond the grave - and this is true. You've heard it said he is a Great Mage, like the mighty sorcerers of old who created powerful artifacts. And, he is that, and more. He can slay with a gesture, and raise an army of undead with a song. He is, perhaps, the most powerful mage who ever lived."

Corvid shook his head, then suddenly grinned. "You're not inspiring confidence that we will survive this meeting, Father."

Father Patience looked to Corvid in surprise, then suddenly laughed. "Have no fear, my son. We will

survive our meeting with him, most assuredly."

"Well, that's good to know, at least," Corvid said, the beach growing nearer and nearer. "What more can you tell me?"

"Precious little, I'm afraid. Paradox prevents me from speaking plainly of the future until it transpires. I'll tell you what more I can, later. For now, know that Eddas Ayar is not our enemy, my son. Our enemies, what we have of them on this journey, lie between us and his tower," Father Patience replied, as the beach loomed closer and closer.

"Hold tight to the rail, we're about to beach!" Corvid called.

But, there was no jarring impact with the sand of the beach. Instead, a giant hand reached down, gently catching the skiff and stopping it. A second hand cradled the stern of the little skiff carefully, and shoved it smoothly ashore, well clear of the waves. The giant, who now knelt beside the skiff, rumbled something in his deep voice that Corvid did not understand, grinning down at the three humans. Corvid grinned back up at the enormous creature, his heart thudding with both fear and exhilaration. "How do you say 'thank you' in his language, Father?"

Father Patience chuckled, looking up to the giant, and spoke briefly. The giant replied in turn, and Father Patience nodded. "He says you're welcome, and he bids us welcome to the territory of his tribe. He also offers to take us to his village for a feast. I have accepted, of course - declining the hospitality of a giant is not wise."

Corvid grinned again. "Err... He means a feast in our honor, I hope? I don't think the three of us would make much of a meal for people his size."

Both Father Patience and the slave-girl gaped at Corvid, then burst out laughing.

The Ocean - Twelve.

I'd already shucked my dress, and stood in my scales, boots and gloves, awaiting the enemy. Eddas Ayar had commanded everyone to flee to the south, following the road. The moon was bright and full, with luck, they wouldn't get lost - but it was obvious they could not stay here. The bright campfire would serve to lure the enemy to a central point, and I could hear the strange sounds of their approach... The rattle of armor from many men I could recognize, but other noises that overlaid a strange thumping sound, I could not.

Eddas had caught the young apprentice by the shoulder, and told him to remain. As the sounds of the approaching enemy drew nearer, he spoke. "Likely this is a small scouting force, sent to investigate our fire. Marilith, watch Vaddan and your sister closely, and use your spells defensively to guard them. I'll be casting the spell of Reverse Missiles now, but I'll have to leave the rest up to you. Sasha, Vaddan, I'm going to cast a defensive wall about us, but it may not hold them back. Be prepared to defend us against any of their melee troops that may get through. Barag, you were taught a spell of transference, yes?"

"Yes," he replied, trembling nervously.

"Good. Watch myself and Marilith, and use it if you see either of us appear to tire. Marilith, drop that human form, you don't need it right now, it just occupies a part of your will for no purpose," she said, and began gesturing over each of us, muttering an incantation.

"Yes, *Master Eddas*," Marilith replied, and shimmered for a moment, returning to her humanoid horse form.

Vaddan stepped to my side, his sword drawn, as Barag gaped at Marilith. "A demon!" Barag yelled.

"Yes, I have interesting acquaintances," Eddas replied dryly. "Now focus, apprentice. Your very life depends on it."

"*There they are!*" Marilith called, pointing.

Suddenly, I saw them walking cautiously out of the forest. Nine men in strange, bronze armor - ornately engraved plates that covered them from head to toe, their helmets completely covering their heads. Two of them bore strange crossbows, while the rest bore long staves with double-axes at each end. Behind them, however, was a machine of such incredible design, it took my breath away.

At least twelve cubits tall, it walked on two bird-like legs, and had a round, bulbous body. From its sides dangled two ape-like arms, blunt and ending in long rectangular boxes instead of hands. A slim slit a palm's width wide went across its front, the slit filled with gleaming glass. The bronze behemoth strode cautiously into the clearing, then a voice emanated from it.

"*Surrender now, or be slain,*" the creature called, the little amulet Eddas Ayar gave me four years ago allowing me to understand its language.

"Oh, *rather,*" Eddas replied, and gestured with her staff. A moment later, the ground exploded, clearing a circle completely about us ten paces across, the ground bared two paces wide and a cubit deep. Without pause, she gestured again, and a wall of flame filled the bared earth, crackling and burning nine cubits high. The warriors near the edge backed away from the heat, but the machine did not seem affected at all.

"That machine... That's one of the ones that shoots flame!" Barag called.

"Good to know, thank you, Apprentice," Eddas replied, "Marilith, be ready with a pyrotic shield."

"Follow, take down the spellcasters first," the machine called to the soldiers nearby, then strode forward, crossing the flames easily. It lowered its arms, pointing them at us, then I felt a tingling in the palms of the magic gloves my sister had made for me. Twin blasts of flame came from the machine's arms as Marilith gestured...

...then was deflected, wrapping around us as though boiling over an invisible sphere, to no effect. The machine stood there a moment, as though confused.

The other soldiers with crossbows fired through the flames as the remainder charged, emerging on the other side of the flames coughing and staggering. The bolts reflected away from us, back towards the crossbowmen beyond the wall of flames, striking them - but to what effect, I could not tell through the flames. I could hear the sound of the bolts hitting their metal armor, though I did not hear screams of pain. I stood my ground, my lance at the ready.

"Ignore the crossbowmen, they'll faint in a moment!" Eddas called.

"What?! They will?! Why?" Vaddan asked.

"Because the phlogisticated air from a wall of fire is released on the outer side, and phlogisticated air is toxic!"

Vaddan glanced down to his sword, then to the machine again. "But that machine... What... What can *anyone* even *do* against that thing?!" he asked as it started to stride forward again, apparently intending to simply stomp us, since its fiery blasts had no effect.

"This," Eddas replied, and spoke a rapid incantation, then flicked out her hand.

A titanic stroke of lightning leapt from Eddas's fingertips. The blast sent my ears to ringing and the flash left spots before my eyes, and I staggered, stunned. I blinked, looking at the machine...

...and saw the bronze beast had a hole a cubit wide melted completely through it, right in its middle, just below the slit of glass. Smoke poured from it for a moment, then it staggered and collapsed.

"*Get her!*" one of the enemy soldiers shouted, and they charged.

I lowered the point of my lance towards the nearest, and charged in return, shouting a wordless battle-cry.

The point of my lance met his chest squarely atop his ornately-engraved bronze armor, staggering him with the impact - but it did not penetrate. I had little time to gape, however, as he stepped in with his axe-staff, swinging. My weapon was invulnerable, and could not be blunted - but his own armor was invulnerable, and could not be penetrated. I parried, then parried again. He had the edge on me - though my scales were strong, they were still only my skin. A solid blow from his axe would snap bones and crush the flesh beneath.

He swung low, and I hopped over his blade - then he snapped high with the other end, and I ducked. Seeing an opening, I leapt forward, tackling him, and sending us both to the ground. Claps of thunder and flashes of lightning split the air, though who was casting, I did not know.

We wrestled around for a moment - he was strong, but I had the strength of a mermaid, I was his equal. I could see a flash of pale skin, the underside of his jaw above his gorget and beneath his helmet. I didn't think - I simply reached for it, extending my thumb-claw through the small hole in the thumb of my glove and slashing. He cried out in a moment's pain... Then began spasming, as the poison took it's effect.

A shadow loomed over me - one of the soldiers, his weapon raised, about to smash down with all his might. I started to roll to the side...

...when suddenly, a *word* split the air. It was unlike any other word I had heard in my life. I could *feel* it... Feel the stunning force of it. It was not in any language I knew, or had ever heard before. I did not understand what it meant, but I could somehow *feel* its meaning, in the back of my mind. It was dark... Harsh... And *final*.

And I was only glad that it had not been directed at me, for the soldier about to smite me screamed horribly, then collapsed.

I gaped at him, stunned, and stared in horror as the flesh beneath his armor dissolved and putrefied, leaking from the joints and openings in his armor in a reeking liquid with a stench of death powerful enough to make me gag. "*Gods...*" I whispered, horrified, swiftly crawling back.

"Sasha, get up, please, it's over," Eddas called.

I rose to my feet, and turned to look. Eddas stood, leaning on her staff, watching me. Marilith knelt beside her, her head and ears low, gasping with exhaustion and soaked with sweat. Barag, the shaven-headed apprentice, lay on the ground beside them, and Vaddan was tending to him.

"How... How is he?" I asked, trotting over.

"Alive, but unconscious," Vaddan replied, gently lowering his head to the ground.

"It was the strain of the transference spell, Sasha," Eddas said. "He's only an apprentice, he doesn't even have a staff to draw from. He saw Marilith staggering, and gave her all he had. It's why she is conscious, and he is not."

"What... What happened to that one?" I asked, pointing behind me.

"We were using lightning on the others, since both you and Vaddan discovered their armor is too tough for most physical attacks. As for that one, your sister used a Word of Power upon him," Eddas explained, looking down to Marilith. "She's only a lesser demon, however, and that was one of the words of the First Order. Quite tiring, she nearly fainted."

"I did what I had to do," Marilith replied quietly, panting.

"Well, yes, but *Rot? Stun* would have been a better choice, dear, you'd have had time and strength to follow it up with a simple bolt of lightning, easily."

"I... I didn't think of that," Marilith replied, still panting. *"I just wanted him dead, before he swung. I... I didn't want to chance his resisting it..."*

Eddas blinked. "What?! A *mundane* resist a Word of Power from a demon of the Fourth Rank?" she said, then rolled her eyes. "*Impossible*, he'd have to be a mage. You're not a *bufotibranche*, after all." Eddas held out a gloved hand to help Marilith to her feet. "You did well, however. Very well. Next time, just remember to pace yourself better."

Marilith's ears perked up as she smiled, and she took Eddas' hand to pull herself to her feet. *"Thank you, Master Eddas."*

I looked to Vaddan. "Vaddan, are you alright?"

Vaddan smiled ruefully. "I'm fine, Sasha - though I'm afraid my sword has seen it's last days," he said, reaching to his side and then standing. He held out what was left of his sword - the blade had snapped off a palm's width above the hilt, leaving him with little more than a bell-guard. "I tried to strike one from behind, hoping to at least dent his helmet and perhaps his skull beneath. I staggered him, but that was all. Eddas slew him with lightning."

Eddas smiled. "I can repair your sword later, Vaddan, and Marilith can help me enchant it to something that will be a bit more useful, after she's had some time to rest. For now, try to find the broken piece of the blade, my friend. It will make things easier than having to reconstitute it from scratch."

Vaddan nodded. "Yes, Eddas Ayar," he said, and walked off, his eyes scanning the ground as he searched for the broken blade.

I stepped over to Marilith, and hugged her. "I'm glad you're alright."

"And I, you, Sister," she replied, and smiled.

"I didn't even know you could *do* something like that!"

Marilith grinned wryly. *"Neither did I, I'd never used a First Order word before, and I've not used any Words of Power since converting to this plane so I didn't know if I even could. We equibranch usually limit ourselves to Third and Second Order, they're much less tiring. But when I saw him about to smite you, I..."* Marilith shook her head. *"Well, nevermind. It all worked out for the best."*

Eddas, meanwhile, was kneeling beside Barag. She muttered a brief incantation, then extended her hand. "Wake," she called, tapping his forehead.

Barag's eyes snapped open, and he gasped. "Gods!" he yelped, blinking, then looked around. "I... I'm not dead? We won?"

Eddas smiled. "Yes, apprentice. You did well, also."

Barag sat up, rubbing his shaven scalp with his fingers. "I remember... Before it began... The demon... Marilith... She called you... 'Master Eddas?'"

"Yes."

"Eddas Ayar of the Dyclonic Circle?"

Eddas nodded. "It's quite a long story, Apprentice," Eddas replied, rising to her feet and walking over to where her hidden sanctuary was. "Joy, you can come on down, now!"

"I would imagine it is, you're *quite* famous and you've been *dead* a good twenty years," Barag replied, a weak smile lighting the corner of his lips. "I read your work on the elemental planes... Truly incredible."

As Joy clambered down the rope, Eddas smiled at Barag. "I'll tell you the story as we travel."

"I've found the blade, Master Eddas!" Vaddan called from nearby.

"Good, good. Toss it in your wagon, for now, we'll need to be moving on, and soon. That was just a scouting party, sent to see what our campfire was. When they don't return and this larger ring of fire is seen, they'll send more forces to investigate - particularly since any spellcaster they have within a league or two *had* to hear that Word of Power being spoken, they'll know to send a serious force. I can take *one* of those machines using a bolt cast with the Deep Magic, yes - but not several, it's simply too tiring. Start packing your gear, Vaddan, and go and catch Champion and calm him down, he's dancing around the clearing over there, utterly terrified. Sasha, take care of Marilith, see she rests as much as she can before we have to move, using a First Order word is immensely draining. Joy, help Barag, I need to go over the dead and gather what I can from them that may be useful, and his insights as to what I'm looking at may be invaluable. Come, come! Let's all get to work!"

As I put Marilith's arm over my shoulder, I looked to Eddas. "Ummm... Master Eddas, do you really think they'll come soon?"

"Oh, I sincerely hope so, yes. That's one of the larger reasons I used that wall of fire. And what with Marilith using a Word of Power? Oh, yes, I sincerely hope they do, and there's quite a good chance they will."

"Err... But why?"

"Because the more troops they send here to investigate, the less troops they have patrolling their borders, and the more of my people who are trying to flee them will escape."

Joy looked over Barag as she helped him to his feet. "He's a bit weak to walk far, Old Man."

"Just carry him, Joy, I need his eyes, not his feet," Eddas replied, and gestured, snuffing the wall of fire that surrounded the clearing instantly. The little clearing was plunged into near darkness, the shadows broken only by the light of the moon and the quiet campfire. "Let's go."

The Ocean - Thirteen.

"There's just so *much* I could learn from you, Master Eddas!" Barag yelped as we travelled down the

road. "Even listening to what little you've told me now, I can see my old masters were but apprentices, compared to you!"

Eddas grinned broadly, and I tried not to roll my eyes. We'd traveled all evening, rested for a few hours in the morning, then traveled all day along the stone roads of Hyperborea, heading south. And, in the end, Barag had chatted with Eddas Ayar endlessly, about a hundred different subjects I knew absolutely nothing of. Marilith found it interesting - she listened intently, and occasionally asked questions. As for me, however, I found the entire exchange boring in the extreme. Most of it flew right over my head, of course. What didn't, however, was *dreadfully* dull. And, the one time I'd managed to work up enough interest to ask a question was when they were speaking about the armor the Invaders were wearing. Orichalchum, they said it was - but when I asked what orichalchum was, Eddas simply dismissed the question with the briefest of explanations, as though I'd asked something of utterly trivial knowledge to them. "Orichalchum is an argyric alloy, Sasha - bronze, with a bit of silver to ease the enchantments. That's all, there's really nothing to it." I held my tongue thereafter, and just endured the boredom in silence.

"Words of Power..." Barag said, shaking his head as he continued what was still to me a dreadfully dull conversation. "It would be fabulous to be able to use them."

Eddas shrugged. "Demons are the Elder Race, only the Creator is older. Such is their power. Even converting to existence on this plane can't prevent Marilith from using her birthright - though some of the First Order words are draining enough to be dangerous to her, perhaps fatal if she's weakened from a battle."

"It's why we only use them in moments of extremity," Marilith agreed with a nod.

"I'm surprised demons don't just use them the moment they're summoned," Barag said, still shaking his head.

"That's what the circle of protection is for, Apprentice," Eddas replied, smiling. "My old master taught me, however, that one always treats demons with the utmost of respect - and anything else you summon. Elementals, undead... Anything. But particularly demons. Demons heal slowly, and reproduce even slower. No one wants to be summoned from their home and forced to serve against their will, then be sent back wounded, to suffer in pain for a century or more while their wounds heal - and certainly no one wants to be snatched from their home and sent back dead. I was taught to summon only in absolute

necessity, and always with the greatest respect. It's why I was able to sit down with Marilith's clan-father, Azual, and have a more-or-less civil chat about her situation - they've learned I can be trusted, I treat them with respect and honor, and I don't summon them when I know they're likely to be badly wounded or killed. Just because I *can* command them doesn't give me the right to. Their lives are not mine to command, they have their own lives. He understands that - I think all his people do, now. He's a *satyribranche*, both a greater demon and a clan-leader, incidentally."

"Well," Barag replied, looking at Marilith in her humanoid-horse form, "meaning no disrespect, but I am still an apprentice - and the more I listen, the more I think that even my old masters were apprentices, compared to you," he said, looking back to Eddas. "I read your treatise on the elemental planes as a part of my journeyman's studies - I had been told it was always known it was *theoretically* possible to go there, but no mage who had tried had returned."

Eddas shrugged. "Well, of course not, the elemental planes are hostile to ordinary forms of life. Why, on the Plane of Fire, the average temperature is hot enough to melt lead. You need spells of adaptation just to survive."

"Yes, so I read... But what truly amazed me was your discovery that the four elements are not what *comprise* matter, but rather the planes themselves are the embodiments of *states* of matter."

"Well, yes. The four elemental planes represent the four basic states of matter - solid, liquid, gas, and meta-radiant. Before the formation of the Arc of Time, their purpose was to attempt to establish some sort of order to the rest of the universe, by providing self-referential foundations for existence through the Law of Similarity. After the formation of the Arc of Time, their purpose was muted, and by the time I went there, a sphere of annihilation had formed through the actions of a pawn of one of the more destructive gods, and threatened the elemental planes with destruction by restoring them to the chaos of Unity..." Eddas replied, then shook her head. "But, that's a story for another time. Regardless, matter itself in my day we already believed to be comprised of small particles we call 'atoms,' with various combinations of earth, air, water or fire atoms forming the matter we see about us. But, having had a few centuries to think upon it and experiment a bit, I've learned that atoms really don't work quite like that. I think when we are studying 'atoms' of bronze or granite, we're actually experimenting with larger particles, combinations or perhaps amalgamations of smaller, more pure particles that may or may not be universal to all forms of matter, and have nothing to do with the four elements at all, as the elements represent *states* of matter, not matter itself. And more, though Fire seems the least common of all the elements, I actually think that because it also represents the meta-radiant state, it may be the most common element. My theory is that meta-radiant matter is found almost everywhere - in the glow of lightning, in the spark of a flint one uses to light a campfire... Perhaps even in the sun. The entire sun may be made of meta-radiant matter, possibly a gas or gases of unknown qualities. Further, the stars we see in the night sky may be more suns, at vast distances from us - and each may have more worlds about them, as ours does. Possibly with their own peoples, as well," Eddas replied, gesturing expansively to the

blue sky with a gloved hand. Then, she shrugged. "But, I've only begun researching this less than twenty years ago, I simply don't know yet."

"Twenty years ago... Eighteen centuries in the future," Barag replied, awed. "Phlogiston - you mentioned it, the night of the fight. Does this mean you've confirmed the basic theory?"

"Well, no," Eddas replied. "I ended up having to develop my own theory. We know the theory that matter is made up of particles of atoms. I've been working on trying to confirm a new theory, that atoms themselves are made up of smaller particles - and these particles are universal, and theoretically interchangeable. As part of those experiments, I was splitting sal ammoniac into its components-

"And stinking the tower to high heaven," Joy added, making a *moue*'.

Eddas grinned. "Well, yes, unfortunately. Nevertheless, in one series of experiments, I was working with dephlogisticated marine acid, following the old Dwarven recipe to get it. Now, every classical text agrees that it's a kind of dephlogisticated air, but it's an oddity, in that it does not support life, but rather extinguishes it rather quickly. It can even burn one's skin and lungs - to your death, if one isn't careful. The more pure it is, the more deadly it is. Yet, at the same time, it supports combustion - when it's quite pure, fire will burn in it, and quite brightly, as well. I couldn't resolve this as being a classic movement of phlogiston from calx into atmosphere, as only combustion is supported, not respiration. Then, when I was experimenting with iron and turning it into rust, I noticed another oddity - classical texts describe the phlogiston in the iron leaving the iron as the process of rust, which is a form of slow combustion. The iron gets lighter, leaving the calx of iron, rust, behind. But, my experiments showed that iron rust is not lighter than iron - it's actually heavier."

Barag blinked. "Heavier?! That's impossible! It violates everything known!"

"I know! That's the part that fascinated me - but the more rigid the controls I applied, the more consistent the results were. In one experiment, the resulting pile of powdered rust was almost twenty percent heavier. Thus, I determined that one of two things is happening - either phlogiston must have a negative value in mass, or phlogiston does not exist, and we're dealing with something else entirely. You see, objects which are considered to contain phlogiston and lose it through combustion *gain* weight, they don't lose it. Even wood - if you burn the wood in a bell-jar and very carefully sift and collect the soot, tars and ashes from the air with the Spell of Filtration, the resulting ash, soot and other debris weighs slightly more than the original wood did. This means either the phlogisticated air, having received the

phlogiston from the wood, now weighs slightly less, or phlogiston does not exist, and something *else* has *left* the air, and been combined with the wood," Eddas said, then shrugged. "But, that's the farthest I've gotten with the theory. After the last time I was working with sulphur, Joy put her foot down, and I promised her that I wouldn't work any further on experiments that would stink until I had developed a better spell to ventilate and cleanse the air in the tower, so my work in that area is on hold for awhile."

"Thank the Gods," Joy added.

"And all this... Eighteen centuries in the future..." Barag said, his eyes bright.

"Yes - but it's not quite as exciting as you think."

"Perhaps, but your laboratory! Your notes! Your experiments! Your mastery of the Deep Magic! Being your apprentice would be a dream come true!"

"While surrounded by the nightmare of endless ruins, yes," Eddas replied.

Barag sighed. "Well... Yes."

"You could change that," I reminded him.

Eddas looked to me calmly. "We shall see, Sasha."

Barag, however, did not hear our exchange, being lost in thought. Finally, he looked up. "You know so *much*, Master Eddas... I would give *anything* to be your apprentice."

Marilith nodded. *"As would I. My time has been spent with my sister, and my life is intertwined with yours. But I could learn so much... What I know of magic is the Will and the Word, and what little I learned of your method of sorcery when I was younger. And it is far too little, I fear. And now that I have converted to the Prime Material, my powers are limited by the Laws of Magic - and, unfortunately, my familiarity with them is that of a lesser demon, not a sorceress of this plane. I make mistakes. And I do not want to make mistakes. I want to be perfect, for Sasha,"* Marilith said, and sighed. *"Oh, Master Eddas... I could learn so much from you..."*

Eddas smiled. "And I could learn much from you, Marilith. And your sister."

I blinked. "Me?! What do I know that would be of use to you?! I'm a *mundane!*" I yelped, a bit flustered at suddenly being dragged into this conversation.

"As I told you four years ago - your knowledge of herblore, pressure points, and the martial arts of Palome... All are valuable, to me. If you would agree to teach that to Joy and I, I would instantly agree to teach your sister what I know of sorcery, to improve her own spellcasting and make the two of you a stronger team," Eddas replied, and smiled again.

Marilith looked at me suddenly, her eyes wide and pleading. When I hesitated, she began to chew her lower lip, her eyes that of a begging puppy. I nearly giggled. "Alright, Master Eddas. I'll do it."

"Yes! Thank you, Sister!" Marilith whinnied, hugging me tight.

Joy rolled her eyes. "More bumps and bruises. It took me ten years to master what you knew of fighting, Old Man, and the first three years were loathsome."

"I imagine it will be more of the same, for both of us," Eddas replied, and winked. "I'll start working with Marilith tonight, we can worry about Sasha fulfilling her end of the bargain after we return home."

"Ummm..." Barag said, very hesitantly. "Please forgive me for my impertinence, Master Eddas, but... I,

too, would like to be your apprentice. My old circle is gone, the masters dead, the surviving journeymen and apprentices scattered, our library destroyed... Everything is gone, Master Eddas. Is it... Is it at all possible you might accept me?"

Eddas gazed at him quietly, her face impassive. I didn't understand why she hesitated - after several hours of chatting with him, it was fairly obvious she liked him, and thought he was intelligent. What could possibly cause her to hesitate? I simply didn't know.

At last, Eddas spoke. "That, Apprentice, is entirely up to Yorindar to decide."

"Err... Yorindar? The god you told me you served?"

"Yes."

"I... Err... Ummm..." Barag said, very nervous. "Ummm... I still find it a bit odd. I mean, I know you were a member of the Dyclonic Circle, and they honored-" Barag said, and was instantly silenced by Eddas clapping a gloved hand across his mouth.

"*Don't* speak the name, Apprentice. It's bad enough I'm here in the past, I'd rather not attract *his* attention. In my time, he's gone mad and is evil through and through. The war changed him, and for the worse. Whatever you do, do *not* speak that name in my presence, or in the presence of anyone in this party." Eddas looked to Vaddan, who sat beside him on the cart's buckboard. "That goes for you, too, my friend, now that the subject's come up."

Vaddan reached to his closed lips with a thumb and forefinger, twisted his hand in the air, then flicked his wrist as though tossing something away, and smiled.

Eddas nodded. "Thank you."

Barag sighed. "How... How will we know if Yorindar approves?"

"I'll know. And so will you," Eddas replied ominously.

"Ummm... Is there anything I can do to perhaps affect the decision?"

"Not that I know of, though prayer couldn't hurt. I'm not a priest, I'm merely his pawn. In the Southlands, eighteen centuries from now, I'm considered a Holy Warrior, with some divine conduit to the gods. But, I'm not - I'm simply myself. All I can tell you is that you will know - and so will I. Yorindar is an extremely subtle god, and the signs he gives me are quiet and unobtrusive. But when he needs to be, he can be as clear and unmistakable as a sledgehammer to the skull. You will know - and so will I."

"Yes, Master Eddas," Barag replied, bowing his head.

"We're nearing the next village," Vaddan warned.

"Time to resume our disguises," Eddas said, and gestured, covering Joy with her illusion again. Marilith gestured over me for a moment, then herself, and she again assumed the form of a Hyperborean woman in black robes. Eddas looked me over, then nodded. "Vaddan, you can warn the villagers again that Tholonir city was attacked, but again, don't reveal much more than that. Of course, by now, they likely already know - the word has probably spread. From what little I know of what they did, the Invaders will be spending time securing the villages and towns to the north along Vorgriddan Bay, first, and securing their southern and eastern borders against counter-attack. They won't turn south for at least another week. When they do, however, they'll sweep through like fire on a dry plain, and King Faldan's lands will fall very rapidly. Our main concern is still reaching Wilanda city well ahead of them, so we can warn King Darrak."

"You use the third nominative declension... You speak the names of kings with great familiarity, Master Eddas," Vaddan noted, looking to Eddas. I didn't know what Vaddan meant for a moment, then realized that though the bracelet Eddas Ayar had given me allowed me to understand what was said, it did not allow me to hear and understand their language and every slight shade of nuance as they spoke it.

Instead, I heard their words in my own language, that of Vilandia, spoken with the tone and inflection that carried the nearest absolute meaning. It *did* sound a bit like Eddas was speaking their names with great familiarity, but apparently some of the nuance was lost in translation.

Eddas blinked for a moment, then nodded. "Err... Well, yes. I knew both Faldan the Fourth and Darrak the Second in my living days. Darrak himself granted me my lands, to the east, on the border of the giant's territories. I mean them no disrespect, if that's what you're thinking. Darrak, in particular - he and I had a great deal of respect for each other."

"No, Master Eddas, that's not what I mean. I am thinking of your story, and realizing it's been twenty years since you died. You came from the future, where you awakened in that body - but you did not return to the moment of your death. Both those kings are dead, and their sons now rule."

Eddas blanched, then after a long moment, she sighed. "I... I see," she said, gazing down at her lap. "How long ago did Darrak die?"

"About fifteen years ago, Master Eddas, though his son was regent for the last five years of his life, as he was too frail to manage the kingdom."

"So Gothnar is on the throne, now?"

"Aye," Vaddan replied, nodding. "Do you think... Do you think it will make a difference?"

"Yes. Gothnar was not the warrior his father was, though he was an excellent diplomat. Now, in the time our people need his father's strength as one of the greatest war-leaders of Hyperborea..." Eddas said, and sighed again. "The Invaders did not know it, but they came at the perfect time."

"Do you think we can still win?"

Eddas hesitated a moment, then shook her head. "I... I don't know, my friend. I just don't know. I only know it's the best thing we can do. I collected two full suits of the enemy's armor, two of their axe-staves, and those crossbows and bolts and such, and stored them in my sanctuary. If we have to, we can prove what we say. King Gothnar may or may not have what it takes to win... But he certainly is heir to the wealthiest and most powerful of the Hyperborean kingdoms, and his father's alliances stretched far and wide. With luck, he has maintained the strength of those alliances, and can gather enough..." Eddas said, her voice trailing off. Finally, she shook her head again. "I'm sorry, I honestly don't know if it will make a difference. We can only hope, and pray."

Vaddan nodded silently, his eyes on the road ahead.

The Owl - IV

"That went far smoother than I thought it might," Corvid said, smiling wryly.

Father Patience nodded. "Giants, in some ways, are like men. They kill what they fear. Once we showed there was naught to fear, we were alright."

Corvid chuckled. "What could a *giant* possibly fear to begin with?"

"In Hyperborea? Oh, much, lad. There is much to fear, here."

Corvid cast his gaze on the forest around and before them. They had been walking east since dawn, having left the giant's village with full bellies and warm memories of the feast the giants prepared for them the evening before. Now, they followed the deer-trails through the shadowed forest - yet, despite the fearsome reputation of Hyperborea in the Southlands, what met Corvid's eye did not quite match up to the tales he had heard.

The village of the giants, such as it was, was built a few hundred paces from the edge of what once was an ancient city, with broken stones and bits of rubble poking through the forest floor and peeping from behind ancient trees. The giants used what they said was the old farmlands of that city to supplement the bounty of fish they harvested from the sea. If one could ignore the rubble in the forest and ignore the size of their hosts and their village, large leathern houses like titanic tents looming near the shore, there were many similarities with human villages Corvid had seen in his days sailing the world. Indeed, there were many times during the feast the night before, when Corvid had watched the giants dance and sing, that he had the distinct impression of not being a man in a village of giants, but being a mouse in a village of ordinary humans. It felt very much that it was not the giants who were large, but he himself who was small. Yet, he knew it was not so, of course. It did not take much of an eye to see that the giants were built differently and moved differently than men, as each was the mass of an oilphant. Compared to a human, a giant was much broader and had far thicker bones, and their gait when they walked was distinctly different - more precise, more deliberate, it was an almost cat-like gait. They were deliberate in all their movements, as though wary of a fall or other accident. Which, Corvid realized upon reflection, was quite likely exactly the reason. Like the step of a horse was more careful than the step of a man, larger creatures were injured worse in falls than smaller ones, and tended to walk with more precision and care.

Corvid glanced back to the slave-girl, who followed behind Father Patience as they trekked through the forest. She smiled at him briefly, then tugged at bit at the straps for her leather pack, settling it more comfortably on her shoulders. "Are you certain you wouldn't like me to carry that?"

The slave-girl smiled again. "Thank you, but I am fine. This is my duty, and I shoulder it gladly."

Father Patience nodded. "The pack is enchanted - it carries ten times it's volume, but the weight is only a tenth of what is within. That is why she was able to pack all your supplies. Your hands and back are needed free, friend. If we are attacked, you will need to be nimble to defend us."

"How true are the legends, really?" Corvid asked, as the trail before them opened into a small clearing.

"You've seen giants, and even supped with them. You have to ask?" Father Patience replied, smiling.

Corvid grinned back. "True, I - look out!" Corvid suddenly yelled, thrusting out his arm to shove the old man aside. A stone the size of a man's head zipped by, crashing into the brush of the clearing as Father Patience sprawled upon the ground.

Corvid drew his sword as an ogre stepped forth from behind a tree, a massive club made from a gnarled tree-root in the ogre's ham-sized hands. Corvid gaped - he had heard of ogres, but never seen one. The creature was a tremendously muscular humanoid of four cubits in height, twin tusks protruding from his jaw. The ogre wore a crude loincloth of animal hide, but nothing more over his massive, hirsute body. The ogre snarled something - though whether it was an insult or a battle-cry, Corvid did not know. A moment later, the ogre charged.

Corvid leapt aside as the ogre's immense club crashed down where he had stood a heartbeat before, then slashed with his sword. The enchanted blade was keen, but the ogre's tough skin was more like hide than anything else - the slash was not deep. The ogre roared in rage and pain, swinging his club. Corvid ducked, and slashed again.

What followed could hardly be called artistic, for all Corvid's skill with his blade. The ogre was a whirlwind of fury, swinging his club with unstoppable force. Corvid could not parry a weapon so massive - he would simply be crushed. All he could do was duck, dodge, and leap back, slashing and stabbing at the creature when the opportunity presented itself. The ogre's wounds did not regenerate - it was no troll, after all - but its reserves of strength and endurance were nigh onto bottomless. Corvid had speed in his favor, but his own reserves of endurance were not infinite, as he was only human. He could only hope that blood loss would eventually slow the beast down, so perhaps he might get a more telling blow in.

The battle wore on, the two combatants moving around and around in the small clearing of trees. Corvid was careful to not let the ogre press him back against a tree or bush, which might slow him enough for the ogre's club to connect. Soon, blood streamed from over a dozen wounds to the ogre's body. The speed of its massive club seemed to slow, and Corvid allowed himself a small smile - if he could keep this up and avoid being struck, he could win.

Suddenly the ogre leapt back, gasping with exertion. In a sudden move, the ogre reached a massive paw down to the ground, snatching up a handful of grass, dirt and forest litter, then flung his ham-sized hand out at Corvid.

"Gack!" Corvid yelped, blinded for a moment by the dirt and forest litter in his face and eyes.

But, it was a moment too long. With a roar, the ogre leapt in, and swung with all his remaining strength.

Corvid cried out in pain as the ogre's club smashed into his left thigh, shattering the bone and sending him sprawling, his sword flying from his hand in a glittering arc to land point-first in the ground nearby. Corvid held out his hand, and the enchanted blade blinked to his grip again as he frantically struggled to crawl away - but the grinding of shattered bones in his leg was a spike of agony that slowed him.

The ogre stood over him, grinning an evil, fanged grin. Smeared with blood from his wounds, he rumbled something in his guttural language, then raised his club...

-BOOM!-

The ogre staggered as the sound of an explosion split the clearing, then turned to face the new threat. Corvid, blinking away dirt and detritus from his eyes, dimly saw a score of small, bloody wounds in the ogre's back...

-BOOM! BOOM-BOOM!-

The ogre took a staggering step towards his unknown foe, the front of his chest torn to ribbons by three score small wounds... Then, he shuddered, falling to his knees. A moment later, he pitched over

onto his face, and lay still.

Corvid lay gasping upon the grass of the clearing, wiping at his eyes with his free hand as he propped himself up on the elbow of his sword-arm. A heartbeat later, he saw Father Patience kneeling over him. "Lay back and rest a moment, my son, I'll try to heal your wound."

Corvid grinned despite the pain. "I'm glad you chose to step in with your sorcery, friend. I'm not sure I could have beaten him sitting on my rump."

Father Patience smiled. "It was not I, my son. A mendicant takes the Vow of Peace, we are prohibited from violence of any kind - even to save ourselves."

"Then who-?" Corvid began, but was interrupted by a new arrival.

A gray-bearded dwarf in blue pantaloons, red doublet and hose and a broad-brimmed blue hat with a long red feather leaned over the kneeling priest. In his hand was a blunderbuss, brimstone smoke trickling from the flared muzzle. Behind him, three other more plainly-dressed dwarves trotted up, each also armed with a smoking blunderbuss. "How be the lad?" the first dwarf asked.

"His leg is broken, but I can heal it with sorcery," Father Patience replied.

"Ye be a Mendicant of Yorindar?" the dwarf asked, looking him over. "If not, me pardon, ye be dressed like one."

Father Patience smiled. "Yes, I am. Father Patience, Mendicant of Yorindar, at your service," he replied, inclining his head.

The dwarf swept off his feathered hat with a free hand, and bowed in return. "Mungim Oakenshield,

Travelling Merchant, at yours," he replied, then swept his cap towards the other three dwarves. "Me brothers, Flori, Gungim, and Balar," Mungim said, and plopped his hat back upon his head. Gesturing, he rattled off something in his own language, pointing to the ogre. In a trice, two of his brothers went to check the ogre and make certain it was dead, while the third trotted over to the wagons to fetch powder and shot for their weapons. Mungim nodded, then turned back to the priest. "It be quite a piece of luck for ye that we did hear the battle from nearby."

Corvid grinned again. "And even better luck you were all armed with blunderbusses."

Mungim grinned. "Aye, lad. Four blunderbusses can yet make short work of an ogre when they be as bad cut as that one. Another moment or three, howe'er, and ye would have yet beaten the thing."

"Assuming it decided to be chivalrous enough to allow me an hour or so to carve a crutch from a tree to stand again, yes," Corvid replied, and chuckled briefly before wincing with pain. "Ah, no laughing for a bit, I think."

Mungim plopped his blunderbuss over his shoulder, watching as Father Patience quietly gestured over Corvid's leg. Glancing to the slave girl who drew near, he nodded. "Ye three be quite a ways from the Southlands. What do yet bring ye here to the lands of Hyperborea?"

"We seek the tower of Eddas Ayar, the Raven of Yorindar," Father Patience replied, tugging gently on Corvid's knee. Corvid grunted in pain as the shattered pieces of bone straightened themselves within his thigh, the power of the priest's sorcery manifest in his flesh.

Mungim shook his head. "We were yet there but a fortnight past, now. He be not there. The giants of Dohbari village do say that he be gone, on some quest or such-like."

Father Patience nodded, gesturing again over Corvid's injured leg as he held the bones straight. "This I know, friend dwarf. Yorindar has shown me this much. But he will be there when we arrive, or shortly thereafter. A few days, at most - no longer than a week after we arrive." Father Patience then nodded to Corvid. "Rise, my son, your leg is healed. It may be a bit sore for a few hours, but you'll be alright."

"Aye?" Mungim said, his bearded face splitting in a wide grin. "Eddas Ayar shall yet return soon? This be good news, good news indeed! There be a giant village nearby we would yet trade with, but an ye do wish, ye may yet ride with us back to the tower o' Eddas Ayar after. There be safety in numbers, as they do say," Mungim said, and winked as Corvid chuckled, rising to his feet. "A question, though... Why do ye yet seek Eddas Ayar?"

The slave-girl held her hand out to Father Patience, and he took it. After rising to his feet, he leaned on his staff as he gazed down at Mungim. "I am a healer, friend Mungim " Father Patience replied. "And when Eddas returns, he will need healing. He is the most powerful wizard in the world, and his will is indomitable. But, even his will has limits. Even the strength of his mighty companion will not be enough to save him. When he returns, he will need healing, or he will die."

Mungim's bearded face grew grim. "We will yet make our business short with the giants, then, and be on our way."

The Ocean - Fourteen.

Wilanda City! I had never seen or imagined anything like it. A quarter million people lived here, or so Eddas said. And I could easily believe it. The city was massive... Huge... Titanic beyond anything I had ever imagined. Easily ten leagues across, possibly more, a seemingly endless maze of streets, side-streets and alleys presented itself to us in an ever-changing variety of ancient architecture. And people! On the main streets, literally hundreds of people could be seen everywhere one looked - walking, riding carts, chatting with each other... Living their lives. Clothing in an endless variety of fashions, streets lined with shops... It was beyond anything I had ever experienced or imagined in all my days. And yet, there was

more - far more. In the skies above, strange ships could be seen... Like longboats, with two or three pair of articulated, bird-like wings (depending on their length) that flapped slowly, propelling them through the sky. I could not even begin to imagine the sorcery behind such a device. And yet, despite my amazement at seeing one pass above us, sailing along high above, the people of the city took it in with utter aplomb, not even glancing upwards to watch them. Meanwhile, along the streets were streetlamps - and though they looked somewhat ordinary in the light of day, Eddas Ayar told us that they did not burn with candle or oil at night, but instead were fed by a strange gas made at a central place from horse dung, the dung gathered from the streets by cleaning crews each day. And more, there were no crews of lamplighters who had to scour the city each dawn and dusk to light them, but rather they ignited and extinguished themselves magically come sunset and sunrise. No, here, truly, was *civilization*. Not the civilization I had known in Vilandia, or even what I had seen and experienced in Palome. This was something greater, grander... Sorcery and mundane knowledge beyond what I had ever seen before, yet utterly commonplace and trivial to the people who lived here. Even the smallest things to them were marvels to me - large sheets of plate glass in windows, countless tens of thousands of stones in the streets and buildings that were cut to match each other without mortar... Yes, here was a people and culture on the cusp of something truly *marvelous*. Even Marilith, who had seen things in her home-plane that I could only dream of, seemed as deeply impressed and awed as I.

At last, Vaddan tugged on the reins to his horse, drawing the wagon to a stop before a tremendous temple with white-marble pillars. "Here we are, friend. The Temple of Vyleah, as you asked. Where to, now?"

Eddas simply gazed at the temple in silence, her expression unreadable.

"Old Man?" Joy said, gently placing a gloved hand on her forearm. "Are you alright?"

Eddas shook her head, rising from her seat atop the wagon. "I know you need grain for Champion, Vaddan, and it would be best if we rented rooms for the night. We can meet you here in two hour's time after you've arranged things - I should have your sword repaired by then, as well," she said, reaching beneath the seat to withdraw the broken blade and hilt of Vaddan's sword, the blade kept inside the sword's sheath. "The rest of you, come - we've much to do."

Shortly, we were walking down a broad street lined with armor and weapon shops - the sign at the corner proclaimed it as the Street of the Armorers, or so the bracelet Eddas Ayar had given me years ago revealed. Barag followed with Marilith and I as Joy and Eddas led the way.

"You couldn't have simply used a spell of repairing on it days ago, Old Man?" Joy asked.

Eddas shook her head. "I could, but that's not what the gods intend. I've known what I must do with this sword for several days, now. There is another who will bear it in our time, and it will save their life many, many times over. It must not be simply repaired, it must be enchanted with the Deep Magic. And that means I must borrow a forge for an hour or so."

"And you..." Marilith gasped, her eyes widening. "You'll let us watch?"

"Of course," Eddas replied.

"I... I am honored," Marilith said, bowing her head.

"I, as well," Barag added, equally impressed.

I, however, wasn't impressed. I'd rather have spent my time with Vaddan. Still, I managed a polite smile. "It sounds very exciting."

Marilith nodded emphatically. "You have no idea, Sister. To see the forging of an Artifact? It's a dream come true, really."

"Perhaps," Eddas replied. "Afterwards, we can go to the tower of the Algrassian Circle, and see if Master Kairatin is still alive - or, if not, if they'll at least allow me to browse some of the spells he developed..." she said, then sighed. "Assuming they'll even allow a half-elf inside the tower."

"I could go," Barag offered.

"An apprentice would have little better luck than I, I think," Eddas replied.

Barag nodded, sighing. "True. I'm of the Mordovian circle, and only an apprentice. I don't even rate a visit to a foreign circle's library, much less browsing the spell-books of a master."

Eddas nodded silently, and led us into the first shop along the street, apparently to see if we could borrow their forge for awhile.

Unfortunately, it was not to be as easy as all that.

The eighth smith we'd asked, just as all the others, shook his head. "There's a war coming, elf - or didn't you know? The kingdoms to the north have been invaded. It's only a matter of time before they come here. King Gothnar has mobilized his army, and all the battle-circles within the kingdom have their masters on alert, ready to leave at a moment's notice. As for us, nearly every armorer and smith in the city is working night and day to fill orders we've been given. Armor, swords, arrowheads... We're all too busy, elf."

Eddas sighed. "But I *really* need a forge, today! It will only be for an hour - less, really."

"Impossible, elf, I'm simply too busy. Try Honor's Forge, at the end of the street. They filled much of their orders with back stocks, they may have a forge free you can borrow."

Eddas started, though I couldn't understand why. After a moment, she sighed. "I should have suspected. Yes, friend smith, you're right. I'll go there, now. Thank you," she said, and turned to walk out of the smithy.

As we left the smithy, I glanced at Eddas Ayar's face. Her expression was... Odd, to say the least. Focused, yet somehow... Pained. "Is something wrong, Mas-"

"Raven," Eddas snapped, interrupting me. "Call me Raven, here."

"Ummm... I-"

Joy glanced at me. "Leave him be, for now, Sasha. Now is not the time."

We walked for quite a while in silence, until finally we were at the end of the busy street, where it ended in another at right angles. On the corner was a large brick and woodwork building, adjacent to a large smithy. Eddas walked past the smithy, and directly to the house. Stepping up atop the stoop, she knocked at the door. Moments later, a young Hyperborean woman answered. She looked Eddas over in surprise for a moment, then smiled. "Can I help you, elf?"

"I am Raven. I was looking for Hietar Ayar. Is he here?"

The woman blinked at Eddas for a long moment. "Err... My husband's grandfather has been dead some fifty years, elf. What business did you have with him?"

"Ah," Eddas said, and sighed. "I had forgotten how short-lived you humans can sometimes be. I met him seventy-five years ago when he was on a trip to his son's tower, in the east. He said that if I ever had need of his forge, I should look for him in Wilanda City. Now, here I am, but he is gone."

"His grandson Songar still lives - he's my husband. I'm Bettara."

"Did Songar inherit that cute little dimple in his chin his grandfather had?" Eddas asked, smiling.

"Yes, and he shaves so I can see it, the rascal!" Bettara replied, and laughed. "Come - he's in the smithy right now, working on orders with his apprentices. I'll take you to him," she said, stepping out onto the stoop and pulling the door shut behind her.

Moments later, we were walking through the smithy - which, itself, was a bustle of activity as twenty men of varying ages pounded and hammered away on swords, arrowheads, and pieces of armor. Bettara led us directly to a tall, olive-skinned Hyperborean man who had long, thick mutton-chops on the sides of his jowls. His hair was tied back behind his head in a short ponytail, and the thick thews of his arms flexed as he worked on hammering the blade of what apparently would be a sword. He seemed to be in his late forties, with graying hair at his temples. "Songar?" Bettara called. "This elf is called Raven - she says she knew your grandfather."

Songar flashed a broad smile at us, holding out his hand. "Pleased to meet you," he said as Songar took Eddas' ebon-gloved hand in his much larger hand, Songar clasping her fingers and inclining his head briefly. "What can I do for you?"

"I met your grandfather once, while he was visiting your uncle's tower in the east. Your grandfather once said that if I ever needed a forge, I should see him. But, that was seventy-five years ago - it had slipped my mind how short-lived you humans are. I hate to impose, as it is not a promise you made, but my need is urgent - I must borrow a smith's forge for an hour."

Songar stepped back, gesturing to his forge with a broad smile. "Please feel free to borrow the forge of my father and grandfather, Goodmaid Raven."

Eddas set her staff aside, still holding the sheathed and broken sword in her other hand. "May I..." Eddas said, and paused, a small quaver to her voice.

"Yes?" Songar asked.

"May I borrow your grandfather's tools, as well?"

Songar smiled. "They lie before you, Goodmaid Raven. Please feel free."

"Th-thank you," Eddas replied, her voice trembling.

Quietly, she slipped the broken blade of Vaddan's sword onto the anvil, then picked up a small wrench to loosen the pommel and free the tang of the blade from it. With the two pieces of the broken blade before her, she picked up the tongs and thrust the blade and tang into the glowing embers of the forge...

...and then, she began to quietly sing.

It was not a song of words that my bracelet could translate. It was a song of power, of strength. I could feel it, inside me. I could hear the emotions in her voice. Sadness... Yearning... And even mourning.

The embers of the fire glowed brightly, and Eddas Ayar withdrew the broken pieces of the blade from the fire with the tongs, then began hammering them together with a heavy smith's hammer against the anvil, still singing. I had never seen a sword forged before, but I imagined it would not be as smoothly done as this. The broken edges flowed together seamlessly beneath the blows of the hammer, the metal still glowing cherry red, as Eddas' quiet song brought all the other work in the smithy to a standstill. Two dozen pairs of eyes gazed on silently, all in awe.

Again into the glowing embers of the forge, and with a mournful rise in the song, the embers of the forge glowed with renewed heat as Eddas gestured over it. She then drew the blade out again awhile later with the tongs, the blade now glowing white-hot. Eddas gestured over the blade, her sorcery and the words of her song etching runes along the flat of the blade. Tears flowed down her cheeks, and she paused, reaching for a cup that dangled from the nearby water trough. Holding it to her cheeks for a moment, she then held the cup over the glowing blade, letting the tears drop onto it, to vanish with a hiss of steam...

And instantly, the blade was cool, and gleamed like quicksilver. Eddas lifted the blade in her hands, slipping the hilt and guard back into place, then screwing the pommel back on with the wrench. The song had ended, and I blinked with returning awareness - though it seemed mere moments of work, the

shadows that crept in from the nearby window showed it was at least an hour, perhaps more, that all of us had stood silently, enraptured by what we saw.

Songar found his voice first, and slowly shook his head. "That was... Truly amazing," he said, his voice hushed.

"I agree," Barag said, his face showing utter awe.

"And I," Marilith agreed with a nod.

"Thank you," Eddas replied, sheathing the sword in its scabbard, then turned to him. "And now, Songar Ayar, I have a message from your uncle."

Songar blinked. "Err... My uncle? Eddas? But he's been dead nigh onto twenty years."

"Yes. And here is the message," she said, and reached out to his shoulder, drawing him down to her, and kissed his cheeks. "You are loved, Songar, and you will be remembered. Always."

And with that, Eddas Ayar picked up her staff with her free hand, turned, and strode out of the smithy without a backwards glance.

Joy nodded to Songar and his wife, then strode after Eddas swiftly.

"Err... We should follow, I believe," Marilith said, and held out her hands to me and Barag. "Come, let's go."

We caught up to them about a block down the street. Eddas had paused, and now stood silently, her head bowed. Joy had her hands upon Eddas' shoulders, and was speaking quietly.

"How much more, Joy? How much more?" Eddas said, her voice quavering.

"As much as it takes, Old Man. You told me that, yourself. There are things they must see, and things they must do to understand. Their lives, and perhaps the future itself, depends on it."

"Yes, but-" Eddas said, then suddenly paused, her eye falling upon us. "They're *here!*"

"So they are, Old Man."

"And now they see me in my moment of weakness, compounding my shame!" she wept, then turned to stride away.

Joy caught Eddas by the shoulders again, and pulled her back. Despite the illusion of a Hyperborean woman that covered her, Joy was still a little giantess - Eddas was drawn back, and into her arms. "No shame, Old Man. None," she said, holding Eddas to her as she reached down, taking the sheathed sword from her hand. Joy held the sword out to me. "Take it, and give it to Vaddan. Tell him Eddas says it will never break and never dull, the edge will stay razor keen eternally. Once attuned to Vaddan, he can summon it to his grip at a thought. To attune it, he needs to wear it on his hip for a few days."

"Ummm... You want us to take it back ourselves?" I asked, taking the sword from her.

"You three can find the temple of Vyleah again, yes?"

Barag nodded. "It's just down the street a few blocks."

"Then go, and meet with Vaddan. We'll catch up to you later."

"Err... Vaddan was supposed to get our rooms... How will you know what inn he chose?"

Joy glowered at me. "Eddas already knows. He's known for days. We'll meet you there, later. For now, we have to go to the Algrassian circle, so Eddas can try to get the spells he needs, again try to warn them, and again be cast out into the street like a dog."

I blanched, clutching the scabbarded sword. "Err... But that doesn't necessarily have to happen. I mean, she-"

"*He!*" Joy snapped suddenly. "*He!* For all that he is going through for your sakes, for all that he is suffering so you will learn, it should at *least* behoove you to remember that! That was his *nephew*, his *brother's son*! He has a wife, and likely children - none of whom Eddas can meet as he is, because it would be shameful for him to be seen in the body of a woman! And no matter what happens, good or bad, in the end, in our time, they're all *dead! Dead and gone!* It's *sixteen centuries from now!* That was his *nephew!* That was his *father's forge, and his father's tools!* Gone! All gone! So *you two can learn!*"

I stepped back, startled. A few passers-by on the street glanced at us, not understanding what Joy was shouting about, but did not stop on their way. "Err... I'm sorry, I don't understand-"

"Then I'll explain!" Joy snapped. "I'll explain it to you the same way he has explained it to me, countless times for a good century or more - and the same way he explained it to you, once before! Mortals war with sword and spell across bloody battlefields, gods war with souls and paradoxes across the Arc of Time! Their battles have physical dimension, but they are also battles of spirit and emotion! Love, joy, fear, hate, anger, sorrow... All are weapons in the arsenal of the gods! He suffers now, that you can see what kind of battles you face! Soon, it will be your turn! *All too soon!*"

I stammered for several heartbeats, not sure what to say. Then, Marilith stepped forward, putting a

hand on my shoulder. "We understand, Joy. And we'll be ready."

"You'd better be. You-"

"Enough, Joy," Eddas said suddenly, pulling free of her. "Enough. The Algrassian Circle awaits." And with that, Eddas turned and strode away, Joy following.

I sighed, shaking my head. "She's right... I *have* always been thinking of Eddas as a 'she.' My fault... I know that he is a male, inside that body. I guess it's just that I don't see what shame there is in it..."

"You're not Hyperborean," Barag replied quietly, gazing at me. "Your illusion and that of your sister makes you look as one of us, but you're really not. If you were, you'd understand. And it's worse for him, I think." Barag looked down the busy street. "We should go, and meet Vaddan."

"Lead me, Sister," Marilith said, taking my hand. "I'm going to keep my gaze on them, and see what happens."

"Alright," I replied, and Barag began to lead us back down the street, towards the temple of Vyleah. "Ummm... What did you mean when you said it might be worse for him?"

"He's not of my generation, Sasha," Barag replied with a shrug, "he's from three generations before - the last of the Internecine War generations."

"Err... The Internecine War?"

"Yes. A thousand years of political and military conflict to determine who would be emperor of us all. It was mostly political, and we didn't fight often. But when we did fight, blood ran in rivers, and sometimes for decades at a stretch. Hyperborea has many ancient battlefields where the bones of the

newly dead are layered atop those who died before, decades, centuries, even a millennia before, layer upon layer. We'd learned the art and science of war fighting against the elves and dwarves before - and we'd learned our lessons well. In the earliest days of our history, some thought to consider each kingdom separately, as a separate people. But contact with the other races, our wars with the elves and dwarves, showed us that we are all one race, the Hyperborean race - and once the varying kingdoms of Hyperborea had made peace with the other races, they then turned to trying to answer the question of which would be the ruler of us all. The Battle Circles arose during the time of the Internecine War, and much of our society was shaped by it. You're not one of us, so I just don't know how to explain... You really just can't imagine how deeply a thousand years of conflict affected our people. The traditions of *Fridmagg*, the *Kor'na'lagbar*, the *Juvan-lato*... The *Juvan-lato* most of all. But, times are different, now. Five years after his death, about fifteen years ago, now... Well, the kings of Hyperborea decided to resolve the question another way."

"Another way? What way?" I asked, fascinated.

"That, they haven't decided yet. They're still talking about it. They might take a vote between them all, a vote to determine the emperor. They might just have all the kings of Hyperborea gather and duel each other. Or, perhaps they'd select the greatest battle-mages from each kingdom, and have them duel. We don't know, the kings are still talking about it, still debating, still wrangling with each other... But the one thing we know is that they all want the wars to end, and there to be one emperor of us all. The Seelie Court has made overtures about allowing us to join, if we had a single emperor. That would be quite a bit of gold for all the kingdoms of Hyperborea - gold from trade and taxes. Our knowledge would also grow, as we would have more interchange between scholars, and..." Barag shrugged. "Peace can be as profitable as war, and just as honorable."

I smiled. "I suppose it can, yes."

"But he's not of my generation, he's from three generations before. Well, four, really, he was born a century ago. He's from this city, and the time of Darrak the Second. Darrak became king at eighteen, when his father died in a hunting accident, and Darrak ruled for over eighty years. During that time, a lot of things changed... Many of the changes were as a result of the battles of Eddas himself and his circle. The Battle of Chorim Keep, the Battle of Selim Pass, the Battle of Rathas Pass, the Battle of White Creek, the Battle of Faldor's Crossing... No, he was the best, the greatest - and everyone knew his story. He could have been the master of his circle, easily. But, he had another calling. Instead, he went to distant lands and even other planes of existence seeking a way to return his beloved Dyarzi to him, his murdered wife-to-be. Troubadours sing his tale today, you know. He showed our people both the good that true honor could bring us, and the harm that total war could bring us. Still, after his death and the passing of Darrak's crown to his son, things changed. The people wanted peace - and so did the kings. So they began talking about it. We're hopeful that someday..." Barag said, his voice trailing off. At last, he sighed. "But, I suppose it doesn't matter, now. The Invaders are here. The end is at hand."

"It doesn't have to happen that way," I said, smiling. "It might be changed. Eddas agreed he'd try to change it, if he could."

Barag looked at me oddly. "Did he agree, or did you *force* him to agree by placing it as a question of honor?"

I blinked. "Err... Well..."

Barag nodded. "I thought as much - you may be from the future, but women are still women in the future, it appears. Unfortunately, by placing it as a question of honor to one of *his* generation, you force him to attempt something he *has* to know is impossible."

"But... But it might not *be* impossible!" I yelped, both insulted and embarrassed.

Barag shook his head. "I'm only an apprentice, and my journeyman's studies of temporal theory had only just begun. But I do know that the Arc of Time has limits. The past is set, Sasha. And if you and he are from the future, then this is the past, and what he knows will happen, will happen. Little details can be changed..." he said, then paused, shaking his head again. "Well, not really. They can be *discovered*. Things that weren't known before can be discovered, like the woodsman who cuts a sturdy tree, and discovers the tunnels of termites within it. The termites weren't created by the woodsman's axe, they were merely discovered by it - they were always there. And the Gods can add small things... Little changes in small events here and there, like a weaver might take a finished rug and go back over it again, adding in extra threads to improve the pattern here and there, or repair tiny flaws they made in the weaving. But the end result can't be changed."

"It *could* change! Vaddan doesn't have to die!"

Barag smiled. "Aaaaah. So that's what it's about, for you."

I blushed. "Well... Yes."

"He *does* have to die, Sasha. And so do I, and everyone else, here. You're from the future... Eighteen centuries in the future, Eddas said. Even if we won, even if the Invaders were utterly crushed and defeated... Well, it's eighteen centuries, Sasha. We're only human. When you return to your time, we'll be long dead and gone."

"Err..."

"And what happens if we win? Beneath that illusion, you don't look like us. Your skin is pale, like an elf, and your hair the color of copper. You're from a kingdom in the future that arose after us, yes?"

"Well... I was found as an orphan lost at sea and washed up on a beach in Vilandia. But many have said I look like an Arcadian... They're a people that came after you... The legends say they're a mix of your people and the Invaders..."

"If so, our blood must be very thin in you, I think."

"Well..."

"And if we win, that kingdom never comes about. And you are never born. And all the things you've done..." he said, and snapped his fingers. "All un-done. All the battles you won are lost, all the people you saved are lost... Everything you have ever done is un-done."

"Well... Maybe..."

"And then, if you are not born, you and Eddas are not here to help us win. Since you are not here to help us win, we lose, and..." he said, and snapped his fingers again. "You come into existence again."

I blinked for a long moment. "Wait... That doesn't make any sense!"

Barag grinned. "Ah, but it does. It's paradox, you see? You can't change the past. That's what the Arc of Time is all about. As I said - it's like a rug the weaver has finished, and you and Marilith and Eddas and Joy... Well, you are like the weaver adding a few extra threads here and there to improve the overall pattern. Yorindar being the weaver, I suppose, though perhaps your own goddess has a hand in it, as well. No matter - the final result is that we are doomed as a people, and as a civilization. Yes, you *can* be here, and you *can* act, but nothing you do can change what you and Eddas know of history. Only small details can be added, like the weaver adding additional threads to the finished carpet to improve the pattern."

I felt my heart sink. "But... But that means... That means Vaddan will die..."

"As will everyone else alive today, yes," Barag replied, nodding again. "By your time, we've all died of old age, if nothing else. Even an elf doesn't live that long. Only dragons and other immortals live that long."

"I... I see..." I said, my eyes misting with tears.

"But, in the end, he's not of my generation, he's from four generations before. And honor is even more important to him than it is to us - and to us, today, it's very important. Being trapped in the body of a woman..." Barag shook his head. "It would be endlessly humiliating."

"Why?!" I snapped, my heart in turmoil. "Is there something *wrong* with being a woman?"

"For a *woman*, no. But turn the tables around - say you were trapped in my body. Would you be happy living as me? Being a man of a different race, and looking as I do? Or would you be endlessly

embarrassed?"

I paused. "Well..."

"And what if you fall in love with a man, while trapped in the body of a man? Perhaps you fall in love with Vaddan? Just what would you *do* with him, as a man? Unless he was a sodomite, your love would be doomed from the start - he would be insulted if you even attempted to kiss him, much less anything more."

"Well..." I said, then sighed.

"It would be an endless embarrassment for you or me to be in his situation. For me, a Hyperborean man, it would be a deep humiliation, a loss of manhood. To lose one's manhood, to become a eunuch and be... Neither man nor woman..." Barag shook his head. "It's a deep humiliation. For him, he's several generations older. For him, it would be an endless, daily humiliation that grinds him down to nothing. How he endures it, I don't know. What I've read of him is that he was always a strong man. I think he is stronger than even anyone of his day ever knew."

I sighed again, thinking as we walked.

"I've been with you nearly a week now, traveling to here. I've heard your story - Master Eddas has told it to me, as have you. Your sister, Marilith," Barag said, nodding to her. "Have you not noticed she always addresses him as 'Master Eddas'? And always refers to him with a male pronoun? So does Vaddan. And so do I. Joy, his companion... Have you not noticed she calls him 'Old Man'? A constant reminder of who he really is, beneath his garment of flesh. That keeps him going, I think. But you..." Barag said, and shook his head. "You do not. You remind him of his humiliation, every day. You very nearly rub his nose in it."

"But I didn't mean-!"

"Perhaps you didn't, but you were," Barag interrupted. "And now, today, he returns to his family's house, the house he was born and raised in, and meets his nephew... And he can't even tell him who he really is, for the shame."

"I... Err..."

"Yes?"

"And I only made it worse. Again," I said, and felt deeply ashamed. "I need to apologize to him."

Barag nodded. "I think you do, too," he said as we neared the city square.

Suddenly, Marilith paused, her eyes still closed. "Something is happening," she said, ominously.

"What? What do you mean?" I asked, confused.

"I'm still watching him. He went in and spoke with the masters of the Algrassian circle... I can't hear them, from here, but I could see from the greater reality that they were arguing. But they're not just throwing him out... It seems like... Yes. They're having him arrested. The city guards are coming, and mages among them."

"Oh, no! What can we do?!"

Marilith opened her eyes, then looked to me. "Joy is still outside, she does not know what is happening - but when she finds out, I doubt her reaction will be pleasant. I'm going to quickly fetch Joy from there, before she does something that gets her arrested, as well. You and Barag need to find Vaddan, and head to the inn that he's found for us. We'll figure out what to do, there."

I nodded, my eyes scanning the crowd of people walking about in the square. "Alright, I think I see Vaddan, over there. Let's go, Barag."

"But how will Marilith find us, herself?" Barag asked, confused.

Marilith smiled briefly. "My link to my soul-sister allows me to see where she is, even were she in another plane. I can find you, don't worry." Marilith then turned, her robe fluttering, and vanished into thin air.

I reached out, taking Barag's hand, then tugged him along as I trotted a weaving path through the crowds of people in the square. Barag followed silently, which was good - with worry over Eddas on my mind, mixed with embarrassment at what I now knew of how I'd treated him, I could hardly think of anything useful to say, myself.

The Snake - Three.

We walked through the quiet, night-time streets of the city. A few wagons passed us here and there, but otherwise, the city was nearly silent, the gas-lamps flickering as they cast pools of light here and there. "Master... I'm worried about you."

"Oh? And why is that, Haifa?"

"You... You broke your idol, and now... We didn't go straight to your circle, or really anywhere near. What's wrong, master?"

"As to the latter, my dear, we walk the city because I wanted to see it, one last time. Mundanes get quite tedious when they see a liche walking about in the daylight. I suppose our bones remind them of their own mortality."

"Err... One *last* time, master?"

"Yes, Haifa. Can't you sense it? Certainly I have. Something very large is looming..." he said, then reached to his waist, extracting a flat leather case. A message-pouch of his circle, there was a matching pouch in his circle's vault. A letter placed in one appeared in the other - though the enchantment only worked one way. Sorcery, of course, and something my people simply could not do. *"The message-pouch, of course, was only the confirmation. Their letter contained a brief synopsis of the last few weeks. The northern kingdoms have been attacked - well, more than attacked, destroyed. His cities have been sacked and burned, his armies broken and scattered, and King Faldan the Fifth himself has lost his young head. All over the course of about seven days' fighting."*

I gaped. "S-seven *days*?! But... But it would take *months* to lay siege to each of his cities, *years* to conquer his lands! What happened, master? Who attacks them?!"

"That, we do not know. We only know their armies now approach here. They will be here sometime tonight."

I nodded, calming myself as best I could. "And they want you to help fight them, of course."

"Of course. All the circles have been alerted by the king to prepare for battle. Ah, but there is more. Do you remember Eddas?"

I nodded. "Very well, master."

"Apparently the king's men have found someone who claims to be him. I've been asked to find out if this is true, as I knew him best when he was alive."

"And we go there, now?"

"No. We walk and chat, Haifa. And I dream of how things might have been, had the circle allowed you to begin guarding me perhaps five years earlier."

I smiled, shaking my head. "Master, if your circle calls, we must not dawdle."

"Mustn't we?" he replied, gazing at me with empty eye-sockets. *"You broke your idol. Why?"*

"Because..." I said, and sighed. "Because you were right, master. My god did not exist. We die, master. Slowly, century after century, our numbers dwindle. It angered me... And I broke it in my anger."

"And I, instead of thinking of the coming fight or what might happen, thought of you."

"Me, master?"

"Yes. I prayed for you, Haifa. Someday, despite your best care, this body will fall to dust. I prayed that at least your next assignment might be given a bit earlier, that you would at least have a chance to accomplish the dream you told me of... To bear a child."

I smiled. "You are too kind, master."

"Perhaps. But, when I looked upon the statue with these eyes, seeing it's astral emanations, I had a strange impression... An impression of indifference... Perhaps even amusement."

"Amusement, master? I don't understand."

"Neither did I. Yet, I have sensed such before, from the god of our circle. It is strange... I have sensed it some twenty years, now, ever since the day of Eddas' death. It is as though..." he said, then paused. "It is as though with his death, some decision was made, and now is done. Yes, your god was false. But mine no longer cared. I could sense not even the slightest indication that he cared for your fate... Or, even for mine. And I grew angry, myself. I care little for my fate, Haifa. A side-effect of feeling the UnLife that sustains this body, unfortunately..." he said, then shook his head. "No matter. Whether I survive or not matters little to me, anymore. I find I am more interested in learning, studying the subjects I had little chance to, while performing the duties of my former office in the circle. The history of your people, and the Fell War in general. It interested me for years - and after my death, I found I had plenty of time before me to study it..." he then suddenly chuckled. "Ah, I digress. I find my mind floats, often - another side-effect, I suppose. This body feels not like it used to, when I was alive... At times, it feels like a marionette, a puppet on strings, and I just see through it's eyes..." he said, his voice drifting off. A moment later, he nodded. "But yes, I prayed for you, Haifa, and your people. And I felt nothing but indifference from the idol. My god simply does not care what happens to you. This made me angry, and I smashed the idol," he finished, and chuckled. "It was actually quite interesting. I haven't felt true anger in years... Decades, really, since I died. Quite an interesting experience, for the few moments it lasted."

"You... You cast aside your god, master?" I asked, amazed.

"Yes. If he cares little for you, why should I follow him? At the very least, your tribe has served our circle and others well, and for many generations. You deserve far better than to simply die out."

"But... But what will you do now, master? Whom will you follow?"

"I've no idea. Quite a delicious feeling, really. Were I alive, I'd actually be quite intimidated looking forward to the future. But..." he said, and sighed again. "It is faint, Haifa. Faint and faded. Strong emotions... Just don't grip me as they did when I was alive. Sad, I suppose. There is one emotion I truly miss, and wish I could feel, now."

"Oh? What emotion is that, master?"

"Love, Haifa. Ah, yes. Before I died, I was in love with a wonderful woman. Yes, quite a dear. Her touch is gentle, her heart is pure... I met her a few months before I died. Quite a wonderful, charming woman."

"Ah, I see," I replied, my eyes on him, but the strands of my hair still watching around us as we walked. "So, we go to meet her before the battle, in case you do not survive?"

"No, of course not, I've hardly that much time. I am walking and chatting with her now, in case I do not survive."

I blinked, startled, eight strands of my hair instantly focusing on him, tongues flickering. "M-me?!"

"Naturally. And why not? You are eminently lovable, my dear. Sadly, after I died and became what I am, I discovered the UnLife energy that sustains this body leaves me with little emotion at all. I find I am saddled with an impassiveness and placidity that defies adequate description, Haifa. Emotion is, at best, muted... Or simply nonexistent. But, yes, before I died... I did love you, Haifa."

He fell silent as we walked, gazing at me hollowly, and I laid a hand atop his bony arm. "Oh, master... I... I love you, too. I'd hug you, but I think I'd hurt you."

"Ah..." he replied, lifting his head to gaze upwards at the stars. *"That was... Delicious. To know you love me, too... For the briefest moment, it pierced the blase' darkness of UnLife, and warmed my soul. And for the briefest moment... Ah, I felt my love for you again, just as when I was alive. Yes... Quite a lovely feeling..."* he said, and sighed, a hollow sound like wind through bones as his gaze fell to the street. *"Tragic that it faded so rapidly."*

I walked beside him in silence, the strands of my hair watching around us. They had to, my eyes were misted with tears. He *loved* me... Had things been different...

"Ah... You weep," he said, gazing at me. *"Had I lips, I would kiss the tears away. Now, sadly, it is just something I see, like noticing the rain. Perhaps, someday..."*

"Err... Someday, master?" I asked, wiping my eyes with my gloved fingers.

"Yes. *Should we win and drive the enemy off, of course. I've written a letter to the High Master,*" he said, patting the message-pouch at his waist. *"I have asked that a request be forwarded from me to the king. All I need is a condemned man or other doomed individual to be brought to my tomb. Then, I can destroy this body, and my soul would return to my animuary. Then, I will be able to possess their body from my animuary, and shape it into my own again."* He shrugged, flicking a hand dismissively. *"They die, of course, their soul destroyed. But, I would live again, Haifa. And then, perhaps..."* he said, then gazed at me. *"Of course, you should stay clear of my tomb if this body is destroyed in the coming battle, Haifa. Arising from one's animuary is much like a sleeping man trying to awaken. I cannot tell whose body I am attempting to steal."*

I nodded. "I know, master, it is why we are reassigned when that happens."

"Good - I'd rather not kill you trying to awaken and love you, Haifa. That would be immensely disappointing. Now, we go to the Black Tower to present this letter to the High Master. Thereafter, we shall speak with this odd individual the King's Men have found. And then, I suppose, gather with the other liches and masters of the circle to fight. You and the rest of the

yal'onca will likely be told to wait in the tower basement along with the apprentices, where it's reasonably safe."

"And after, master? What then?"

"I've really no idea. Had I breath, I would sing your name. Had I lips, I would kiss you. Had I a god, I would pray to them. But, lacking any of that, and finding my soul is as placid as a still pool, I suppose we will just have to do what we must do, and see what may come."

"Yes, master," I replied, smiling as we walked down the darkened streets.

The Owl - V.

"Aye, lad, it be fairly simple," Mungim replied to Corvid's question, his eyes never leaving the forest as their wagons traveled along beside the rubble of an ancient Hyperborean road. "The Black Powder which some do yet call 'Bang Dirt', it do burn fierce-like when lit by flame or spark. The burning do make much smoke and hot gas, and this do push the pellets down the barrel in a mere instant o' time, like a dart from a blow-tube be pushed out and beyond by one's breath. Powder in the pan be set alight by sparks from the flint against the frizzen, and when it do burn, the flame from which goes through the touch-hole to spark the charge in the barrel alight. It be an ancient thing, we did discover it ages ago, during our wars with the elves. It do have not the range of a good steel crossbow, not by half. But it do yet be more swift to yet load, and be not picky about what ye do shoot from it. We do use pellets of lead, but aught will yet do in a pinch - nails, rocks, aught that will yet fit down the bore. All one do need be powder, and for a traveling merchant, that do yet make it an ideal weapon," he said, and grinned. "Along with a good

axe, o'course."

Corvid smiled as he rode next to Mungim on the seat of the wagon. Though he missed the opportunity to chat with the priest and his attractive companion as they traveled, Mungim was at least as interesting - and, from what Father Patience had said, he was several centuries old. "Interesting... But how is the powder made, I wonder?"

Mungim grinned. "Ah, lad, that I cannot tell ye, for I do not know. It be a secret of our alchemists, and e'en were I one o' their number and did yet know, I could not tell ye - for I would yet be sworn to secrecy 'pon the matter entire." A moment later, Mungim paused, then pointed. "There be the turning, lad. As I did yet tell ye 'afore, do yet keep thy paws clear o' thy weapon, else ye'll have me fighting one o' me customers."

Corvid smiled. "Alright."

Mungim flicked the reins to the small team of dwarf-ponies that pulled his wagon, and slowly, they turned past a lightning-blasted tree and headed into the glooming shadows of the forest. The wait was not long, little more than a quarter of an hour of travel. Finally, Mungim drew his team to a stop in a small clearing. Corvid could see several hides stretched on simple wooden frames and stacks of cured hides standing beneath a nearby tree, but there was no one in sight. "Err... Was there supposed to be someone here?"

"Aye, lad. They do yet watch us, I do reckon. Ye be a stranger, and they will yet be wary of ye."

Corvid smiled. "I can't imagine anyone who lives here being afraid of me."

"Not afeared, lad. Wary. Those who do yet lack caution in Hyperborea do not live long."

Suddenly, a flash of movement caught Corvid's eye, and he looked to his right. From behind the trees, a large creature slithered out. Part woman, part titanic snake, from the waist up the creature had a long

torso and six arms, from the waist down they had the tail of a gigantic snake instead of legs. Her skin was a smooth gleaming snake-hide from her head to the tip of her tail, and Corvid guessed that she was at least fourteen cubits long. In her four lower hands, she bore single-edged one-handed swords, the squarish blades a cubit long and two palms wide with a simple semicircle for a hand-guard. Both tool and weapon, the short blades could both be used for cutting and chopping tasks as well as self-defense. In her two upper hands, she held a longbow at full draw, the arrow pointed at Corvid. Her hair was long and black, her face bore a glare of anger, and she hissed something in a language Corvid did not understand.

Mungim smiled disarmingly and spoke back at her, again in a language Corvid did not understand. Some words had half-familiar sounds, but that was all. After a few moments, the creature lowered her bow, hissing again. Mungim chuckled and replied, and the creature let out a sound remarkably like a woman's giggle.

"What did she say?" Corvid whispered.

"I did tell her that ye be a friend, and did explain that ye do travel with us to the tower of Eddas Ayar. She did then ask in jest if I did bring ye as an item to trade. I did laugh and tell her I did not, but should she in sooth desire ye, we could likely strike a bargain," Mungim replied, and winked. "It be merely jest, lad, she has no interest in ye - but be ye yet friendly, nonetheless."

Corvid nodded, then flashed what he hoped was his most charming grin at the creature. She slowly smiled back - this did not, however, improve her appearance one whit. Corvid managed to maintain his smile, despite seeing her teeth were sharp and predatory with long fangs, and the corners of her mouth that he had taken for a frowning scowl were actually folded flesh of some kind, perhaps to allow her jaw to open wide enough to *use* those fangs. "May I ask what she is?" he said, hoping his voice didn't betray his thoughts.

"She be a lamia, lad, one o' the snake-women of Hyperborea. They do yet live as long as elves, and they be the mortal enemy of ogres, trolls, and all others of the Unseelie Court. They have little liking for your kind, I be yet sorry to say, as humans be afeared o' their looks and do yet kill them on sight. On the bright side, howe'er, they do yet also loathe elves passing fiercely. They do yet say they once were yet betrayed long ago by the elves, and as we dwarves have yet little love for any of the dandelion-eaters ourselves, this do make the perfect opportunity for me family to yet trade with them," Mungim said, and winked. "I should tell ye that her name, in her tongue, do yet translate somewhat near "Sweet-Breath", and despite how she may appear to ye and me, for her kind, she be yet considered quite beautiful."

Corvid grinned. "Well, perhaps if she'd stop scowling, she might actually be somewhat... Err... Well... Perhaps she'd look less hostile, at least..."

Mungim chuckled. "She can't, lad. She does nowise scowl at us, howe'er. That be simply the way her face be made," he said, hopping down from the wagon and bowing low to the lamia, sweeping his feathered hat off his balding head.

The lamia slipped her arrow back into a slim quiver she wore at her hip, then inclined her head briefly, sheathing the four swords she had drawn back into a strange, six-way scabbard that was strapped to her back. Corvid slipped down from the wagon, seeing that Father Patience and the others were doing the same, and looked the lamia over as Mungim spoke with her.

It was easy to see that Mungim was right, her skull was humanoid, but differently shaped and vaguely reptilian. She had very large eyes that peered out from beneath sharply angled brows, the frontal bone of her skull being angled down to meet her nose rather than going straight across. As the lamia slithered closer, Corvid realized her black hair was more like a mane than human hair, growing not merely from her head but from down the back of her neck and between her topmost shoulders. And more, she had no visible ears that he could see, though since she spoke and replied to words, it was obvious she could hear. After what apparently was an exchange of courtesies and news, Mungim came back over to the wagon Corvid stood beside while his brothers trotted over to their wagons, and began to unload items. "Ummm... How did you ever learn her language?" Corvid asked the gray-bearded elder dwarf, amazed at the lamia's appearance.

"I did not, lad," Mungim replied, opening a small hatch under the seat and withdrawing a pipe and pouch. "She and all her people do yet speak the language of the ancient Hyperboreans, which be a tongue me family did keep alive among ourselves as belike a secret language o' traders and merchants, and today do yet slowly become a 'common tongue' of these lands once again. She be passing hard to ken, at times, as she do speak with the sounds of her people and her tongue be like that of a snake rather than that of a woman. Still, one can yet ken her words, an ye do listen with care. The snake-women be yet keen hunters and fearsome warriors, but until I did begin trading with them some ten years ago, they did yet have to content themselves with rude clubs, wooden spears and such-like. I do yet trade blades, steel arrow-heads and other things they do yet need to survive against the ogres, goblins, hobgoblins and trolls. In turn, they do trade hides and such that they gather, as well as the seeds o' wild herbs that do yet grow in parts of these lands too dangerous for any but them to yet travel to. The herb seeds and hides I do yet trade to the Witch-women of Iolo Mountain, who are the daughters and allies of Eddas Ayar. The seeds they do plant and grow, and it do yet save them the trouble of scouring the land for them. O' the hides, they do have but few goats and sheep, and they do yet appreciate the leather muchly."

Corvid grinned. "I see," he replied as Mungim's brothers spread a blanket atop the grass of the clearing, then began laying samples of their wares atop it. "Is there *that* much profit in seeds and hides, here?"

Mungim chuckled as he filled his pipe from the small pouch. "Nay, lad. There be yet some profit in herbal seeds, but precious little. Most o' seed that do have value do yet require great care and skill if one do intend to yet grow, harvest and then do yet concoct herbal philters from them, and only the Witch-women of Iolo Mountain be any good at the task. Nay, me brothers and I do profit in trading for the *bayallar* of the Giants and Eddas Ayar, and from the herbal concoctions of the Witch-women of Iolo Mountain do yet make. Bloodmoss, for ensample, we can yet make quite a tidy profit with. Still, howe'er, the true profit be in that we do yet build *friendships*," he replied, then pointed his pipe-stem at Sweet-Breath. "The lamias be close cousins and allies o' the gorgons, with whom they do share common heritage. The gorgons do yet have their acquaintances, who do yet have their acquaintances, and so on, and so on. O'er time, we will yet build a wider network o' trade and yet closer bonds betwixt the friendly races o' Hyperborea."

"Err... Her people are considered friendly, here?" Corvid asked, his eyes on the rather dangerous looking creature.

"Aye, lad - those that will yet talk before they do kill ye be yet considered friendly, in these lands," Mungim replied, and winked at Corvid before continuing. "Anywise, closer bonds betwixt the friendly races be yet a greater goal of Eddas Ayar and the Witch-women of Iolo Mountain - they do yet wish to do bond all the friendly races together o'er time, that they may yet more ready-like band together 'gainst the goblins, hobgoblins, trolls, ogres and others of the Unseelie court - and, mayhap, eventually to yet drive them from these lands, and mayhap to yet build a larger civilization again."

"I see... A very noble goal," Corvid replied, nodding as he gazed at the lamia, who was looking over the trade goods that Mungim had brought.

"Aye, lad, we do yet think so, as well," Mungim replied, putting the pouch back and extracting a small sliver of wood from a box beneath the seat. "I may not yet live long enough to see the end o' the matter, but me sons and me brother's sons may yet see it," Mungim said, and scratched the wooden sliver on the bottom of his boot.

A flame flared to life at the end of the tiny stick, and Corvid gaped as Mungim lit his pipe with it. "Is that a *match*?!" Corvid asked, pointing.

"Eh? Oh - aye, it be a match, lad," Mungim replied, and blew out the flame before dropping the match to the ground, then stepping on it carefully to make certain it was out. "A trifle, a thing of me people we do use to yet light small fires and such like. Lamias be quite enchanted with the smell o' me pipeweed, it be rum-steeped and sweetened with apple juice."

"No, I know what it is, it's just they're *incredibly* expensive in the Southlands - dwarven traders sell them in little tin jars... They have a screw top and a rough spot on the bottom to strike them against. But we only use them for lighting fires, only the *very* rich use them for anything else, they're just too expensive. A silver for a small tin jar of a hundred is typical. It's just surprising to see you light a *pipe* with one..."

"Hmmm..." Mungim replied, puffing on his pipe. "I should tell me nephew Bombur to yet take along a few hundred tins o' matches next time he do yet go to the Southlands, and do examine the competition. An a silver a tin be the rate in the Southlands, that be quite a tidy profit... Me son Kiri did yet consider a shop in Greenhaven, as well, for to better distribute the *byallar* we do trade for, here. An the market for matches be yet that solid, he and Bombur could yet take me nephew Gloin along - he did yet join the alchemist's guild, and he be yet ready to graduate to master ranking, now. The three of them might yet also consider a small operation to yet make matches in the Southlands. They could yet easy-like undercut the competition were they to yet make them locally. A bit of tin and a tin-press, a bit of pine bought local, a small fidget-cutter, an annual shipment of chemick... I could advance the lads ten or twenty gold to yet build the shop and hire a few dozen humans to yet distribute our wares, and they'd yet pay the loan back easy-like the first year at that rate. Hmmm..."

Corvid grinned. "If you're willing to invest in a ship and crew, I could distribute your matches to Vilandia - and perhaps beyond, depending on how many your son and nephews can make."

"Ye be a sailor, lad?"

"Yes - I know the routes between here and Vilandia and Palome very well, as well as the sea routes to all the major ports. For the last ten years, I've been hunting illegal slaver-ships for King Parial. I started out as a cabin-boy, and worked my way up to captain my own ship. It's actually quite profitable to hunt slavers, the bounty on them is very good and the king's law also gives us their ship as booty."

Mungim chuckled. "Then why be ye here, lad, and not on the high seas?"

Corvid smiled. "Well, for two reasons; first, I realized making my future by my blade might be profitable, but there was a chance that future could also be very short," he replied, and Mungim chuckled. "I'm thirty now, my friend, and though that may seem young to you, it's not young for us. It's time for me to consider a line of work a bit less risky."

"Aye, lad, ye be wise in that respect," Mungim said, winking. "What be the other reason?"

"Well, that's a long story..." Corvid said, then shook his head. "I won't bore you with it. The end of it is I had a dream, a dream of accompanying an old man and a young woman into the wilds of Hyperborea. I ignored it at first, but I started having the same dream every night, night after night. They say the gods speak to us sometimes in our dreams, if we'll only listen. Well, if that's true, then *some* god was likely *screaming* at me, my friend," Corvid said, chuckling as the sweet aroma of Mungim's pipeweed came to his nose. Corvid then looked to the lamia again. "Hmmm... You know, when she's not pointing a weapon at you, she's really not *that* bad to look at... Not attractive, perhaps, but certainly not like that ogre. I suppose their males must be similar?"

Mungim grinned, puffing on his pipe. "Nay, lad. They have no men-folk that I have ever seen or heard of. I know not how they yet have offspring, howe'er, and as it seems a question of a rather personal nature, I'll not ask." Mungim called to his brothers in his own language, then smiled at Corvid again. "Me brothers be ready - Sweet-Breath do like to see what she do trade for, and yet think awhile on what it may yet be worth to her. Do yet wait awhile, lad, while me brothers and I do finish our trades here."

Corvid nodded, stepping back to allow Mungim to speak with the lamia, then turned to Father Patience and his slave-girl, who were approaching. "I was just speaking with Mungim about these creatures... Lamias, he said they were called. It's interesting that they don't have any males. That makes me quite curious as to how they reproduce at all. I mean... Where did they come from, then?"

Father Patience smiled. "That is a rather long and complicated story, my son. Suffice it to say that they were ancient allies of the Hyperboreans of old, and their race began in the chaos of the Fell War, some twelve thousand years ago at the dawn of the Hyperborean civilization. Legend has it that they once were

human..." he replied, then shook his head. "But, as to their reproduction or if they even reproduce at all, my son, that I do not know. How they reproduce is a subject they do not discuss with outsiders."

Corvid smiled wryly. "I see I've *much* to learn about these lands."

Father Patience smiled. "If you wish, I can begin by giving you an outline of the History of Hyperborea. It will, at least, pass the time while we wait for our friend Mungim to finish his trades."

"You know the history of these lands well?" Corvid asked, sitting before Father Patience.

Father Patience nodded, his expression oddly somber. "Oh, that I do, my son. Very well, indeed."

Interlude II - The Raven.

The cell they had put me in was musty and dank, though this was not surprising. It was, like the other cells in the city gaol reserved for holding spellcasters, a good fifty cubits below the ground, circular, and inscribed with a permanent circle of protection around the edges of the floor. The mages of the city guard had assented me carefully, and not liked what they saw. As such, I was manacled both hand and foot in *mana*-suppressing chains, and wearing the usual mouth-block to prevent me from speaking incantations - a metal tube in my mouth, held in place by a broad leather strap around my head. None of it would hold me if I did not allow it, but for the moment, I allowed it. As nearly everything I wore had some kind of

enchantment upon it, they had simply stripped me bare, and left me chained to a ring set in the floor, held kneeling by the chains about my arms and legs. For a mundane, such treatment would be quite excessive and completely unnecessary - but, for a spellcaster, even keeping one behind bars was somewhat problematic. Unfortunately, being nude on the chill stone floor and held in this position for several hours was now beginning to grow quite painful.

With an effort of will, I forced the discomfort from my mind. Someone was coming - I could hear conversations, and the sound of enchanted keys in ensorcelled locks. As the voices drew nearer, my heart skipped a beat at the sound of one of the voices. *That* voice, I knew. I would never forget him. And it was the one person I had both dreamed of seeing, and yet vehemently hoped I would *not* see, here in the past.

Keys rattled in the cell door, and then it swung open with a creak of hinges. The guard gestured with his free hand. "There she is, High Master."

"No, *just* Master," the black-robed, hooded visitor replied, his voice a hollow echo from a tomb. "*Lagan is High Master of our Circle. I was called only because I can identify this individual the easiest and with the greatest certainty, not because I am High Master.*"

"Err... Yes, Master Frarim," the guard replied nervously. I suppressed a snort. Frarim often made the weak-willed afraid, and the guard who watched over me, though a trained sorcerer, would barely qualify as a journeyman in a battle circle.

"I'll need the muzzle removed to speak with her."

"Err... That can't be allowed, Master Frarim. For your personal safety, you understand - if she could speak, she could cast..."

"*My attendant is Sis'thlash-nal, no mere caregiver,*" Frarim replied, gazing at me with his hollow eye-sockets. "*My bodyguard can protect me, worry not,*" he said, gesturing to the second hooded figure standing silently to his left.

"Ah... Well... She could also escape, and... Well, it's the *law*, Master Frarim. I can't, I'd be punished."

"Alright. Stand outside the door, then, and lock it behind you. I take personal responsibility for anything that follows inside this cell while I am here. Should anything untoward happen to me or my attendant, you will be held blameless. But, my time is limited - stand outside the door, and lock it behind you. Now," Frarim replied, and gazed into the guard's eyes until the guard trembled and nodded.

"Y-yes, of course, thank you, Master Frarim."

Frarim turned to me, reaching up thin hands that were carefully wrapped in gilded cloth, and lowered his hood. Frarim had been my mentor and teacher since I first joined the Dyclonic Circle as an apprentice. He had changed little since I saw him last, that fateful day I shared a final cup of *byallar* with him, then went to my tomb to suffocate myself.

Of course, he had changed little because he'd died about twenty years before I had.

As old age had claimed him, rather than suicide, accident or violence, his spirit had not returned to his *animuary*, but instead drew upon the power of UnLife energy to animate his slowly fading body. He had, of course, become a liche - exactly as those who designed the Spell of Hidden Life that the Masters of our circle used had intended. A Master represented decades of training and accumulated knowledge and skill - losing them to accident, violence or simple age was an incalculable loss. I remembered the final cup of *byallar* I had shared with him, before I went off to my own tomb to suffocate myself. I did not tell him that was what I intended, but he knew it anyway. He had known I would not live without Dyarzi, and could not live with my failure to bring her back to me. Yet, he did not stop me. His bodyguard drank the cup for him, as he no longer even had lips or tongue, but the gesture was appreciated.

"Gaze upon that one, Haifa. Tell me what you see."

Frarim's bodyguard nodded, lowering the hood of her robe. The dozens of snakes that made up her

hair rose, turning their heads towards me, their tongues flicking in and out rapidly. The flickering light of the sconce outside the cell gleamed off the reptilian scales of her face as she looked me over. "A half-elf female of *Malani* extraction, Master. She has the scent of power about her." Slowly, Haifa opened her third eye, the eyelids in the center of her forehead parting to reveal the milk-white orb. She could, at a mere thought, use that eye as a weapon, and turn me to stone. Or *try*, at least - I doubted her power would overcome the knot of *mana*-energy that maintained this body as it was. "And yet, there is more, Master. On the astral, I see a vast raven before us... A greater being, of some kind... Flickering... Not a raven, but a man... And now, just the woman's aura," she said, and closed her third eye. "I do not understand, Master, but that is what I see."

"And it is similar to what I see," Frarim replied, gazing at me hollowly. "*Fascinating.*" Frarim looked around the cell, but it was bare. "*I would sit, Haifa,*" he said.

Haifa nodded, lowering herself to her hands and knees. The bones of a liche were still bone, and over time they dried and became delicate. In the Dyclonic Circle, we assigned a caregiver and bodyguard to our old masters who rose as liches, whose duty it was to carefully clean and protect the bones with wrappings, as well as to regularly tend to them with special oils so their owner would last as long as possible. I had met Haifa before, the last time I saw my master. As the trim of her robe announced, Haifa was a member of the *Sis'thlash-nal*, a tribe of gorgons the Dyclonic circle retained for these tasks. Though their *Talent* was virtually nonexistent and a gorgon could not master spells, the deadly gaze of their third eye and their incredibly keen vision more than compensated. A gorgon could easily sense even the slight body heat of a mouse with the twin nose-pits of each of their snake heads, thus even assassins concealed by spells of illusion or invisibility could not sneak up on them. And more, the *Sis'thlash-nal* were highly trained in hand-to-hand combat, both with blades and barehanded, and a single bite of their snake-hair was highly lethal.

Frarim carefully sat upon Haifa's back as she knelt on the floor, then looked me over, the light gleaming from his steel skull-cap. "*They told me the story you told those of the Algrassian circle. The King's Justiciar cannot see it as being true, it is simply too impossible for him to believe. Yet, they called me anyway, as the law demands the benefit of doubt be given you. I would use the Spell of Joining to have the truth of the matter from you, elf. But, I warn you that I live though the force of UnLife Energy, and my touch is... Somewhat unpleasant, to the living. Will you permit this?*"

I nodded mutely and closed my eyes, waiting.

Farim gestured, muttering an incantaion, then reached out to me, his carefully wrapped finger-tips brushing the hair of my head. "*My thoughts to your thoughts... My mind to your mind... Feel the barriers falling... Feel our minds touch...*"

A moment later, I could feel his mind brush mine, and I wept with joy. *'Master... Oh, how I have missed you, all these many years...'* I thought silently.

'Eddas,' Frarim thought in reply, and I felt his silent, mental smile. In the background of his touch, I could feel the UnLife energy that sustained him, held by his will and the power of the Spell of Hidden Life. Yet, I did not fear it, for I understood it - far better than any who had ever lived in my day. *'It has not been that long, to my experience... Yet, I sense you mean far more. Open your mind to me, Eddas. Tell me what has happened to you.'*

It took an hour, relating my story. I began with my awakening, sixteen centuries in our future, and told him the story of how I became the Raven of Yorindar. I told him what I had learned of the Invaders, and the coming Great War of Devastation. I told him everything, sparing him nothing, and ended with the events leading up to our meeting. I had told the masters of the Algrassian Circle the truth - every bit of it, including the fact of their ultimate destruction, and the destruction of our civilization and people. They had not believed me, of course. Instead, they had thought me some trick of the enemy, to crush their morale. And so, I was arrested as being a possible collaborator with the enemy. In my defense, the King's Justiciar had asked that a member of the Dyclonic Circle who could identify me be sent. And hence, Frarim was called.

Frarim gazed at me quietly, his silent mental voice echoing in my mind. *'Ah, Eddas... In my breathing days, your story would have filled me with anger and fear... Now, I feel little but resignation.'*

'I am sorry, Master, but it is true,' I thought in reply, and sighed. *'Your tomb is in what will be the Ninth Dead Zone, Master. Your tomb and your animuary will be destroyed. At least save yourself, Master!'*

'To what end, Eddas?' Frarim asked silently, gazing at me. *'You said that when you had seen the culmination of the first stages of Yorindar's plan, at the time the Great Wall was completed, you realized that even had you survived the war, you'd have gone mad puttering about as a liche for century upon century in the ruins of our civilization. Do you truly think that I am stronger?'* Frarim chuckled, an eerie sound in the silence of the cell. *'No, Eddas. You always were the most powerful of our circle, and I can sense that you are far stronger than you were when I knew you in our living days. You are here, in this cell, because you allowed yourself to be arrested, allowed yourself to be chained. You could, at a thought, shed these bonds and simply leave, slaying any who tried to stop you. You are the Tool of a God, Eddas Ayar, there are none here who could oppose you and live. I*

am merely myself, Eddas. Before I came here today, I once thought there was no battle-mage who could match me, living or undead. But, I now see that you dwarf me in power, as master to mere apprentice. You are a Great Mage, Eddas Ayar, my power and my will a mere shadow of yours. I could not survive in the ruins of our civilization, Eddas. I would go mad, in time.'

Tears flowed down my cheeks. 'Please, master... Do not allow yourself to be destroyed, I beg you. Move your tomb to someplace safe.'

'Have you seen it, Eddas? Have you seen it in the future, crushed and destroyed? For if you have, Paradox would prevent me from succeeding, no matter what I do.'

'No, master. According to the map I obtained from Gorlon-Mak, the map he stole from the circle's archives, your tomb is near the center of the Ninth Dead Zone. Nothing survived, there, and the ground was blasted to bedrock.'

Frarim nodded silently. 'A slip in the Gods' weaving of the fabric of the past, perhaps. If I moved my tomb without telling Lagan, I may survive...' Frarim then shrugged. 'Or, perhaps not. We are all called, Eddas, for the coming conflict. This body will be destroyed, almost certainly. There may not be time for me to move my tomb, even should I choose to do so.'

'Please, master... I beg you... You are... Like a second father, to me,' I wept silently.

Farim gazed at me silently, then finally nodded. 'I will consider it, Eddas. More important to me is to insure the survival of the Sis'thlash-nal. They have served us well for eight centuries, Eddas. Our people may be doomed, but every effort must be made to insure Haifa and her tribe survives. We owe them that much, at least.' Frarim then sighed, a hissing sound that chilled the bones. 'But what are we to do with you, Eddas? If I tell the king's justiciar that you are who you said you are and your story is true, then we cannot possibly win. No warrior can win a battle he believes he has already lost, and our people cannot survive should they believe they are already doomed. Yet, if I do nothing, the same result is assured. Paradox.'

I took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. This was something I had already considered, and I knew there was only one answer. 'Deny me, master. What happens to me thereafter is entirely in the

hands of the gods. Our people will rise again in the future, through my daughters. And, the people of the Southlands in the future are our distant descendants. The past is set, but the future that lies before our people is not a future of oblivion. Like a phoenix, we will rise again. Deny me, master. This is what must be, and I have known this since long before you arrived.'

'If you knew, then why did you bother to tell the Algrassian circle the truth?'

'It was...' I thought, then turned my head, unable to meet his gaze. 'It was in the nature of an experiment. I knew I would fail, but the proof of the theory is in the experiment. It is not enough to tell Sasha of Woe that the Arc of Time is immutable - our simple presence here casts doubt on all temporal theory. Only through rigorously attempted experiment can any theory be proven true or false. And, it was part of a lesson she must learn... Even should I die in the teaching, she must learn. She has things to do, in our future, as does her sister.'

Frarim chuckled hollowly. 'Ah, Eddas... You have not changed. The teacher, the experimenter... You have not changed. You are as I taught you, Eddas. And you make me proud. Remember that, Eddas, and remember it always. Whether I survive this war or not, it matters little. What matters is that you remember that you have grown in power far beyond myself, and I am very proud of you.'

And with that, Frarim lifted his fingertips from my forehead, then used his staff to rise to his feet. Haifa rose from the floor, holding out a hand to steady him, then reached out to pull the hood of his robe back into place as the snakes of her hair gripped her own hood in their mouths, and pulled it back into place. Frarim gazed at me in silence a moment longer, then turned and knocked on the door with his staff.

The guard unlocked the door and swung it open. "Well, Master Frarim? Is she who she said she is?"

"No. She is merely a simulacrum of an elf who visited our city earlier today, and forged a sword at Honor's Forge. Whether that elf survives or not, I do not know, but it is evident the enemy captured her after she left the city, and decided to create this simulacrum to trick us, and weaken our resolve to fight. The astral evidence is nothing - just a trick of the enemy's sorcery. Ignore it, and keep her chained. She is not Eddas Ayar," he said, then gazed at me a final time. "She is, rather, the Raven of Yorindar."

"You... You'll have to explain that to the King's Justiciar before you leave, Master Frarim," the guard said, shaking his head as he closed the door.

"Then let us go to him now, that I may be on my way," Farim replied. Slowly, the sounds of their voices and footsteps retreated, until they were gone.

The Ocean - Fifteen.

Vaddan had bought us dinner, and we had taken the food to the large room he had rented. The conversation at our little table in the room was muted, to say the least. Joy was furious - livid with anger. Marilith quietly conversed with Barag and Vaddan, trying to come up with some solution. I, however, merely endured Joy's furious gaze silently, trying to finish the dinner Vaddan had bought us.

"This is *your fault*, Sasha," Joy hissed.

"I know," I replied quietly, the weight of it bowing my head.

"What if they *kill him?! What then?*"

"I don't know, Joy. I'm sorry."

"Sorry," Joy replied, nearly spitting out the word. "He *told* you it was impossible, and that if he tried, something would stop him. He *told* you that he could even *die* trying. You didn't listen, you persisted, and now he just *might*! *Why, Sasha?! Why did you do it?!*"

"I did it for Vaddan!" I snapped, slapping down my fork. "I love him! I don't want him to die!"

Vaddan, who had been talking quietly with Barag and Marilith, paused, gazing at me with astonishment. "Wh-what?!"

I gulped nervously, but pressed on anyway. "I love you, Vaddan. So does Marilith. We both want you to live."

Vaddan looked at me, then at Marilith. I was still concealed by Marilith's illusion, and Marilith still was hidden by her spell that changed her physical form to that of a Hyperborean woman. Marilith smiled at Vaddan. "It's true, Vaddan. She and I both love you, and we want you to be our mate."

Barag grinned. "You lucky dog."

"So... It *wasn't* just a dream, after all..." Vaddan said, his eyes widening as he gazed at us.

"It seemed the best way to tell you, at the time," Marilith agreed with a nod.

"So, you three go off and live in happiness, while the one *I* love rots in prison, maybe is executed," Joy growled. "Oh, and have we mentioned that without him, you two are *stuck* here in the past with me? And

if you think your lives will be long and happy, think again. The Invaders are *coming*. Within a year, maybe less, all that you see here is *gone*," Joy growled, and rose to her feet.

"Joy, where are you going?" Marilith asked, reaching out to catch her arm.

"I am going to that gaol, then I am going to assume my full size and *kick the walls down until I find him!*"

"You'll *die*, Joy," Barag said, looking at her. "It would take at least four master battle-mages to simply smash their way in - perhaps more. The guards are numerous, and many are mages. The King's Justiciar himself is a battle-mage."

"Without Eddas, I'm *dead already*," Joy replied, pulling free of Marilith's grip.

"He isn't dead yet, Joy. I think he's waiting for something," Marilith said, then took Joy's arm again. "Please, Joy. Sit."

"How do you *know*?" Joy asked, eyeing Marilith suspiciously.

"Because you still look like a Hyperborean woman," Marilith replied, and smiled. "That spell may only take a small fraction of *his* will to maintain, but it *does* take will. That means that despite whatever anti-magic they may have applied to him, he is not affected. He was arrested because he *allowed* himself to be arrested. He remains there because he is waiting for something, I think."

"Waiting?" Joy asked, sitting again. "But what is he waiting *for*?"

"That, I do not know. Perhaps an *Event* of some kind. Perhaps not. He might simply be waiting for some kind of proof that Sasha and I have finally understood what he's been trying to teach us."

"And *have* you?" Joy asked, glowering at Marilith and me.

Marilith nodded. "I have, I think. A week ago, I'd never have thought to try to stop you until you were gone. Master Eddas has been trying to teach me that here, on this world, I am his *peer*. And, I need to think and act as such, if I and my sister are to survive."

"And what of you?" Joy asked, glowering at me.

I sighed. "I... I'm just not sure. I don't know what he was really trying to teach me..."

"Shall I *tell* you, then? Is there at *least* a chance you will *listen*?"

I bit back a sharp retort, then nodded. "Yes, please."

"Ordinary mortals get to *choose* their fate, Sasha. *We don't*. You decided you wanted to spend your life with Vaddan. But whether or not that happens is not your choice, or Vaddan's choice. That is in the hands of the gods. And the more you fight it, the more miserable you will be," Joy said, and suddenly sighed. "When my first husband... Well, when he finally passed... I asked Eddas if he would use his sorcery to bring him to life again. He refused. He had the power, yes. But he refused. And he was *right* to refuse. What would we have told my son? That he would have to wait another sixty or seventy years before he could rule? Would Eddas have to use his powers on him, to keep him young enough to do so? And what of the people? What would we have told the tens of thousands that would be clamoring at the gates of the castle, demanding *their* loved ones be brought back, *their* lives be extended, and..." Joy sighed again. "No. It was his time, it was his fate, his destiny. He fulfilled his destiny. It was his time to go, and pass the crown to our son. I wanted to die with him. But Eddas did not allow that to happen. He knew that I had another destiny, whether I liked it or not. And, out of the kindness of his heart, Eddas gave me my dream again - that of being a true giant-wife, and bearing my husbands children. Yet, even that... Even that was my destiny, he simply acted to fulfill it. Thus, when my second husband died, I vowed I would stay with Eddas, and be his companion forever. I owed him that much. Yet, even that was merely a further part of my destiny. As Eddas says, we are, one and all, pawns of prophecy. But we major pawns have little choice in our fate - often none at all. All we can do is try our best to fulfill what the gods wish us to do, and hope that the gods we follow will win their battles, that we can live in

happiness."

My eyes misted, and I sighed. "Joy, I-" I began, but was interrupted by a knock at the door. "I'll get it!" I yelped, glad for the opportunity to leave that table.

I knew what Joy was saying. It was the same thing that Barag had already said - he, Vaddan, and everyone else alive today would be dead in my time, no matter what happened. All my efforts had truly been in vain, and all I'd really done is get a gentle man and teacher in trouble, possibly risking his very life. I wiped my eyes with my fingers for a moment, then reached for the door...

...and nearly leapt out of my skin when I saw what was on the other side of it. A hideous creature with snakes for hair gazed at me, and I leapt back in alarm, my lance appearing in my grip at a thought. "Yeek!"

"Sasha, no!" Barag called, just as the lump on the creature's forehead split, revealing a third, milk-white eye. "It's alright!"

"I-I-I-I..." I stammered as Barag scrambled over beside me.

"Your pardon, madam, she's never seen one of your people before," Barag said, nodding as he pushed me behind himself.

The creature's third eye closed, and she nodded. "You will be pleased to learn we find you humans equally frightening, at times," she said, and grinned a fanged, wry grin.

Barag looked to me, smiling. "She's a gorgon, Sasha, and a *yal'onca*. That's... Err... A type of bodyguard that the battle-circles use to guard their elder mages who have... Err... Died and become liches. A liche's bones are often delicate, and they need protection and regular care for them to last. See her robe? That's the robe of a bodyguard, the trim shows she's of the *Sis'thlash-nal* tribe. They serve the Dyclonic Circle, and a few others. They're really very nice people. Err... So long as you're not pointing

weapons at them, I mean," he said, looking meaningfully at my lance.

"Ummm... Sorry, I didn't know," I said, sheepishly, leaning my lance against the nearby wall.

"That you did not know is curious..." she said, then shook her head, her snake-hair weaving to keep an eye on me. "But, no matter. Which of you is called Joy?"

Joy rose to her feet. "That would be me."

"My master orders me to bring you this," the gorgon said, holding out a box.

Joy nodded, stepping over to take the box from her, then opening the lid and glancing inside. After a moment, she gasped. "It's... It's all of his things! His gloves, his boots, his rings..."

"Yes," the gorgon said, stepping inside and closing the door. "My master was called to examine the prisoner and determine their true identity. Afterwards, he told the King's Justiciar that he wished to examine the prisoner's possessions, to perhaps gain insight as to the enemy's plans through sorcery. He told me the truth of the matter, later - and part of that is that he wished me to bring this to you. My master says that Eddas has the power to free himself at any time, but chooses not to. This is because he would have to blast his way free, and this would mean the death of innocents."

"The guards, yes," Joy replied, nodding.

"My master says to tell you that they plan to execute Eddas in the morning," the gorgon said, and Joy gasped as she continued, "but he thinks your best chance of freeing him will come before then. The Invaders march on this city, and they will be here a few hours before midnight. From what Eddas has told him, they will easily over-run the city's defenses. You can free him in the confusion, if you act quickly."

Joy nodded grimly. "Then that's what we shall do."

"Good," the gorgon replied, nodding. "I must go, now. My master has told the High Masters of the Algrassian and Latavian circles that in chatting with the prisoner, he has discovered a potential weakness in the enemy - but it will take all the *Sis'thlash-nal* to exploit it. He now tells the High Master of the Dyclonic circle the same, while I deliver this to you. Four dozen feeble, ancient skeletons now are tended by trembling apprentices, not us. Once my people have gathered, we shall flee the city with my master to parts unknown."

"Is there a weakness?" Joy asked.

"No. As the enemy is shielded head to toe in enchanted orichalchum, there is nothing we can do to stop their warriors - and our gaze has no effect on their golemic constructs, as they have no flesh to begin with. No, my master wishes to insure we survive, in payment for the service we have provided for centuries. He did not lie when he said he would study Eddas' belongings - he has looked at the map of our future lands, and chosen a spot he knows will survive the coming devastation. And, as we agree that survival is better than annihilation, we obey." The gorgon then reached up with her hands, flicking her hood in place over her mane of snake-hair. "I go. Farewell - and good luck," she said, then turned and opened the door, closing it again as she left.

"Gah," Vaddan growled. "It seems I'm to lose Champion and all our supplies - I cannot harness him to the wagon and drive out of the city if we're to rescue Eddas at the same time."

"You, Barag and my sister can manage it, Vaddan," Marilith said. "Hitch me to the wagon, and simply tie Champion's reins behind it."

"Err... How can you pull the wagon, my dear?" Vaddan asked, grinning wryly.

Marilith shifted to her humanoid-equine form, and tossed her mane. "You forget what I am, dear Vaddan," she said, then shifted back to her human disguise. "In my equine form, I can pull the wagon easily."

"Ah, but who's to drive it?"

"Joy can."

"No, I can't," Joy snapped. "I want to help rescue Eddas!"

Marilith looked to Joy. "It would be better for Barag to help, Joy. I cannot go - their mages would sense me easily, they will be *looking* for demons and similar threats. Barag may only be an apprentice, but he would have been a journeyman had the Invaders waited a month - and he requires no sorcery to look like a Hyperborean, nor does Vaddan."

"*Sasha* does, and you'll be letting *her* go!"

"Yes. Your greatest strength is assumed at the size of a giant, Joy. And a giant isn't going to fit inside that building. At human size, between the two of you, Sasha is the better fighter."

Joy glowered at me for a long moment in silence. Finally, she nodded. "I'd fight you to determine if that was true, but right or wrong one or both of us would be hurt, and that's not going to help Eddas."

"No, it won't," I agreed, trying to firm my gaze back at her. Joy was larger than me, and at human size she was as strong as an ogre, which put her at about twice the strength of a mermaid. Though I might be better trained than she, I could tell by her stance that she would not be an easy opponent - she was obviously trained to punch and grapple, and should she manage to grapple me, she could easily snap my bones in her grip.

Joy nodded. "Alright. I'll drive the wagon - though I suppose it will all be you, Marilith, I'll just be holding the reins."

"It will be hard enough holding a bit in my mouth without someone tugging on it, yes," Marilith agreed, making a *moue*'. "Once you and I are safely outside the city and away, I can hover my perception over Sasha, and guide her as I did before. You can guard me as I do."

Joy nodded. "Alright. Let's hurry, though. If the Invaders are to attack by midnight, that's only a few hours away."

"Indeed," I said, and picked up my lance. "Let's hurry."

The Owl - VI.

Mungim nodded, his eyes on the nearby trees as they followed the ruins of the ancient Hyperborean road. "Aye, lad. The giants do patrol here regular-like - their great feet do keep the road clear. It be too uneven for the wagons, howe'er, so we do follow alongside. The Witch-women do yet say that someday, when their numbers be greater, they do intend to travel the roads and repair the main by-ways with sorcery - a project they do say will yet take perhaps fifty years or so. They will yet be careful, howe'er, as it were the glory of their fine roads that did yet greatly contribute to the doom of the Hyperboreans of old."

"Oh? How so?" Corvid asked, sipping at a flask of water.

"The roads did yet make the travel easier for the Hyperboreans, yes. But it did also yet make the travel easier for the Invaders of old, much as the Hyperboreans themselves did use the roads in both peace and war. The goblins and their kin are yet a danger, here - and their other Unseelie allies, like that ogre ye did meet. Roads would yet make the travel easier for merchants such as meself - but, they would also yet make the travel easier for a goblin army."

Corvid looked at the nearby trees, but saw nothing. "How common are goblin attacks, in these parts?"

"Passing rare, lad, passing rare. It do yet happen, from time to time, yet it be passing rare, these days. The giants do hate the goblins and their kin e'en more than do we dwarves - and that do say much, lad. To a dwarf, a goblin be a mortal enemy who do yet vie with us for dominion o'er the underlands. To a giant, they and all their kin be like loathly little rats what do dig through the graves of their ancient friends, the Hyperboreans - and to them, that be a thing of disgust beyond measure or compare. When I did yet begin trading with the giants, some two centuries ago, now... Well, in those days, it were yet quite a danger to do ride these trails," he said, and patted the blunderbusses that were mounted into slots beside his seat. "Four good guns did I carry then as now - and often did I use all four, and me axe, besides. Goblin raiders were common, and passing fierce. Then, Dragonslayer did gain his name, and did begin to patrol these roads. He did make quite a difference in the goblin numbers hereabout - and, later, his son did the same."

"Dragonslayer? Who's that?"

"He were a giant, lad, and surely the bravest and best of their race. There once were an evil dragon hereabouts, it did eat anything that caught it's fancy - often giant children, and their women-folk. A mad creature, surely, but it were a red dragon, not black, and Eddas Ayar once did say that the reds were betimes prone to madness..." Mungim said, then shrugged. "Well, Dragonslayer did yet creep up upon the beast while it did gorge itself on it's last prey, then he did leap upon it, and did strangle the beast with his bare hands. He wore it's hide as armor thereafter, and as the tale did spread, the goblins did yet fear to come anywhere within fifty leagues of Dohbari village. He be dead now, o'course. Giants do not live as long as dwarves. Yet, we do yet remember him, as do they."

A distant roar split the air, and Corvid looked up. "What was *that*?!"

"The battle cry o' a giant, lad!" Mungim snapped, then turned his head and yelled something in his own language to his brothers in the wagons behind. A moment later, he flicked the reins of his dwarf-pony team, getting them up to a trot, then a gallop.

Moments later, we crested the hill before us. In the shallow valley below, a giant stood beside the ruined road, surrounded by dozens of much smaller enemies. Pale yellow of skin, they wore ringmail hauberks and simple helmets. Darting to and fro to avoid the smashing blows of the titanic club the giant swung, they fired arrows up at him, while some darted in from time to time to slash at his legs with swords. For his part, the giant was far more nimble on his feet than Corvid thought one his size would be. He shuffled his feet rapidly, now moving to force his enemies to move, now crushing one with a foot, and now swinging his club with deadly aim - he hit, and left a small crater and a smashed corpse behind. "Hobgoblin raiders!" Mungim shouted to Corvid. Corvid nodded, drawing his sword, then hanging on tight to the running board of the bouncing wagon with his free hand.

A moment later, Mungim yanked back on the reins, bringing the team and wagon to a skidding halt, then reached down and yanked hard on the brake to hold it in place. Shouting to his brothers, he snatched up a blunderbuss from beside him and fired at the nearest hobgoblin, thirty paces distant. The hobgoblin screamed and spun, pierced several times by lead shot, falling dead to the ground as one standing near him staggered, an arm shredded by pellets. Corvid leapt to the ground as several hobgoblins split off from the main group to charge this new threat - and, a moment later, Mungim's brothers opened fire from where they had stopped their wagons beside Mungim's.

Another volley, then a third, then a fourth - then Mungim and two of his brothers drew axes from below their seats, leaping down from their wagons to melee, while the third began to reload. Corvid took this as his signal, and charged the nearest blade-armed hobgoblin.

The hobgoblin was as tall as Corvid, and was a powerful, muscular creature. Armed with sword and shield, he was also a skilled opponent. Corvid parried a slash, then side-stepped as the hobgoblin tried to bash him with his spiked shield. A quick twist of his blade, then he lunged, his thrust impaling the creature through the heart, Corvid's enchanted blade piercing the ringmail armor between the rings and through the leather, slipping through the stout leather as though it was mere paper. Corvid leapt back, parrying a weakened counter, then his opponent collapsed, and Corvid turned to the next.

The next opponent was more wary, and more skilled. Blocking Corvid's blade with his shield, he countered swiftly with his sword at the same time, causing Corvid to have to make a frantic parry. The enemy renewed the attack, slashing again from behind the protection of his shield. Corvid parried and attempted a counter, but the hobgoblin's shield was there again, blocking it while his sword flickered out simultaneously, forcing Corvid to make another frantic parry. Corvid hopped back to give himself room,

and his opponent lunged suddenly and viciously, thrusting low. Corvid parried, flicked his blade in a circle to throw his opponent's blade into a bind, then flicked again, twisting the sword out of his enemy's hand to send it spinning to the ground a pace away. His opponent blinked a moment, startled, gaping at his empty right hand, and Corvid flicked his blade upwards towards the hobgoblin's face in a feint. When the hobgoblin raised his shield reflexively, Corvid suddenly slashed down, below the hobgoblin's hauberk and into his thigh, just above the knee. His opponent howled, his shield flying down far too late, and Corvid made a lighting slash across his neck, beheading him. Corvid grinned, his blood singing in his veins, and leapt to his next opponent.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Corvid could see Mungim and two of his brothers fighting the hobgoblins with their dwarven axes. A flat, twin-headed axe with a long thrusting spike, Corvid had joked with Mungim that the nearly circular span of steel reminded him of a shield on a stick. Yet, unlike the war-axe of a berserk, the battle axes Mungim and his brothers used were slim, flat steel, and this made them surprisingly light and fast. And, unlike Corvid who had never even seen a hobgoblin in his life, Mungim and his brothers had fought them many times before, and his people had fought them for millennia. There was no trick a hobgoblin knew with sword and shield that a well-trained dwarf was not aware of, and knew counters for. And Mungim and his brothers never would have survived travel in these lands if they were not skilled enough to defend themselves when attacked.

The melee quickly degenerated into chaos, the hobgoblins struggling with new and deadly opponents while still trying to avoid the smashing blows of the giant they had beleaguered only moments before - and now, with his enemies distracted, the giant's blows were more telling. Though Corvid knew it not, the giant was a young and skilled warrior trained in the Dohbari fighting style - the style founded by Dragonslayer ages ago, and a style that relied on footwork and calm, deadly accuracy. He, like most giants who patrolled the roads, also wore what was, to a giant, the sandals of a warrior; oak planks strapped together running right to left across the sole of his foot, making a flat surface the size of a huge door or gate. With broad thongs running across his foot, around his ankle and up his shin to hold it in place securely, it was (for a giant) a comfortable and durable shoe, and (more importantly) an integral part of his fighting style. The giant shifted his feet, then stomped. His stomps were not the bone-jarring stomps of a human, which would in truth have shattered his own leg bones, but were rather more of a deliberate and sudden, crushing step. To Corvid's eye, it seemed the giant had only shifted from foot to foot, as he hardly lifted his feet at all - but beneath his foot, a hobgoblin screamed briefly before being crushed to paste. The hobgoblins had nearly overcome the giant with numbers, and the fight had been a very close thing before Corvid and his friends arrived. Now, however, the tide of battle had clearly turned. Corvid traded feints and parries with a hobgoblin for a moment - then, like a sudden stroke of lightning, the giant's club fell upon Corvid's enemy, smashing him utterly, his blood splashing Corvid's trousers. Corvid jumped back, startled, then looked up at the giant, who winked at him despite a dozen arrows in his face, looking like tiny, feathered stick-pins. Corvid laughed, then turned to attack another enemy.

Corvid grinned broadly, the experience of years of training and over a hundred boarding actions on the high seas driving his blade. Swords and axes clashed with the sound of steel on steel, interspersed with

the pounding smashes of the giant's tremendous club, the occasional hiss of an arrow, and the sharp report of a blunderbuss. Corvid moved quickly from opponent to opponent, relying on his speed and nimbleness. The enemy had numbers, but Corvid knew numbers could be overcome with speed and ferocity - and Corvid was a tiger with a blade.

Corvid did not know it, for he considered himself as mundane as a stone and had no real knowledge of sorcery, but the *Talent* manifested itself in more than one way. In most, it manifested as the ability to do sorcery - though without testing and training, of course, the individual would not even know they had the ability. In some creatures, it manifested in innate powers. A gorgon's deadly gaze, the swift regenerative powers of a troll or lamia, the might of a unicorn's horn. Even some otherwise ordinary animals bore the *Talent* on Corvid's world - ravens, cats, owls, wolves and many dogs could, to varying degrees, see into the astral plane, sensing things that ordinary humans could not. And, more importantly, many otherwise completely mundane creatures had a *Talent* that manifested as a "sixth sense" for danger. In Corvid's case, he had always had a nose for danger - he could smell it in the air, at times, and at other times he could simply feel it as the prickle of the small hairs at the nape of his neck rising. In a fight, he simply *felt* where he needed to be to survive - and, more importantly, how he needed to move to slay his enemies before they slew him. It was, to a mage of his world, a very minor manifestation of the *Talent*, and of little import. But, Corvid's *Talent* may have been weak in regards to sorcery, but in regards to sensing danger, sensing the ebb and flow of battle, and feeling what he needed to do when he needed to do it... Corvid's *Talent* was, in this regard, very sharp, and very strong. Corvid's bloodied blade gleamed in the sunlight as he darted to his next opponent. Blades clashed for several moments, strike, parry, then riposte, and suddenly his opponent fell beneath his blade, and Corvid was moving on to the next, a whirlwind of fighting steel.

Movement on the horizon caught Corvid's eye as he dropped another opponent. It was another wagon, moving swiftly towards the battle. "Someone else is coming!" Corvid shouted, leaping upon his next opponent. Whether anyone understood him over the din of melee, he did not know. An arrow plucked at his sleeve, followed by the report of a blunderbuss - the archer spun and fell, mortally wounded.

Suddenly, a crash of thunder split the air, and a tremendous flash caused Corvid to stagger back, spots before his eyes. The opponent he'd been fighting, however, fared far worse - he was nearly cut in half by a blast of sorcerous lightning. The hobgoblin nearest him raised his sword to smite Corvid while he was dazzled... But then the hobgoblin stopped, gaping and looking around, as though he could no longer see Corvid at all. Corvid did not question his good fortune - he lunged, hacking off his opponent's head, then turned to find the next enemy, blinking to clear his vision.

But, there was no one else. All the hobgoblins lay still, or gasping their last. Corvid blinked, the spots in his vision still fading, when suddenly a tiny female perhaps only two hands high appeared before him, hovering with dragon-fly wings. Her hair was a brilliant blue, her ears were sharply pointed, and she wore

a little strip of gray fur artfully wrapped about her body, but little else. "Are you alright?" she asked.

"Err... Yes, I... Who are you? Better yet, *what* are you?"

"I'm Kiriin, I'm a pixie - and a friend. I covered you with a spell of invisibility a minute ago, though you probably didn't notice. Well, you're standing, you're talking - you're alright. Mungim's not," she replied, and buzzed away.

Corvid turned to look where she'd flown, and saw that the dwarves and Father Patience were gathered about someone on the ground, and a blonde-haired stranger knelt beside them. Corvid trotted over, and saw that Mungim lay on the ground, his axe beside him, an arrow piercing his chest. He still breathed, but he was gasping, and very pale. The blonde-haired man lifted his head to look at Father Patience, and Corvid gaped in amazement as the man's hood fell back, revealing his pointed ears. Corvid had *heard* of elves, of course, but never seen one.

"Deep, but not immediately fatal," the elf said in the tongue of the Southlands. "You're dressed as a Mendicant of Yorindar - are you?"

Father Patience nodded. "Yes, friend, I am."

"See what you can do for LongStep, please - that's the giant, over there. I'll join you as soon as I've finished with Mungim."

Mungim gasped for several moments, then glowered at the elf. "Ye would not dare..."

"Heal you?" the elf replied, and grinned. "Oh, yes, *I would*, old friend. That's something I know you'd *never* live down among your people," he replied, and the pixie laughed. The elf then looked to Mungim's brothers. "If you've needle and thread, boil a needle and a few yards of thread, then help the priest - he can't possibly have the strength to just heal LongStep completely, he'll need some stitching done to close the wounds. Never fear for your brother, I'll tend to him. He'll be alright."

Flori nodded. "I'll start the fire, Balar can yet fetch the water while Gungim do yet open our supply of healing unguents," he replied, then looked to Gungim and Balar, speaking quickly. The brothers nodded, then each trotted off to the wagons.

"Have you bloodmoss?!" the elf called after them.

"Aye, Taliad, that we do, six tins!" Gungim shouted back.

"Fetch one tin for your brother and the rest to the priest - LongStep has so many cuts you'll need to use it to seal some of them up before the bleeding becomes too much for him!"

"Aye!" Gungim shouted back.

"Ye do cost me a fortune, Taliad," Mungim grumbled, still gasping.

"What, with the bloodmoss?" Taliad replied, and rolled his eyes as he drew a knife from his boot. "Oh, *tell* me that the old cliché isn't true that a dwarf will choose his gold over his life!" Taliad replied as he carefully slit Mungim's shirt open.

"That do yet depend on how *much* gold, elf," Mungim replied, and grinned weakly as Taliad chuckled.

"If it were a *thousand* gold, or even *ten thousand*, Mungim, I would spend it to save your life without a moment's hesitation. You cannot be permitted to die quite yet," Taliad replied, examining the arrow-wound.

"Ye... Ye do care *that* much for me?"

"Not hardly, you hairy oaf. But *Eddas* cares for you. And should you die, that would pain him deeply. So, much as it pains me to heal my business rival, it appears I'll have to," Taliad said, and winked.

Mungim grinned. "Ye dandelion-eatin' bastard..."

"I *really* don't know where you hairy runts get that particular insult. We don't eat dandelions, the leaves taste abominable and the juice stains your teeth. Now, we *Sylvani* make a lovely wine with the roots, however..." Taliad said, and began gesturing over Mungim's wound, slowly withdrawing the arrow with sorcery.

"Come on!" Kiriin, the little pixie called, waving at Corvid, then pointing to where Father Patience was examining the sitting giant. "That priest is going to need extra hands to work with LongStep, he's huge. Just holding his hide together to seal the cuts with stitches and bloodmoss will take at least four hands. Come!"

Corvid nodded, following the little buzzing creature, hoping that his new friend Mungim would be alright.

"Joy and I are well clear of the city, Sister," Marilith said, her silent voice echoing in my mind as it had in times past. "If you can get to Master Eddas, I can come and take you all out at once."

I nodded, looking to Barag and Vaddan in the darkness of the alley. "Marilith says they're clear of the city. If we can get to Eddas, she can come and take us all away."

Barag nodded, his eyes on the city gaol a half block away. In the distance, to the north, the sounds of battle could be heard. Marilith had cast her vision to the north side of the city, and told us that dozens of the machines of the Invaders and thousands of their warriors battled to enter the city. And, it would not be long before they breached the gates. "Tell her to keep going, we'll need as much distance as she can get for safety."

"I hear him, Sister, but I cannot run and watch you at the same time - I'll trip and break a leg. I am far enough, for now."

"She's far enough, for now. Let's do this."

Barag gestured, incanting quietly, and the clothing of both he and Vaddan shimmered, changing into what looked to be armor and uniform surcoats, helmets appearing over their heads. Just an apprentice's spell, he had told us earlier, a minor illusion called a Glamour and not likely to fool anyone for long - but it only had to fool them for a few heartbeats. "We're ready."

Vaddan nodded. "Wish us luck," he replied, and darted out of the alley, running towards the gaol, Barag close behind.

"Luck!" I called after them, and crossed my fingers.

Vaddan and Barag raced to the oaken door of the gaol, and once there, Vaddan battered on it with the pommel of his sword. "Ho, warder! Ho!"

A barred hatch opened in the door, and a face peered out. "What is it?"

"The Invaders are breaching the gates! All able warriors are needed to help repel them! Hurry!"

"We can't leave, the King's Justiciar has already taken most of the men to help defend the city! We have to stay here and defend the gaol!"

"What matters the gaol if the *city* is taken?! Come on!"

"We *can't*, don't you understand?!"

A distant *boom* echoed down the street, the force of it strong enough to shake the ground. In the distance, I could hear the sounds of screaming.

Barag suddenly looked to the guard peering through the hatch. "To hell with this - I'm getting my family and fleeing for our lives. The city is lost!" Barag then turned, dashing away from the door and back to me in the alley. A moment later, Vaddan followed.

I watched the gaol as Vaddan and Barag hid again in the shadows of the alley, their clothes returning to normal as Barag let his spell drop. "Do you think it will work?"

Vaddan shrugged. "That depends on them. Some will stay, no matter what. Others will try to save their families. Some will simply flee to save their own lives. But some will stay, no matter what, and maintain their honor by fulfilling their duty to the last. We are Hyperboreans, Sasha. It's simply who we are."

"So I've learned," I replied, and smiled at him.

"The door is opening," Barag said, pointing.

I looked, and saw it was true. The front door to the gaol was wide open, and at least two dozen men in armor were streaming out - some heading north, to the battle, while others simply ran in all directions. "Now! Before those inside close it!" Vaddan called, and ran.

Barag and I followed close behind. Dashing inside, we saw at least twenty more men, shouting at each other. Some saw us and drew swords. "Keys?!" Vaddan shouted. "Where are the keys! The city is lost, we must release the prisoners or the Invaders will simply kill them!"

"Who *cares* if they die, they're criminals!" one of the guards shouted.

Vaddan glanced at the rank insignia on the guard's tunic. "Lieutenant, some are only in here for *minor* crimes! Are you willing to sentence a man to death just for petty *theft?!?*" Vaddan snapped back.

The lieutenant looked at him for a moment, then shook his head. "No." Turning to the others, he pointed to the door. "The rest of you, go - get your families, and try to flee. Perhaps we'll regroup later, I don't know. But go." He then looked to us, and nodded. "You three, come with me," he said, snatching up a set of keys and trotting away down a nearby hall. We followed, and he stopped by a box attached to the wall. Opening it with his keys, he reached inside, tossing each of us a set of keys. "They're numbered, each matches a cell-block. Open all of them."

Minutes passed as we quickly darted from cell to cell, opening the doors. Some of the prisoners immediately ran. Others milled about, shouting, trying to find out what was happening - though, as the sounds of battle drew nearer, they decided flight was a wiser choice. Soon, we'd opened all of the cells - but none held Eddas Ayar in them. "*Sister, where is he?*"

"Deep below, Sister," Marilith replied. "There is a door, near you. The lock is enchanted, it needs an enchanted key to open... The Lieutenant has the key, I can see it."

"Give me your keys, I need to check below," I said, holding out my hand.

The lieutenant's eyes narrowed. "There are none below not sentenced to death."

"Forgive me, but I don't have time to argue with you," I replied, and turned, snapping a kick at his chin and sending him sprawling. Vaddan darted forward, snatching up the keys with his free hand, then tossing them to me. The lieutenant slowly rose, blood streaming from a split lip, and drew his sword.

"Go, Sasha. I'll keep him occupied for a moment," Vaddan said, assuming a ready stance with his sword.

"But-!"

"Sasha, come on!" Barag said, grabbing my hand and tugging me over to the door.

I nodded - the plan had to be followed, or Eddas would be lost. "Which is it?" I yelped, looking at the keys.

"I don't know," Barag replied, studying them for a moment.

"The brass key, Sasha. It's enchanted," Marilith replied, her gaze still on us.

"This one," I said, stuffing it into the lock and twisting viciously, trying to ignore the sound of clashing blades. The door swung open, revealing torch-lit stairs. I darted down the stairs, key in hand, my heart thudding with fear for Vaddan.

"Sasha, Joy and I are going to have to move, the enemy has surrounded the city and they're getting very near us!"

"Go, Marilith, we'll be alright for the moment," I replied, glancing to Barag. "Marilith says she has to move, the enemy has the city surrounded and they're getting close. She can't watch us while she's moving, she might trip and break a leg - so we're on our own for a bit."

"Let's hurry, then, so we can get back to Vaddan quickly," Barag replied.

Another door blocked us at the bottom of the stair, but it opened with the same key. Behind it was a hallway, with several cell doors. I ran down the hallway until I saw a flash of pale skin. I turned, and paused, startled.

There, nude, gagged and chained kneeling, was Eddas Ayar.

Much as I had tried to see Eddas in my mind as being a man, it was impossible, looking at him now. Instead, I saw a little half-elf woman, wrapped in a ridiculous amount of chain, nude, small and helpless. Her hair hung loose and disheveled, but her eyes shone bright and strong. As I watched, she simply shrugged, and the chains fell from her limbs. She stretched for a moment, then reached behind her and removed the strange muzzle they'd put on her. Stretching her jaw for a heartbeat, she then looked at me. "If you're here, I assume you've gotten past the guards. I hope you didn't kill any of them - none of them deserved to die."

"Vaddan... He's fighting one of them, now!" I yelped. Barag simply stared silently, either stunned by how easily Eddas escaped the chains, or simply enchanted by her beauty.

"We can't have that," Eddas replied, walking to the door. She gestured, and the lock clicked - the door swung open as she breezed through it, heading swiftly for the stairs. "Come along, you two," Eddas called.

"If you could get out so easily, why didn't you do so earlier?!" I yelped.

"I couldn't, Sasha," Eddas replied, trotting up the stairs. "I ended up there because I made literally every effort to do precisely what *you* asked me to do. I tried to change the past, by warning my people of exactly what would happen to them, and trying to get them to act to change the future. The result was I ended up in that cell, as you saw me. I told you before, Sasha - the past is set. And those chains and that muzzle I wore are the same I found in these ruins eighty years ago, in that very spot. And there *were* no bones in here and *no* ghosts, so *none* of the guards could die. If I had tried to escape, *some* of them I'd have to have killed to do it, no matter *how* careful I was. The King's Justiciar is a battle-mage himself *and* he believed me to be a tool of the Invaders, he'd have *never* let me go without a fight. But, there were no bones, here, and no ghosts. That meant no matter how hard I would have tried to escape, I'd have failed, and likely been killed, myself, because none of the guards died here. I have proven the original theory I told you, Sasha. The past is set, and cannot be changed. I had to wait for you to come free me," she said, turning at the top of the stairs towards the sound of swordplay.

Vaddan and the lieutenant exchanged quick strikes and parries, their blades gleaming in the light. Both were panting, sweaty, and looked determined. Eddas gestured, and suddenly Vaddan was snatched up and away by an invisible force, placed safely behind us. Vaddan staggered, and fell upon his rump. The lieutenant blinked, gaping at Eddas, and she gestured again, twisting his sword out of his grip and flicking it aside. "Run, little man. I give you your life."

The lieutenant panted for several moments, then spat. "Someday, bitch, you and the Invaders will pay for this," he snapped, then ran, darting towards the hallway, and beyond.

"Oh, that I'm certain of," Eddas muttered after him, then looked to us. "Sasha, where are Marilith and Joy?"

"Outside the city. Marilith was going to come get us once we had you, but... Well, the Invaders have the city surrounded, and they were getting too close. She and Joy have had to move, and Marilith can't

watch me and watch where she's running at the same time."

Eddas looked behind her, and saw that both Barag and Vaddan were gaping at her openly. "Lovely," she muttered, then looked to me. "We can't stay here, that guard will go looking for help. Sasha, tell your sister to stop when it seems safe, then come to you to fetch us. I can't use my spell of returning, because in *this* time period, this body hasn't been where she is - and I don't even *know* where she is to begin with, or where she'll end up when she stops. As for us, let's go," Eddas said, and strode towards the hall leading out, her head held high and her ebon hair streaming behind her.

Barag, Vaddan and I caught up with Eddas as she strode down the darkened street heading south, away from the sounds of the approaching battle. I noticed both Vaddan and Barag seemed enraptured by the sight of Eddas' swaying buttocks as she walked - but, I supposed I couldn't blame them much. I spoke to Marilith in a quick whisper, then looked to Eddas. "Err... Marilith says she thinks she can be with us in a few minutes, if we can find a safe place to hide for a bit..."

"There is no safe place," Eddas replied, still walking before us. "The Invaders went from building to building and killed everyone who did not escape before the battle began. Wilanda-city is central to Hyperborea, and they did not intend to capture it, they intended to destroy it, to break our will to resist, and to reduce our ability to fight by cutting off the most central point for all our roads." Eddas glanced over her shoulder, then pointed briefly. "Can't you see the glow on the northern horizon, lighting up the night sky? They lit the fields, and before the dawn, they'll light the city. Wilanda-city was utterly razed. The men and children they captured were simply executed where they were caught. Women, however, their soldiers occasionally amused themselves raping for a bit before they killed them. I don't know how many escaped. Not many, perhaps only fifteen or twenty thousand of the quarter million who had lived in this city before. The rest were simply murdered - soldiers, citizens and all. It's after midnight, now, and they're already inside the city, working on smashing the towers of the battle circles. By noon, there will be nothing left of this city but smoldering rubble. *That* is what I told the masters of the Algrassian circle, *and* the King's Justiciar. *That* is what they could not believe. They simply could not accept that our destruction would be so easy, and yet so total. There *is* no safe place, Sasha. By dawn, this entire city will be ablaze."

"Then where... Where are we *going*?" I yelped.

"Here," Eddas replied, pointing. "One of the last buildings to fall, by my estimation. We'll wait in the alley, here," Eddas explained, and strode into the shadowed alley. When we had followed, she turned to gaze at us, her arms crossed beneath her breasts. "Shortly, the king's men will come riding down the street, shouting an advisory for those still in the city to try to flee. But it will be hopeless - many will be crushed in the panic to escape, and those that make it to the southern gate will find the Invaders there,

waiting for them. I have studied this disaster for over a century, speaking with the dead, examining the ruins. We'll be safe here, for a bit. But not for long."

"Erm..." Barag began, he and Vaddan still gaping at Eddas. "Did you... Ah... Wish to cast an illusion, or something?"

Eddas gazed coolly at Barag. "This body cannot be concealed by illusion, you'd see through it easily. There is no point."

"We... Ah... Should have brought something. A blanket, perhaps," Barag said, finally managing to tear his eyes from Eddas.

"Or her-" Vaddan said, interrupting himself, then tearing his eyes from Eddas. "I mean, his robe," Vaddan agreed, turning his head.

"You have my robe?" Eddas asked.

"We have all your things," I replied, nodding. "A gorgon brought them."

"We... Ah... Were in a bit of a hurry, we just didn't think of it, Master Eddas," Barag said, his back to Eddas and his face showing deep embarrassment. "I'm really terribly sorry."

"I am already shamed beyond measure, apprentice, it no longer matters. I suppose this is how a eunuch must feel when he's seen naked, and the shame of the stump of his scrotum is obvious."

Vaddan shook his head, his gaze still turned from Eddas. "I don't suppose it helps to say that you hardly look like that?"

"No, Vaddan. I know what this body looks like, and what kind of reaction it draws from men. Before I came into my full powers, I was once tied up and gagged so I could not cast, then gang-raped by forty-eight men for three days, day and night, until I nearly died of thirst from it. I know *precisely* what this body looks like."

I gasped, stunned, and Vaddan and Barag visibly blanched. "They didn't... I mean, they didn't hurt you in the gaol?" I asked.

"No, Sasha. Rape is illegal in Hyperborea, and if a guard of the King's Justiciar committed it against a prisoner, they would be publicly beheaded. They took my clothes only because they were enchanted, and it is safer to confiscate enchanted items to study them later than risk that they have a hidden enchantment that might allow the prisoner to escape."

"Gods," Vaddan replied, his voice choking, and he sheathed his sword. Reaching up, he pulled his tunic off, then held it out behind him. "Take it. I've another on the wagon. Several. Take it. Gods... I can't believe I stared at you. If you killed me, I'd be glad."

"I..." Barag said, his own voice choked, "I'd give you my own robe, but I've nothing beneath, and nothing else. I lost everything when Tholonir City fell, I've just been cleaning it with a spell every day. I feel the same, I am shamed to think I stared, and if you slew me slowly and painfully, I would thank you, Master Eddas."

"I can give you two something better than death," Eddas replied, slipping on Vaddan's tunic. She then flicked her hair out from beneath the tunic, and looked them over. "*Forglamma*, Vaddan. *Forglamma*, Barag. It never happened, and we shall never speak of it again from this moment onwards. Turn, you two, I am covered."

Vaddan and Barag turned, and both bowed deeply. Any other time, I'd have greatly appreciated the sight of Vaddan's bare, muscular chest, but at this moment, my attention was on Eddas. Vaddan's tunic draped down to the middle of her thighs, she was so small. And yet, I knew in my heart that the man beneath that garment of flesh was much, much larger than that.

Eddas began to roll up the sleeves of the tunic, turning an icy-cold gaze at me. "As for you, Sasha... It would be well for you to remember: As a Pawn of the Gods and a female, losing and being captured by the enemies of your god often means something far, far worse than simple death. You have yet to experience true horror, Sasha of Woe. With luck, you will learn, and you never will."

I bowed my head, shivering. "Yes, Master Eddas."

A sudden puff of brimstone-scented smoke, then Marilith stood beside me in her humanoid equine form. "*I think I've found a spot where we'll be safe for a bit. Come, all of you - join hands and I'll take you there,*" she said, holding out her hands. We joined hands, and Marilith looked at me meaningfully. She had been listening, and she had heard. Perhaps, with her help, I wouldn't have nightmares over what I had learned.

Marilith saw that we were all holding hands, then nodded. The world blurred, and we were gone.

The Snake - Four.

Frarim shook his head. "*It's impossible now, Haifa. The city is surrounded.*"

I shook my head. My master was a gentle, wonderful man - but, he was also dead, a liche. The thought of his own destruction did not bring fear, he could not feel fear. He could barely feel any emotion at all. He wanted to save me and my people out of honor and respect for us. And, perhaps, out of love for myself. But trying to appeal to emotions he did not have was ultimately futile. "We will make it, Master," I replied as we went down the stairs. Moments later, we stood near the bottom of the stair in main room of the basement of the tower, high enough to overlook the entire room. The apprentices chatted with the *Sis'thslash-nal* that were there - they did not understand the danger. And there was little time to explain. I lifted my head, and hissed loudly as we stood on the stair.

The apprentices fell silent, and my tribe gazed at me.

"It is over, our bond is severed," I called in our language. "I have been told the future, a gift of the gods. This city is doomed. All will be destroyed, all the men lost, dead. We must escape."

My tribe stared at me, shock in their eyes, their hair undulating. *"Over?! The men doomed to die?! What of us?!"* one hissed. The apprentices gazed on in confusion, not understanding our words.

"We serve this one, now," I replied, nodding to Frarim. "I shall explain as we go. The rest of us are already outside. For now, we must gather what we can and flee quickly, before the city is lost and we all die. Those of you who helped with tomb-building, gather tools - they shall be needed. The rest of you, we shall need to bring food, water, weapons, tools... Supplies to survive in the wilderness. And there is no time, we must move now to protect this one. By dawn, he will be all we have left to us, and any who remain in this city will be dead. Open the doors to the supply rooms, here, kick them open if they are locked! Gather food, skins for water, rope, tools for tomb-building. Flint and tinderboxes, if there are any here. Blankets and sheets, if you can find them. Look for empty boxes or chests to carry it all in. And hurry! There is no time left!"

The *Sis'thslash-nal* bowed their heads, bringing their vambraces together with a *clack*. "Yes, chieftess," they replied, and as one, they arose.

Frarim watched as the *Sis'thslash-nal* began opening the supply-rooms and darting within. *"If Lagan only knew..."*

"Master, as it seems likely they will have little use for any of it come the dawn, it seemed appropriate to gather it for ourselves."

Frarim chuckled as the apprentices gaped, watching the *Sis'thlash-nal* loot their supply rooms. "What are you all *doing?!'*" one of them yelped.

"We act under the orders of Master Frarim, apprentice," I replied, gazing at him and opening my third eye. "Do you oppose my master?"

The apprentice blanched. "Err... No, no, of course not!"

I looked around. "And the rest of you! Do any of you wish to oppose my master?!"

After a chorus of negatives, I closed my third eye. "Good. Now sit there quietly, we're quite busy."

Frarim simply chuckled.

A low *BOOM* echoed from outside, and dust drifted down from the rafters, above. "*There is no more time! I see a sedan-chair, there - Hassta, Vesta, grab it, we'll carry him in it once we get outside! The rest of you, take what you have, wrap it up in whatever is near, and come!*" I hissed in my language, then turned to my master, speaking calmly. "Master, those two there are Hassta and Vesta, they'll be carrying you once we're outside."

"*Oh, I can walk, Haifa, don't worry.*"

"Master, please, we will have to travel rather quickly, and I wouldn't want you to trip. Please ride the sedan-chair once we get outside?"

Frarim shrugged. *"As you wish."*

I smiled. "Thank you, master. Unfortunately, I can't wait for you to walk outside again, so..." I said, and scooped him up into my arms. He was very light, as he was little more than bones and cloth. I dashed up the stairs, kicking the door open again, then ran through the first floor, heading to the door.

After brushing past the journeymen guarding the door, I looked around the street. The sounds of battle were close. *"Move, move, move!"* I shouted to my people, streaming out the door to join the others.

"Where do we go?" one nearby asked. *"Is there a plan?"*

"Master Frarim has a plan, don't worry," I replied.

"I have a plan?" Frarim asked, chuckling.

"Yes, master, and it's absolutely brilliant," I replied as Hassta and Vesta trotted up, holding the sedan-chair. I carefully slipped my master into the chair. "Please hold on tight to the arms, master, we'll be traveling rather quickly."

"Of course," Frarim replied, nodding and placing his staff across his lap. *"It would help, however, if I knew where we were going."*

"To the ornithopter dock, five streets over," I replied, then turned to the others. *"Let's move, follow me!"* I replied, and began to run.

Running five blocks for a *yal'onca* is, of course, nothing. We train to defend our masters from any danger, and we keep ourselves in peak physical condition. Running five blocks with one's arms full of as much supplies as one can carry, however, was hardly nothing. When we got to the large open-air enclosure of the airship dock, all were winded except me. The guards had gone - and so, apparently, had the majority of the ornithopters that were usually inside. I swore, thinking rapidly. *"Rest, rest, catch your breath!"*

"What are you attempting to accomplish, Haifa?" Frarim asked, gazing at me as Hassta and Vasta put down the sedan-chair.

"Master, it would take too long to explain," I replied, looking through the iron gate. The sounds of battle were close... Too close. "There - there's one, in the reserved section. Master, can you open this gate? The guards are gone, but the gate is locked."

Frarim shrugged. *"Stand back a bit, Haifa,"* he replied. I did so, and he muttered a short incantation, then flicked out his hand.

A stroke of lighting from his fingertips struck the gate, blasting it open, the right side handing loosely while the left went flying.

I nodded as the left gate clanged and bounced off the cobblestones, coming to rest a dozen paces inside the compound. "Thank you, master," I replied, scooping him up out of the sedan-chair. *"Leave the chair, it's served it's purpose,"* I hissed in my language. *"Everyone, grab what you've got, then follow me!"*

I ran inside, running over to the reserved section. Only a few ornithopters remained, and I knew little of them. "Master, you know of airships. Which would be the fastest?"

"Oh, that would be that one, there, in the third slip. That's Lagan's, it's easily the fastest. Incidentally, he pays a hefty sum for that berth."

I nodded. *"This is the one - everyone aboard!"* I hissed, running up the boarding stairs and onto the ornithopter.

"Haifa, you cannot mean to steal this ship, it belongs to the High Master of the Dyclonic Circle!" Frarim said as I placed him down gently beside the controls at the stern.

"No, master, of course not. I intend to borrow it. Since it seems clear Lagan will have little use for it in the morning and we have need of it now, I'm certain Lagan wouldn't object," I replied, looking over the controls. "Incidentally, master, how does this work?"

Frarim chuckled. *"The ship's pilot sits there. The lever to that side controls altitude, the other controls pitch and roll. This is a racing quadrep, however - it will never fly with this much weight, it only has four wings and is intended for speed, not cargo capacity. Look - there's only one passenger seat, Haifa. This is not a cargo vessel."*

"Hurry!" I hissed to the others as they scrambled to find places for themselves and our cargo. It would be a tight fit. "With respect, master, let's hope you're wrong. Might I ask you to sit in the passenger seat, and possibly shield this ship should we get it airborne?"

Frarim chuckled, taking a seat. *"If you wish."*

I envied him his calm, dead or not. *"Alright,"* I hissed, sitting quickly in the pilot's seat. *"I'd ask you all to pray, but our god is worthless, so just cross your fingers!"* I then reached for the left lever and pulled it back...

...but nothing happened.

"You have to unfold the wings, Haifa," Frarim said, pointing to a small lever.

I nodded, pulling the lever. The four wings of the ornithopter unfolded like a bird. Made of wood like the ship itself, they were much like a bird's wings, down to having individual, socketed wooden feathers. When they had unfolded, I pulled back on the first lever. The wings began to flap slowly. "Come on..."

"It will never work, Haifa," Frarim said, shaking his head.

I pulled back on the lever, and the wings flapped faster. Still, the ornithopter did not rise.

I hissed, screaming in my language as I pulled back on the lever with all my strength. *"If any god or goddess is listening and gives a damn about fifty halflings and my master, we would appreciate some help! If not, then to hell with you all!"*

A brief flash of movement out of the corner of my eye - I snapped my head to my right, my third eye opening to smite any enemy...

...but there was no enemy. It was an owl, sitting on the ship beside us, gazing at me. Yet, as I gazed at it, I realized that I could *only* see it with my third eye. The strands of my hair saw nothing, tasted nothing of bird in the air, and sensed no heat from it. My own eyes saw only the boat it was sitting on, even though my vision at night was very keen. No, I could only see it with my third eye - on the astral.

"Anything... Anything you want... Just help us... Help me..." I hissed, straining at the lever.

'Drop a bit of weight, Haifa...' a silent voice replied, then the owl vanished.

I released the lever, and the wings slowed, then stopped. There was nothing I could think of we could throw away, and it would take too long to inventory our supplies to see what we could afford to lose. I thought furiously, trying to come up with a solution.

"What do we do now, chieftess?" someone nearby called.

I looked to Frarim, then back to my people. *"Strip! Toss everything you're wearing off the ship, keep only your weapons and your boots, we might need to fight and we might need to walk, but he's dead, we've no need of modesty! We need to make the ship lighter, there's fifty of us, including vambraces and greaves that should be a good quarter ton! Strip, toss everything you're wearing overboard except your knives and your boots!"* I hissed, and began to do exactly that.

Frarim watched silently as we quickly stripped to our skins, leaving only our knives and our boots. *"Interesting notion,"* he said, then chuckled. *"I wish I were alive, I might actually appreciate what I'm looking at quite a bit more."*

Several of the nearer of my tribe-mates giggled at his words. I finished strapping my knives to my forearms again, then sat in the chair once more. *"That's a problem we'll address later if we survive, master,"* I replied, yanking back on the first lever again.

The wings flapped again, slowly at first, then faster and faster, until they were beating rapidly. Slowly, painfully slowly, the boat began to lift.

"Very good, Haifa," Frarim replied, summoning his staff to his grip. He muttered briefly, gesturing, then relaxed in his chair, watching me. *"A sphere of deflection. There are more specific spheres that would be far stronger, but as I don't know what they'll use against us, that will do, for the moment. Oh - and when you pitch or roll the ship, push gently on the lever, Haifa."*

'Owl, I hope you're still with me and can teach me to fly in the next few heartbeats,' I thought, and gently pushed the lever forward.

To the surprise of everyone aboard (except likely Frarim), the ship tilted forward, and began to move forward a few moments later. It moved slowly at first, then faster, and faster.

"Pull back to stop, Haifa, walls and buildings have the right-of-way," Frarim said, pointing at the compound wall before us.

I pulled back suddenly, and the ship pitched back quickly, causing everyone except Frarim and I to scream - I didn't scream because I was busy, and Frarim didn't scream because he was too busy chuckling and he was dead anyway. We weren't high enough to fly over the compound wall yet - we were barely four cubits in the air. Yet, we were slowly rising. I could hear the sounds of battle getting closer. Would it be fast enough?

I experimented with the lever, discovering that to turn, one had to be moving forward or back, and while moving, roll the ship to the side. It was apparent from how quickly the ship turned it was very sensitive and responsive, and I had to be careful - several had already nearly fallen out as I moved the ship around the compound, learning the controls. And, of course, there was much screaming each time the ship tilted wildly - which was almost every time.

"I think we're high enough, master. Here we go!"

To the accompaniment of more screaming, I sent the ornithopter shooting over the compound wall, and down the street. The wings beat swiftly, our altitude slowly increasing. Higher and higher - soon, we would be higher than most of the buildings.

A sudden flare of light, and more screams as flames licked around the ship, held away from us by an invisible sphere.

"Oh, very nearly broke through with that," Frarim said calmly, raising his staff in both hands. *"Try to dodge them a bit, Haifa, if we take two hits like that at once or just one solid hit, the shield will fail despite my will. Oh - and you'll need to be at least twice this height to clear the city walls."*

I nodded, trying to slip the ship over some nearby buildings. Blasts of flame and sprays of arrows from the Invader's war-machines lanced around the ship, grazing Frarim's shield many times as I struggled to keep us moving, keep us aloft, and keep us from being hit. The ship swooped and flew above the

buildings, around and around the city for many wild and screaming moments of barely-controlled flight.

"That should be high enough, Haifa," Frarim said calmly, still holding his staff before himself in both hands. I envied him his calm, again.

Slowly, I made my way towards the city wall in a wild, zig-zagging course that was half intent, half near-crash. Several more war-machines fired at us as we neared the wall, flames and showers of arrows reflecting from the shield. It only became worse as we flew over the wall, and for a moment, Frarim trembled, concentrating as he struggled to maintain the shield. Then, moments later, we were past them, and quickly flying out of their range.

Frarim lowered his hands, resting his staff in his lap, then nodded. *"Oh, very good, Haifa. Now, turn us a bit more to the left. That's called 'port', incidentally. A bit more... A bit more..."* he called, to more screaming as I tilted the ship. *"There we are. Now keep going in this direction for a bit. As slow as we're going this heavily loaded, you'll have to keep it up until dawn, most likely. Oh, and ease off on the left stick, Haifa, we're high enough."*

"A gorgon was *not* meant to fly," I muttered, my heart pounding with fear. Strange that I would feel fear now, rather than before. I supposed that before, I was just too busy to be afraid.

We zoomed on through the sky, the trees and farmlands whipping by below us. The ornithopter gradually picked up speed until it seemed to be going as fast as it could. I guessed we were going at about the speed of a galloping horse, or perhaps a bit less. The spring night was warm, but moving through the air it felt much cooler, and I shivered. Fur would have been nice, but my ancestors got the skin of a snake, instead. I reached down with my hair, the strands stretching as long as they could. I arranged the strands over my chest and breasts, trying to block the cool breeze of our passage through the air. A few of the longer strands from the nape of my neck reached down to my belly, but they were too few to help much so I curled them around my neck as a muffler. I shivered again, and hoped we wouldn't have to fly too far.

Frarim leaned towards me, reaching out with his fingers, the carefully wrapped fingertips lightly stroking my forearm. *"Since we're alive, Haifa, it seems that at least one gorgon was meant to fly. Well, you and your clan are alive, at least,"* he replied, and chuckled again as he sat back in his chair.

I grinned wildly, my fangs gleaming in the moonlight. "I had a bit of help, master. There was an owl."

"An owl? Interesting... You'll have to tell me about it after we've landed. Assuming we can manage to land without becoming an integral part of the landscape."

"We will, master. We will. We'll be alright. I can feel it in my heart. We have a god, now, you and I."

"Oh?" he said, then chuckled again. *"My word... I find I'm actually looking forward to that explanation, my dear. I'm actually quite fascinated, and almost excited. What a tremendous feeling,"* he replied, and laughed.

The Owl - VII.

Hours later, all sat gathered around a small bonfire that Mungim's brothers had built in the early evening hours. Flori had un-hitched one of the dwarven ponies and ridden ahead to alert the giants to the situation, and now the het-man of LongStep's tribe, Keeneye, muttered quiet incantations to complete the healing of LongStep's wounds. Keeneye, it was explained to Corvid, was apparently the grandson of Joy and the great-great grandson of the fabled Dragonslayer. For a giant, Keeneye was considered to be an incredibly competent wizard - though how he compared to a human wizard, Corvid did not know. They said that Joy's strange history and heritage had contributed to his sorcerous powers, and those powers were easily seen in his son, as well. The larger slashes in LongStep's legs had been sealed by simple stitching to bring the edges of the wounds together long enough for the flesh to be knitted with sorcery

and bloodmoss. The smaller arrow wounds were minor, most had clotted of their own accord long before Father Patience and Taliad had gotten around to working on them. Eventually, they had been closed with just blood-moss and the pressure of a pair of hands holding the skin together - fortunately, none of the arrows had hit LongStep in the eyes. Yet, healing the tremendously broad slashes to his legs was only barely within the reach of the "little people", as the giants called their small friends. For Keeneye, however, it was merely a matter of patience and time before he had the last of the wounds completely healed.

Keeneye finally leaned back, rumbling something in the language of the giants, and LongStep nodded, flexing his legs. Keeneye then looked down to the smaller people gathered around the fire, and rumbled a question.

Mungim, who sat by the fire in a new shirt, shook his head and replied, doffing his hat briefly. At Corvid's question, Mungim grinned. "He do ask if I be in need of further healing. I did say that it were not necessary. I'll yet have a new scar to show me wife come the time I be home again, but I be fit as a fiddle elsewhere."

Taliad, who was returning from his wagon with a jug under his arm, grinned wryly. "Yes, thanks to me," he said, sitting down again.

"Oh, ye'll yet hold that o'er my head for the rest o' me life, now, won't ye?" Mungim remarked sourly.

"Naturally, old friend," Taliad replied, and Kirin giggled.

LongStep rose to his feet, holding out his hand for Keeneye. In a few moments, the two giants stood. LongStep hefted his club, made from the bole of a tree, then he and Keeneye exchanged thanks and farewells with the small group before them, Keeneye heading back up the road towards Dohbari village, while LongStep continued on in the opposite direction, resuming his patrol.

Taliad sat again, reaching for the jug he'd brought from his wagon and pulling the cork. "Now, I've something I want you to try, old friend. Just a *sip*, mind you, and don't swallow, just spit it out after," Taliad said, lifting the jug and pouring a cup of a strange amber liquid.

"Aye? What be it?"

"I'll tell you after - for now, just take a sip for the taste, and spit it out. I've some water for you to rinse your mouth with, after. Eddas told me once that his studies revealed it won't hurt you, but don't swallow, just spit it out."

"It do smell like brandy..." Mungim said, sniffing cautiously at the cup.

"Just a sip, then spit it out, don't swallow," Taliad cautioned again, pouring a second cup of water.

Mungim sipped with visible trepidation, then his eyes lit up. He nearly swallowed it for a moment, then remembered and spat out the liquid. "It be brandy!"

"Water - rinse, then spit," Taliad said, holding out a second cup.

"Aye, an' ye do say," Mungim replied as his brothers looked on in curiosity. When he had done so, he looked at Taliad again. "What be that?"

"Dandelion wine," Taliad said, and smiled, sipping at the cup. "Eddas said won't hurt you, and I thought you'd at least like a taste."

Mungim's brothers burst out laughing as Mungim sputtered with anger. But, after a moment, Mungim paused, and grinned. "Aye, the jest be on me, fair and square. An' ye do understand, someday I'll yet return the favor."

"Naturally," Taliad replied, smiling. "But how was the flavor?"

Mungim paused, then wagged his hand. "Were it not made of dandelions, I would yet say it be good brandy, I must admit. There be a faint after-taste, now, howe'er, e'en after a rinse o' water... A faint taste, yet much like bile. I do not think I could yet finish a full cup of it, e'en if I did wish. It do yet remind me o' liver, a bit... And liver be poison, to us."

"I thought as much - we'll have to tell Eddas what we've discovered, when we see him next. Eddas told me a dwarf could drink a full jug and not get ill, but you'd never finish more than a cup, because to you, it tastes of poison - in specific, it tastes like liver, to you. But, he doesn't know *why* it tastes of liver to you, even though it's not dangerous, and he doesn't know *why* even the smallest slice of liver kills you. Fish liver, deer liver, what have you - it doesn't matter, it's all death to you, but not to us. With us, yes, there are certain animals you don't want to eat their livers - particularly animals that live in the far north. With other animals, like fish, it takes *ridiculous* amounts to be dangerous to us. And Eddas doesn't know why that is so, either. It's part of his latest research he's asked me to look into. I've three jugs of dandelion wine I brought for him, he wanted to study it's alchemical composition."

"Hmmm... But why do it yet interest him? What be it he do yet wish to know?"

"That, my friend, I simply don't know. He said it had something to do with a dwarven condition you call *Melti-Ubo*. He said he thinks it can be cured, if he could understand why dandelion-wine tastes of poison to you and not to an elf or human."

Flori, Gungim, and Balar gasped, their eyes wide, and Mungim sputtered for a moment. "Impossible! Ye do not even know what ye do say!"

Taliad grinned. "No, I don't - no elf does. That's entirely the problem, you see?" he replied, and Kiriin giggled.

"What is *Melti-Ubo*?" Corvid asked. "Some kind of disease?"

Father Patience smiled, patting Corvid's knee. "No, my son. It is the condition of three male births to one female birth - *Melti-Ubo* means "three-to-one" in their language. It is a sad reality of their people, one they have dealt with since long before the first human ever drew breath."

"Aaaaah," Taliad said, nodding. "I suppose curing that would be quite important."

"Ye've no idea! The end of the *akmaran*, the end of a great many sad things!" Mungim said, shaking his head. "Ye elves do yet see us all as being greedy and money-grubbing. But a young dwarf *must* be that way to yet afford a proper bride-price, else he'll yet spend his life alone!"

Taliad smiled again. "I know, my friend. I admit, I was once like all of my people, and saw you as being greedy and money-grubbing. But I admit this to my *shame*, my friend. Eddas explained the truth to me years ago, when he told me about your little bride, Lumri. He even conjured a simple illusion to show me what she looked like, and I must admit that she was painfully cute, to my eyes. Yet, when I saw you in that light, and realized what you had to go through to catch your darling little Lumri, both winning her heart *and* earning the bride-price required by your custom, it dawned on me that you were not the grubby little beast I once thought you were, but were actually a far better man than I had ever thought," Taliad said, and set his cup down beside his feet. "I say this to you now, Mungim Oakenshield, before your brothers and before these witnesses," Taliad said, nodding to Father Patience, his slave-girl and Corvid. "In all the times I have dealt with you, I have learned that you are a being of honor, civility, and politeness; a being that can see and appreciate beauty, and a being with a song in your heart. This, to an elf, is all that matters."

Mungim's brothers applauded, and Mungim grinned wryly. "For a dandelion-eater, ye be not too bad thyself, Taliad."

Kiriin giggled again, and Taliad smiled as he picked up his cup. "I should tell you, though, that Eddas said he can't really know if his theories are right until he is able to examine a *female* of your people."

Mungim shook his head. "That may yet be difficult - he'll yet have to make a trip to Iron City, at the least. Our women-folk do yet have *Latrao* - the fear o' open spaces. They'll not travel above ground, and so cannot do visit his tower."

Taliad nodded. "Whereas our females do not - nor do even those of the Dark Elves, or humans, or the goblin-kin, any other race I've ever heard of. And your females give birth to three males to every one female, which no other race does, and your people find dandelions poison, while no other race does. Interesting coincidence, is it not?"

"But mere coincidence..." Mungim replied, then paused. "Unless ye do say they be part and parcel o' the same problem?"

"I don't say that, no. I admit I am a *Sylvani*, a wood-elf, and I am utterly and completely ignorant of your physiology, my friend. If you told me that baby dwarves have wings and flutter around the caverns like bats, I'd have to believe you," Taliad replied with a wink, and Mungim and his brothers chuckled. "Still, *Eddas* has suggested it, however," Taliad replied, and gestured to his wagon. "I've brought nine books covering the body of our alchemical research, and I'll tell you now, friend, I think this year he intended to ask you for the same. And, knowing what I know of why he wants them, I think I'll not be *too* hard on him when it comes to bartering for them. Is it all mere coincidence, or is it something more? The answer interests me - though likely not as much as you." Taliad smiled, reaching out a finger to stroke Kiriin's cheek. "I once began trading here just because it seemed the best way to obtain the interesting things I seek. Yet, now, I find I return because I am interested in seeing what *Eddas* Ayar and his daughters are building here. Something wonderful is happening here, Mungim. And I'd like to see as much of it as I can, as it grows."

Mungim lifted his mug, touching it to Taliad's cup. "On that, elf, we do yet agree."

Corvid shook his head, smiling. "You people are amazing, sometimes. You chat about building a civilization and changing things for an entire race of people... As though it was merely a casual subject of conversation."

Mungim nodded. "Aye, lad. An' ye do get to meet *Eddas* Ayar, ye will yet find that the conversation often do turn to matters of e'en far greater import."

Taliad nodded. "Indeed, Mungim. Like the time he told me that the results of his last adventure had repaired the broken weather patterns for our world. Before, the deserts were expanding endlessly - in time, most of this continent would have been desert. Now, he has repaired the problem, and the long cycle of weather that only the dragons knew of before has resumed. In forty or fifty thousand years, an ice-age will come - the whole of these lands will be sheeted in snow and ice for millennia before the

warm climes return."

Kiriin nodded. "My darling Taliad won't be here to remind me, then, he won't live that long. So I promised him I'd wear a coat."

Taliad grinned, Corvid snorted, and Mungim and his brothers burst out laughing. Soon, the night was filled with the laughter of friends.

The Ocean - Seventeen.

The enemy sent out patrols before dawn to scour the nearby lands for those who had escaped, and we needed to move again. But, after pulling the wagon at a dead run, Marilith was very tired. Worse, she could not simply resume the harness and pull the wagon again - and this we had known before she began. To escape the harness, she had simply shifted to her humanoid equine form, and let it fall from her body before coming to get us. But, once done, it would take just as long to harness her to the wagon in her equine form as it would to harness Champion. Eddas, however, simply gestured, and the limp harness that lay on the ground lifted into the air, and stayed there. "An invisible steed," she said, in brief explanation - and after Vaddan had checked to see that Champion's reins were still securely tied to the back of the wagon and we were all aboard the wagon again, Eddas called out to the invisible steed, and we were quickly on our way, following the roads south.

By the time the sun hung high in the sky at noon, we had stopped in a small village Eddas said would be safe, for awhile. We were not alone, however - at least two hundred refugees from the city were also there, and the village was in an uproar as both the survivor's stories spread, and the pall of black smoke

from the burning city and surrounding farmlands darkened the northern horizon. Many wanted to flee into the wilderness - but, the wilderness of Hyperborea was not a kind and gentle place. The Hyperboreans had pushed back the vicious creatures and evil races in their conquest of their lands and in the building of their civilization, but they were still there, beyond their borders. To the south, the lands were full of goblins, ogres, trolls and other vicious things. To the east, things were better - that was the lands of the giants, and they patrolled their lands carefully to keep them clear of evil creatures. Yet, though they were allies of the Hyperboreans, this was still not a solution. The Invaders had already cut off the east to prevent escape, and were in the process of pushing the Hyperboreans west, into the sea. Many thousands were fleeing across the sea in boats, hoping to find some sort of refuge. Eddas told us quietly that most would die, lacking enough food or water to find a new land. Those that did not would eventually find their way to Vilandia, and join their people - which was why the people of Vilandia in the future would have a faint touch of the Hyperborean's language in their tongue, and resemble the Hyperboreans a bit. But, other than a desperate, suicidal attempt to cross the sea, there simply was no place for the Hyperboreans to escape to. And, the war-machines of the Invaders were simply too powerful for the Hyperboreans to resist. The entirety of the Great War of Devastation had, Eddas said, taken less than a year - though time was difficult to tell. As Eddas put it, "The dead are notoriously loose with time." Even so... A year for a grand and powerful civilization, the likes of which I had never before even dreamed of, to be utterly and completely destroyed. I could not help myself - I wept.

This was the true result of war between the gods. People dying - and dying by the millions. I loved Vaddan, and I found I had grown to care for his people, as well. And his people were doomed.

The merchants of the village had long since fled, and the people in the village were hungry. So, after Eddas had entered her hidden sanctuary and dressed again, she walked around the village, summoning food and drink for all. Joy, Vaddan, Barag and I ate, then rested by the wagon on the outskirts of the village, Champion nibbling at the grass quietly beside us. Eddas, however, did not rest, but continued on feeding the hungry, healing the hurt...

"You've lost your feathers, Old Man."

I opened my eyes, awakened by Joy's voice. Marilith, Vaddan and I were dozing in the shade of the wagon. Barag had been with us when we lay down, but now was gone - I supposed to relieve himself, or perhaps to get some food. I lifted my head a bit, looking around. I saw that Joy and Eddas stood near the wagon, holding hands and talking quietly.

"Likely the King's Justiciar threw them away. They were only raven feathers, Joy."

"Were they? I think they were more than that, to you."

"Perhaps, but they're gone, now, so it doesn't matter."

"You should rest, Old Man."

"I'll be alright, Joy," Eddas replied, gazing up at her.

"When was the last time you slept?"

"Oh, I napped a bit while I waited in chains, that will do."

"You really shouldn't try to lie to me, Old Man," Joy said softly. "I've known you far too long for it to work."

Eddas sighed. "I don't *want* to sleep, Joy. If I do, I'll sleep the sleep of the exhausted, and Yorindar will likely try to speak to me. And I fear what he'll tell me to do. Deeply."

"You'll have to sleep sometime, Old Man. If you don't, you'll eventually collapse anyway."

"I know. That's what frightens me."

"Do you love me, Old Man?" Joy asked quietly.

"Deeply, and beyond measure."

"Then come - I've some of the food you summoned earlier. Let's sit, and eat. You haven't eaten in over a day to my knowledge, either. Then rest in my lap, Old Man. If you don't sleep, at least rest."

"Joy, I-"

"For me, Old Man. Do it for me."

"Alright, Joy," Eddas replied, and sighed.

Joy then pulled Eddas down to the ground, and into her lap. Reaching beside her, she lifted a small bowl of gruel Eddas had conjured, and held the spoon to Eddas' mouth. I watched silently as Joy and Eddas shared a small meal, Joy giving one spoonful to her mate, then one to herself. When it was gone, Joy set the bowl and spoon aside, then wrapped her arms around Eddas, holding her close and rocking silently. Eddas laid her head on Joy's shoulder, and closed her eyes. After a moment, I heard Joy's voice, softly humming a gentle melody.

My eyes misted with tears as I watched them. *Here* was love, true love. Yes, I loved Vaddan - he was a dear man, and a good man. But what I felt for him did not compare to what I saw before my eyes. And in the end, I did not know if he truly loved me in return. My love was the love of a child, really. It was much the same love I had felt for Yanar, the day of the dance, when he swept me away. It was the love of a woman who'd had her childhood stolen from her, and her childhood love. I had paid back the thief, now - Malik had been repaid. But the loss was still there.

Did Marilith truly love Vaddan, or did she simply go along with me, to make me happy? I did not know - but I suspected the latter. Vaddan, to her, would be interesting, yes. But, his fate had been determined by the gods. And in the end, Marilith was a very pragmatic being. She could let him go, if she had to. I wasn't certain that I could. But, I didn't think I would have a choice, in the end.

I had to know. Even if it broke my heart and I died, I had to know.

I rolled over quietly, and placed my hand on Vaddan's shoulder. "Vaddan," I whispered.

Vaddan blinked, yawning, then looked at me. He smiled that dazzling smile of his, and my heart ached. "What is it, Sasha?"

"Vaddan, do you love me? And my sister?" I asked, my voice soft.

Marilith lifted her head. She was in the human form she had given herself with sorcery, just as Joy and I were still concealed by illusions. Illusions, and trickery. I wanted no more of it. "Do you love me, Vaddan?"

Vaddan gazed at me silently. Was he considering his answer, or just considering how to word it so as to not hurt my feelings? Either way, his answer was clear.

Vaddan opened his lips to speak, but I stopped him, placing my fingertips over his lips. "Silence is answer enough," I said, my eyes again misting with tears.

"Not quite," Vaddan replied, taking my hand in his. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Marilith was awake, and smiled to her. "It's hard to explain... Part of me is aroused by you, and the offer your sister made in my dream. Yet, when I think upon it... Well, to my heart, you two are like the sisters I never had. Perhaps, if we had met under different circumstances... Another place, another time..." he said, then sighed. "Well, no. If we'd met a year ago, I'd likely have treated you much as I treat all the other women in my life - and that, you hardly deserve. I must be honest with you, Sasha. I have lived my romantic life... Well, much as a bee, going from flower to flower to flower. I thought I had all the time in the world. Now, I see I do not." Vaddan reached out his hand, stroking my cheek softly. "Beneath this... This sorcery... You are a woman of a different race. Beautiful, but alien to my eye." Vaddan rolled onto his back, reaching out to stroke Marilith's cheek. "And you... Beautiful, as well, yet even more alien. This," he said, waving a hand to encompass her, "I could be comfortable with. Your other form... That would

take time to get used to. I have feelings in my heart for both of you. Beneath your garments of flesh, each of you is a wonderful woman. And, were we in another time, another place... Perhaps I could learn what the feelings in my heart truly are."

I felt a tear spill down my cheek, and Vaddan reached out a gentle finger to brush it away. "You told me your story, over these last few weeks. You live in the future, on a little island somewhere out in the ocean. A clan of mer-folk live there, you said. Were I to somehow go with you to the future, that's where I would be - alone on a little island, surrounded by alien beings who live a stone-age way of life beneath the sea, while you and your sister go off and do the tasks of the gods, and return to me from time to time as your duties permit. In time, I would grow old and die there, never seeing another of my people again. Never again to enter an inn and wager a few silver on a long game of *chatto* or a quick throw of *tagra*, never again to breathe the heady scents of the marketplace as I wheel and deal with the merchants over a cargo of *pashta* or a barrel or two of *dovor*, never again to see the sun rise above the gleaming spires of Wilanda-city, or to follow our glorious roads on and on to the edge of our lands..." Vaddan shook his head. "And were you and your sister to stay here... Well, our civilization is doomed, and soon, it will be gone. It would be just the three of us, living in the ruins, until I grew old and died. I cannot live like that, Sasha. I spent my life here, in Hyperborea, a thriving civilization, traveling from town to town, seeing our people grow and prosper, trading with the merchants, singing in the taverns over a heady mug of mead, laughing and loving the women I knew in each town... But soon, it will be gone. This is who I am, Sasha. I am a man of Hyperborea. Perhaps not the best of men, and certainly not the wisest, for I find myself looking at a beautiful woman and her equally beautiful sister who both wish to stay with me and make love to me for the rest of my days... And yet, I find I open my mouth and tell them 'no.' Perhaps not the best of men, and certainly not the wisest. But, I am what I am - and I am a man of Hyperborea. And when I and my people are gone, all I ask is that you remember me with kindness."

Tears streamed down my face. My throat had closed up with sorrow, and I could not speak. Marilith looked at me, and nodded. She then looked to Vaddan, and smiled. "We will, Vaddan. All the days of our lives we will remember you, and the glory of Hyperborea."

Marilith and I hugged Vaddan in silence after that. He wrapped an arm about each of us, and hugged us in return. It was a long time before my tears stopped flowing, and even after, my heart was breaking.

It was a long time before I heard it - a soft sound, like a woman's moan of pain. I raised my head, wiping my eyes, and saw Joy was still holding Eddas in her arms, and now gently stroked her hair as she rocked her back and forth.

"No..." Eddas whispered. "Not that... Anything but that..."

"Eddas," Joy called softly.

"Yorindar, no... Don't ask me that..." Eddas murmured.

"Eddas," Joy called softly again. "Wake, you're having a bad dream."

Marilith gazed at the two of them silently, her eyes unfocused, then blinked and looked to Joy. "It's no mere dream, Joy. You can't see it, but I can. A great owl is near, hovering over him... He grips his soul in his talons, speaking to him on the Plane of Dreams. I have met him before, I know him. It is Yorindar."

Joy looked around, but saw nothing. After a moment, her eyes narrowed. "Well, god or not, he can *damn well stop hurting him!*" Joy snapped.

"Aaah!" Eddas yelped, startled awake.

"It's alright, Eddas," Joy said soothingly. "You're awake, now."

"Oh, Joy..." Eddas replied, and wept. "I fell asleep."

"Yes, my love, you did."

"And now I know... Yorindar spoke to me. He told me what I must do."

"Is it that bad, Eddas?"

"I would rather have died, Joy. I would rather have died," Eddas replied, her voice cracking, then wept quietly into Joy's shoulder.

I looked up at the sound of approaching footsteps. Along the dusty path near the stone Hyperborean road that passed through the village, I saw Barag returning, a group of young men following. Like him, all were young, robed, and shaven-headed. Soon, they stopped before the wagon, and Barag bowed to Eddas. "Master Eddas... I'm sorry to disturb you, but... We must speak with you."

Joy glared at Barag and the others fiercely. "Turn about, and give him a moment. Don't shame him with your gaze."

Barag nodded, and did so, as did the other young men. I watched as Eddas wiped her eyes with a gloved hand, sitting in Joy's lap silently. She closed her eyes, and took deliberate, slow breaths for a long moment - apparently to calm herself. At last, she opened her eyes, and Joy reached out, smoothing a few stray hairs. "How do I look?" Eddas asked quietly.

Joy smiled. "Perfect, as usual, Old Man. As I told you before, that pretty little face Yorindar stuck you with never looks out of sorts."

The barest flicker of a smile lit the corner of Eddas' mouth, but only for a moment. Eddas leaned in, kissing Joy gently, then summoned her staff to her hand. A moment later she rose to her feet, holding out a hand for Joy. As Joy rose to her feet, I decided I'd best do the same - this seemed some kind of formal meeting, and it probably wasn't a good idea for Marilith and I to just lie there snuggled up to Vaddan during it. I scrambled out from beneath the wagon, then summoned my lance to my grip. Marilith and Vaddan followed, standing beside me a few moments later.

"Alright, Barag," Eddas called. "I am listening."

Barag turned about, then he and the other eight bowed again. "Master Eddas... I've been talking to the others... The refugees and villagers. These eight behind me are apprentices from all of the battle-circles of Wilanda-city... Well, not quite all, those of the Dyclonic circle were not ordered to flee, they stayed behind, and are now dead," Barag said, shaking his head. "But, no matter - they, like me, *saw* you summon food for hundreds upon hundreds... Counting those who were simply traveling through, easily a thousand or more. Even a master of their circles could not do that - it would take dozens, possibly hundreds to manage it. I told them what you told me - that you are a Great Mage, a master of the Deep Magic. And they believe it, having seen it with their own eyes. We want to *fight*, Master Eddas. Even should we lose, even should we *die*, we want to *fight*. We ask..." Barag said, then paused, firming his chin. "No, we *demand* that you teach us what we need to know to fight the Invaders. Inside that body, you are still one of us, a Hyperborean. We *demand*, in the name of *Honor*, that you teach us what we need to know."

"We cannot win, apprentice. We can kill them, crush their armies, destroy their forces... But in the process, we will destroy Hyperborea."

"Better to die on one's feet than to die on one's knees," Barag replied.

"And I cannot teach you to be a Great Mage. That is a process of decades of learning and research, and requires a *Talent* of the highest caliber. The best I could do is to teach you a single spell over the course of the next few months, one that will allow you to accomplish your purpose, blasting the armies of the enemy to dust. Beyond that, the rest is up to you."

"That is acceptable," Barag replied, nodding, and the eight others behind him nodded, as well.

"And once you cast the spell, you will die."

Barag shook his head. "We are dead already, Master Eddas. They crushed Wilanda-city with ease, and slaughtered all they managed to catch. Our greatest masters, our finest battle-circles, defeated in a single engagement, in a single night. Before the might of their war-machines, our best and bravest were mere chaff before the wind. We're dead already, Master Eddas. We simply want to insure that *they* will die along with us."

Eddas nodded solemnly. "Alright. This village will be raided tomorrow, it isn't safe here. There's a small cave fifteen leagues from here, at the edge of Wilanda-forest. That's where we'll go," Eddas said, and looked to the others behind Barag. "If you've loved ones or belongings near, gather them now. The sooner you are ready, the sooner we can be on our way. Go - and hurry."

"Yes, Master Eddas," Barag replied, bowing. "And thank you."

Barag's thanks was echoed by several of the others, then they turned to leave. Joy, however, simply gaped at Eddas. "Eddas... You *can't* mean...!"

Eddas gazed at Joy silently. She opened her mouth to speak...

...and then, to my utter surprise, she burst out laughing.

"Why, yes, Joy! It's a *delightful* little paradox! Absolutely *delicious*, when you think about it!" she replied, and laughed again - a long, strained laugh that slowly grew more and more strained and hysterical, until finally Eddas collapsed to the ground, sobbing like a broken-hearted child.

Joy knelt, wrapping her arms around Eddas, and looked up to Marilith, Vaddan and I. "Vaddan, please harness Champion, and make the wagon ready for travel. Marilith, Sasha, help him, please," she said, her voice calm, but firm.

Eddas sobbed, a keening woman's wail of horror and misery that made my heart ache in sympathy for the man inside. "Will... Will he be alright?" I asked.

"The wagon, Sasha," Joy replied. "Now."

"Come, Sasha, you can help me with the harness," Vaddan said, taking my hand.

"A-alright..." I said, and followed, confused and concerned.

The Snake - Five.

"It is impossible, Chieftess," Vesta hissed quietly from our hiding spot in the woods, behind some low thorn-bushes. "I gazed upon the machine with my strongest glare, the man inside is unaffected."

I nodded. Our reptilian hide had provided us concealment, and the patrol we watched had not spotted us yet. We had noticed them a month before, and in watching for them, realized they came through once a week. It was our only chance... But, aside from our gaze, we had nothing we could use against them. Six men in armor escorting one of the Invader's machines, four with axes, two with their strange repeating crossbows, and we could touch none of them. Our gaze did not require eye-contact to kill, though eye-contact insured instant death. It was, however, limited by distance, the strength of the effect fading the farther and farther away the enemy might be. And, more, the enchanted orichalchum armor the soldiers wore and the enchantments on their war-machines protected them greatly from it's effect. *"There... They've stopped again," I whispered, "just as they did before. Now the machine will sit, and they will open that hatch in the back and fetch food and drink from it, as they did before. When they do, they will remove their helmets. Then, we can get them."*

Vesta nodded. *"If we focus on the ones with crossbows first..."*

"Agreed. Let us focus on one at a time, as well."

"Yes, chieftess."

Shortly, the machine had sat, and two of the soldiers with axe-staves were already opening the hatch, while the others were reaching for their helmets.

"Now, the one on the right!" I hissed, opening my third eye and focusing my will.

He was laughing at a joke his comrade had made as he tucked his helmet beneath his arm, his crossbow held casually in his left hand. Laughing, not knowing, and unprepared when our gaze fell upon him. Weakened as it was by a hundred paces of distance, at first, there was no effect. Yet, he felt it... The tingling power of it, raising the hackles at his neck. He paused, then started to say something...

...and a heartbeat later he froze, his body turned instantly to stone.

His friends gaped as he toppled over, the force of the fall snapping off his arm inside his armor, the arm bouncing once to lay nearby. They would not appreciate the beauty of it, of course. Flesh turned to stone resembled delicately carved marble, pale veins of stone where living veins once were, each hair carved with delicate precision. No, they would hardly appreciate the beauty of it, given that they would be next.

Vesta and I turned our gaze to the second crossbow-armed soldier, concentrating, exerting our will... He was shouting to his friends, running to his fallen companion...

...when suddenly he, too froze, his swiftly moving body tumbling to the ground, bouncing, shattering and snapping into several armor-covered pieces.

The others clapped their helmets back on their heads, and the machine arose again.

"The glass!" I hissed. "The man inside the machine sees through it!"

"But it's all enchanted, chieftess, we cannot affect him through it!"

"We can if he meets our gaze with his eyes!" I replied, and rose to my feet, glaring at the machine with all the will I could muster.

The soldiers shouted, and the machine turned, its bird-like legs stepping swiftly. The arms of the machine raised, and a sound of power building came to my ears as it pointed its arms at me...

Then I felt it. That sudden snap, the feel of eye to eye across the distance, the knowledge that the hidden pilot had met my gaze.

The machine mis-stepped, then fell forward, its arms rammed deep into the earth by its weight as the humming sound of power grew louder, and louder...

"Chieftess, get down!" Vesta yelled, grabbing my arm and pulling me down beside her.

A heartbeat later, the machine burst asunder in a mighty blast of flame and thunder, scattered pieces of metal bouncing and rolling before coming to a rest many paces away.

The soldiers arose from where the explosion had knocked them down, then gripped their axe-staves again. Their armor had saved them - and at a shouted order, they charged us.

"Up!" I hissed, rising. *"Run! Come on!"*

Vesta nodded, rising swiftly to her feet, and we ran into the forest.

Darting between the trees, running, we could hear the soldiers behind us. Their enchanted armor did not weigh them down, they ran as swiftly as though they were as naked as Vesta and I. *"Keep running, we're nearly there!"*

Vesta nodded, panting, and soon we had dashed up into the clearing. My master sat atop the same tree-stump I had left him on. He rose as we ran towards him. *"Ah, you have returned,"* he called calmly. *"I was concerned from the blast I heard that something untoward had happened."*

"No, master," I panted. "They're right behind us, though."

"Ah, good. Carry on, then - my reach in my animuary should only be fifteen paces, but stay a good thirty or more away, just to be certain. I only hope it will be safe in the hollow of this tree-stump. For some reason, it's actually quite disquieting to think of one's soul being so naked, and perhaps easily destroyed."

"Their machine is gone, master - it exploded. It will be safe."

"Let's hope so, I - ah, there they are," he said, gazing to the edge of the clearing. *"Do run along, Haifa,"* he said, and began walking towards the approaching soldiers.

I nodded, grabbing Vesta's hand, and ran as fast as I could. My master was skilled and deadly with his staff, he could likely hold them off for several moments before they smashed him to bits. He had eschewed sorcery, for fear of the delicate crystal vial that was his animuary. A tiny thing, smaller than my littlest finger, the lead-sealed stopper held a tiny curl of hair within the vial - and, through sorcery, my master's soul.

I heard the ringing crack of staff on staff for several moments as we ran, swiftly leaving the clearing and darting into the woods. Then, a dry crunch as the Invaders finally surrounded him, and began swinging at him at odds of four to one. He could not possibly parry that many. My heart skipped a beat as I heard his feeble cry, and the sound of his bones being smashed to flinders by the enemy's heavy axe-staves. I skidded to a stop, and turned to look...

...and there, a good sixty paces away, the soldiers were smashing what was left of my master, their shouts those of anger. A moment, then two...

And suddenly one of them paused, trembling. He staggered, dropping his axe-staff and stepping back, a horrible wail coming from his throat as my master's spirit lashed out from his animuary, gripping his soul, crushing it, then scattering it to nothingness. Beneath his armor, his flesh flowed, the power of the spell of hidden life manifest as my master reflexively shaped his enemy's body into his own...

Then the soldier stood steady, and held out his armored hand. My master's staff flashed to his hand, and he shouted a swift incantation, lashing out with his free hand. A blast of lightning smote the nearest soldier, bursting his body asunder, scattering pieces of his armor about for several paces.

The remainder attacked, but now my master was no mere feeble skeleton to fall so easily. Now he stood strong, in their armor, and armed with his staff. He parried the first easily, then gestured, blasting him back with a gust of wind that sent him rolling on the ground. The third he ducked, then incanted quickly, flicking out his hand to smite him with lightning and blast him asunder. As the other arose again, my master smote him quickly with a final blast of lightning from his fingertips.

And just that quickly, it was over, and my master stood alone - the true power of a master battle-mage of the Hyperboreans evident in his silent stance over his slain foes.

After a moment, he looked around. "Haifa?!" he shouted, fumbling with the strap of his helmet.

I ran to him and embraced him as the others of my tribe came out from hiding, gathering around. "Oh,

master, I am so glad you're alright!"

"Ah, Haifa!" he replied, hugging me with strong arms. "My heart sings with love for you. I would kiss you until you gasped for breath, my love... Err... But this damnable helmet is in the way. Help me off with it, please, I can't seem to manage the strap."

It took a moment, but eventually we had it. Frarim tossed the helmet aside, and gazed at me for a moment. He was marvelously handsome, with olive skin, mahogany eyes, a black, full beard and a smile that made my heart skip a beat. He was not the old man I had first met, or the dead skeleton he had become. He was young again, his body that which it was when he first cast the Spell of Hidden Life, in his thirties. "Oh, master..." I gasped, my heart fluttering. "I love you!"

"I love you, too, Haifa," he replied. Frarim then took me into his arms again and did, indeed, kiss me until I gasped for breath.

"Me! Me!" shouted Vesta, bouncing up and down, her hair undulating with excitement. "Me, next! Me!"

"Then me!" shouted another of my tribe beside her.

"Then me!" shouted another, and soon the clearing was filled with happy, eager shouts. "Share, chieftess! Share!"

I hissed loudly to silence my tribe. "This is a *man*, not a toy. I cannot *share* him, he does not belong to me. We must *ask* him, with respect."

Silence followed, and I looked to Frarim. "Frarim... You are all we have left. Our people dwindle in number. We are not like our sisters, the Lamias. We need the seed of man to have children. Please say you will lie with us, and insure our future."

Frarim smiled at me. "One question," he replied.

"Ask, master."

"What of me will be in these offspring?"

I shook my head. "Nothing, master, I am sorry. In that respect, we are like the dryads. Our children will be gorgons, not humans, and will carry nothing of you in them. But, they will be your daughters, and our tribe will honor you until the end of time."

Frarim chuckled. "Well, alright - on three conditions."

"Anything, master, just name it!" I replied eagerly.

"First, Haifa, my animuary is just sitting in a hole in a tree stump. Until it is safely secured again in the tomb you all have made for me, I'm afraid that leaves me a bit nervous - as you might understand. If that is broken, Haifa, I am gone."

I bowed my head. "Of course, master. We will take care of it immediately."

"Second, you, Haifa, must absolutely *stop* calling me 'master.' Frarim will do. Or 'husband', as you prefer."

I smiled broadly. "Husband it is, then. What else?"

"Well, lastly, my dear, I haven't the *foggiest* notion how to get out of this damnable armor, so until you all manage to figure that out for me, I'm afraid that servicing some fifty or so lovely gorgons including yourself will have to wait. Try not to wait too long, however, I find I have to urinate and I don't even know how to loosen the codpiece for this," he said, and grinned.

I grinned back at him. "Never fear, husband, that is the *first* piece of armor we will be working on figuring out how to remove," I replied, and the gorgons of my tribe burst out laughing.

The Ocean - Eighteen.

The little cave at the end of a small box canyon was precisely where Eddas said it would be. How Eddas knew it was there, I did not know - but, given Eddas' mood, I wasn't certain I should ask. It had taken us several days to get there, traveling overland, and several days to clean out the cave and make it habitable. All during that time, Eddas Ayar seemed almost to be two people. When teaching the apprentices, she was cool, calm and collected. Barag mentioned several times that her teaching style was straightforward and excellent. Yet, when not teaching, she would simply sit near the cave entrance and stare into the distant horizon, as though dead. She would not eat unless Joy lifted the spoon to her lips, nor would she drink unless Joy held the cup to her lips. If one spoke to her, she would reply, but her voice was distant. It was all the more difficult for me to watch her, as I would constantly be looking at the tiny little half-elf woman sitting there, looking like her heart had been utterly broken and wishing I could comfort her somehow... And then each time I would realize that inside that little woman's body was the spirit of a *man* - and a man who had, prior to now, been an utterly indomitable pillar of strength. His heart was broken - this, I could see easily enough from the woman's face he wore. But, what to do about it, I did not know. Unfortunately, Eddas' incapacitation left much of the day-to-day tasks to the rest of us. And, as Joy was almost completely absorbed as Eddas' caretaker, Marilith, Barag, Vaddan and I had to sit down and decide what to do.

Vaddan eventually came up with the notion of trying to organize some kind of resistance - both to hinder the Invaders where possible, and to gain information on what they were doing. His thought was that he could use Champion and simply ride about the countryside, trying to find scattered warriors and mages and rally them together - as well as any woodsmen or hunters there may be in the wilderness. I didn't like the plan, as it meant that Vaddan would be potentially gone for days or even weeks at a time - alone, out there, somewhere. Vaddan, unfortunately, would have it no other way, and since both Barag and Marilith agreed with him, I was out-voted. Thus it was that Barag pulled a saddle from his wagon, saddled Champion, and rode off on the third day we were in the cave.

Marilith and I, meanwhile, represented all the real defenses we had here. Eddas was, unfortunately, incapable of doing much of anything, and I wasn't even certain she would lift a finger to defend the cave. Certainly Joy could defend Eddas, but we needed more than just her. So, Marilith and I took to keeping watch, and Marilith spent time casting various spells on the cave and the land nearby that would warn her of the approach of strangers. How effective they were, I did not know - but I was quite glad when they alerted Marilith to Vaddan's return, a week later.

Vaddan returned with a small company of men - most were hunters he'd found riding through the wilderness, but a few were former soldiers. When we brought them before Eddas, she rose and addressed them calmly, quietly explaining their plans. I thought, briefly, that she might be recovered. But, she was not - after they left her presence, she sat down again, and resumed her quiet stare at the horizon. It was as though something had died, inside her. I so desperately wished I could help - but there was literally nothing I could do.

Finally, I took Marilith aside, whispering to her in the flickering candle-lit darkness of the cave. "Marilith, we *have* to help Eddas, somehow."

Marilith was in her ebon humanoid-equine form, wearing the black apodesmos and loincloth that Joy had made for her, what seemed a lifetime ago. Marilith thought about it, then shrugged, flicking her mane out of her glowing red eyes. "*We are. We're guarding this cave, saving Joy the trouble so she can focus on caring for him. That's all we can do.*"

"But there *must* be some way of helping him... I mean... Have you *seen* him? It's like... It's like he *died*, Marilith."

Marilith sighed, nodding. *"In a way, he did, sister. When his god told him what he had to do, his heart broke. Joy can get him to eat and drink, a little. But only enough so that his body will survive long enough to teach what he must teach. That is all."*

"I just... I just don't understand. What's wrong? What happened?"

"Do you remember he told us of the Dead Zones? Places in Hyperborea of our time, places blasted and dead?"

"Well, yes..."

"That is the spell those apprentices are learning. It is only taking so long because they are apprentices. And they are all Hyperborea has left. A final strike at the enemy, a single blast to destroy them. There are nine Dead Zones in our time, Sasha. Each is large, very large - the smallest is over a league across, a round blasted spot where nothing grows, nothing lives. Most are larger, leagues across, some many leagues across. The Great Southern Dead Zone is the largest. It stretches from the shores of the Bright Sea to the foothills of the Iron Mountains, some fifty leagues or so across, and some twenty leagues wide at it's widest point. Most of the damage wasn't done by the blast, but by the ferocious mana-storms that were sparked by the blasts. If you remember when we were at his tower years ago, he told us that in some areas, those mana-storms raged for over a hundred years, and occasional mana-storms flared up even centuries later. A mana-storm is a vortex of transformative, deconstructive forces, raw mana-energy loosed upon the earth... Like a cyclone, shot through with sparks and arcs of lightning, sparkling with power as any matter it encounters is transformed randomly, ultimately breaking down to it's smallest components, then being reduced to energy and absorbed by the storm. Ultimate devastation, Sasha."

My eyes widened with both amazement and fear. "Goddess..."

Marilith nodded. *"Nine Dead Zones... And here, in the past, there are nine apprentices he is teaching. The destruction of his people, of his lands, the loss of everything... And now, he is in the past, and he discovers it is he who did it. If you remember, when I was healing at his tower, he told us his story. In the future, he discovered how the spell worked by reverse-engineering the*

effect. Now, he discovers it is the spell he created which he was researching - like picking up a rope lying on the ground, carefully coiling it up as you follow it back to its other end, and finding that the person holding the other end of the rope is yourself. Paradox - and the death of his people. Yet, if he refuses, the past happens anyway. Perhaps someone else would just discover it, and bear the burden he bears, now. There were much smaller and weaker mana-storms in the Fell War, an ancient battle between sorcerers twelve thousand years ago that spawned the halfling races - dryads, naiads, gorgons, lamias, centaurs, minotaurs... All of them. Perhaps some mage would discover the spell through researching those ancient mana-storms. Or, perhaps his spellbook would be stolen, and the spell used by another anyway. I don't know - but, it doesn't matter. Either way, even if he refused, the past still happens. It has to - for if it does not, he isn't here to refuse to begin with, and the past happens anyway. Paradox, again, and more pain for him. He sees the destruction of everything he held dear, and he knows it is his fault. I think without Joy, he would simply die. This is his ultimate lesson to us, Sister. Being the Tool of a God can mean more than simply sadness, even misery. It can mean ultimate, soul-crushing horror."

I shuddered. "But... But how can he go *through* with it?!"

"Because he knows the end result, Sasha. The birth of his daughters, the birth of Joy's children, the rise of the kingdoms of the Southlands... All the good things that happened thereafter, many of which he helped make happen. Even you, Sasha - you are an Arcadian, by blood. You were born because Hyperborea died. And I was freed from my prison and certain death because you were born. I waited for you for centuries, Sasha. Centuries of agony. And you saved me from it, with his help. Good things come out of all this, many centuries from now. And he knows the future goal of Yorindar and all his allies is a larger kingdom... A global kingdom, where all races will live in peace. No more wars, no more killing, no more hate... In the end, if Yorindar wins, then everyone wins. This is why the Ocean, our goddess, supports Yorindar. This is why we are here. We learn that the gods do not plan as men do, for something that will happen in a few years. The plans of the gods can take aeons to come to pass. You were once a farmer, Sasha. And you know yourself that sometimes, to make the fields fertile for the seeds of the future, you have to burn the grasses of the present."

I sighed, thinking. "Eddas... He always spoke... Well, I don't know how to describe it..."

"He spoke like an Ancient One, you mean. A being of great age, and great wisdom."

"Yes. And I can see that if I'm supposed to be a tool of the gods, that's how I'll have to be. But... I'm just *not* like that, Marilith. I'm me," I said, and tapped my chest. "In here, I'm still that tall, gangly girl who went to a dance hoping and dreaming... And was knocked to the ground by Malik, and lost

everything. In here, I'm still the lonely girl marooned on Round Island who finally became a happy mermaid, too. I can feel the warrior that Buntaro trained, and I can feel the general that Morita taught. But deep in my heart, I'm still that young girl. I'm not like him, not even close."

Marilith smiled. *"Give it a century or two, Sister. It will come in time,"* she said, and chuckled. *"Until then, I'll play the Ancient One between us, and you play the mysterious magical mermaid, like Storm used to. How's that sound?"*

I managed a smile. "I can do that."

"Good. Now, as the Ancient One between us, I can tell you this: I know you want to help Eddas. So do I. But, the best way we can help him right now is making sure Joy is able to give him her undivided attention. He's hurt, Sasha. It's as though he lived all his life knowing his family was murdered, and then found out one day that he was the murderer. He's hurt, he's broken-hearted. We have to concentrate on freeing up as much of Joy's time as we can. And that means not only guarding this cave, but doing other things to help Joy. Right now, she cooks food for the two of them. Let's free her up from that, and do it for her."

I nodded. "Hunting, too. Vaddan's supplies aren't going to last forever. And cleaning, too. We're going to be here awhile, let's get this place into shape."

Marilith nodded. *"All good ideas, I agree."*

"Oh - and one more thing..."

"Yes?"

I reached down to the hem of my dress, then pulled it off and handed it to Marilith, then extended my scales from the top of my neck down, leaving only the my head, palms and the soles of my feet bare. Reaching to the little magic bottle at my wrist, I pulled out my gloves and boots with a touch, and sat

down on the cave floor for a moment, pulling them on. When I was done, I rose again, looked myself over, and nodded. "There. Much better. I know *Joy* may not like me just wearing my scales because *she* knows it's really my skin, but... Well, I'm sorry, Marilith, I'm thirty-seven, almost thirty eight. I've lived the majority of my life wearing nothing but my scales, most of it on Round Island with the mer-folk as one of them. It just feels weird to wear clothes."

Marilith laughed. *"Spoken like a true mermaid,"* she replied, giggling.

I grinned back at her, taking the dress and folding it, then putting it back in my magic bottle. "Besides, if I had to fight, it would just slow me down. It's pretty and I like it, and I'll wear it again if I have to deal with ordinary people in the future, but it's hardly me."

"Well, you're a mermaid, Sasha - you don't have a lot of considerations that ordinary women do, anyway. It's not like those are going to be bumping your knees when you're eighty, or something," she said, giggling as she waved a hand at my scale-covered breasts. *"When your eighty or eight hundred, you'll look the same as you do now."*

I grinned. "That's true, isn't it? I don't even... Err... I mean..." I said, then paused. After a moment, I sighed. "Well... Eddas told me what happened to him, as a woman. And it was a terrible thing, yes. I think if it had happened to me, I would have just wanted to die. But... Well, really, it *can't* happen to me. Well, at least not the same thing. These," I said, patting the scales that covered my mound and sex in a smooth layer of steel, "make that impossible. I'm sure someone who really wanted to hurt me would think of something worse to do, but... Well, what happened to Eddas can't happen to me."

"True," Marilith replied, nodding. *"But it's also true that if someone wanted to hurt you like that, they could think of something much, much worse - so his lesson was still valid. And I don't have that kind of protection. In this form, that could happen to me. And many, many worse things, since I heal like a demon - very, very slowly."*

"That won't happen," I said, taking her hands in mine. "Not so long as you and I stick together, Sister."

"Together forever, Sister," Marilith agreed with a smile, and we shared a hug. *"Now come - I'll*

start the cleaning if you can hunt us up a deer. We've thirteen to feed, and no idea how many Vaddan will bring back when he returns. I can cast a spell to chill down one of the back passages of this cave, but we need to start building up a larder of meat."

I nodded, summoning my lance to my grip. "And fish, too, that river nearby looks full of fish. I'll get right on it. Be back later!" I replied, and trotted towards the cave entrance.

* * *

A month passed, then two, and summer slowly began to give way to fall. Vaddan's small force grew slightly larger, and ranged farther afield. The Invaders had captured a port-city far to the west, and now used it as their headquarters. Supplies from conquered cities and villages poured into it, and virtually all their women and children were there, protected by the city's walls and a garrison of their war-machines. It was decided unanimously by the apprentices that this city should be their first target, once they were capable of striking back. Strangely, this news seemed only to pain Eddas even more.

One day, as the first snow of winter began to fall, I looked around our little site. Outside the cave, we had a pen built for the horses Vaddan and the hunters had gathered, and a small barn where bales of stolen hay and bags of stolen grain were stored. Our larder inside the cave was full of deer meat, fish, and a wide assortment of roots and vegetables that had been found, bartered for or stolen over the course of the last few months. We'd made more than enough gloves and boots to equip the men of Vaddan's little rebel army from the deer-hide I'd gathered, and Marilith had conjured winter clothing to make up for what we lacked. Vaddan and his men weren't here, at present - they were out scouting the enemy, again. But, they would soon return, I knew. We had come far in a few months, and built a site that was fairly well hidden in this little box canyon, and well-stocked enough to make it through the coming winter. Short of tracking Vaddan's men back here, the enemy could only find this place by stumbling upon it accidentally. I stood at the cave entrance, my lance in my hand, gazing out across the horse pens and the barns, to the distant western horizon. I did not know what it was Eddas looked for, there. My work was done for today, however. Perhaps, if I watched it long enough, I might understand what it was she sought.

I felt a touch on the scales of my left shoulder, and turned my head. Eddas stood beside me, Joy at her shoulder. "You've done well, Sasha of Woe. Very well," she said softly.

I gazed at her for a moment. She seemed the same, and yet... Not the same. Her dark eyes seemed

hollow, and her expression was of someone who was lost. "I... Thank you," I replied, not knowing what else to say.

Eddas then looked away from me, her gaze on the horizon. "You won't see it yet, but you will, eventually. It's the one legend I know beyond doubt survived the war, carried by the survivors. The Invaders... They crushed everything even remotely of our people. I don't know why. But our legends, our songs... Everything, silenced and buried, forgotten by the people of the Southlands. Save this one fragment... An odd thing that none of them understand. The sun, rising in the west."

"Err... In the *west*?" I asked, confused.

"Yes. Arella told me of it one time, when we were cuddled together on a cold winter's night. It was written in their book, the Holy Tome of Yorindar. Two verses, placed at the very start of the chapter which tells the history of their people up to the time the book was written. It is a verse that, to the people of the Southlands, is completely inscrutable. *"And the sun rose in the west with a sound like thunder, then darkness fell again before the sunrise. And lo, that was the beginning of the end, and the end of the beginning."* Arella asked me if I knew what it meant, since I was ages old - more a creature than a man, to her. In truth, not even a man, in either sense. Ages old, not human... Possessed of knowledge from times of yore, times her people had forgotten. She asked me if I knew what it meant. I did not, then. Now I do. And so, I wait, and watch for the sun to rise in the west."

"I... I see..." I said hesitantly as Eddas sat on the ground, her legs crossed beneath her robe. Joy carefully wrapped a blanket around her against the chill of the early winter's day, then sat beside her, stroking her hair.

"No, you don't. But you will," Eddas replied quietly.

The Owl - VIII.

Corvid had found himself absolutely amazed at the tower and lands of Eddas Ayar. The lands themselves were a plantation, several leagues wide and running alongside a broad stream - on the far side of which, there was a deep and magnificent forest. The wide, hard-packed dirt road that led from the main by-way ran a quarter league to the tower, then a bit further to the river, beyond, where a stone bridge crossed it. The road continued a bit further on, disappearing into the forest - how far and where it went beyond, Corvid could not tell. The tower itself could be easily seen, however, long before they actually turned off the main road. Made of white marble, it was graceful, tall, and capped with a golden dome that gleamed in the sunlight.

Corvid had drunk *byallar* many times in his life, of course. The roasted, ground beans were sold by dwarven and elven traders, who (they said) obtained them in the lands of Hyperborea through trading with the giants. The beans were somewhat pricey in the Southlands, but the drink one could make from them made it worth the price. Brewed dark, it could keep one awake on a long night's watch, which made it quite valuable to a sailor like Corvid. The flavor was bitter, but very good with a dash of honey or milk. Once, Corvid had paid a gold for a small, half-pound bag of what was sold as beans straight from the mythical plantation of Eddas Ayar, the Great Mage of Hyperborea - ten times the price of a bag of ordinary beans, which one could obtain for a silver in the Southlands, sometimes a bit less. Compared to ordinary *byallar*, even the more expensive Dohbari beans, the flavor was incredibly good. Corvid had been flush with gold from a recent capture and sale of the booty from a slaver vessel, and he'd laughed as he spent his money on what he considered an extravagant waste. After he tasted it, however, he wasn't laughing anymore - it was fabulous. Yet, he had never seen the trees that the beans actually grew on, save as small drawings on the label of some of the packages, as the trees did not grow in the south. Now, he was here, on the plantation of Eddas Ayar, and surrounded by thousands of them in the full of their spring bloom. The heady scent of millions of tiny flowers was in the air, the trees looking like they had been dusted by a recent snowfall. Countless bees buzzed from flower to flower, gorging themselves on nectar, the pollen-sacks on their legs bulging to overflowing. In shape, each of the trees reminded him somewhat of an apple tree, with a stout trunk and branches held high up from the ground. The leaves were different, however - small, somewhat rounded, and having a waxy surface.

Mungim chuckled, seeing Corvid's fascination with the trees. "Ye may yet wish to stand a bit further back, lad. The bees in these here parts do get a mite touchy an they do think ye do threaten their harvest, and it be a long dash to the river."

Corvid chuckled, walking back over to the wagons. "I suppose there's quite a bit of honey to be harvested here, as well."

"Nay, lad, Eddas Ayar be no beekeeper, he do yet have little time for it. He do have a spell he do yet cast when he do wish it, it do cause the bees to slumber, and he then do gather a few combs from their hives. He do yet have another spell which do yet separate the larva and such from the comb, leaving wax for candles and honey for *byallar*. I know little more than that, howe'er, as I yet be no mage."

"A simple area-effect 'sleep' spell," Taliad said, walking up to them, "and a simple spell of filtration. It's nothing, there are better spells that beekeepers of our people use - but Mungim is right, Eddas is no beekeeper, he's far to busy for that."

Kiriin grinned. "I offered to escort a few hundred pixies here to manage the bees for him and gather the honey, and wow! You should have seen just how fast he turned *that* idea down!"

Mungim burst out laughing, and Taliad grinned. "Where's Father Patience?" Taliad asked, looking to Corvid.

"There, by Flori's wagon," Corvid replied, pointing.

"Ah, I see him," Taliad said, nodding. The priest slowly walked over to them, accompanied by his slave-girl assistant, until the two stood before them. The priest's eyes were on the tall marble tower, however, and he grinned broadly.

"Magnificent," he said, and the slave-girl nodded, her eyes wide.

"An we did not tell the giants we were to be here, howe'er," Mungim said, grinning, "we would not yet see it for long. When Eddas be gone for whate'er reason, they do yet guard his lands more fiercely than they do e'en their own."

"I would imagine. He sleeps at the top, yes?"

"Aye, yes - but why do it matter to ye?"

Father Patience looked down to Mungim. "Eddas is trapped in the past, friend Mungim. For him to get home again, someone will have to show him the way. A line of force, for him to follow back to the present."

Taliad shook his head. "Impossible - no one can travel through time."

Kiriin giggled. "Dear, this *is* Eddas we're talking about. Is there *really* such a thing as 'impossible' when it comes to him?"

Taliad opened his mouth to reply, then closed it. After a moment, he shook his head. "No, I suppose not," he said, and grinned wryly. Looking to Father Patience, he nodded. "What will you need to do?"

"I'll need to gather a hair from his comb or brush, or perhaps his bed. From that, I can cast a spell of summoning. It won't work, but the tug of it he should be able to feel. And, if he's still even half the mage he was when I first knew him, he'll realize how to follow that pull, and come home."

"You mean to use the Law of Contagion to transect *time*?" Taliad asked, raising a finely-arched eyebrow.

"Well," Father Patience replied, walking over to the tower as the others followed, "not precisely. The Law of Contagion, like most of the sub-laws of the Law of Association, is specific to the zero-beat of the absolute present, and is not independent of temporal flow. Theoretically, however, his own body still contains the potential for temporo-spatial alignment with the present, despite being in the past.

Temporo-spatial disassociation and realignment essentially put him out of phase with the current zero-beat harmonic of the universe as a whole - the absolute present. But, theoretically, he would resume phase sync through ordinary temporal progression should he decide to simply sit and wait eighteen centuries or so. However, if we can find a hair, we will have what was once a part of him - and, through the Law of Contagion, still is a part of him. Thus, through the Law of Synecdoche, where the existence of a part is also symbolically demonstrative of the existence of a greater whole, he is both here and there. Through casting a spell that uses the Law of Contagion, this will create empathetic *mana*-vibrations, which will propagate throughout the whole, despite the whole being separated by loss of temporo-spatial phase-sync with the absolute present. The Spell of Summoning uses the Law of Contagion to draw the subject through space, but cannot draw through time, as under the Laws of Magic, the past does not exist as a physical place the object can be drawn from, but rather is merely a set of theoretical temporo-spatial coordinates, and the Law of Contagion is dependent on the zero-beat of the universe. Still, he will *feel* the pull of it, through the Law of Synecdoche, which is independent of the zero-beat of the universe - and, if he thinks about it long enough, he will be able to construct a spell that will create a null-point reference between himself and the hair we cast upon, restoring his phase sync with the absolute present," Father Patience finished, stopping before the door to the tower.

"Aaaah, I see," Taliad replied, nodding.

Corvid just stared, while Mungum rubbed his temples. "It be times like this I be yet quite glad I be not a mage. Ye do make me head hurt with all thy mumbo-jumbo, priest, and that be certain."

Kiriin giggled, and Taliad smiled. "Would a simple analogy help?"

"Simple be good, I be a simple dwarf."

"Alright. Say you're in a cavern, and you spot a beard-hair of a dwarf by a deep pit. It's too dangerous to go down there yourself and fetch them. You can't see them, and the pit is so deep that they can't hear you if you shout. But, you know they're there. What do you do?"

"Well, were one in a pit so deep that ye could not hear a shout at bottom or top, the dwarf that did fall to the bottom would be little more than paste, there be little question o' rescue," Mungim said, and chuckled as Taliad grinned wryly. "Still, I do ken thy intent. An' ye did know a fellow dwarf may yet be lost in a pit or cavern below, ye would yet cast a long life-line down with a lamp at the end, and do tie it off firm-like at the top. With luck, they may yet find it and do climb back out," Mungim replied.

"This is essentially the same thing. The summoning spell is like a life-line. He'll feel it, and understand what it is - and, given his skill, he'll figure out how to climb back up to us in the present. It's not a perfect analogy, as all he really has to do to come back to the present is sit down and wait eighteen centuries. But, it's essentially what Father Patience means."

"Aye, that I do ken," Mungim replied with a nod.

Taliad shrugged. "Eddas should be able to establish a null-point reference using a variation of the basic continuity elements found in the formula for several spells of restoration, such as the Spell of Repairing. Those formula call upon the laws of Contiguity, Contagion and Synecdoche to restore a subject's physical state to that corresponding to a previous temporal existence - it should be quite easy for him to extend any of those formulas to one that restores temporal sync. Well... If he still has quill, parchment and ink to do the mathematics of it, that is."

"Bah, now ye do make me head hurt again, elf," Mungim replied, and winked, causing the assembled friends to laugh.

"But," Father Patience said, "I'll need a hair from Eddas to begin, casting a spell of summoning. How do we enter the tower?"

"Oh," Mungim said, shrugging, and simply reached up and opened the door. "Ye do but walk in. As the Witch-women of Iolo mountain do say, there be yet no lock or key to be found anywhere in Hyperborea, as they do yet have no thieves. Were he here, o'course, we would yet knock."

Taliad grinned. "No thieves, perhaps, but there still are the occasional goblins, hobgoblins and the like," he replied, and pointed to the door. "See that glyph, friend?"

"Aye, I do, I've yet seen it many a time. It be yet common on the doors o' the Witch-women o' Iolo mountain these days, as well," Mungim replied, looking at it.

"Father Patience wasn't hesitating out of politeness, friend. That's a Glyph of Warding. I was visiting the day Eddas carved it into his door, about eighty years ago. I suspect that had you any thievish intent when you touched the door, it would not have opened. If you'd been a goblin with hostile intent, I suspect it might have killed you, as well."

Mungim simply shrugged. "It be good that I be a dwarf, then," he replied, and grinned as he walked inside the tower.

* * *

"I've found a brush, here," Corvid called, holding up a wooden brush with stiff bristles from a dresser.

"What color hair is in it?" Taliad asked, looking in a drawer.

"Ummm... Looks blonde," Corvid replied after a moment.

Mungim shook his head as he peered under the bed. "Nay, lad, Eddas Ayar do yet have hair black as night."

"Yes, that's probably Joy's brush," Taliad agreed, nodding, opening another drawer. "Ah - here we go," he called, lifting a brush from the drawer. "A few black hairs in it, not many. Apparently he cleans his brush regularly." Taliad extracted a hair from the brush, and held it up to the light. "Long and straight as an arrow. This is it - his daughters all have curled hair."

"Aye, as all their people did, back then," Mungim replied.

Father Patience held out a hand, and Taliad handed him the hair. Father Patience nodded. "Let's go back outside the tower before I cast the spell, so we can watch for him and know when he arrives. We can't hardly camp in his room, after all."

"Well, we could, but he may yet belike take a dim view o' us were we to," Mungim said, chuckling.

Corvid grinned, putting the brush back, and followed the others back down the stairs. As they passed the fourth floor, Corvid spoke up. "Err... What is all this stuff on this floor?"

"That be the finest laboratory this side o' Iron City, lad, and stocked with the best dwarven alchemist's equipment that money could buy," Mungim replied, grinning.

"And the best *elven* equipment," Taliad added.

"Bah, I be yet surprised Eddas has not yet blown himself to bits with *thy* equipment, elf," Mungim replied, and winked at Taliad.

"Hah! I was just about to say the same thing!" Taliad said, and laughed again.

Soon, the small group was outside the tower again, and Mungim closed the door behind them. Father Patience nodded, then held the hair up and incanted for a moment, gesturing over the hair. As he finished, the hair vanished in a puff of smoke.

"That's all?" Corvid asked, looking around.

Father Patience nodded. "Yes, my son. I already knew the spell would fail. It's a summoning spell - it brings the subject from wherever they are to where you cast the spell. But, if we searched the entire world for Eddas Ayar and even all the planes of existence, we would not find him. He is not here - he's in

the past. Still, he'll feel the pull of it, and if he thinks about it, he'll be able to create a spell to follow that pull, and bring him back to the present again."

"Soooo... He's somewhere in the past, but he'll feel the pull of your spell *now*?"

"From *our* perspective, yes - it's instantaneous. From *his* perspective, no. The *mana*-energy must propagate not merely across time, but across space. The world today is not in the same position it was in eighteen centuries ago. It will take time. How much time, however, I do not know. Eddas could likely calculate it fairly accurately, but he isn't here to ask," Father Patience replied, and winked at Corvid. "Regardless, once it reaches him, he'll then try to come back to the absolute present. And, how long that takes depends on several more variables - including how long it takes him to construct the spell to do it. In the end, he should be back to us sometime within the next day to a week. However, for him, the time that passes could be weeks, months... Even years."

Mungim looked at Father Patience. "And then, when he do yet return, ye will have to yet heal him?"

Father Patience nodded.

"We will yet wait here for him, then," Mungim said, and turned to call out to his brothers in his own language, gesturing to where he wanted them to make camp.

Taliad smiled. "I assume your servant will set up your tents again, Father Patience?"

"Yes, she carries them in her pack. It's enchanted," Father Patience replied.

"You fascinate me, Priest. I've met many mendicants in my travels of the Southlands, yet few were as knowledgeable of the higher magical theories as you - most were simple healers. Somehow, I have the feeling you and your two companions are far more than you appear."

"Appearances are sometimes deceiving, yes," Father Patience replied with a smile.

"Will being mysterious possibly earn us more of that fabulous stew you made the other night?" Corvid asked.

"Possibly," Taliad replied with a smile, and Kiriin giggled.

"Oh, then we're all damned mysterious," Corvid shot back with a grin, and the slave-girl and Kiriin burst out laughing.

The Ocean - Nineteen.

Spring slowly arrived, and finally, the apprentice's training was done. They discussed who would be first. To my surprise, they all wanted to go. In the end, they finally decided that they would choose by drawing lots. A young, handsome boy named Tomarg won. He couldn't have been more than seventeen. Tomarg beamed with joy, dancing about the cave waving the little marked twig above his head while all the others cheered. All save Eddas, Joy, Marilith, and myself. Joy, Marilith and I silently wept. Eddas, however, simply resumed staring at the horizon. I think Eddas had gone beyond weeping, long before.

Vaddan saddled a horse for Tomarg, and the others waved and wished him luck as he rode off, towards the port-city that the Invaders had captured. The hunters, the apprentices, all of them were very happy as Tomarg finally disappeared into the surrounding forest. It was a beautiful spring day.

"How long do you think it will take him to get there?" Barag asked Vaddan as the others dispersed.

"I don't know. A few days, perhaps a week, at most?" Vaddan replied with a shrug.

Barag grinned. "Do you have anything left to drink on that wagon?"

Vaddan grinned back. "I've some brandy I'd hidden away for a special occasion."

"Let's have it, then," Barag replied, and Vaddan clapped him on the back before the two walked off, deeper into the cave. Soon, the crowd of apprentices and hunters had dispersed, and it was only Eddas, Joy, Marilith and myself. Eddas slowly sat, Joy sitting beside her, and Eddas again resumed staring at the horizon.

"Three days," Eddas said quietly.

"Err... Pardon, Master Eddas?" I asked, looking down at her.

"He will ride his horse to near-exhaustion each day, and will arrive sometime on the evening of the third day. He will be captured by a patrol, and will be taken in chains to see the guard captain sometime after midnight, and before dawn of the fourth day. He has a strong, sparkling talent. Had things gone differently, he likely would easily have made master-rank in his guild, though perhaps not high-master. The Invaders do not know our ways of chaining and muzzling wizards so they cannot cast. Their sorcery is that of the *Cabalist*, with large groups and long rituals. They do not understand battle-magic. But, they do not fear it, because of the power of their war-machines. He will be brought to the guard captain. And then..." Eddas said, her voice trailing off. "The dead are notoriously loose with time."

"You... You spoke to his ghost? In the future?"

But Eddas seemed not to hear me, her gaze lost in the horizon. "The spell casts easily, even when bound. The somatic components are very simple. The verbal components are somewhat complex, but short. It's drain is only slight, for it is a refinement of the Spell of the Final Strike - a spell that was meant to be cast when one is dying or near death as a last, ultimate attempt to destroy one's enemy. Despite how simple the spell is to cast, and despite it's being simple enough that even an apprentice can learn it, the Law of Tativity does not rear it's head, as the caster dies when they cast the spell. The spell turns the power of the caster's *Talent* inward, destructively - and the stronger the talent, the greater the effect."

"Master Eddas, I-"

"Once the effect is released, it is not instantaneous. It builds slowly over the course of a few heartbeats, the caster's body rising a bit, lifted by the energies they have evoked. Their body begins to glow as the energies mount, and the pain mounts as their flesh begins to break down. For a long moment, a span of perhaps three or four heartbeats, they become a being of light, intangible, and screaming a death-scream of utter agony. And then..."

My cheeks were damp with tears as I listened. Marilith took my hand, and I could see she was weeping, as well.

"They never knew who it was. Thousands of ghosts. I don't know how many. Thousands. I spoke to as many as I could. They never knew who it was. He had no ghost there. He moved on to the afterlife, having accomplished his destiny. Sometimes, at night, you can hear the wailing of the dead. The guards told me the most, though each only had a small bit of the story. Most never knew why they died - they were asleep. All they knew is that it happened after midnight and before dawn, in the early days of spring, on the first night of the full moon."

"*Master Eddas,*" Marilith said, her voice soft and trembling. "*It was his destiny.*"

"I know. But I made it happen. *I* did it. All the destruction... The Dead Zones... The ghosts... The *mana*-storms... *I* did it."

"If you had refused, another would have in your stead."

"I know. That is why I did not refuse. It is finished, now. Done. Yorindar calls me, now, through the actions of another pawn. I can feel it. I've felt it for two days. Someone in the present tries to summon me, and it's only now, after nearly ten months, that I feel it. It is impossible - I cannot be summoned through time. But the spell has created a tension of *mana* between now and then, past and future. I can use that tension to nullify our temporal displacement, and return to the present. It will take time to do. A spell formula must be devised, then the spell carefully cast, with you and Joy and Sasha gripping me tightly so you will be drawn with me. Weeks, perhaps months of work. But I'll not start today. I will start when I see the sun rise in the west. Then I will know it is truly the beginning of the end."

"Or, perhaps, the end of the beginning," Marilith replied, and knelt beside Eddas, drawing me down to sit beside her. *"We shall wait with you, Eddas Ayar, and see which is which."*

Eddas looked to the two of us, and a small, wan smile lit the corners of her lips for a brief moment. "Alright," she said, then turned her gaze back to the horizon.

* * *

Vaddan, Barag and the others hardly seemed to notice Eddas' silent vigil for the first day. Marilith and I, of course, did not have anywhere near Eddas' phenomenal endurance. We slept, rose, cooked and cleaned for everyone, then once the day's work was done, we again sat beside Eddas, and watched the horizon.

By the second day, some of the men had begun to notice. I could feel their eyes on us as we watched the horizon, but they said nothing. By the third day, however, some began to sit beside us. By the evening of the third day, Vaddan, Barag, the apprentices and the hunters sat nearby - some inside the cave behind us, others spread across the grass outside the cave before us. All watched the horizon, waiting. When they spoke, it was in hushed whispers.

I knew not when it happened. Eddas was right, it was sometime after midnight, but before dawn. On the distant western horizon, there was a flare of light. It grew brighter for many heartbeats, like the rising sun... Then faded and was gone, the darkness falling again.

Another heartbeat, then two...

...and from the distance came the muted sound of a blast, like distant thunder.

We sat there in silence thereafter, watching the western sky, until at last the dawn came up behind us.

The Ocean - Twenty.

The months of spring passed slowly, for Marilith and I. Eddas had pulled out her knotted rope and summoned her sanctuary, and now spent most of her time inside it, working on a new spell formula that might take us home. Vaddan and his hunters rode across the lands, spying on the enemy, and what they were about. And, slowly, the numbers of the apprentices grew fewer and fewer, as choice targets of the enemy were selected one by one, and destroyed.

From what Vaddan and the hunters had discovered, however, the Invaders did not sit idly by after the death of most of their women. They instead scoured the lands of Hyperborea, gathering what Hyperborean women they could find. Villages near the borderlands that they had missed, like Dohbari village near Eddas' tower, they raided, slaughtering the men and children, smashing the buildings, and taking the women with them. But, of course, this was not enough for them. They were *Cabalists* - Eddas explained that Cabalism was a more focused and yet also more limited path of sorcery that his people had discovered and abandoned after the Fell War, thousands of years before. Though some still followed the path, as with a large enough group it allowed tremendous enchantments to be forged (such as those that made the war-machines of the Invaders), in the end, it took hours or even days to do even the simplest things, whereas an ordinary mage could accomplish far more in a shorter period of time. Still, the power of the Cabalists of the Invaders was immense, as we discovered when Vaddan and his men at last found out what had happened to the Hyperborean women the Invaders had abducted.

We had thought, perhaps, that they would be broken in spirit. And, they were. But when Vaddan and the hunters finally returned with a lone woman of Hyperborea they had managed to steal away from the Invaders, we discovered it went much, much farther than that.

They had been *transformed*.

Oh, they were still human - though that was little consolation to them. The Cabalists of the Invaders, with a long and lengthy ritual, literally changed them, wiping away all traces of their Hyperborean heritage, and turning them into women of the Invaders. The woman Vaddan had brought was about my height, had pale skin, blue eyes, and straight, blonde hair. Her name was Javanne, and she wept frequently.

Eddas studied Javanne, casting quiet spells and observing her astral aura. Vaddan and the other men had hoped that he might be able to heal her. But, Eddas could not. The change, he said, was total and complete, even down to the level of her germ plasm. It was, he said, a standard spell of transformation - but, multiplied by the lengthy rituals of the Cabalists of the Invaders, the effect was far more complete, and far more permanent. She was, literally, now a woman of the Invaders, and there was nothing Eddas could do to restore her.

Javanne wept and screamed when Eddas finally told her. She looked to me, screaming, and pointed. "You! Are you like me?! Did they do this to you, too?!"

I sputtered, unable to reply. Eddas gazed at her. "Sasha is not like you, Javanne. She is from the future - the descendant of the Hyperboreans and the Invaders. She is not like you. She is what your children will be."

"Then we are *lost*! Soon they will have captured all of us, and changed us! There will be *nothing left of us*!"

"No, Javanne, there won't," Eddas replied quietly. "The Hyperborean race is doomed."

Javanne glared at Eddas, her eyes wild. "They said you were a man... A battle-mage, one of our people, trapped in that elf's body like I am now trapped in this one! You, of *all* people, understand! My husband is dead, my father is dead, my brothers... I have *no one*! They say you are leader here, and you are old... Ancient! You're close enough! If you are a man of Hyperborea, I beg you - *restore my honor! I beg you for the release of the Juvan-lato! Don't leave me like this!*"

"The *Juvan-lato* is done with a calm heart, not screaming and wailing," Eddas replied, and knelt on the cave floor.

Javanne sputtered, then fell silent. Smoothing the tattered dress she wore, she knelt before Eddas. The men watched silently, their faces sad. Joy turned away, wiping her eyes, but Marilith and I simply stood silently with the men, watching. "I... I'm trying..."

"There is no rush. You have all the time in the world to choose."

"I *have* chosen!"

"Tell me again when your heart is calm."

Javanne knelt quietly, closing her eyes, trying to calm herself. After a long while, I could see the fury drain from her, and her shoulders slumped. Her head bowed, she spoke quietly. "They say you are Eddas Ayar... I know of you. I heard the troubador's songs, I know of your deeds. I know of you. You do not know me. I am Javanne Malao. I was born in Costora-city in the seventy-fifth year of the reign of King Darrak the Second. I had a husband, brothers... And children. Now, they are gone. I thought that I could lose nothing more. I was wrong. Now I have lost even who I am. They have stolen everything from me, Eddas Ayar, even my honor. Worse than rape, worse than mutilation... I have lost everything. Before these witnesses, I beg you for the *Juvan-lato*. Give me my honor again, Eddas Ayar."

Eddas nodded, rising to her feet, lifting the hem of her robe, and drawing her knife from her boot. She then knelt again, and held it out to Javanne, hilt first. "The blade is ensorcelled, it will cut well."

"Thank you, Eddas Ayar," she replied, and smiled.

Then, without warning, she took the blade from Eddas' hand, then slit her throat from ear to ear.

Eddas reached out to hold Javanne steady, bending her over and holding her shoulders. The knife fell from Javanne's nerveless fingers, and she trembled, gurgling. She trembled for many moments, blood pouring from her throat, splashing the two of them and pooling between them. Eventually, her trembling slowed, then stopped. Eddas waited silently, holding her shoulders, until the flow of blood from her throat had stilled.

I had seen death many times in my life, and I had killed enemies in combat. But I had never seen death like this. I felt ill, but remained silent.

Eddas looked up to Vaddan. "She should be buried in her family's plot, if that's possible."

Vaddan shook his head. "It's not, but there's a village cemetery not too far from here. A few day's ride there and back."

Eddas nodded. "Find a needle and thread and a sheet or blanket I can use to sew a burial shroud, then take her there. The rest of you, come here," Eddas said, reaching a finger down to the pool of blood that lay between her and Javanne. Dipping an ebon-gloved finger into the cooling blood, she smeared her finger across her forehead, leaving a line of blood behind. "I mourn you, Javanne, in the stead of your family."

Barag knelt beside Eddas, and Eddas did the same with him, smearing a line of blood across his forehead. Barag bowed his head. "I mourn you, Javanne, in the stead of your family," he said, then rose, and stepped back to allow Joy to come forward. Joy knelt, and the ritual was repeated.

Marilith tugged my hand and we joined the line. Eventually, Marilith knelt and received a smear of blood across her broad equine forehead. "*I mourn you, Javanne, in the stead of your family,*" she said, her hollow voice showing deep sorrow. I then knelt after Marilith, and did the same, barely able to speak for the sadness choking my voice.

At last, only Vaddan was left. He knelt, a blanket tucked beneath one arm and a needle and spool of thread clutched in his hand. After he had received the mark, he laid out the blanket, covering her with one side of it, most of the blanket draped to her right. Eddas and Vaddan then carefully straightened her out from her kneeling position, then rolled her over to her left, holding the blanket to her that her face would be covered as they wrapped her. When it was done, Eddas tucked in the blanket at her head and feet, then began carefully sewing it closed.

"We will avenge her," Barag growled. "We will avenge *all* of our people!"

"Aye," Vaddan said, standing beside him and watching Eddas work. "I only regret that I cannot do what you apprentices are doing - I'm as mundane as a fish. This is the last of our people, the end of all. But if it's at all possible, we will make them *pay*."

"There's but four of us left. Let's make the last of us count. Let's *destroy* them!"

"Aye. After we've buried Javanne, we'll search out a good target. One that will cost them, dearly."

All I could do was weep silently. Marilith wept, as well, and we hugged each other in silence.

The Ocean - Twenty-One.

Marilith and I slept as we always had - spoon-fashion, me behind her, my arms wrapped around her. It was, at times, a great comfort to bury my face in her mane, to smell her scent, and feel her warmth. Sadness surrounded us daily, and the number of apprentices dwindled to three, then two... Then, only Barag was left. The last of them. I wept almost daily now, and if it were not for Marilith cuddling with me at night, I didn't think I'd be able to sleep at all.

Soft voices, in my dreams... I stirred, then felt my sister slip from the grasp of my arms in my dream. It took me a moment to realize that it was more than simply a dream, and she was gone. "M-Marilith?" I muttered, groggy.

"Sister, I need you to stay here. Eddas and I have something we need to do."

I blinked, my mind still fuzzy from sleep. After a moment, I realized that Marilith knelt beside me at our sleeping-spot in the cave, with Eddas standing behind her. Their faces looked particularly grim. "Wh-what's happening?"

"Stay here, Sister, please. Eddas and I have something we need to do."

"Well... Alright. Is Vaddan back, yet?"

Marilith winced slightly. *"I... I'll tell you later, Sasha. Just stay here, please. It won't be long."*

I reached out, grabbing her wrist. "Marilith, *what's happened to Vaddan?*"

Eddas Ayar gazed down at me. "Your sister is trying to protect you, Sasha."

"Sasha, please..."

"Just tell me!"

Eddas shook her head. "The explanation would take too long. Since you refuse to trust your Sister's judgement, get up and come along."

I still was wearing my scales, as I had been for months, so I simply sat up, casting the blanket aside and reaching for my gloves and boots. A few moments later, I stood before them. "Alright - let's go."

We didn't have far to go. Joy and Barag stood by the cave entrance, looking outwards. Just outside the cave, I could see someone standing in the moonlight. They were wounded... No, more than wounded. They had been hacked and shot with the crossbow bolts of the Invaders, several of which were still stick in them. Dry wounds gaped wide through rent garments, the blood stiff and flaking. More than wounded. They were dead.

The gashed, sliced face turned to me, and grinned a ghastly grin. "*Sasha...*" the creature gurgled.

It was *Vaddan*.

"Oh, *Goddess*, no!"

"I'm so sorry, Sasha. I didn't want to come. They made me. I love you, Sasha..."

"Don't listen to him," Eddas warned firmly. "That is not Vaddan. It's a revenaunt the Invaders made from him. It only *thinks* it's Vaddan. It's not."

"I AM VADDAN!" the creature screamed, the slashed flesh of his face flapping horribly.

Eddas lifted her ebon-gloved hand, singing softly and gesturing slowly. After a moment, the creature calmed. *"I am Vaddan,"* it repeated.

"No, you're not, you only think you are, but that's alright. Tell me again what you said when you first came here."

Vaddan's corpse smiled - a horrific sight. *"General Ashak... He offers peace... Yes, peace... To the leader of the rebels... No more blasts, no more mana-storms... Peace, peace... Come meet him on the Southern Plains. I told you the place, I told you how to get there. Four day's ride, that's all, that's all. Please say you will meet him. If you do not agree, he says will take the other twenty men he captured and make them like me, and send them here to tear you all limb from limb."*

"Where is the sword and amulet that body once wore?" Eddas asked.

"The lieutenant who caught me and killed me has them. He is not Hyperborean, he is Golannin, from across the Bright Sea. You know, in all the time we fought them, we never knew their names. They are the Golannin. It means 'The Fierce People.' Isn't that interesting?"

"And where is that lieutenant now?"

"Oh, I can't tell you that, I can't, I can't," the revenant replied, and looked to Sasha. "I love you, Sasha. I always did. Did you know that? It's true. I lied to you, when I said I did not love you. I heard Eddas' story. I knew that our people were doomed. I looked at your skin, and realized you had nothing of us in you. We were doomed. I didn't want you to cry, Sasha. So I told you I didn't love you. I lied. Isn't that interesting?"

My only answer was a quiet, shuddering sigh - a mermaid's sob.

"Oh, Sasha... Do you see this little circle on the ground? Barag tricked me, Sasha. Eddas had him run and run and I followed and - oops! Inside the circle, I can't get out. See the circle on the ground, Sasha? It's just a circle in the dirt. Come here, please, and rub it out with your foot. You only need to part a little bit of it, Sasha. Then I can hug you and kiss you, my love. Won't that be grand?"

I shook my head, horrified, unable to speak.

Eddas raised her hand again, singing softly. Vaddan swayed gently to the quiet song, his face relaxing.

Marilith looked to me. *"I'm sorry, Sasha. I tried to protect you from this. I sensed him coming with the enchantments I put up around this area. I turned my vision to him, and realized it was his corpse. I warned Eddas, Joy and Barag, and after the four of us had him trapped in a circle of protection, I came back to try to make sure you wouldn't get up and see this. But you came anyway. I'm sorry, Sister. I never wanted you to see this."*

"I understand," I replied, my voice trembling.

Finally, Eddas let her song fade, and lowered her hand. "And where is that lieutenant now?" she repeated.

Vaddan gazed at Eddas silently for a moment, his expression changed. *"Fleeing to the south, Eddas Ayar. The Invaders are terrified of the mana-storms. They still do not understand battle magic. They only know the Cabal, their own magic, and it would be impossible to do what the apprentices have done. The general's offer is a trap. What is left of their army is going to meet you on the Southern Plains in battle. They think you're doing this through a Cabal. They believe they can wipe you all out before you can even begin a ritual, if they can just get you someplace they can find you. Win or lose, whatever survivors they may have will join up with the group that has the women, and just head south, abandoning these lands. They cannot find you through me, their Cabal's spell doesn't allow that. They can only order, and I obey."*

"And what of Vaddan's hunters?"

"Dead, one and all. They fell into a trap scouting the enemy, and were annihilated."

"And who are you?"

"I have no name, Eddas Ayar. I am the corpse of Vaddan Korag."

"Animated as a revenant by UnLife energy."

"Yes."

"And do they expect me to send you back with a message?"

"No. They expected me to at least kill a few of you before you hacked me to pieces, then charge to the Southern Plains in utter fury, to fall into their trap. They do not know how many rebels are left, or where you might be. They did not dare follow me, on the chance that you would capture some of them, and your sorcery with undead might be better than theirs. They do not expect a message, Eddas Ayar. They want me to kill, and draw you into their trap."

"And what do you want?"

"I..." Vaddan said, then paused, his dry, dead eyes looking down. "I want to go home, Eddas Ayar. Back to the plane of UnLife. This body... It's a prison. I want to go home. I miss the darkness..."

Eddas gazed silently at Vaddan's corpse for a long moment, and slowly sighed. "One last question... Where is Champion, Vaddan's horse?"

"The ambush came at night, and the enemy cut the picket-line for the horses to prevent the rebel's escape. The last this body saw of the creature, he was running wild and free in Wilanda-forest, Eddas Ayar. Running wild and free."

"Rest, friend," Eddas called.

Instantly, like a puppet whose strings had been snipped all at once, the corpse collapsed to the ground and lay still.

Marilith stood before me, slipped her arms around me, and I shuddered, weeping into her shoulder.

"Joy?" Eddas called.

"It was bad, Old Man. But yes, now I can see what you meant. There was a moment, at the end, where you had finally brought him to awareness... Like you said that Goodman Bones eventually became aware. And then, he said... He said his body was a prison, and he wanted to go home. I had closed my eyes toward the end, and just listened. And now I see you were right. My mind makes me see it as horror, but it is not the creature within that is horrifying. They simply are."

Barag wiped his eyes with his fingers. "I thought something might have happened. I felt in my heart these last three days that something..." Barag shook his head. "There's still one horse left, in the pens. The one for me. I'm going to saddle it, and head to the meeting place."

"Barag," I wept. "You don't have to."

Barag sighed for a long moment, gazing at Vaddan's corpse. "Yes, I do, Sasha of Woe. I know you do not understand. You are not one of us. But... Yes, I do."

"You will be remembered, Barag Kaid," Eddas said, quietly.

Barag bowed his head. "Thank you, Eddas Ayar," he replied, then turned, trotting off to the horse-pen.

Joy sighed. "I'll get the shovel, Old Man, and bury him."

"Put him in the cave, Joy. I'll seal it and cast a ward over it, and it will be as I remember, in our time. Then, we'll go home. Marilith, you and Sasha... Gather your things. We'll be leaving, come the dawn."

"Yes, *Eddas Ayar*," Marilith replied, leading me back into the cave.

* * *

The stone rolled into place, sealing the mouth of the cave, then was still. The earth-elemental rose again from the dirt a moment later, appearing as a pile of rocks and dirt, shifting stone with tufts of grass. "*What more, Earth-friend?*" it asked, its voice deep and echoing.

"Nothing, friend. You have served me well, and I am more grateful than I could ever express. Go in peace."

"I go, Eddas Ayar. It was an honor and pleasure to serve you," the elemental replied, then sank into the earth, and was gone.

Eddas spent several long moments gesturing with her staff and her free hand, speaking a quiet incantation. There was no effect that I could see, but finally, Eddas flicked her hand, then let her arms drop to her sides.

Eddas gazed at the cave silently, and Joy put her hand to his shoulder. "Old Man?"

"I..." Eddas said, then sighed deeply. "I always wondered what was within it. It was warded, and I had found so many warded tombs, I just assumed it was another. Hyperborea has many tombs, Joy. A thousand years of warfare... Many tombs. The ward was well done, however, very neat, very precise. A Greater Ward, it would easily keep out anything. *'My,' I thought, 'It would have been nice to meet whoever cast this ward, they seem to have been quite an experienced mage.'* And now, I know. It would be funny, if it weren't so tragic."

Joy hugged Eddas, and Marilith squeezed my hand. I didn't know what to say, myself. I had wept for hours and hours, and now, my heart just felt... Empty. And yet, somehow... Somehow, I understood.

The Ocean intended for Marilith and I to be far more than simple servants. "Major Pawns," Eddas often called it. Yet, it was so much more. A pawn can be cast aside when not needed, or sacrificed easily if required. But Yorindar would never cast aside Eddas Ayar. There could be no other in the world to replace him. And that meant Eddas had to be strong, and have a presence of mind and vision that was on a higher level than that of ordinary people. The mental ability to see the long view, the long-term goals... And not merely the goals of decades, or even centuries, but millennia. Marilith was thousands of years old. To her people, she was still a child, perhaps. But here, she was an Ancient One, just like Eddas Ayar. And that was eventually what I would have to become, as well. A being with a greater vision, and an understanding of a larger purpose for both themselves, and everything around them.

Everything we had experienced, all that we had done here... It was all to teach us a greater vision, a larger purpose. Eddas Ayar took the worst of the blows for us - as one would expect a man of Hyperborea to do. Beyond the shield of his body, what we received was, in truth, very little. But, it was enough for me to understand why we were here, and what the Goddess had intended us to learn.

"The time of your forging approaches, Sasha of Woe - both yours and your sister's. It may be a gentle time of learning, or it may be a forging as harsh as my own. Either way, it is a time of forging. And like the forging of a blade, you will either be strengthened by it, or destroyed by it." His words - Eddas' words. I remembered them, now. And now, I saw it was a harsh time, and a time that had strengthened my sister and I. And yet...

And yet, in my heart, I was still myself. Yes, perhaps now a little wiser, perhaps able to truly understand what my role in life truly was. But, I was still myself - that young girl ages ago who went to a dance with hope in her heart, and in the end, lost everything.

It seemed Marilith was right, and I would have to let her play the Ancient One between us, while I played the mysterious mermaid. Though at the moment, the truth of my heart was that of a weeping woman, who sighed over a lost love.

"Marilith?" I whispered.

"Yes, Sister?"

"Was it true? What he said, I mean? Was it true, do you think? Did he really love me, before he died?"

"I think so, yes. The UnLife essence reads the memories impressed upon the flesh... Perhaps, someday, if you meet Vaddan in the Afterlife, you can ask."

I thought about it, then after a long moment, I smiled through my sadness. "No need. I think I knew it in my heart, already."

Joy stroked Eddas' cheek silently, and Eddas nodded. Pulling a rolled parchment from her waist-belt, she spread it out upon the ground, holding it open with four small stones. She then laid a small pouch next to it, and knelt before it. Switching her staff to her left hand, she held her left arm out. "Come, Sasha, Marilith. Take my arm, and hold on tight. Joy, take my arm, and hold on tight. I'm going to try to take us home."

I knelt beside Eddas, then gripped Eddas' left arm firmly, as did Marilith, and my sister and I held hands. Joy took Eddas' left hand in both of her hands, wrapping her hands around the fist holding her staff, then gazing at her silently. Eddas gestured with her free hand, reading the scroll and reciting a quiet incantation carefully, precisely. Lifting the tiny bag, she upended it, still speaking an incantation. Gold dust poured from the bag, a sparkling stream, vanishing in a puff of smoke.

There was a trembling, then the world exploded with a mighty crash - and suddenly, we were somewhere else.

The Owl - IX.

The days of waiting passed slowly, particularly for Corvid. It was difficult to wait patiently when you knew that if luck and the gods were with you, you'd eventually meet someone who was literally the most powerful mage in the world. Slowly, however, the days passed, until finally a week had gone by, and Corvid resigned himself to waiting.

At last, one day, Corvid was sitting beneath the shade of a tree that grew beside the tower, chatting with Father Patience and his slave girl and telling them about one of his adventures on the high seas chasing slavers, when a small sound caught his ear. Corvid looked up, then did a double-take, blinking. There, by the base of Eddas Ayar's pristine marble tower, stood four people - a fire-haired Arcadian woman in skin-tight scale-mail; an enormously tall, tanned blonde woman in chainmail with a strange, short cuirass; a strange, horse-headed, black-furred female with the lower legs and hooves of a horse and eyes that glowed like coals; and a small, black-haired elf-woman in a black robe who knelt quietly in the dust of the road. "They're here!" Corvid shouted, both startled and excited.

Father Patience rose, his slave girl helping him, and nodded. "So it seems, my son."

"Oh, my..." the horse-woman said, looking around. *"It appears we've come back to some kind of gathering."*

"It appears to *me* we have guests," the blonde woman said, and smiled. "Mungim! Taliad!" she called, waving.

"Ho, Joy!" Mungim shouted back, trotting over.

"Greetings, Joy, Eddas," Taliad called as he came, Kiriin sitting on his shoulder. "I see you've brought your friends, Sasha and Marilith. I remember them from the last time, four years ago. Are you quite recovered, Marilith?"

The horse-woman smiled. "*Yes, thank you.*"

Corvid looked down - the small elf-woman still knelt in the dirt of the road. "Err... Are you alright?"

Joy reached down, holding out a gloved hand. "Come, Old Man. Time to get up and greet our guests."

The elf sighed. "Joy... The *last* thing I wanted was this. I wanted to just sit in my tower, and..."

"And weep?" Father Patience said, and smiled. "No, Eddas Ayar. You have been wounded, and now you shall be healed. This is not the time for weeping. Today, you will smile, and laugh."

"Laugh?!" Eddas snapped, jerking her head up. "How could I possibly... Laugh..." she said, her voice fading as she gazed at the priest. "Wait... I know you... I know you..."

"We have met before, yes," Father Patience replied, smiling.

"Greenhaven... Shortly after I awakened from my tomb... You were in the street. You gave me Yorindar's blessing..."

"Yes, Eddas Ayar. But, we met before that. Long before," Father Patience replied, his smile now a broad grin.

"I... I don't remember..."

Father Patience nodded, and in a twinkling, his skin darkened to an olive brown, his blue eyes darkened to chestnut, and his gray beard darkened to ebon. His thin frame became taller, more muscular, and he stood straighter and firmer. "Does this help, Eddas?"

Corvid simply gaped, but the elf's reaction was shock, then tears. "Master!" she yelped, leaping to her feet.

"Aye, Eddas," Father Patience replied as the elf hugged him tight. He patted her back, still smiling. "As you can see, I decided to take your advice and move my tomb. Though, really, Haifa had a great deal of influence. When I told her what I had learned of the coming devastation, she insisted. You may remember her, Eddas, but I doubt you ever saw that side of her. She could wheedle me into doing anything, in time, particularly when she was right."

"But this," Eddas said, leaning back and waving a hand to encompass him. "How?"

"Haifa, again. She and a few of the *Sis'thlash-nal* lured a foot patrol of the Invaders on a merry little chase - all the way up to me, where they crushed my old body with their axes. Unfortunately for them, Haifa had hidden my animuary nearby. And equally unfortunately for them, once I had possession of one of their bodies... Well, inside a suit of orichalchum armor and armed with my staff fully charged, the rest of them were doomed. It was quite a bit of effort to get out of that armor, though - I believe the Invaders had several assistants to manage it."

"It's too bad we didn't meet each other again, after. We might have..." Eddas said, then paused. After a moment, she looked away. "Master... You should know... The Dead Zones... All the destruction... Apprentices I taught. It was my spell. I did it."

"No, Eddas - *I* did. That's what Yorindar told me, when he finally came to me."

Eddas blinked, startled. "What?!"

"I did it, Eddas. But it was not what Yorindar wished. It was simply what he was forced to do. I'd been researching the Fell War, and the *mana*-storms that followed it. After all, as a liche, I no longer slept or ate, and did not grow bored - I felt I had all the time in the universe to study our ancient history. I was curious as to how those *mana*-storms came about, back then. As it turned out, it was the clash of powerful sorcery between those ancient schools of magic. The storms they spawned were small and weak compared to what came in the Great War of Devastation, but still dangerous. But, regardless, in my experiments and research was the seeds of that same spell that you found. And when the Invaders came and crushed us so easily in the north, I realized we would not survive once they began to approach the city. I developed the spell, gathered eight other masters who were liches like myself, gave them a copy of it, and we blasted the Invaders to bits. Haifa and her tribe did not survive, and her race was rendered nearly extinct."

"But I... We..." Eddas said, blinking.

"Yes. Yorindar changed that - the *forgramma* of the Gods, it literally never happened. Paradox, Eddas. I don't even remember it happening, I only know what Yorindar has told me. Once you went back in time, *you* took my place. The events still happened - but *how* they happened now differed. The past is still set, Eddas, and cannot be changed. But the details... Ah, the details."

"Yet I hadn't done it when I met you in Greenhaven... I really had only barely recovered my memory at all, then. I did it over a century and a half later."

"Or sixteen centuries earlier, depending on your point of view," Father Patience replied, nodding. "Paradox. The gods war with souls and paradox across the Arc of Time, Eddas, as well you know."

Eddas nodded. "Yes, Master - I know. All too well."

"Well, Eddas... Once Haifa had helped me gain a new body, we waited for the devastation to end. And, while we waited, Yorindar visited me, explaining, cajoling... It took me quite a long time to truly come to grips with what Yorindar wished of me. He did not want a warrior, a battle-mage. That, he already had - in you. He wanted a priest, a quiet voice to help guide the people, to transform the vicious Golannin into the more reasonable Arcadians and Larinians. And, he needed someone who could follow

their people, quietly and subtly guiding them for centuries. A word here, a comforting hand there, a push given to the right person at the right time... Hundreds of thousands of men, their lives spent in small efforts. But no, he did not want a warrior. He had one, already. He wanted a priest, one man to replace thousands over the centuries, to give the right pushes at the right times, and free up his other, lesser pawns for more useful tasks. It was hard, Eddas. Very hard. A mendicant of Yorindar cannot do violence, even to save their own life. A hard life for a battle-mage of Hyperborea to accept - but one I have lived for eighteen centuries, now. Of course, if it weren't for that little age-rejuvenation spell I saw in your grimoire and copied, it would have been *much* more difficult."

"Paradox, again," Eddas replied, and chuckled. "So, I was the king of Yorindar's little *chatto* board, and you the priest. Who, then, was the chariot? The dragon? The-

"Ah, Eddas. Some things, it's best we not know. Paradox, again."

"Aye," Eddas replied, nodding, then looked to Corvid and the hooded slave-girl, the latter of whom was bouncing on her heels excitedly. "Who are your companions, Master?"

"This young man is Corvid - and though he knew it not before this moment, he to is a pawn of Yorindar, and always has been."

Corvid blinked. "I... I *am*?"

"Yes, my son - try not to let it go to your head, however, it's really not a pleasant life, at times. And here," he said, gesturing to the slave-girl, "is a pawn of the Ocean who has accompanied me and assisted me for the last two decades or so while I spread Yorindar's influence in Vilandia - and nudged things here and there for the Ocean, as well."

The slave-girl pulled back her hood, and grinned broadly. Sasha, however, gasped. "*Orissa?!!*" she shrieked.

"Sasha!" Orissa shouted back, and they leapt into each other's arms, bouncing happily and shrieking with joy.

Marilith grinned. "*I suppose I'll be introduced, eventually,*" she said, and giggled.

"Ah! Ah! Orissa, this is Marilith, she's my sister, and... Oh, oh, it's a *long* story!" Sasha yelped.

"I know, I know, Father Patience told me!" Orissa yelped in reply, and leapt to Marilith, hugging her tight.

Eddas looked to the priest, a perfectly-arched eyebrow raised. "Father *Patience*?"

"Well, Eddas, when you have to wait over sixteen centuries before you can see your best friend and student again, then have to wait another century and a half or so before you can tell him who you are... Yes, 'Patience' seemed an appropriate name," Father Patience replied, and winked.

"Ah, Master, I can't *wait* to hear your story in full!" Eddas replied, laughing.

Marilith hugged Orissa back, grinning broadly. "*I suppose we'll all have time to tell each other our stories, now.*"

Corvid scratched his head. "Err... I do hope so, I... Umm... Well, I'd really like to hear Eddas' story, as before I came here, I had a *completely* different picture of him. Err... Her? Well... I'm sorry, which is it, him or her?"

"*Him,*" replied Joy, Mungim, Mungim's brothers, Taliad, Kiriin, Sasha, Marilith, Orissa, and Father Patience, in chorus. The group of friends gaped at each other in surprise for a long moment, then all burst into laughter.

The Ocean - Twenty-Two.

Eddas Ayar's tower had changed little, if at all, in four years. Unfortunately, that meant he literally did not have a table large enough for us to all sit at, nor enough chairs. There were a few little houses at the base of his tower, however, that he said his grandchildren stayed in during the winter. Not all of them - he had thousands - but enough so that Mungim and his brothers were able to find and bring up another table and more chairs with little trouble. Now, we sat in the top floor of Eddas' tower around the two tables butted end-to-end to make a larger table, finishing the last of the grand feast that Eddas Ayar had conjured for all of us, and trading stories in the early evening.

"Another!" Flori called, grinning. To the amusement of many, both Mungim's brothers and Kiriin found Marilith's ability to eat glowing coals to be fascinating in the extreme. To Marilith, of course, they were like pastries.

"Ah! No, friend dwarf, I'm really very full!" Marilith replied, burping and patting her tummy. This only made the dwarves laugh again, as her burp sent twin smoke-rings shooting from her equine nostrils.

"Aw, come on!" Kiriin said, sitting on Taliad's shoulder, and giggled.

"Just *one* more!" Balar called, fetching a coal from the fireplace with a pair of tongs the dwarves had come up with from gods-knew-where.

"Alright, but no more, after, I'll burst!" she replied, reaching out and plucking the coal from the tongs with her fingertips. *"Oh, my... I never thought one could eat too much sweets!"* she said, popping the glowing ember into her mouth and chewing for a moment. She swallowed with some difficulty, then a moment later, blew smoke from her nostrils.

"Huzzah!" the dwarves cheered, and broke into laughter.

"Oh, dear," Marilith said, burping again and shooting another pair of smoke-rings from her nostrils to the laughter of the dwarves. *"I'm sure I'm going to gain a good stone from this!"*

Kiriin just laughed and laughed, and Taliad smiled at his tiny little wife. "Well, it seems we've accomplished the impossible - we've found common ground between a dwarf and a pixie."

Kiriin giggled. "Some things are just universally funny, dear," she replied, and giggled again.

"I'm opening the doors again," Joy called, waving a hand at the smoke and rising from the table - in a moment, she had opened the glass doors that led out to the parapet, and a cool spring breeze blew through the room.

I grinned at Marilith. "We'll get you some exercise tomorrow and work off some of those sweets, Sister."

Marilith burped again, sending another pair of smoke-rings from her nose to the laughter of Kiriin and the dwarves. *"Oh, that would be good! But I now I need something to wash this down with!"*

"Coming, coming," Eddas called, appearing on the stairs from below. In her gloved hands she held a wooden-handled iron ladle. The ladle shimmered with heat, and a wisp of smoke came from it. "Molten

lead. Sorry, my dear, but it took me a bit to melt an ingot in the laboratory."

"*Oh, lovely!*" Marilith replied, taking the ladle in her hands like a mug and gulping at it's contents. "*Mmmm... Much better, oh, very much better, thank you,*" she said, and smiled.

"You're quite welcome, dear," Eddas replied, hanging the ladle up on a spare hook by the fire.

Kiriin and the dwarves gazed expectantly at Marilith, and she looked back at them. "*What?*"

"Aww! No burp?" Kiriin asked, clearly disappointed.

Eddas chuckled. "No, Kiriin, that's why she needed the lead. That much coal and embers? I'm surprised she didn't have smoke coming from her ears!"

Kiriin blinked. "You can make smoke come from your *ears*?!"

Marilith made a face. "*Yes, and it's very uncomfortable,*" Marilith replied, and the dwarves and Kiriin laughed.

I grinned, and turned back to Orissa. "You were going to tell me your story?"

"Well, I warn you, it's not as exciting as your story, Sasha, not by half! Being shipwrecked and living with mer-folk and becoming a mer-maid and learning to be a warrior and leading an army and rescuing your soul-sister, and... Oh, my, no, my story's not nearly as exciting as yours, Sasha!" Orisa replied, and giggled.

"Tell it anyway, I'm sure everyone would love to hear it," I replied, smiling, and the others nodded.

"Well... Alright," Orissa said, and smiled back at me. "Well, I'm sure you know that I had worked up all the villagers against Malik. I mean, it was obvious you'd been abducted. Your father whispered for years before he died that Malik was associated with the slavers. People sometimes disappeared with no trace, particularly young girls but sometimes boys, and *everyone* knew it was the Palomean slavers." At the confused expression on Mungim and his brothers, Orissa smiled. "Slavery is legal in Vilandia, but abduction isn't - Malik was our Village Master, and he was making the occasional gold on the side selling one or two of the village children to the slavers from time to time. If he'd been caught at it he could have been hung, but..." When the others nodded, Orissa turned back to me and continued.

"Well, I was *certain* that you had been abducted by Palomean slavers. I found footprints of a girl by that log you and your father used to sit at - you took me out to it a few times, and we sat and chatted there. And the hoof-prints of a horse could easily be seen, and it wasn't too hard to see that the horse had been chasing a running girl, it had ended in a struggle of some kind, then the horse rode off in the direction of Jedder's Cove, and that's deep enough for a slaver-ship to anchor quietly and not be seen. I *knew* it was you, the prints were new shoes and a girl's shoes, it *had* to be you. I showed it to my mother and father and several others in the village, and they all agreed - you'd been kidnapped by Palomean slavers. And they all agreed with me - it was likely Malik's doing. You'd made him look like a fool at the dance, and when he pushed you down, he looked like a monster, as well. Then, the next day - poof! You were gone, and Malik was already talking about how he was going to take possession of your farm, hire a few of the villagers to work it..." Orissa shook her head. "No, it was obvious. He *made* you disappear into the holds of a Palomean slave-ship because you had made trouble for him. I spent the next four years looking for evidence to prove his link with the slavers, working the villagers up against him..." Orissa said, then sighed.

"Well, four years passed. Some of the men in the village had expressed interest in me, but... Well, I was consumed with the idea of destroying Malik for what he'd done to you. After four years, word was beginning to get back to the Duke's Seneschal. It was little more than rumors, to them, but rumors were enough - the Duke is indirectly responsible for the behavior of the Village Masters, and his seneschal approves their appointments. A bad Village Master reflects badly on the seneschal who appointed him, and even the Duke himself. Malik was feeling the pressure, I suppose, because one day he caught me alone, and warned me that if I didn't shut up, *I* might just disappear one day, too. I found out through Old Ebrahal that the Duke was not pleased by the rumors, and they were keeping watch on the village. Malik, of course, simply told the Duke's men that it was all a pack of lies, spread by me because he hadn't allowed me to marry his son Yanar..." Orissa said, then paused. "Err... You know Yanar died in a shipwreck, yes?"

I nodded. "Malik told me. He had a foolish notion that he could sign on with a ship bound for Palome, and somehow find me and rescue me," I said, and sighed, shaking my head. "A foolish notion... A young

boy's dream. But... Well, now I understand it was also a noble hope of a young man, and really all he could try to do. They wrecked in a storm off the Coast of Skulls, like so many others have done before them, and all hands were lost."

Orissa nodded. "Well... Like I said, Malik was telling the Duke's men that I was just spreading lies about him. The Duke's men were watching, and I was hoping that someday he'd be caught. But, four years had passed, and it didn't look like he'd be caught anytime soon. I'd gone out to visit your farm again, as I often did. I was leaning up against the stone wall, crying, when... Well, this very odd old man walked up to me. He had pale skin and a gray beard, and for a moment, I thought that strange old man might be related to you, somehow," she said, and winked at Father Patience as he chuckled. "Well, Father Patience asked me to walk with him, and I felt I could trust him, so I did. He told me not to cry, for you weren't a slave in Palome, you had actually been shipwrecked on a tiny island in the Windward Isles. You lived with a tribe of mermaids as one of them, and you were very happy, he said. And, someday, if I chose to follow him and help him, I would see you again. He explained he served Yorindar, and if I worked with him, I'd be serving the goals of the Ocean. And, I could feel in my heart it was true. We walked and talked, and I sat with him by his campfire as he explained things to me, and I finally agreed. From there, we walked south to New Solith City. Father Patience didn't want me to be raped or abducted or anything else while I accompanied him, so I agreed to become his slave."

Mungim shook his head. "I do beg thy pardon, but... How would that in any way yet protect ye?"

Father Patience smiled. "A legal convenience, friend Mungim. A collared slave in Vilandia is legally equivalent to a horse. It protected her from abduction because the penalty for stealing horses is death by hanging, there. And with no disrespect meant to our demonic friend," he said, nodding to Marilith, "it protected her from rape because the penalty for copulating with a horse in Vilandia is beheading."

Marilith laughed, tossing her mane. "*I am not offended, Master Frarim, for as you know, I am hardly a horse.*"

Father Patience laughed. "No, I suppose you're not. Still, I could not protect her myself, due to my Vow of Peace. So, through a legal convenience, we contrived to have the laws of Vilandia protect her, instead."

"Ah, I do see, aye..." Mungim replied, nodding as he stroked his flowing gray beard.

"Well, anyway..." Orissa said, smiling. "As his servant, it was my duty to handle money for him, and do other things he's not allowed to do by his vows. He walked the length and breadth of Vilandia, spreading the word of Yorindar, making converts, and basically paving the way for what he said would be other priests coming in a few years. And, from time to time, he would stop and chat with people - nobles and commoners, men and women... It seemed all at random, to me, but I eventually understood that he was doing as Yorindar needed, giving a push here, and a comforting hand there. And, from time to time, he would point out people I needed to talk to, and do the same. I've no *Talent* myself, and it wasn't until the time I was thirty that I began to dream of the Goddess, and hear her voice in my dreams, hinting at what needed to be done. For the next eight years, we worked together more as partners than master to servant. Then, at last, the Ocean whispered to me in a dream that it was time to follow Father Patience to Arcadia, and thence to Hyperborea, where if all went well, I would finally see you again, and know you were truly alright. Unfortunately, in Arcadia, I don't enjoy the kind of protection I had in Vilandia - we were set upon by thieves shortly after we arrived. But, that's when we met Corvid," Orissa said, and smiled a dazzling smile at Corvid, which he returned.

"Well, after he dealt with the thieves, Corvid took us on his skiff to the coast of Hyperborea, and we traveled overland to here. Corvid fought an ogre along the way but got hurt - that's when we met Mungim, he and his brothers saved us."

Mungim grinned. "It were yet naught, lass, a trifle, do yet think nothing o' it."

"Well, we were *still* grateful, despite your modesty," Orissa replied with a giggle, then looked back to me. "Well, after that, we traveled to here. There were some hobgoblins fighting a giant, and everyone got involved in that, and then Taliad came along and helped finish the fight with his sorcery, and then a few days later we were here. Father Patience cast a spell on a hair of Eddas' to help him find the way back home for you, and we waited, and then there you were and that's my story," Orissa finished, and grinned.

As the others around the table clapped for Orissa, I smiled at her. "What now, for you?" I asked. "Where do you go, from here?"

"Well, eventually.... Home, to Woe," Orissa replied, smiling. "The goddess has said I have a husband waiting - though he doesn't know it, yet."

"Oh?" I said, smiling. "Who?"

"Absor."

I blinked. "*Absor?! But he's a total-*"

Orissa interrupted me by bursting into laughter. "No, he's really not that bad. Years of being the Village Master and all that responsibility and having to live under the watchful eye of the Duke's men and enduring the occasional yelling from Momma..." Orissa said, and laughed again. "Well, all that has changed him. Besides, once he has me, I'll quickly have him shaped up, and we'll have a few children for you to visit, in a few years."

Children... I wasn't even certain I could *have* children. I wasn't quite human, but I wasn't quite a mermaid, either. I'd already discovered I couldn't have children with a mer-man. And so far, the only human man I'd found who I might have considered having a child with... Was dead, eighteen centuries ago. I blinked away a tear, and managed a smile. "That... That sounds wonderful."

Marilith looked to Corvid. "*And what of you, friend Corvid? You're the only one here who hasn't told us a tale, yet. What's your story?*"

Corvid smiled. "Well, for the last ten years, I've been hunting illegal slaver-ships for King Parial. I started out as a cabin-boy, and worked my way up to captain my own ship. It's actually quite profitable to hunt slavers, the bounty on them is very good and the king's law also gives us their ship as booty. But, well, I'm thirty, now, and I realized making my future by my blade might be profitable, but there was a chance that future could also be very short," he said with a wink, and those around the table chuckled. "I've talked to Mungim about possibly getting another ship, and distributing his wares to Vilandia and Palome. That's a considerably more safe line of work, and potentially more profitable."

"You should tell them of your quest, my son," Father Patience said.

Corvid started, looking to the priest. "You know of it?"

"I do, Yorindar has told me. But it is not for me to tell the tale. That is your choice - and part of your free will."

Corvid turned to look at me for a long moment, and I wondered what he was thinking. As his eyes lingered over my scale-covered breasts, I realized he was probably thinking what most of Morita's army thought when they gazed at my breasts - even Morita himself. My eyes narrowed, and Corvid chuckled, turning back to look at the priest. "It was a dream, Father Patience. A boy's dream I carried in my heart, nothing more."

"The gods sometimes speak to us in dreams, if we will but listen," Father Patience replied, smiling.

"Oh, that I know. And the gods led me here through my dreams. But, sometimes, when you see a ship with tall fore and stern castles and many archers aboard, you don't chase her down despite the prize money. Some battles it's wisest not to fight," he said, and chuckled again. "No, no. Should Mungim and I come to an agreement, I may eventually have a respectable retirement arranged for myself. But now that I'm here, in this place, and I see who all of you are and how important you truly are... No, priest. I am no one, and that ship's castles are far too tall. No."

Father Patience nodded, and Mungim shrugged. "An ye do say, lad, we'll yet chat more o' business another time. I do suggest, howe'er, that ye do take time to chat with Eddas Ayar personal-like afore ye do leave these lands. Ye will yet find that the Raven of Yorindar be not merely an Ancient One, but he be also a man. This may yet help ye yet rank thysel among this here company more precise-like. I know not what ye do mean when ye do speak of ships and tall castles, but I do know this - as we dwarves do yet say, *'Discretion be yet wisdom, but sometimes one must yet raise one's axe despite the odds, and do strike with fear and fury.'*"

Taliad nodded. "Or, as we *Sylvani* say, *'One must pluck the flower when it is in bloom.'*"

Mungim made a face. "I'll yet bite me tongue, Taliad, for our new friendship's sake."

Taliad chuckled. "And I promise I'll do the same myself, as the need arises, friend."

Mungim nodded, smiling. "Good, good. Now - as the eatin' be done and the stories do yet seem to be done, it now be time for gifts! Gifts for Eddas Ayar!"

"Aye!" Flori agreed, hopping to his feet. "Come, brothers, let's do fetch them from the wagons!" he called, and his brothers hopped out of their seats, and followed him down the stairs.

I blinked, confused. "Gifts? Is it Eddas' birthday?"

Eddas smiled. "No. I did a favor for Mungim's family a long time ago, and they vowed they would repay it. This is part of that - Mungim often brings me little things from his people and culture he knows I'll enjoy. Small things that we don't have here, because our civilization was destroyed. And sometimes things not so small." Eddas then looked to Mungim. "What is it this time, my friend?"

Mungim grinned wryly. "Ah, Eddas Ayar, were I yet to tell ye, what little magic a mundane such as I do yet have in surprise would yet be lost. So, instead of me yet answering thy question, I will yet ask ye one in return: Why do ye yet dress as ye do, Eddas Ayar? With a woman's waist-belt and such, I do mean?"

"Well..." Eddas said, and I could see the faintest hint of a blush on her cheeks. "It's simply the way this body is, Mungim. I suppose I could get clothes from you or Taliad that would fit and dress as a man, but this body would simply look ridiculous like that. In here," she said, tapping her chest with a gloved finger, "I'm me, Eddas Ayar, a man of Hyperborea. But this," she said, waving her hand at herself, "is the Raven of Yorindar. It's... Well, it's like a mask, such as an actor of Hyperborea might wear on the stage. Or, perhaps, armor a warrior might wear to battle."

"The same as ye did tell me afore, these many years past, now - and I do yet remember. And, as I did tell ye then, the Raven of Yorindar be yet the jewel of Hyperborea, whose gleam and beauty do yet make me return time and time again to these giant-infested lands," he said, and winked, causing Eddas to

chuckle. "But, I know ye did say many a time that ye did miss certain things - like thy beard, which ye did say were yet once long and flowing, a certain proof that ye may yet be part dwarf and not know it," Mungim said, and grinned.

Eddas' eyes went wide. "You *didn't*! Not a *barab*!"

"Oh, but I did," Mungim replied, grinning. "And aye, it be a *barab*, made from the darkest hair me family could yet provide - and several other families, besides, including e'en a few hairs from King Durin's young son, Prince Beldar. It be quite an honor, Eddas Ayar - but ye be a Dwarf-Friend, it be no less than ye do yet deserve," Mungim said as his brothers came trotting back up the stairs, each carrying a box. "The *barab*, first, Flori."

Flori grinned. "Aye, brother," he replied, and trotted over to Eddas, then bowed low. "We do present this with the greatest respect, Eddas Ayar, and intending the highest honor." The box was perhaps two cubits long, a cubit wide, and half a hand thick - and I had *no* idea what might be in it. Judging by the faces of every non-dwarf sitting at the table, nobody else did, either.

Kiriin looked at the box, her little eyes sparkling. "What's in it?! Let's see! Let's see!"

Eddas glanced to the dwarves, then Kiriin, then blanched. "Ummm... Oh, my! Look at that, Kiriin! Why, that must be the largest lightning-bug I've ever seen!" Eddas said, pointing urgently at the north window.

Kiriin looked. "What? Where?"

"It's not lit, now - it was by the north window. Go look, maybe it will light up again and you can spot it!"

Kiriin buzzed over to the window, peering out into the darkness of the evening. The moment she was gone, Eddas bent over slightly, and opened the box for the rest of us to see.

At first, I couldn't even tell what I was looking at - it just looked like some kind of pelt or fur, black as Eddas' hair, laying on a red velvet lining. After a moment, however, I realized I was looking at a *beard*. A full beard and moustache, nearly a cubit long, apparently carefully woven of real beard-hair through some kind of backing, and with two gold hooks at the top corners that apparently went over the wearer's ears.

Taliad suddenly rose, his gaze on the northern window. "Oh, my, yes, Eddas, I just saw it now, myself! Indeed, that must be the largest lightning-bug in the world. I think I'll go over with Kiriin for a moment, excuse me."

"Where?! Where?! I didn't see it!" Kiriin yelped.

"Oh, it was right there, my little love," Taliad replied walking over to the window, his voice trembling slightly.

Eddas closed the box. "You can come back, now, Taliad, I've closed it."

"Oh, give me a moment, Eddas."

"Take your time."

Kiriin looked back at Eddas. "Closed what? What did I miss?"

"It's just a *barab*, dear," Eddas replied, smiling. "It's a very serious, very special garment worn by dwarven females when they have to do certain functions that are ordinarily performed only by males, like buying land or standing in the stead of a deceased husband for a young male dwarf's coming-of-age ceremony, or when they have to swear a formal, life-time oath. Quite a formal garment, really."

Mungim nodded. "Oh, aye, that it is. But it be yet worn for more than that - for ensample, a bit o'er two and a half centuries ago, now, Queen Dalola did yet have to act as regent for Prince Durim. He were yet too young to take the crown, ye see. So, she did wear it for all official functions where she did act as Ruler of the Dwarves. An ye do visit Iron City again, ye can yet wear it to deal with any dwarf, and they will yet not see the face o' a dark elf, but will instead see the *barab* and the bracelet o' a dwarf-friend, and treat ye quite kindly."

"I didn't get to see it!" Kiriin yelped, and pouted.

Taliad reached out his hand, still facing the window, and Kiriin settled upon it. "Kiriin, my love, do you want to offend Mungim?"

"Err... Well, no, he's actually very nice, for a dwarf. And he's Eddas' friend, of course."

"Well, neither do I, so we're standing over here for a bit. Look for the firefly, my love."

Kiriin pouted. "There *isn't* one, and you *know it!*"

"Oh? What's that, then?"

"Where? Where?! I don't see anything!"

"You missed it."

"Grrr!"

Eddas bowed to Mungim, holding the box closed to her chest. "I am *deeply* honored, Mungim - particularly knowing where some of the hairs came from. I will cherish it, and wear it."

"Are you gonna wear it now?" Kiriin called from the window.

"No," Eddas called back.

"Drat!"

Mungim gazed at Eddas, then to Taliad's back, and nodded. "Taliad," he called.

"Yes, dear friend?" Taliad replied.

"Thy restraint be admirable, and we do yet much appreciate it."

"You're quite welcome," Taliad replied, his fingers moving behind his back. A moment later, a little flare of light appeared off the parapet for a moment, then disappeared. "Look, Kiriin! There it is!"

"Ooo! That's a *big* one! If I had twenty that size, I could make a reading lamp!"

"This next one be from me sister, Eddas," Mungim said, waving to Gungim. Gungim stepped forward, holding out a small, square box, and opened it. Inside were several brass cylinders. "As I did tell ye long ago, me sister did wish to see if we might yet have any of the music of your people left in our records. We did yet find some, but to yet translate the works from the old styles of music score they did use back then to that which we do yet use today were yet the work of several scholars and many decades. Now,

here they be. Err... I should tell ye that most were yet the songs that my people heard of yours back then, and did like. Thy people then did not invite us to court functions and such-like, so these melodies yet be... Err..."

"Oh, my!" Eddas said, looking at the label inside the box. "*The Drunken Satyr!* That used to be one of my favorite tavern songs!"

"Look, Kiriin!" Taliad said, his fingers wiggling behind his back. "There it goes again!"

"Ooo!" Kiriin replied, her attention riveted outside.

"Err... Well, yes, they all be tavern-songs, save for a few traveling songs," Mungim said sheepishly. "They will yet all work in the little music-box my sister did give ye, and she do hope they be yet a pleasure to ye."

"They will be, Mungim, thank you," Eddas said, smiling.

"Ye be welcome, Eddas. The last be this," he said, gesturing to his brother Balar. Balar held out a very small box, opening it. Inside was a rectangular piece of marble, and a small, flat, ceramic jar as wide as a palm but only as a finger-width tall. "Me nephew Gilki did carve this for ye. He be yet forty, now, and do just now reach journeyman level in the stonecarver's guild. It be thy chop, in our language. An ye should e'er need to sign a formal document with our people, ye can yet use it. Inside the jar be ink and pad, ye do but press the business-end o' the chop to the ink, then do clap it down to the parchment to leave thy mark."

"That one, I think we can see, Kiriin," Taliad said, coming back to the table.

"But what about the..." Kiriin said, then glowered at her husband. "Oooo! You tricked me!"

"For our own good, yes. I'll explain later," Taliad replied, smiling.

"Oh, it better be a *really* good explanation!" Kiriin grumbled, buzzing over to sit on his shoulder.

Mungim looked at Taliad gravely. "Given what we dwarves do know of pixie wrath, I shall yet say now, Taliad; it were an honor to yet know ye, and despite that ye still be a dandelion-eatin' elf, ye will yet be sorely missed," he said, and winked.

"Aye, Mungim. I'll have my funerary song composed for you to sing, later. I know you're only a dwarf, but do try not to muck it up too badly," Taliad replied, and winked back.

Kiriin blinked, then burst into giggles as Mungim and Taliad chuckled.

Eddas examined the marble chop, smiling. "Lovely work, the little raven on the top is simply gorgeous. Tell your nephew I'm *very* impressed, Mungim."

"Aye, thankee, Eddas, I will yet tell him ye did like it."

"Bah," Kiriin said, crossing her little arms. "I wanna give Eddas a gift, too!"

"But my dear, we didn't bring anything to give," Taliad replied, smiling.

"I'll think of something tomorrow! And I *still* wanna hear that explanation, too!"

Taliad grinned, rising to his feet and bowing to Eddas. "On that note, then, I shall bid you all goodnight. I thank you again for a marvellous feast, Eddas - Kiriin and I will see ourselves out."

"Aye," Mungim agreed, rising from his chair. "Me brothers and I shall yet call it an evening, as well. We can yet work on our springtime trades on the morn, Eddas, an' ye do have the time."

"We've brought a few things ourselves which may interest you," Taliad added, smiling. "But, we'll talk more in the morning."

"We should go, too," Father Patience said, rising.

Eddas waved a hand. "Stay, Master - I'd love to have you sleep in my tower again. We have guest beds on the first floor, and the guarderobe is there, as well. Joy, can you get the blankets and get Master Frarim, Orissa, Sasha and Marilith tucked in for the night?"

Joy smiled, rising. "I'd be happy to, Old Man."

"Good, good. Corvid, stay a bit, I'd like to chat with you."

"Err... Me?" Corvid asked, confused.

"Yes. My master tells me that you're to be a Pawn of Yorindar - in truth, you already are. There are certain things you should know, both about me, and about yourself."

"A-alright," Corvid replied.

"Oh, and Eddas?" Father Patience called, pausing at the top of the stair as the others went down.

"Yes, Master?"

"Just 'Frarim', Eddas. We're both too old and we've been friends too long to stand on formality with each other."

Eddas grinned. "Alright, Frarim. I'll see you in the morning."

"Goodnight, Eddas," Frarim called, and resumed walking down the stairs, Orissa at his side. I grinned, Marilith and I following. Perhaps things had not gone very pleasantly in the past, no. But, the future was looking very pleasant, indeed.

Interlude III - The Raven.

Corvid leaned back, having finished his tale. I could tell by his face it was somewhat of a relief to have done so - and yet, at the same time, something of an embarrassment. Likely this was because Joy was near, cleaning up from the gathering, but that couldn't be helped. I lifted my cup of *byallar*, sipping at it in silence for a moment, thinking. Finally, I held my cup in my hands, and gazed at him. "You should tell her."

"She would never understand, Master Eddas. At best, she would laugh. At worst, she would be highly offended."

"I think you underestimate her, Corvid. And her sister. Marilith in particular - she would hardly laugh at that."

"Wouldn't she? She's three *thousand* years old, Master Eddas. My life is a mere eyeblink of that, I'm literally nothing to her."

"Her sister's life is the same, Corvid. She is aware that just because you're not her age doesn't mean you're not her peer."

"With respect, Master Eddas... That's different, and you know it," Corvid said.

I nodded. His mind was sharp, and he was perceptive. But on this matter, he was blind. Perhaps it was because I'd lived in the body of a woman for over a century and a half - or, perhaps, it was simply because I was old enough to have a better grasp of how women think. Either way, it mattered little. *I* knew he was wrong, but couldn't prove it to him. I turned my head, looking to my left, where Joy was sweeping. "Joy?"

"Mmm? What is it, Old Man?"

"You heard Corvid's story, yes?"

"Most of it, yes," Joy agreed, nodding as she swept the floor.

"Should he tell her or not?"

Joy paused, leaning on her broom. "You really want my advice on this, Old Man?"

"Yes."

Joy nodded. "Alright. First, I think he was right to not mention it at the gathering. With that many people around, she would have been very embarrassed."

"See? A woman's view, there we are," Corvid replied, grinning.

"However," Joy continued, gazing firmly at Corvid, "If you *leave* here *without* telling her and her sister *privately*, you are an *idiot*," Joy finished, and resumed sweeping.

I managed not to smirk only through the skill of a master *chatto*-player. Instead, I considered my words - and, who would be hearing them. To him, I was *Eddas Ayar*, the *Ancient One*, and the *Raven of Yorindar*.

Corvid sat silently, thinking and stroking his chin.

"Corvid," I said, gazing at him, "I know this isn't an easy decision. To bare one's heart to another is to invite great pain. And I know you feel you are trivial in comparison to them. But, you are not. You are actually a very important individual - and the sword you bear tells me you are brave, noble and honorable, as well."

"Eh? How can you tell that from my father's sword?"

"Because I forged it, eighteen centuries ago, at Yorindar's request."

Corvid blinked. "You did?"

"Yes. I forged it at my father's forge, and tempered it with my own tears. I gave it to the first man who bore it, and he bore it until the day he died. He was a man of Hyperborea; brave, noble, and true. I knew that in the future, it would be borne again by a man much like him. That man is you. You, Corvid, have a greater destiny than you imagine. You can cast your destiny aside, and choose your own way if you wish. You still have free will, as all mortals do. But I advise you, no matter what you choose to do, to tell her. And her sister. You owe that much to yourself." I then raised myself straight and tall, and gave him the hardest glare that the body of the Raven of Yorindar could muster.

"You can ignore my words if you choose, Corvid Hremn, such is your right. But they are not mere advice - for I am the Raven of Yorindar, and my vision is far keener than yours. You see a small moment of embarrassment and pain. I see the culmination of Yorindar's plans, plans set forth over one thousand eight hundred years ago, when I hammered at the blade of that sword on my father's forge. And, in truth, those plans are even older than that, and date to when Yorindar shifted a stone deep beneath the earth, countless aeons ago. Do as you will, Corvid Hremn. But remember that you are here, in this place, at this time, for a reason. Whether you fulfill that destiny is entirely up to you. You may consider this a small thing, but it is not."

"You're trying to tell me I was literally born to come here and tell her this?" Corvid asked, raising an eyebrow.

"*Exactly*," I replied, and again felt the familiar chill as the word fell from my lips.

Corvid shuddered, and I knew he had felt it - Yorindar's words, from my mouth. There were times that having this happen made me feel quite morose, as I hardly saw myself as some divine messenger, and *being* the Raven of Yorindar, a beautiful half-elf woman, was an endless humiliation that ground at my soul like grain between the millstones, until it felt at times there was nothing left. And yet, this one time, for one sparkling moment, I was actually glad for it - for I knew he felt the chill, I knew *he* knew I was right, and it was quite pleasurable to put him in his place. I suppose this was likely how Yorindar felt from time to time, when he put *me* in my place. And Corvid, like myself, had a stubborn streak a league

wide.

"A-alright," Corvid replied, slowly regaining his composure. "I'll tell her. And her sister."

"Good," I replied, and looked to Joy. "Joy, can you show Corvid to a bed? I'm sure he'd enjoy a pleasant night in one of the guest beds rather than another night in a bedroll on the ground."

Joy nodded, setting aside her broom. "Certainly, Old Man."

Corvid smiled, rising to his feet. "Yes, thank you, that would be quite pleasant."

Joy and Corvid left down the stairs, and I reached for the pot to pour myself another cup of *byallar*. Unfortunately, it was nearly empty. "Bah," I muttered, and finished off what was left. It was, obviously, time for bed - tomorrow promised to be quite a long day.

I rose, closing the glass doors that led to the parapet, then sat again, reaching up to pull loose the silver ring that held my ponytail in place. Again, I missed my raven feathers - though I could hardly have explained why, even if anyone had asked. I tugged off my gloves and boots, laying them aside, then the waist-belt beside them. A moment later, I'd pulled off my robe, then my *nephni*, and laid them aside. I shook my head to let my hair fall free, spreading it with my fingers over my shoulders until it was comfortable again. I then stretched in my chair, nude, yawning.

My eye fell on the presents Mungim had given me, and a smile crept to my lips. Opening the first box, I pulled out the *barab*, and slipped the ear-pieces over my ears. I then leaned back in the chair, stroking the *barab*. It actually was quite nice. Each hair was individually tied and glued to a cloth backing that fit closely around my jaw and mouth, and gazing at it with a spell of astral vision showed it was enchanted to be invulnerable to harm and wear - it would never wear out or lose hairs over the years. It was quite long, and stroking it was actually quite pleasant.

I looked up at a small, odd sound, and saw Joy near the top of the stairs, both hands clapped over her

mouth. She was trembling violently, her eyes wide, staring at me. "Joy? What's the matter?"

"Nothing!" Joy said quickly, then clapped her hands back in place again. Tears started from her eyes, and she looked like she was having trouble breathing.

I glowered at her. "There is *nothing* funny about a *barab*! It is an *extremely* serious and formal garment for the dwarves!"

"Yes, of course," Joy replied, immediately clapping her hands back in place. She darted over to the bed and threw herself on it, burying her face in the pillow. A moment later, I heard her muffled screams of laughter quietly emanating from it.

"Don't suffocate yourself, Joy," I grumbled. "Besides, you've no idea how pleasant this is! I've missed my beard terribly over the years."

Joy lifted her head with a gasp, glancing at me, then buried her face in the pillow again, muffling her shrieks of laughter.

"Alright, I'm taking it off, I don't want to see you smother yourself to death," I replied, sulking, and put the *barab* back in its box. "There. I put it away."

Joy turned her head, looking at me again, then slowly lifted her face from the pillow. "I..." she began, then snorted, struggling to suppress a giggle. "I'm sorry, Old Man, I know it's not supposed to be funny, but... Seeing you sitting there like that, I couldn't help myself!"

"Bah," I replied, crossing my arms beneath my breasts.

"I don't..." she said, and snorted as she slowly sat up. "I don't want you to be unhappy about it, Old

Man, I know what it must mean to you... But really, now I *truly* understand why pixies enjoy tormenting the dwarves so much!"

"Bah, again," I replied, crossing my legs for good measure.

Joy rose, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes, and came over to sit beside me. "Oh, my... You're really angry!"

"Yes, Joy, I am!" I snapped. "You *know* how I feel about being stuck in this body! There are times it feels like I've been made a *eunuch*! Mutilated, humiliated, my manhood taken from me... You *know* that-" I said, but Joy silenced me, her fingers over my lips.

"I know, Old Man. Give me a moment, please," she said, her hand on my shoulder as she looked away, still wiping her eyes. Joy muttered quietly in Giantish, trying to control herself. "*I'm not going to laugh, I love him, I'm not going to laugh, gods of my ancestors help me...*" At last, when she was finally calm again, she looked at me. "Alright. I think I've got a grip on myself. I'd pull out the mirror to show you what I saw, but I don't think you want to see that. I think what you want is for me to see what the dwarves see, and by all the gods of my ancestors, my love, I'm going to try. Open the box again."

I did so, and Joy gazed at the *barab* again. "Alright. I'm trying to see this in it's proper light. You told me before that the dwarves have very sharply defined gender roles in their society. Certain tasks males simply *will not* do, and the same for females. Part of their culture, their religion... But sometimes, a female simply *must* do what a man does, there's no choice. Like the story Mungim said about the Queen. Certainly I can understand that, I was Darian's queen for forty years, I suppose I'd have done the same in her position. She *had* to rule, she was regent for her son, they couldn't just let the kingdom fall apart for waiting for him to grow. It's honorable, it's respectable."

"Yes, Joy."

"And to you, a beard was *very* fashionable, you enjoyed your beard very much, it was an important part of your masculinity. And I'm sure it was a very handsome beard, as well."

"Dyarzi thought so, she used to run her fingers through it all the time," I replied, still sulking.

"Alright," she said, and stroked the *barab* with her fingertips as it sat in its box. "It's... It feels interesting. Different than I remember Darian's beard feeling - he used to grow a beard in the winters... Not as stiff."

"A dwarf's beard-hair is not quite like the beard of a man, Joy. It grows long, the strands are softer but stronger, they're more firmly rooted, and they're more dense than the hair on your head. The beard first starts growing sometime around the age of fourteen, but isn't really thick and mature until the dwarf is about forty, when it's thick and lush like a lion's mane. Some dwarves braid their beards in braids as thick as your wrist, which no human can do - humans just don't have enough beard-hair to actually do that. The *barab* is made from trimmed hairs and hairs that come loose to a gentle brushing. Dwarves trim their beards to keep them at the length they desire. Smiths and others who work with hot things or spinning machinery often trim them short and square, just a palm's width in length, and smiths and foundry-workers wear a cap over them to protect them from the heat. Others who work outside in the sun, like Mungim and his brothers or for those dwarves who work their fields on the surface, trim the hair that grows below the jaw and across the throat so their beard is cooler. For others, they keep them trimmed to a length that's comfortable for them in their daily jobs - but regardless, if they don't trim their beard and moustache, the hair easily grows long enough to trip over in about a year. Some clans shave their moustache, but most don't - and none of them shave their beard, their religion prohibits it. Dwarves have a special oath they call a 'beard-oath' - it's a lifetime vow they will die before they break. It is usually sworn while gripping the beard. A dwarf's beard is their pride, their honor, their-" I said, and was interrupted by Joy placing her fingertips over my lips again.

"And you're not a dwarf, but it's apparent you *desperately* miss your own beard," she said, and smiled.

"Yes."

Joy reached to the box, lifting out the *barab*, and slipped the hooks over my ears. She looked me over for a long moment. "Alright. I understand what it means to you, Old Man. It's not sorcery, but it's magic nonetheless. The magic of the heart," she said, then leaned in to me, kissing me gently. Joy then leaned back, smiling. "Was your beard really like this, Old Man?"

I looked down at it. "Well, no... Mine was more like Frarim's. I kept it trimmed shorter than this, too." I gazed at the beard as it lay between my breasts and down to my belly, then sighed. "Alright, I suppose it is a bit silly, if you're not a dwarf. I just wanted to wear it when I worked, so I could stroke it and think. I can't *tell* you the number of times I've been working on mathematics, leaned back to think and stroked my chin, and then realized I had no beard there to stroke. I used to sit and twirl my beard in my fingers as I thought about things, smooth my moustache... Quite distracting every time I realize it's not there. It's been over a century and a half, Joy, and I still haven't gotten used to that. I suppose it's part and parcel of having a man's soul inside this body. Kyrie often said she could see the beard my man's soul wears, it really *is* a part of me."

"Alright, you can wear it, and I promise I won't laugh. But there are two conditions, Old Man."

"Oh? What?"

"First, don't wear it all the time. It's a special, formal garment, you said. If Mungim found out you wore it every day, he might be disappointed, I think."

I nodded, stroking the *barab* with my fingers. "True, true. It's not a robe or a pair of shoes, after all, it's a highly formal, ritual garment."

"Wear it for special occasions when you visit the dwarves, or when you know you'll be doing quite a bit of sitting and thinking for your research. Like a 'thinking cap', perhaps."

"Agreed."

"The second condition is this," she said, reaching out to lift the ear-hooks from me, then laying the *barab* back in its box. Joy then closed the box, and looked me over for a long moment in silence. "Always remember, Old Man... I love who you are, inside. This," she said, poking my shoulder with a thick finger, "is just a mask that Yorindar made you wear. That's not what I love. I love you."

I smiled. "What do you see when you look at me, Joy? Do you see this," I said, waving a hand at myself, "or something else?"

Joy smiled. "That's hard to explain, Old Man. I told you once before that I know I have an idealized picture of you in my mind that likely has nothing to do with how you really once looked, even as Pelia and her women have an idealized view of you..." Joy shook her head. "Really, I mostly only see your eyes. I'm aware of the rest of you, and after all these years I've come to appreciate the beauty Yorindar gave that body, but... Mostly, I just see your eyes."

I batted my eyes at her, grinning.

Joy laughed, rising to her feet. "Come, Old Man. Let's get to bed."

"And after...?" I said, smiling at her.

"Mmmm... Yes, Old Man. Very much," Joy replied, and slipped off her dress.

The next morning was lovely, bright, and warm, and the scent of the millions of *byallar* flowers opening to greet the day made it heavenly. Marilith and I sat outside Eddas' tower with Joy, sharing a cup of *byallar* while Eddas haggled with Mungim and Taliad. The two had flipped a coin as to who would get to offer something first, and agreed to alternate thereafter. What they were bargaining for, of course, was Eddas' remaining crop of *byallar* from the previous year, the little beans roasted and ground by the giants last summer. It was, for Eddas, a springtime ritual, and a renewing of age-old friendships. Watching the dwarf and elf try to out-do each other to win the last of Eddas' crop, however, was entertaining in the extreme. I suspected that Eddas' own skill at haggling was likely developed in Hyperborean marketplaces, where such wheeling and dealing was quite normal. That thought, however, caused me to think of Vaddan, who made his living haggling and trading in those ancient markets, and I sighed as we watched.

"Can I talk to you for a moment?"

I turned, looking over my shoulder, and smiled. "Oh - hello, Corvid. What is it?"

Corvid smiled, though his smile appeared nervous. "Well... I was hoping to talk to you. Perhaps we could go sit on the bridge over the river and chat for a bit?"

"Is this a conversation I'm invited to?" Marilith asked, eyeing Corvid with her glowing red eyes.

"Err... Well... Yes, if you wish..."

"Hmmm... Judging by your face, it sounds like one I should hear regardless," Marilith replied, and set her cup back down on the little table Joy had brought. *"Thank you, Joy. Byallar is still quite interesting."*

"I'm sure not as pleasant as molten lead, of course," Joy replied, and grinned.

"Well, no. Molten lead has a lovely sweet flavor to it, it's quite enchanting - almost as nice as

molten gold."

"Oh, I think I'll pass on both, if you don't mind," Joy replied with a grin, and Marilith and I giggled.

Marilith then turned to Corvid, and looked him over. After a moment, she gave him the same dark smile I'd seen her give many a young mer-man as we sat on our favorite rock on Round Island. "*Well, Sister, let's take a walk to the bridge and see if this one sings like a monodont or a seal,*" she said, and I giggled again.

We followed Corvid, and he cleared his throat for a moment. "Err... I don't know what a monodont is, but... Umm... I've seen seals. Seals don't sing, they sort of... Err... Bark," Corvid replied, smiling weakly.

"*Oh, really? My, Sister! I suppose you learn something new every day,*" Marilith replied, glancing at me.

"I'll make a note of it. I'm not sure I'm interested in a shell-top, however," I replied.

"*Oh, you never know. It might be a shell-comb, instead.*"

"Oh, that had better be a *particularly* good poem, then."

"*A living epic,*" Marilith agreed with a nod.

"Heh. Why do I have this feeling that I'm missing most of this conversation already?" Corvid said, attempting a smile again.

"Possibly because you are," Marilith replied, gazing at him.

Corvid sighed as we strode onto the bridge. "Oh, I can see *this* is pointless. If Eddas hadn't told me to tell you, I wouldn't bother. I can see the way the wind blows."

"So can I, and I'm not sure I like the scent it carries," Marilith replied, sitting on the low, broad wall lining the sides of the bridge. She leaned back on her palms, then stretched her legs out and crossed her hooves at the pasterns. I decided to do the same, sitting and leaning back on my palms, then crossing my feet at the ankles.

Corvid sighed. "Well... Pointless or not, here goes. This sword," he said, patting the scabbarded sword at his side, "is my father's sword. It's been in our family for generations... We don't know how many. It's an artifact, extremely rare, priceless. Our family legend was always that it dated from the time of the Hyperboreans, likely made by them. I found out last night that Eddas forged it, so I suppose that's true. I-"

I sat up, startled. "What?! Let me see that!"

"Alright," Corvid replied, slipping the sword from its sheath and holding it out to me.

I couldn't take it, and I found my eyes misting with tears as I saw the runes engraved on the blade. "Oh, my... It *is* his sword..."

"Err... Well, of course it is, that's what he told me," Corvid replied, confused.

Marilith shook her head, still leaning back calmly. *"That's not what she meant, Corvid, but go on anyway."*

"Well... Alright..." Corvid replied, and sheathed the sword again. "When I was growing up, my father taught me to fight, to fence, and to read and write. And, he told me our family legends. He told me the story of his sword, which I would receive when I was twenty. The history of our family, the battles our ancestors had fought in... Many stories. But, he told me that I would be the last of our line, because I'd been cursed before I was ever born."

"*Cursed?*" Marilith asked, an eyebrow raised.

"Yes. About eight years before I was born and two years before my father was married, my father was first mate on a sailing ship. There were several passengers - merchants, going from Arcadia to Vilandia to set up businesses. There was a storm... A tremendous storm. The hatch for the main hold was breached by waves, and the ship was sinking quickly. While they were trying to prepare the pinnacle the ship carried as a life-boat, a wave washed both the pinnacle and the passengers and a good portion of the crew overboard, and nearly heeled the ship over. Only a baby was left, stuck in the scuppers. My father grabbed the nearest thing he could find - a trunk of clothing that had been washed up from the hold but was floating - and put the baby in it. Another wave hit, smashing the ship against some shoals. The ship burst asunder..." Corvid said, and shrugged. "And that's all he remembers of what happened that night."

I was rendered speechless, and Marilith leaned forward, listening with interest.

"He woke up, washed ashore on Vilandia atop a broken plank, no idea where he was. He walked down the beach south for several days, hoping to find a port or city. He eventually reached New Solith City-"

"Had he walked north, he would have reached the Village of Woe."

"Well, yes," Corvid replied, then shrugged. "But, he didn't. He was alone in New Solith City, but he was still a good first mate and a good hand with a blade, and this sword can be summoned back to its owner's hand, so he at least was able to get a position on a ship again, heading back to Arcadia. After a couple years, he found and married my mother. She was a fortuneteller, and she fell in love with him. Before they were married, though, she told his fortune," Corvid said, and paused. "Mother has a spell... She says it's an old spell that's been around for centuries. She goes into a trance, and while she's in the trance, she speaks. Often, in riddles. And she told my father that though they would be happily married, they would only have one child - a son - and he would never marry because my father had cast half his wife into the sea."

"No!" I gasped.

Corvid nodded. "Yes, that's what she said. My father didn't know what she was talking about, until he remembered the baby. And that was when he realized I would be cursed before I was ever born - the baby was gone... Dead, certainly. But, he raised me and trained me, and in time I went to sea myself. Still, ever since I was a boy and my father first told me the story, I had this dream of somehow finding you. I didn't *know* it was you, of course. I dreamed of finding the baby, all grown up into a beautiful princess who would welcome me with open arms. Perhaps she lived on a magical island, somewhere out to sea, in a glorious castle, just waiting for me to find her..." Corvid chuckled. "A boy's dream - a childish dream. But, that's the dream I went to sea with as a young man..." Corvid said, and shook his head.

"Oh, I've met women in my life. Many of them. But, my curse still holds true. They love you while you have the gold in your pocket from the sale of a prize-ship. Once that's gone, they don't want to know you. I still held the boyish dream in my heart that someday, I might find that lost princess... But, as I grew older... Well, I came to realize it was just a dream. Even if I found her, who am I? The son of the man that lost her at sea when she was a child. I'd literally be no one to her. I was thirty, and I realized it was time to start thinking about retiring from hunting slavers, and look for a career that was a little more likely to allow me to grow gray hair. I'd almost completely forgotten about the princess of my boyhood dreams. It had been literally years since I'd thought about her. Then..." Corvid said, and chuckled.

"Well, as I said last night. I had a dream, a dream of accompanying an old man and a young woman into the wilds of Hyperborea, and accomplishing my boyhood quest. I ignored it at first, but I started having the same dream every night, night after night. That, I couldn't ignore. When my last voyage was complete, I sold my ship, just keeping a little skiff I owned. I didn't know where to go from there, but I decided a good beer or two might provide some inspiration, so I headed to the tavern. That's when I saw Father Patience and Orissa walking down the street. They looked exactly as they did in my dream. I was so surprised, I started following them. And the rest of that story, I suppose you already know from what Orissa told you last night."

"I... Well..." I shook my head, not knowing what to say.

"So, there I was, last night, in the presence of the most powerful sorcerer in the world, Eddas Ayar. A being of legend and myth, in the Southlands. *And* his master, a man who turned out to be even older. *And* a beautiful, sensual demon even older than that. *And* Queen Joy, the wife of Darian Vemcrior, possibly the most important figure in the history of the Southlands in the last two centuries outside of

Eddas Ayar himself. Oh, and of course you. And Father Patience told me I should tell you, and I said 'no.' I said 'no' because I realized that compared to you, I am nothing. You really *are* a princess, living on a distant island in a fabulous castle, just as I dreamed when I was a boy. And you're a mermaid. And a warrior, and a general, and judging by your beauty, probably a living goddess, too. And I realized that the best I could possibly hope for was that you'd laugh if I told you."

I simply blinked, staring at him, too stunned for words.

"So, now I've told you, as Eddas Ayar demanded. And now, you're probably laughing. Or offended. Or anything but happy to hear it. But, it's done - I've told you. I'm the son of the man who tossed you into the sea in a trunk to save your life as a baby. I had a stupid childhood dream I would find you and marry you someday. But, that's done. And I'm done," he said, and bowed to me. He then turned, and started to walk away.

Marilith lashed out, snatching the trailing end of his crimson sash and halting him in his tracks. "*Oh, no, little man. You're not quite done, here,*" she said, smiling.

"What do you mean?" Corvid asked, his expression showing annoyance.

Marilith grinned, gripping his sash tight in her fist. "*Your mother said your father tossed half your wife overboard.*"

"Well, yes, that's the nature of the spell mother uses. Her predictions aren't completely accurate, and they're like riddles, most times," he said, and glanced down at his sash. "Let go, please. I'd like to go talk to Mungim about our future business arrangements."

Marilith shook her head. "*Uh-uh. I've caught a very interesting fish from the sea, and I'm going to reel him in,*" she replied, wrapping his sash around her fist and drawing him closer. "*My sister and I agreed quite some time ago that any man who loved her had to love me, as well. Any man who would have one of us had to accept both, and win the hearts of both. And you, I find very interesting, Corvid Hremn. I always assumed that Sasha would find a man who might be amenable, and I'd have to learn to love him as he won my heart. I never thought it might work the other way around, but... Oh, no, Corvid Hremn. You're a very interesting man, and I'm not quite*

letting you slip away that easily."

"Marilith!" I yelped, gaping at her.

Corvid, however, simply grinned at her, looking her over. She was still wearing the black apodesmos and loincloth that Joy had made, and her figure was, apparently, at least interesting to him. "And I suppose if I try to slip your hook, you'll just resort to magic to drag me into your boat?"

"Mmm-hmm," Marilith replied, nodding and grinning wickedly.

"I suppose there are worse fates," Corvid replied, grinning. "Tell me... What kind of demon are you?"

"I'm an equibranche - a nightmare. A Dream Warrior of my people."

"Interesting. And can you change form?"

"Into anything your heart or libido might desire," Marilith replied, grinning wickedly.

"Marilith!" I yelped. "How could you even *think* of...?!"

Marilith smiled, still gazing at Corvid. *"Because he is a brave, honest and noble man. No one wearing Vaddan's sword could be otherwise. I knew you loved Vaddan, Sister, but I did not, at first. But, I opened my heart to him, and he slowly won my heart, over time. He was a wonderful man, and I loved him dearly, as did you. But all the while, I knew he was doomed. The greater reality over him was clear. You knew it, too. Eddas Ayar told you several times, as did Vaddan himself. You just could not listen. You had to learn of destiny yourself. And when he was gone, I wept with you, for I loved him, too,"* Marilith said, then tugged Corvid within arm's reach. *"Ah, but this one, now... This one... Aaaaah, he's the one. The twinkle of mischief in his eye, the courage*

and goodness of his heart... No, I'm not letting this one slip away, Sister."

"I find you interesting too, Marilith," Corvid replied, "and I might not struggle too hard to get away. Tell me, I'm quite curious... How do your people... Err..." he asked, glancing down at her breasts with a decidedly wicked leer.

"Oh, we can do that, yes. But we have children with a kiss. The male breathes into the female's mouth, and the female stops breathing, the male providing her breath. In time, perhaps a century or so, the new life takes hold inside us, and we breathe the child out as a cloud."

"A kiss, eh?"

"Mmm-hmmm..." Marilith replied, grinning wickedly.

"I've been told by several women I have some small talent at kissing," he said, and winked.

"Mmmm... I'm very tempted to find out if that's true," Marilith replied, then leaned back, tossing her mane as she held his sash in her fist. *"Tell me, Corvid... Do you like me like this?"*

"Different, but interesting, and very nicely shaped. It's more your attitude and personality that intrigue me, however. And, to be honest," he said, and grinned wryly. "I'm rather honored that you'd even notice me, given who you are. I mean... Well, meaning no disrespect... You're three thousand years old, give or take. I thought I'd be beneath your notice."

"Mmmm... Modesty, no false pride with this one. Handsome, brave, honest, noble... Ah, but I'd like to be courted properly, Corvid. How are you at courting?"

Corvid smiled. "I've been told I have some small skill at dancing and courtship - the same who say I'm

fair at kissing, as well."

"Mmmm... And experienced, too. Just the kind of man who might someday take a little nightmare on a very pleasant ride," Marilith replied, and winked. "Oh, I can see you and I will get along just fine, sailor-man," Marilith said, then looked to me. "But what of you, Sister? Can you open your heart to this one, as I did with Vaddan, and allow him to win your heart?"

I looked at Corvid. He really was a handsome man, and he was wearing Vaddan's sword. "Well..."

Marilith took my hand. "Please, Sister. You had Yanar on Round Island, and Vaddan. Please... Let it be my turn, now. This is the one for us, I know it."

I wanted to ask her *'what if you're wrong?'* But, I did not. After all, *she* had never asked *me* that. She had simply allowed me to follow my heart - even when she *knew* I was wrong. And, so far, I'd been wrong twice.

I thought about telling her *'I need time,'* but then I realized that twice I had acted without giving *her* time - in fact, without thinking of her at all. It was always *she* who had thought of *me*.

And in the end, she was my *sister*. She saved me from the wrecked slaver vessel, helped teach me what I needed to learn on Round Island to survive... She was everything. As much as she trusted me, I had to show her I trusted her the same, because I *did*.

I smiled. "Alright."

Marilith flicked her hand, releasing Corvid's crimson sash. She then smiled at him. *"That leaves the decision up to you, Corvid. Will you court us?"* Marilith asked, holding out her hand.

Corvid reached out his hand, taking her hand gently, and kissed her hand softly. "Gladly," he replied, and smiled a dazzling smile. He turned to me, and I held out my gloved hand. He kissed it softly, then smiled a dazzling smile at me. I couldn't help but smile back.

Corvid stepped back, then bowed again. "And now, ladies, if you'll excuse me, I'd like to go see if Mungim is free yet for a chat."

"We'll talk to you later, Corvid," Marilith replied with a smile. Corvid nodded, then strode away, back towards Eddas' tower.

I watched him walk away, and sighed. I felt Marilith take my hand, and squeeze it gently. *"Are you alright, Sister?"*

"Yes. It's just... Well, it feels like... It feels like only yesterday Vaddan died... Even though I know it was so long ago. I hope... I hope he doesn't go too fast."

"He won't, Sister. He is the one. He wasn't fooled by my little act, he knew I was frightened to death."

I blinked, looking at her. "What?! You were scared?!"

Marilith nodded, smiling. *"Very. And he felt it, when he held my hand. I trembled, and he squeezed my hand, and our eyes met. He knew. He is sharper than he appears, Sister. Don't underestimate him. He, like you and I, is a tool of the gods. He may not completely understand what that truly means, yet - like you and I, he still has much learning ahead of him. But he is one of us, Sister. And he is the one for us."*

"But... But his mother's prophecy! She said he'd never marry!"

"Sister, no one on Round Island is married - they're mated. For that matter, Joy and Eddas aren't married - they're mates, too. Just because she didn't see marriage in his future doesn't mean he won't find a mate. Or, if we're lucky, two," she replied, and smiled.

"Don't you mean if *he's* lucky?" I said, and grinned.

"Mmmm... Well, he might look at it that way, yes," Marilith replied, and laughed. "Come - let's go back, and see what the others are up to."

* * *

Awhile later, Marilith and I sat beneath the shade tree again, listening. I could tell that Marilith was enraptured listening to the conversation, so I tried to pay attention. After all, *she* made an effort to have interest in things that interested *me*, it was only fair I try to do the same for her.

"And then you rinsed and spit?" Eddas asked.

Mungim nodded. "Aye, Eddas, that I did."

"Good, good - and you say the aftertaste had the same bitter, bile-like taste as liver?"

"It be much like that, aye."

"Ah! Marvelous, simply marvelous!" Eddas replied, patting the books in her lap. "I'll have to review these texts to see what the elves may have found, if anything, before I copy them. Shouldn't take too long to copy them with the magic quill, just a few days. Can you wait that long, Mungim?"

Mungim grinned. "We did yet wait a good week for ye to return, Eddas, it be naught. And when I do consider what ye do yet search for, there be no time we may yet wait that would yet be too great."

"What is it you've found in your research so far, Eddas?" Taliad asked.

"Oh, many interesting things, Taliad, but I can draw scant few conclusions yet. I've put together a lot of clues from what I remembered, and researched them with the spell of Contagion Comparison and a bit of alchemy. For example, what would happen to an elf-child if they had no milk, cheese or eggs as they grew?"

Taliad shrugged. "They would risk night-blindness, of course. If they eat no greens on top of that, there's a chance they might go blind completely."

"Same as with humans, though elf night-vision is several orders of magnitude better than human and humans can get by just eating greens to preserve their night-vision. Hyperborean children sometimes developed rickets from a diet lacking in cheese, eggs and milk, as well, but this seems very rare among the humans of the Southlands. Now, can you guess what happens to a dwarven child who never eats a bite of cheese, never drinks a cup of milk and never, *ever* has a nibble of greens in their life?"

"I've no idea," Taliad replied, shaking his head.

"*Nothing!*" Eddas replied, and grinned.

Taliad blinked. "Nothing?!" he asked, as Mungim chuckled.

"Yes! Nothing! Milk, cheese, eggs... None of it is important to their diet. They enjoy it, but that's all. Consider, on the other hand, that they don't *have* a lot of goats or cattle or chickens to begin with, they

live underground for the most part. What fields they have on the surface, they grow grains - mostly wheat, but dwarven rice is common, as well. That means for dwarves, the majority of their diet is grains, the same breeds of domesticated mushrooms we used to eat in Hyperborea, and meat from domesticated animals. They do eat organ meats, but not brains, reproductive organs or livers, the former two being prohibited by their religion and the latter being poisonous to them. Due to high demand and somewhat lower supply, cheese, for dwarves, is actually rather expensive and is considered a luxury item. Now, Mungim; what happens to a rich dwarf who can afford wheels and wheels of cheese and eats too much of it for years on end?"

Mungim shook his head. "They will yet die, Eddas, ye do know that."

Taliad blinked again. "*Die?!*" he blurted, astonished. "From *cheese?!*" Kiriin saw her husband's reaction, and burst into giggles.

Mungim grinned. "Aye, Taliad. It be a disease o' the wealthy we do call *feddo*. The liver be yet damaged, and in time, they do die."

"Incredible!" Taliad replied, shaking his head. "But *why*, Eddas?"

"That, I don't know. It's an interaction of two chemicals I haven't identified yet, possibly three. One, it seems you and I get from exposure to the sun, and the other you and I get from certain vegetables, milk, cheese, eggs and greens. Yet, dwarves apparently are able to make these chemicals within their bodies through processes I can't even guess at - and, with one of these two chemicals, when they eat foods that contain it, they can grow ill or even die from excess of it. The real clue, however, was putting together the differences between what dwarves eat, what humans and elves eat, and what the dark-elves eat. From that, I realized that there are two distinct factors involved."

"Oh? How so, Eddas?" Frarim asked.

"Well, there are certain fungi the Dark Elves grow in the deeper caverns that they *must* eat, or they go blind - they usually make it into a kind of bread that's a staple of their diets, and believe it or not, it's actually quite tasty. There's another fungus they must eat or their children develop rickets - that one's a bit sour, they mix with meat as part of a type of sausage that's also a staple of their diet. Both fungi they

obtained from the goblins ages ago, who eat the same. Yet, dwarves eat neither of them, and one they consider poison - a poison that to their tongues tastes of bile, just like liver does to them. But to your tongue and mine or even Sasha or Corvid... Well, it has no taste at all. Interestingly, a spell of comparison used on dandelion extract and fish-liver extract I obtained from fish from the river shows no similarity. But, a spell of Poison Detection registers a weak, fifth subordinal poison on the liver extract when referenced to this body - if I could somehow eat ten thousand vials of it, I'd die, much as one who ate a snow-cat's liver would, or a dwarf who ate any liver at all. My current theory is that there may be two different chemicals that a dwarf's tongue senses as one, one in green, edible plants and one in animal livers, even though only the liver extract is poison to them. Either way, however, it's a chemical their tongues are sensitive to and detect fairly readily, but you and I can't detect at all. Interestingly, to some humans, any amount of cooked liver, no matter *how* it's prepared, tastes like bile."

"It does to me," Corvid agreed, nodding.

"Not me, but then again, I'm more a mermaid," I replied, shrugging.

Eddas nodded at us. "Well, that was rare in Hyperborea, but it's apparently very common in the Southlands, I remember Arella thought it odd I would even want to eat liver at all, she thought it quite horrid. And in all the different meals they served at Steelgate when I was there, liver was never among them. Again, I've no explanation as to why. And though I can't identify or explain it, I *know* there is a chemical there, for a human or elf who eats a whole bear liver will die - and the symptoms are identical to a dwarf who eats only one bite of the same. Meanwhile, plants and things that to a dwarf tastes of bile are usually a necessary part of human and elven diets to prevent eye problems - if a human fails to eat them, they can go night-blind or blind entirely. Dwarves, however, don't eat them at all, and don't suffer the same problems. The most interesting conclusion of my research so far, however, was that humans and elves eat nothing special to match the second fungus that dark-elves eat. The only common element is that they live above ground, in the sun, whereas dwarves, goblins and dark-elves do not. In the end, I concluded that it's two separate chemicals, possibly three, that elves and humans get in their ordinary foods and daily exposure to the sun, dark-elves and goblins get from the two special fungi they eat as staples, but dwarves can make within themselves, through a process I can't even guess at."

"Amazing..." Taliad said, shaking his head.

"Ah, Eddas," Frarim said, smiling. "You're still the scholar and researcher I taught, and you've gone far beyond what I taught you - in truth, far beyond all our people ever knew. I never had children, but feel as proud as a father."

Eddas smiled, bowing her head, and I could *swear* there was a hint of a blush at her cheeks. "Thank you, Frarim," she replied, then looked up again. "There are still a thousand unanswered questions, however - some are questions I'll have to ask the dwarves, and some are questions I think I'll only discover through years of work in my laboratory. To really understand what is happening, I need a better grasp of the underlying structures of the universe to begin with, so I can have a better grasp of the structures I'm actually studying. Right now, I'm only guessing, and using theoretical models that just aren't consistently matching the data, and don't allow for precise mathematical analysis. In my day, we thought matter was comprised of small particles we called 'atoms,' with various combinations of earth, air, water or fire atoms forming the matter we see about us. But, I know that theory to be only partially right - the four elemental states have nothing to do with the components of atoms. In my day, we believed there were four basic forces in the universe: Lumenic, Gravitic, Atomic, and Magic. Each has a carrier particle - the Lumen is the particle of light which comes from the candle to our eyes, the Graven is the particle of gravity which draws us down to the earth, the Atomen is the particle which holds atoms together, and the Magicon is the elemental particle of magic which we manipulate with sorcery. Yet, the more I study it, the more I think Atomic force is made up of other forces, and our theory regarding the Lumenic force was either incomplete, or just completely wrong. Which is right? And, more importantly, which is wrong? I feel like I'm very close to the answers, at times - but, at other times, I feel I'm very, very far away."

Taliad shook his head, grinning. "That, I cannot answer, Eddas. When you speak of the four forces - what you call Lumenic, Gravitic, Atomic and Magic, though we have other names for them - you're brushing the edges of elven alchemical knowledge in that area. We have similar theories if not the same, and they're discussed in those books I traded you, and a bit more besides. But, we've not gone many paces beyond that point."

Mungim nodded. "Aye, and I yet be no alchemist to yet know our people's theories, either. Still, I do yet see that ye do take a bit o' knowledge here and another bit there, pieces that we do yet see as separate as stone and tree, and ye do then discover the earth that link stone to tree, and do yet make it so plain it be a wonder that none did yet see it afore, as we were yet standing on't all along. Ye will yet have to ask many o' thy questions of our alchemists face-to-face, Eddas, for much be yet knowledge I cannot e'en ask them about, for I've yet no ken o' what ye speak of. Ye be a dwarf-friend and trusted well, so I can yet get ye the secret books ye do yet desire, but I know naught o' the subjects within," Mungim said, then stroked his beard, thinking. "Still, it do occur to me that ye do yet in sooth link tree and stone by seeing simple earth I do not. An ye do have questions ye do think I may know, ask, Eddas. Mayhap I do yet stand on a stone I know not of, a stone ye do look for."

"Alright," Eddas replied, setting the elven books aside. "Have you any legends or stories of a dwarf-wife who was trapped on the surface or at least in the sunlight for any length of time? Not a dwarf-maid, but a dwarf-wife?"

Mungim stroked his beard again. "None that I do recall," he replied, and looked to his brothers. "What of ye, brothers?"

"I do recall one," Flori replied, nodding. "It were nigh onto three centuries past, now. Kardin-town were yet raided by a horde o' goblins and hobgoblins, and the men-folk did yet spirit away the children and women-folk through the escape tunnels while they did shore up the ramparts. Yet, one dwarf-wife did yet get lost in the confusion, and did end up in the wrong tunnel, chased by a dozen goblins. After many misadventures and much falling and dirt, she did end up 'pon the surface lands, and were mightily afeared o' the sky from her *latrao*, o'course. Well, the goblins did yet follow, and to their bad luck and the good luck o' the dwarf-wife, there were yet human delvers from Arcadia that did skulk through on their way to the lands o' the elves. Grave-robbers they may have been, aye, but they had no love of Goblins - they did hack the lot to pieces. They did find the dwarf-wife hid behind a bush, and in time did make their way to Iron City, where she were yet dropped off with the guards, a shivering wreck from two weeks o' travel above-ground. We might have yet made the lot dwarf-friends, were they not in sooth skulkin', grave-robbin' delvers, out to find and loot some ancient tomb, and the only reason they did yet return the dwarf-wife were that they did yet hope for a sack o' gold as reward." Flori sniffed. "They did not e'en know she were yet female, at first, they did think she was a beardless boy until they did notice she did yet wear a dress and did yet have a figure most complimentary. They did have some damn fool notion that our women-folk did yet have beards," Flori finished, and Mungim and the other two brothers snorted with derision.

Taliad smiled. "It's a common belief, friend - please don't be offended, but even many elves think that. I myself thought that, until Eddas told me the truth one day," Taliad said, and bowed his head respectfully. "The simple truth is that we just have never met your females, and so for many, it's logical to conclude that some of the more gentle of your males might be bearded women. Of course, now I know *why* we don't see them - Eddas told me. They fear open spaces, and the blue sky of this lovely spring day would strike absolute terror into their gentle hearts."

"Aye. Sad, but true," Flori replied, nodding.

"Ah," Eddas replied, leaning foward. "Now, for the second most important question, Flori - was she in any way ill after?"

Flori shook his head. "Nay, Eddas. She did yet have a touch o' sunburn, as any young dwarf might who do take his first trip onto the surface-lands, but it were naught, she did recover fine."

"And now, for the most important question - what happened to her after?"

"Oh!" Flori said, brightening. "Moradim did yet take pity on her for that which she did yet suffer, praise Moradim," Flori replied, and made a fist-to-palm clap of his hands I did not understand - oddly, echoed immediately by his brothers. "Her husband did yet comfort her and did lie with her, and she did yet bear a girl thereafter."

Eddas leaned forward, her eyes brightening. "That's interesting... And how many other girls did she have?"

Flori stroked his beard, thinking. "Hmmm... I do not quite recall the number precise-like... She had one from before, I do believe, and she did yet have several sons before and after. Do not yet quote me on that, however, I be not certain. All I do know is she did have no daughters after the one Moradim did yet bless her with, but she had yet borne one years before," Flori replied, then shrugged. "Ye may yet ask, Eddas. I know not her name and she be dead now some thirty years or so, but her story be yet known passing well in Kardin-town. Do but ask 'round Kardin-town, should ye have chance to yet visit in future."

Eddas leaned back in her chair, stroking her chin - then paused, gazing at her fingers, and made a face. Eddas shook her head, then looked to Flori. "Well, it could be simple statistics, or a blessing from the gods. But, if I'm right, it could be that Moradim's true blessing to her was in guiding her to the surface-lands - and then guiding you to tell me of this, centuries later," Eddas said, clapping her gloved fist to her opposite palm.

The strange gesture was echoed by the dwarves, then Mungim spoke up. "What do ye mean, Eddas?" Mungim asked, a bushy eyebrow raised.

"It's just a guess, Mungim - and only a guess. And the only way I can know I'm right is to have a dwarf-wife and her husband here, at my tower, so I can examine her and work with her. If I'm right, I think I can guarantee she would have a daughter. If I'm wrong, however, all I can guarantee is she would be absolutely terrified for at least four months - the full time of a dwarf-wife's cycle. The body is comprised of somatoplasm, but within it is contained the germ plasm, which is expressed in heredity to the following generations, and can be assensed in the astral aura as part of the second aural layer. In elves and in humans, it's the man's germ-plasm that determines gender when he gives his wife his seed. In you dwarves, however, I think it's the female's germ-plasm that determines gender. And, I think this

gender determination is being affected by external factors. But, I can't know for certain without examining one of your women, and I can't test my overall theory unless she and her husband are here for her full cycle, and they try to conceive."

Mungim shook his head. "Ye do ask much, Eddas. To ask a dwarf-wife to come here be hard enough, but to yet ask her to bring her husband and to yet try to conceive a child... Oh, ye do ask much, Eddas," Mungim said, and his brothers nodded. "And yet, ye do offer a vast reward should ye be right - a daughter be a tremendous blessing, and more, a great amount of wealth to herself and her family. And, the knowledge that would yet follow would be a boon immeasurable to our people! We could never repay such a gift!"

"Ye would be yet made canon as a *saint* o' our people, Eddas Ayar!" Flori agreed, and the other brothers nodded.

Eddas smiled, then spoke, my amulet carrying a different tone - I guessed she was speaking in the language of the dwarves. *"An that did happen, Mungim Oakenshield, and three-to-one did yet again become three-to-three, the broken vessels of Ovmala repaired, it would be little more than the barest start at repayment for thy friendship these many years, despite that I do wear the body o' a dandelion-eater."*

Mungim blinked rapidly. "It..." he said, wiping his eyes. "It be naught, Eddas Ayar. It be merely *business*."

"I'm afraid I missed that part," Taliad said, shaking his head.

Corvid grinned. "Me, too, sorry."

I grinned, looking at Eddas. "I didn't, thanks to the bracelet Eddas made for me. But I still don't understand it. Who's Ovmala?"

Eddas smiled at me. "It's for a dwarf to tell, not me."

Mungim nodded. "Aye. Ye all be friends, and will not mock our beliefs, so I will yet tell it. It be an ancient story, part o' our religion, and part o' the tale o' how we did come to be. I be yet no storyteller, but I will yet try," Mungim said, and removed his hat, clearing his throat.

"After Moradim did yet make the first dwarf and the first dwarf-wife, they were yet made o' iron, as Moradim had yet forged them. But iron can yet have no get. Thus, Moradim did give six stone vessels to Ovmala, the first dwarf-wife, in which to yet catch the seed of her mate, and do grow her children. Moradim then did say to the couple, "Guard ye well these six vessels, dwarf-to-dwarf-maid three-to-three, and do protect them from harm - for an ye should not, there shall be no more o' ye in the world." And the first dwarf did take up his axe, and did guard the cave, while the first dwarf-wife did yet watch o'er her mate's seed close-like. The goblins did yet not wish this to happen, as they did know the dwarves were to yet live in the underlands beside them, and they did yet not wish to share. So, the first goblin-wife did yet devise a cunning plan, and did share it with her husband. In those days, none did yet know evil save the goblins, all were as children. So, the first goblin did slip away to the forests where the first elf and the first elf-maid did yet live, and he did speak to them sweetly and kindly, but with hidden guile. "Come to the mountain, elf, come, come. See the new creatures that Moradim has made. Dance and sing for them, elf, and let them do laugh and play with ye." And the elves did, for they were as much children as the dwarves yet were in those early days. And passing beautiful was the elf-maid, and she did enchant the first dwarf, and he did lay down his axe, and did dance with her. And passing lovely was the song of the first elf, and he did enchant the dwarf-maid. Yet, she did greatly fear to leave the vessels, should the ill Moradim warned of befall them. But, the elf did yet sing sweetly, and slowly he did soften her heart, and at last she did rise from the cave, and she did dance and sing in the sunlight with him. Then did the first goblin sneak in with a hammer, and did yet begin to smash the vessels. At the sound, the dwarves returned, and the goblin ran in fear - but, the damage was done. Three-to-three were but three-to-one. The dwarf did take up his axe, and did raise it to the heavens. "I did abandon me work to dance and play, and it were yet nearly the doom of us! Ne'er again shall I yet abandon work to play, and cursed be the dwarf who e'en think to do such!" And the dwarf maid did weep over the lost vessels, and was much heart-broke. "I were yet afeared this would yet happen, and it did. Henceforth, all me daughters shall yet feel the same fear, and shall ne'er abandon hearth and home to sing and dance and play in the sunlight." And from that day the dwarves did yet also hate the goblins, and did war on them for their evil. In time, the goblins did wound the elves in secret, in a story that be their own, and they, too, did war on the goblins. Yet, despite a common enemy, there was yet ever after mistrust between the dwarves and the elves, and we did occasionally war on each other from time to time thereafter. And that be a story from the time-before-time. Hail Moradim," Mungim said, then placed his hat back on his head as his brothers made the fist-to-palm clap they had made before.

"That's a very sad story," Kiriin said, and sighed a little pixie-sigh.

"Very," Orissa agreed, sighing.

"Oh, my..." I said, looking at Mungim. "But did it really happen like that? Are the elves' stories the same?"

Taliad smiled at me. "Our stories are nothing like that, no. None of my people had never heard of *Melti-Ubo* until Eddas mentioned it, and he only mentioned it in passing, he didn't explain it. I learned what it was from Mungim and Father Patience, and I myself am probably the only elf in the world who knows about the problem."

Mungim grinned at Taliad. "Thy people were yet lazy in those days, Taliad, and did laugh and play in the forest while ours did scribe our history," he said, then winked as Taliad laughed and Kiriin giggled. "Nay, nay, I do but jest," he said, chuckling, then looked back to me. "*Melti-Ubo* be not a secret, lass, it be common knowledge. As to whether the story be true, well, we do yet believe it to be true, as far as any story o' the time-before-time be true."

Eddas smiled at me. "All the races have stories of their origins, Sasha, and other things that happened before the formation of the Arc of Time. And the mathematics of the Arc of Time show that any of them could be true, or even *all* of them could be true, all at once - despite any contradiction or paradox. Reality was not firmly fixed back then, magic was the Will and the Word and could be used by anyone, all of existence was malleable and in flux, and paradox was a tool of any mortal or god. The Arc of Time established Causality, and many of the physical laws of the universe we know of today, as everything stems from Causality. It also removed Paradox from the hands of mortals and left it as a weapon of the gods alone, and from then on *mana* could only be manipulated by those with the *Talent*. So, it's as Mungim said - it's as true as any story from the time-before-time, of which any of them might be true, or even all of them at once."

"And paradox is... Well, like what we experienced. I went back to a time before I was born, to do things I'd already done."

Eddas smiled again. "Correct, Sasha. I see you've been talking to your sister."

"Actually, I kind of figured that out on my own, after listening to you talk about it long enough," I

replied, and smiled, noticing Corvid grinning at me.

"Lunch!" Joy called, walking out with a large tray and two large wheels of cheese upon it - one of which looked suspiciously familiar.

"Ah! Mungim, can we borrow that folding display table of yours to serve lunch on?"

"Oh, aye, Eddas, aye!" Mungim replied, eyeing the cheese.

"I'll yet get it!" Balar called, trotting over to his wagon.

"Good, thank you," Eddas replied, rising. "I'll get us another pot of *byallar* and more cups."

"It's already hot and ready, the cups are on the table upstairs," Joy replied as Balar trotted back with the table and his brothers quickly unfolded its wooden legs.

"Well, I'm certainly not running up four flights of stairs and back down again," Eddas replied, then gestured, muttering a quick spell, and vanished. A few moments later, the air shimmered and Eddas reappeared, holding a *byallar*-pot by its handle, a padded hot-pad, and a stack of cups tucked carefully into the crook of one arm, pinned in place with her chin. Mungim took the pot, and Eddas nodded. "Thank you. It's actually *immensely* difficult to cast when you're juggling cups about."

"Walking would have been easier, Old Man," Joy replied, grinning as she set the cheese on the table.

"True, but hardly as challenging," Eddas replied with a wink, laying out the cups and the hot-pad, then setting the pot atop the hot-pad. "Now," she said, producing her knife, "I'd like each of you to try a slice of this, and tell me what you think."

We all tried a slice of the cheese, and I nodded. It was very similar to the cheese I made on Round Island. "Nice," I replied.

Frarim nodded. "Yes... It reminds me of the cheese your cook, Kylinae, used to make into fondues, Eddas. Very nice."

Corvid shook his head. "Never quite had anything like it, but it's good."

Mungim nodded. "Oh, aye, it be quite nice. It do lack the tang o' dwarven cheese, but it be quite good."

Taliad, however, closed his eyes for a moment. "Far better than nice, to my tongue, it's supernal. A delicious, elegantly sharp flavor, yet backed with a round, mellow sweetness. Gorgeous. A goat-cheese, almost certainly - it couldn't possibly be human-made, they use cattle in the Southlands. I could fetch a gold for a wheel of this, once the flavor was known among our people."

Eddas smiled. "A bit more than a gold, I think. This is Rhendish White, from eighteen centuries ago, brought back through time by me. As there's only three wheels of it in the entire world and you're eating one of them, I'd have to say it's likely priceless."

Taliad and Mungim gaped, their eyes wide. Taliad found his voice, first. "Eddas! I can't eat this! It's like gobbling down history!"

"Well, I'm not going to build a museum to keep it in, Taliad," Eddas replied, and winked. "It was made to be eaten and enjoyed, and I wanted you all to share it."

"But do you realize I could take a quarter wheel of this to the Queen's castle and easily fetch a

thousand gold for it?!"

"Yes, I do," Eddas replied, grinning. "That's why I intend to send one wheel to the Queen of the Elves and another to the King of the Dwarves, as gifts. I'll send them with you and Mungim - though I've a brief note that goes with each that instructs them they are *not* to put it in a museum, it is intended to be eaten and enjoyed."

"But-but-" Taliad sputtered, and Kiriin giggled.

"As the elves of *Thall-Tasaal* say, *'When the century-flower blooms, one must stop and enjoy it's scent to the fullest, for it shall not come again.'*"

Taliad bowed. "Aye, Eddas. And that you've shared it with me will be a moment I shall treasure all of my days," he replied, and broke off a small piece for Kiriin to try.

"Besides," Eddas continued, reaching with his knife for the other cheese, "I've found this. Try a slice of it, and tell me what you think."

Mungim tried his piece, then nodded. "It be the same, Eddas, or yet very near so. It be much like the difference one do see in cheese betwixt one year and another."

"Or one cheese-farm and another where both are neighbors, yes," Taliad agreed, nodding.

"Ah, but that is *not* Rhendish White. In fact, it has no name I know of -it's a cheese made by a mermaid on a distant island. Quite rare, I don't think she produces many wheels in a year," Eddas said, then looked at me, her eyes twinkling. "Tell me, Sasha - have you decided on a name for this?"

"Err... Well..." I replied, blushing.

"Ye did make this?" Mungim asked, a bushy eyebrow raised.

"A better question," Taliad said, and smiled. "How many wheels of it can you produce in a year?"

"Err... Well... Ummm... I don't have many wheel-molds, it's mostly hand-made blocks. It takes about ten years for it to get that flavor... Ummm... Well, I suppose if I expanded the cheese cellar a bit and I could get some more wheel molds... Oh, and more wax, Marilith conjured some but it's quite difficult to get the consistency perfect, so I have to recycle what little I have... Of course, there's only so much grass and so many goats... Mmm..." I said, and finally shrugged. "Probably eight or nine a year, after what Marilith and I eat."

Marilith nodded. *"No more than that, however, there's only so much milk to go around."*

Taliad and Mungim both started to speak at once, but Eddas over-rode them with a loud voice. *"Aaaaand the mer-folk of Round Island still need certain things. Bronze or perhaps orichalchum spears to hunt and defend themselves with in the sea, something that won't corrode - or won't corrode too swiftly, at least. Armor would probably be useful against the orcas... Tools would be nice, I'm sure, as might many other things."*

Marilith shrugged. *"Well, if there's anything they really need that they can't make themselves, Sasha can make it or I can summon it for them. I suppose the only real advantage to trading would be to build better relationships with the races beyond the Windward Isles. After all, there's more that the mer-folk can offer besides cheese - ivory from orca teeth, pearls... Yanar is very good at seeding and harvesting pearls."*

I nodded. "I agree," I said, then paused as an idea struck me. "I suppose if I was going to give the cheese a name... Well, I'd call it *Vaddan*."

Marilith smiled. *"Very appropriate, Sister, and a lovely way for him to be remembered."*

Eddas bowed to Mungim and Taliad, waving a gloved hand to Marilith and I. "Gentlemen, I present to you a market. It's up to you to figure out how to gain access to it."

Mungim and Taliad both began speaking at once, and Corvid smiled disarmingly. "If I had a ship, I could sail out there once a year to trade with her. A ship large enough to carry a small skiff, so as to sail over the reefs after dropping anchor nearby. And, of course, carry matches and *byallar* and other goods from the Southlands to Vilandia, which would be on the way."

Marilith shook her head. *"And then my sister and I see you for a few days once a year? Oh, no. You'll have to make Round Island your home port, Corvid. You're far too interesting a man to just let sail away into the horizon."*

Corvid smiled wryly. "A ship's crew would likely not make for pleasant company if they sat on a little island, away from their families."

"Perhaps not," Marilith agreed, thinking. *"Well, I had planned on being Eddas Ayar's student in sorcery for a few years, to hone my skills and better understand the limitations of my life here on the material plane. In turn, Sasha was to teach Eddas and Joy what she knew of combat. When that is through, perhaps I may have the skills needed to create an enchanted vessel for you - one that you could sail across the oceans by yourself."*

Corvid chuckled. "And who would load and unload the cargo? I would still need a crew, and keeping that crew from stealing a magic ship... Ah, that would be a challenge."

Frarim shook his head. "An ornithopter would be far better - it would travel faster, as it travels constantly."

Eddas shook her head. "They're gone, Frarim, and I don't know how to make one - Barad and Kardak were the experts on semi-golems, not I. I'd have to rebuild our entire knowledge of semi-golems from basic theory, and that would take decades. All the ornithopters we had were destroyed in the first

few weeks of the war, trying to attack the enemy. Fire-bombs did nothing to them, and they simply blasted the ornithopters with their war-machines as soon as they came within spell range."

Frarim smiled. "There's still one, Eddas. After all, Haifa and her people had far too many belongings to carry in their arms and still hold hands for a spell of returning, and we needed enough supplies to not only survive in the wilderness, but to build me a new tomb. It's interred in the upper chamber of my tomb."

"Oh? What kind is it?"

"A lovely little Yalond *Quadrep*, sleek and fast, the best the Yalond-city shipwrights built at that time. You may remember Lagan, it used to belong to him. He loved racing, and as he was high master at that time, he could afford the best."

"Wait, wait, you *stole* the *high master's racing quadrep*?!" Eddas said, and laughed.

"No, of course not, Eddas. Theft from the Circle would have been a terrible violation of our order's rules," Frarim replied, then winked. "Haifa stole it for me, and didn't tell me what she was about until she had that poor little skeleton I was then safely aboard it. She told me that after listening to my explanation of what was about to transpire, she had concluded the high master would have little use for a fifty-thousand gold piece racing *quadrep* by dawn and was highly unlikely to put forth any objection, whereas we had an immediate need for transportation for fifty-odd gorgons and one liche plus cargo. That poor *quadrep* barely got airborne, it was so heavily loaded, and despite my shielding it as best I could and Haifa flitting it about like a magpie on our way out of the city, we were nearly shot down twice. It was actually too bad I was undead at the time, I likely would have enjoyed that night's adventures far more had I actually been able to be afraid of being killed."

Eddas chuckled. "Ah, Frarim, I wish I'd gotten to know Haifa better when I had the chance."

"You still can, Eddas. As I told you, I copied that age-reduction spell I saw in your grimoire when I had it. She still lives, and today is literally an Ancient One for her tribe. When I am not performing the duties Yorindar requires of me, my time is spent with her and her tribe, as they guard my tomb. Their territory encompasses the Yeldring bogs and a good portion of the Vorgriddan swamp."

"Ah, I haven't explored that area since my awakening in this body, I loathe mosquitoes," Eddas replied.

"Haifa's people have an oil they make from certain plants that repels insects, as they don't like them much, either," Frarim replied, and winked.

"Oh?" Taliad said, an eyebrow raised. "I'll have to make my way there next year to see what they might wish to trade for that."

"Not if I do yet beat ye there, elf," Mungim replied, and they shared a chuckle.

Frarim nodded. "I'll tell her you two may be coming, so her people can watch for you. The best place to meet them would be near league marker eighty-five on the Old North Road, it passes through the Yeldring bog there and they've an outpost near it that they use to trade with the lamias. Mind the trolls, however, there's still a few of them left that Haifa's people haven't killed off yet."

"Aye, that we will," Mungim replied, and Taliad nodded.

Frarim then looked back to Eddas. "Haifa will be pleased to know you remember her kindly, Eddas. She liked you, as well - though she thought you were a bit too concerned with your image. Always preening, never a hair out of place..."

"That part hasn't changed much," Joy replied, smiling as Eddas glowered at her.

"Soooo," Corvid said, trying to inject himself into the conversation. "You would give me a ship - how large is it?"

Frarim shrugged. "Oh, about as wide across the beam as your skiff, my son, and about twice as long."

"Well... That might be large enough to sail the ocean, yes, but it would be tricky unless it had a high freeboard."

"No, my son, it's a racing *quadrep*, a type of ornithopter. Though it will float in water if you're forced to land over water by the weather, the wings would eventually get waterlogged even folded, and it would be quite impossible to handle in water. No, my son, it's meant to fly in the sky."

"A ship that *flies?!'*" Corvid replied, astonished.

Taliad nodded. "Enchantments reduce it's weight, and power the wings. One of the greatest accomplishments of the Hyperboreans, young friend, and an absolutely priceless item."

"Nay, their roads be their greatest work, to a dwarf," Mungim replied.

"I would *love* to have that!" Corvid said. I could see in his eyes he was already dreaming of the skies.

"It's yours, my son, I do not need it. It will take time to extract it from my tomb, however - and even then, there's still the matter of teaching you to fly it, and working out what you'll carry aboard it, and where."

"Hmmm..." Corvid replied, stroking his chin. "There's also the matter of how to defend it. I can see quite a few people who would want to take such a ship from me, if they could. And I'd still need help loading and unloading barrels of *byallar* and other heavy things..."

Eddas shrugged. "Well, as to defending it, I've two suits of orichalchum armor the Golannin wore, as well as their axe-staves and repeating crossbows. I could animate the two of them as golems, then order them to obey your commands. They'd be an ideal crew. The armor is invulnerable, enchanted piece by piece, and all those enchantments would have to be removed before they could be made into golems, though... Oh, and I'd need cork or other light wood to fill them with, or you'd lose them if they fell overboard into water in bad weather. I think Sasha said there's quite a bit of cork on her island, however, so that's little worry."

Corvid grinned. "A flying ship and a magic crew? Well, if there's any other problems, I'll just figure out how to work around them, that's more than I ever could have asked."

Mungim nodded. "Good - now let us do discuss the matter o' thy trading route, lad, and how ye might yet turn a profit."

"And how I might get some of that cheese," Taliad added. "After the queen tries Eddas' cheese, I'm certain that a highly rare, modern cheese that tastes identical will be quite valuable to certain elves who possess interesting things I'd like to trade for."

"Oh, aye, and let us not forget pearls and ivory," Mungim agreed with a nod.

"It was on the tip of my tongue, friend," Taliad replied, smiling.

"And how we might finish lunch!" Kiriin said, grinning. "More cheese, please!"

The assembled friends burst into laughter as Eddas filled their *byallar*-cups.

Epilogue I - The Raven.

"So, I missed them, it seems," Arella said, glancing over the trees of my lands.

I could tell Arella was attempting to conceal her annoyance as she sipped at her *byallar*. She leaned back in her chair on the parapet of my tower, the warm spring breeze flitting a strand of her copper-red hair and ruffling her gold-trimmed red-velvet robe, her black leather waist-belt looking perfect about her slim waist. She was the picture of human beauty - though, I supposed, given that she was a sorceress and nearly two hundred years old, this was to be expected. On her shoulder, her familiar and my little friend Swift-wing sat, smoothing his feathers. He'd had nothing to add to the conversation so far, but his aloof demeanor, for him, meant he had something on his mind.

It was rare Arella came to visit, these days. Usually, she simply sent Swift-wing alone to chat with me, exchange news, and so on. When I'd come to finish the education of Parial's children, decades ago and before Joy and I became mates, I'd been desperately lonely. Of course, I knew the reason why it had to be that way, by then, and simply lived with it. Arella was constantly busy, then, and rarely had more than an hour or so to spend with me each day - she was always busy doing something, it seemed. Meetings with the king or his ministers, replying to letters from various mages in the Southlands, meeting occasionally with a mage who came to discuss sorcery or a physicker who came to discuss a new unguent or philter... She was always busy. She was even more busy a few years ago, after Joy and I became mates, when I was again at Steelgate to train Parial's grandchildren. In eight months there, she barely had eight words for me. Today, caring for the king's health was one of her primary duties, of course, and Parial was now very old - she simply did not have time to visit. It was, of course just part and parcel of her life, and her increasing importance to the kingdom. Still, once I'd begun to relate the story of traveling back through time, Arella suddenly appeared. *That* event, and the sheer impossibility of it, apparently was enough to pique her interest as a mage, and draw her to visit again.

I smiled pleasantly. "They'll be back, Arella. Sasha and Marilith will return here tomorrow. They'll go home again to visit their little island one day a week each week until their training is completed in a few years, but they'll be here, you can meet them. Corvid, too, will be here from time to time. I'm working on

a few items he'll need if he's to survive as a tool of the gods - not the least of which is a ring of flight, so a simple spill out of that ornithopter doesn't spell his doom. You'll be able to catch him between training sessions with Frarim as he learns how to fly that ornithopter, and likely accompanies Marilith and Sasha from the island in his spare time. And Frarim you'll meet, I'm certain. My old master is not going to stay away too long, he and I have far too much history to share, and stories to tell. I suppose the only person you really missed was Orissa - she's gone back home, today, Sasha and Marilith have taken her."

"Yes, of course," Arella replied, and lifted another thin slice of Rhendish White from the tray beside her. "Quite delicious, Raven."

I smiled politely. "I'm glad you like it. How are things with the king?"

"I know you lose track out here in the wilderness, Raven, but it's seventeen-ninety. Parial's ninety-seven," Arella replied tartly. "I'm giving him the same herbs I gave his grandfather to keep his mind sharp, but his heart is fading. I doubt he'll live too much longer."

"I know how old he is, Arella, and I know the date," I replied quietly.

Suddenly, Swift-wing lifted his head, his beady black eyes glaring at Arella. "Mistress, just stop it, the scars are gone."

Arella blinked at her familiar, startled. "What?"

"Just stop it!" Swift-wing repeated, his voice a raven's scream. "Just stop it!" he screamed again, flying off Arella's shoulder to land on mine. "You left him here! You left him alone! He healed the scars that maimed your face, he taught you everything you know, he loved you deeply as his dearest and most cherished friend! And you repaid him *how?! You left him alone and he nearly died!* He had *no one!* He nearly *died of loneliness!* Then you came back and loved him again, he gave you immortality and youth out of his love for you, and you *left him again!* He came back to you, helping to train Noril and Dawn, and you *condescended* to touch him again - but you *couldn't* leave him because he was *there* in the *castle* and *wasn't going away*, so instead, you pointed *Tybalt* at him! *Tybalt!* Then he saved the kingdom, saved the king and *saved your life*, bringing you back from the brink of *death*, and you *left him again!* Over and over and over again! Well, now he has Joy, not you! *That's as it should be!*

Now you're alone and you have no one, and it's been like that for a hundred and seventeen years! *That's as it should be, too!* You don't deserve him! After what you've done, you don't deserve *anyone!* All you ever did was leave him, over and over and over again, because you know in your heart he's a man and you just *could not accept that Mariah is dead, dead, dead, and a man loved you!*"

"*He never loved me, he loved Dyarzi, and she is dead!*" Arella shouted.

"No, he *always* loved you as his dearest and most cherished friend, and Dyarzi let him go over *eighty years ago* and *you know it!* You *never* loved him, you only loved *that body!* How many times did you try to convince him that his change meant he was now really a woman? How many times did you try to get him to deny what he really was, just so you could be comfortable with him?! Answer me! How many times?! Do you remember?! *I do!* I remember hundreds of times over the years! You never loved him, you loved Mariah, you wanted to convince him he was a woman and *replace her with him but it didn't work because the truth is he is a man and you knew it so you left him!*"

"Why you...!" Arella yelled, raising her hand to begin a sorcerous gesture.

"Oh, *NO!*" Swift-wing shrieked, flapping into the air, then hovering. "There! *NOW* I'm clear! You want to kill me, fine, but you're not hurting *him* again! One man cut you, one man healed you! One man murdered your lover, one man loved you! They are not the same man! The scars are gone! They've been *gone* for *one hundred and fifty-six years!* Stop acting like they were still there! *Just stop it!*"

Arella lowered her hand, then buried her face in her hands and sobbed as Swift-wing landed on my shoulder again.

It was generally unwise to get between a familiar and their master when they had a disagreement - no matter how it worked out, anyone that came between them would always come out with the worst of it. There was, quite literally, no one who knew Arella's mind better than Swift-wing. After all, he *shared* her consciousness. He *heard* her thoughts - and she his, if she wished. She, of course, could close her end of the connection, becoming deaf to his thoughts. He, however, could not. He *knew* what she was thinking, and *why*. This made a familiar, even a tiny one like Swift-wing, a powerful ally and confidante, particularly as the years passed and they grew older and wiser. It also made them a *very* poor choice of people to annoy. I sipped quietly at my cup of *byallar*, and simply waited.

"I told you before I should have been *your* familiar, not hers," Swift-wing muttered.

"But then she truly *would* have no one, little friend. At least, this way, she has you."

"True."

Arella struggled to control her sobs. "Raven-"

"His *name*," Swift-wing shrieked, "is *Eddas Ayar! Master Battle Mage, Founder of the Eddasic Circle, Father of the New Hyperborean Race, Savior of the Southlands and the Raven of Yorindar!* He was dubbed Dame Raven and Defender of the Realm by Darian because *you* allowed it to happen, your resistance to Darian's *stupid* idea was *half-hearted at best and Joy needed your support to sway his feeble mind and you didn't give it!* He was stuck in this half-elf's body at first because it was too weak to cast a spell to alter it, then later was locked into this form *saving the kingdom!* He *lives* with the name 'Dame Raven' in the Southlands because it causes less problems than constant explanations, but that is *not* his name, it is his *rank and title!* His *name* is *Eddas Ayar, try using it!*"

I went back to sipping my *byallar*. It was apparent this wasn't going to be a short spat.

Arella sobbed for many long moments before she tried again. "Eddas... I... It's just that I'm-"

"No, no!" Swift-wing snapped. "Start again, you're *not* going to ask him that! I don't *care* what you think, you're *never* going to get back into bed with him, all you'd do is offend the *hell* out of Joy even if you managed to succeed in convincing him and she's the *Queen Mother of Larinia*, she *never* gave up her crown, you have a *duty* to not dishonor her and you damn well don't deserve him even if she allowed it to happen so that's *right* out!"

I gazed out across the trees of my lands, watching the wind ripple the flowers like waves on the ocean.

Joy, fortunately, had not returned from her brief visit to the guarderobe. Perhaps she heard the shouting and decided it was wisest to wait until it was over. I sincerely hoped that was the case.

"E-Eddas... I'm sorry..."

"That's a good beginning, yes, you most certainly owe at least an apology. Continue," Swift-wing said, preening his feathers.

"Eddas... You told me once I was a pawn of Yorindar, and my duty was in the Southlands, with Darian and his children. You're the Raven of Yorindar... You have his ear... Please... Tell him I'm lonely..."

"Better suggestion: You stop pushing people out of your life," Swift-wing replied. "You won't let *anyone* near you, and every time a man of the Larinian court tries, you push them away. I know what you want. You want Mariah. She's *dead*. And if you're expecting a sapphite woman to approach you, the *Court Wizardess of Larinia*, you've *really* got another think coming. The scandal would *destroy* you, *wreck* everything you've built, and the scandal would shake the very foundations of government to its roots. You are *not* going to risk the *entire future of a nation of millions* just because *you, one sapphite woman*, are suffering from a bit of loneliness and concupiscence. *Absolutely not*. Start again."

"I can't! I can't! There's nothing else to say!" Arella sobbed.

"Try *'I'm sorry, I was wrong, I'm walking around every day wearing a mask I have to wear to do what I have to do but inside I am dying of loneliness, please help me find a solution.'* There's something to say. And it's a feeling he can understand very well. You made him feel the same for decades on end."

"Eddas... I'm sorry. I was wrong. And yes, it's true. I walk around the castle with this... Mask. Like the *chatto*-face you told me about. Control, rigid control. Like a mask, I wear it because I have to. But inside... I hurt, Eddas. I'm lonely... Help me... Please..."

Swift-wing looked to me silently, and I realized it was finally my turn to speak. "Well, Arella... I can try to help you, but you'll have to do something quite difficult, for you."

"What is it?"

"Sit there, and don't leave," I replied, and rose to my feet.

Swift-wing fluttered off my shoulder to sit on the back of my chair. "Lovely, lovely, thank you. Feel free to take a few whacks more, she knows she deserves it."

"One was enough. It's been a hundred and seventeen years, little friend, I really *have* gotten over her."

"Oooh, good one, nice."

I sighed - that didn't quite come out the way I'd wanted. "No. What I meant was that for me, it is long since over, and I've forgiven her ages ago. There's an old Hyperborean saying... *'It takes two to dance the jappa.'* I made mistakes, and she made mistakes. For me, it's over. I forgave her mistakes long ago, and she remains a dear friend. For her, it was never over, because it was never really about me to begin with."

"Very kind," Swift-wing replied, nodding. "It's too bad she doesn't deserve it. You're right, it was never about you. It was always about Mariah. I know her mind. For her it was always about her loneliness and concupiscence. Yes, she liked you as a friend. But that is all. She never loved you, Eddas. She loved that body - the mask Yorindar made you wear to serve his purposes. And every time she got a peek at the man behind the mask, it made her skin creep. Each time, she tried to convince both you and herself that you were really a woman named Raven, not an ancient liche named Eddas Ayar, a creature from beyond the grave. And when that didn't work, when she finally realized she could neither convince you nor herself, she started pushing you away. It was worse after the mana-storm changed you. You looked the same to me, all you mammals still look very much alike to me. But to her, that body became perfect, in her eyes... Idealized beauty, impossible beauty. Surreal beauty. To the point of being eerie. All as one would expect from the Raven of Yorindar. But it was a mask of beauty a hundred times more perfect than she could ever attain. And behind the mask, you were still a man. Still a man, and still a

liche, a long-dead sorcerer from a dead civilization. So she pushed you away. She still thinks of you as a friend, yes. But even now, she is thinking of her friend, Raven, not the man, Eddas Ayar. And now she hears me say it, she knows it's true, and she is both afraid of what you are, and ashamed at her betrayal. Yes, you're very kind to her, Eddas Ayar. But she doesn't deserve it, and she knows it."

I turned and walked off the parapet into my room, *truly* glad I did not have a familiar.

Joy stood near the stairs, leaning against the wall. As she saw me, she stood, crossing her arms. "He couldn't take it anymore, I gather?"

"Well, Joy, he *is* almost a hundred and sixty," I replied, and sighed. "You told me her problem a century ago, the night Cordo attacked me here in my tower, and he's just said the same thing. She wanted Raven, not Eddas Ayar. It's not surprising he would eventually get tired of it. He *has* had to listen to her thoughts every day and night of his life, after all, and he's hardly the insecure, ignorant little bird you and I knew over a hundred and fifty-six years ago. I suppose it would be worse if he was a cat, as a familiar they reach this point mentally quite a bit sooner, usually after only thirty years. I should tell you the story sometime of Mage Brachos and his cockatrice familiar. Oh, *that* ended poorly, to say the least."

Joy nodded. "Well, once I had the gist of it, I used that ring you gave me, Old Man, and popped over to Iolo Mountain to see your daughters. Lyota says Melia's the only unattached adult right now. She's been busy working with the dryads and centaurs, recording their history, and just never allowed herself time to develop a relationship. Lyota said she'd ask Melia if she might be willing to meet with Arella, and she said she'd explain Arella was desperately lonely, and a sapphite. Likely little will come of it, but..." Joy said, and held up her hands helplessly.

"Well, Arella's a hundred and eighty-seven and Court Wizardess of Larinia, Melia's a hundred and eleven and master-rank of her circle... At least that puts her as something near a peer to Arella. Maybe..." I said, and sighed again. "If nothing else, at least she'll be someone to talk to," I finished, and Joy nodded.

Arella wore a mask, certainly. The mask of the aloof Court Wizardess. And, certainly she has needed it to do what she needed to do. But, as much as she has worn a mask, so have I - the mask of this body, the Raven of Yorindar. And from what Swift-wing had said, the simple truth was that Arella loved the mask. The man behind it, she cared little for, and preferred not to think about. That, in the end, was what Swift-wing finally could tolerate no longer.

I wasn't certain how I felt about it. Swift-wing was right, I could remember hundreds of times Arella would console me when I was feeling morose or angry about my fate, trying to tell me that I was no longer a man, and needed to accept myself as a sapphire woman, just as she was. Yet, as I thought about it, I wondered if she would have felt the same were the situation reversed, and she was required to be the Court Wizard of Larinia, trapped in the body of a man. Would she have casually assumed the garb and mannerisms of a man, easily welcoming the change, courting women as a man, coupling... Or would she have looked down at herself, her missing breasts, the genitalia so different, the body hair... And felt mutilated, mourning the loss of what she once was?

A question I would have to ask Swift-wing, another time. Yet, somehow, I already knew what the answer would be. In the end, only Joy and my daughters could see beyond the mask - my daughters with their eyes, and Joy with her heart.

The air shimmered near Joy, and suddenly a white-robed Hyperborean woman stood nearby. Melia grinned, tossing her ebon ringlets of hair as she looked around, then spotted me and dashed over to hug me. "Father!" she yelped.

I hugged Melia back, then explained the situation in a terse summary.

"She sounds like she at least needs someone to talk to," Melia replied. "I can't promise anything more, Father, I don't even know her."

"That will do, dear, I wouldn't ask for more, anyway. She may have a wound, but it's one she gave herself, and you're not a bandage." Of course, Melia, like all her sisters and nieces, could see the third astral layer - the soul itself. She would be instantly able to judge what kind of person Arella was and what her feelings were just with a glance - and if Arella hadn't changed *too* much, Melia would at least like her, and perhaps become her friend. Anything more than that, however, would likely depend on Arella.

Melia and I walked through the door to the parapet. Arella was still sitting there, sobbing, and Melia's eyes widened.

My eyes, of course, just saw a sobbing woman. Melia, however, could see Arella's soul, and Arella was in great pain - the kind of soul-crushing pain I felt when she had left me alone for decades and decades on end. Yorindar is, in the end, a very fair god. Some of my pain was necessary, as part of a balancing effect to protect my daughters and their mothers, Yorindar and Vyleah using the Law of Karmic Balance to keep them safe. But, in time, Pelia and all her women, still technically my courtesans, would have their day of reckoning, as well, when the balance was redressed. Frarim, I knew, would play a part in that, and possibly even Faral. Pelia and her women, whom I had given children to through sorcery time and time again at great pleasure for themselves and none for myself, still did not touch me despite that they were technically still my courtesans. They had dreamed of having me, the Last Man of Hyperborea, restored to my former self, and could not touch the eerie, surreal beauty of the Raven of Yorindar. But, in truth, I never was the Last Man of Hyperborea - and now, there were three of us. Yes, in time, there would be a day of reckoning for them, as well. But, I did care for them - each and every one of them. So, I had kept the knowledge of Frarim's existence from them, to protect them as long as I could. Someday, the balance would be redressed, and they would suffer as Arella was suffering. But, not today.

"Oh, my!" Melia yelped, darting over to Arella. "Oh, dear, oh, dear..." she muttered, gesturing briefly and producing a kerchief with sorcery. "Now, now... Come, let's dry your eyes," Melia said, daubing gently at Arella's face.

Arella looked up, flustered, and Swift-wing suddenly snapped "Don't!"

"Err... Pardon?" Melia asked.

"I was talking to her," Swift-wing replied. "She was about to say something *truly* stupid - specifically, she was going to say 'leave me alone.' But she doesn't want to be left alone, it's just a reflex for her, now. What she wants is a shoulder to cry on. What she *really* wants is for Joy to conveniently curl up and die, Eddas to suddenly love her as Raven, and basically to have the clock rewind about a century and a half so she can try everything all over again and maybe get it right this time. But that isn't going to happen, she's *hardly* the Raven of Yorindar to go popping about in time willy-nilly, so that's that. Now, mistress, she's offering you a kerchief. The proper response is "thank you", not "go away." Take it and use it, you've got icky stuff coming out your nose."

Joy clapped her hands over her mouth, turning away from the door in silent convulsions of laughter. As for me, I rolled my eyes. I was *supremely* glad I did *not* have a familiar.

* * *

Hours later, Arella and Swift-wing had gone back to Steelgate, using a spell of returning. Melia was sitting at the table in my room with us, sharing a cup of *byallar*. "Well, Father... She's agreed to meet me tomorrow at our village in Iolo mountain. She's really rather nice, and she likes me - but she has quite a bit of sadness to work out, really. I think we could be friends, in time."

I nodded. "I hope so, Melia. I've known her many years, and deep inside, she is a wonderful, special person."

Melia smiled. "Actually, Father, you can't see her soul - she's really a bit shallow and a touch self-centered, I'm sorry to say. I know you care for her, and her affection kept you going during those early years. But, all she can see is the surface, Father. She *is* a good person, and in time, she'll open her heart again, I think. But she's not quite as sweet as you think. She may be seventy or eighty years older than me, but she still has a bit of growing up to do."

Joy smiled. "Likely Swift-wing will help her with that."

"Likely so," Melia agreed, nodding, then looked at me. "Err... Father, I just realized... I thought you said you lost your feathers when you were taken prisoner by the city guards in Wilanda-city?"

I nodded, my mind still on Arella, and what Melia had said. "Yes, I did. I was literally plucked, I suppose," I said, and chuckled.

"Ummm... Then where did you get *those* raven feathers?" she asked, pointing at my head.

Joy looked at me, then did a double take. "Ummm... Old Man, where *did* you get those feathers? You

weren't wearing them this morning, and I didn't even notice them until now."

I smiled. "I found them in my drawer while Melia was talking to Arella and you were working on a new pot of *byallar*, Joy. They were in the same place I always keep them. If they're not the same feathers I lost, they're identical. Yorindar, again, and more paradox. I'm not even going to *attempt* to figure out how they got there. I'm just glad Yorindar thought to return them to me. After all, a raven without feathers really felt *quite* odd," I replied, and both Joy and Melia burst out laughing.

Epilogue II - The Owl.

Haifa stretched in her bed, the afterglow of a tender moment setting her hair to undulating sinuously. Outside, night had fallen, and the cool breeze that wafted between the stone pillars brought the sounds and scents of the night-time swamp. Already, the voices of hundreds of nearby frogs were beginning their evening chorus, accompanied by the omnipresent buzz of insects, and led by the lonely call of a night-bird echoing in the approaching gloom. Here, in the center of the swamp, the sturdy island that Frarim had raised ages ago to both build his tomb under and a stone temple atop, the sounds of life were endless, vibrant, and warming. The tree-city of Haifa's people surrounded the island for a league, wooden walkways and small houses in the branches of ancient cypress, suspended high above the dark waters below. Haifa rolled onto her side, then reached out with her hand, running her fingers through Frarim's beard. "I am glad you have returned, husband," she said, enjoying the scent and taste of him that a dozen eager strands of her hair sensed with flickering tongues.

"I'm glad to have returned, wife," Frarim replied, smiling as he stroked her bare hip.

"You bring good news, as well. Now that the onus of paradox is lifted, we can more fully participate in the rebuilding of these lands. Working with the traders, then perhaps speaking directly to Eddas Ayar, working with him, learning... He is wise, husband. Our sisters, the lamias, have told us many stories carried by the dwarven trader, Mungim. There is much we could learn from him. I worry, though... What can we offer in return? Does Eddas have any needs?"

Frarim shrugged. "He has little needs, as he always did. Even in his first life, he was really a very simple person. He had servants because it was expected for one of his station to have servants. All he has ever needed was a wife, love. A wife who would hold him in the darkness of a warm evening, support him when his spirits were low, cajole him when he needed encouragement... And box his ears from time to time when he needed that, as well," Frarim replied, and chuckled. "And all that he has, in Joy."

Haifa sighed. "Then there is nothing we can offer him."

Frarim smiled. "I didn't say that. You can offer him something he values incredibly. In fact, you and I can both offer him something he values beyond measure."

"Oh? What?" Haifa asked eagerly.

"Knowledge, Haifa."

"Err... Knowledge?"

"Yes. The history, culture and language of your people. What I learned studying the Fell War. We have a great deal of knowledge between you and I, Haifa, and to him, knowledge is literally priceless." Frarim chuckled, shaking his head. "It was Yorindar's intent that I teach him to be a scholar and researcher, though I knew it not at the time. I did my job well - too well, perhaps. He became my

apprentice in the Dyclonic Circle at the age of twelve, and he was both my best and my favorite student, closer to me than if he were my own child. And the result..." Frarim chuckled again. "His spell-book was astounding. It was precisely as I taught him to make a spellbook, Haifa. Just as I taught all the apprentices I taught. But, Haifa... *No* mage keeps his spellbook *completely* orderly, there's always a bit of untidiness here, cribbed notes there... Ah, but not his. His was perfect. *"A proper battle-mage's grimoire is not a notebook - it is a reference tool, and a weapon of war,"* I often told my apprentices. And, Eddas took that to heart, it seems. Even with over three hundred spells in it, now, the largest collection of spells I have ever heard of, possibly the largest in *history*... Not to mention maps, tables, formulae and other useful reference information he'd bound into the back as an appendix... It was still perfectly numbered on each page, with a precise index in the front, all just as I'd taught him," Frarim said, and chuckled again, shaking his head. "Quite convenient when I needed to search it quickly, back then - but still amazing to me, all the same. He is a creature of order, Haifa. Order, stringent discipline, and filled with the same love of scholarship and research that I tried to instill in all my apprentices. He said I was like a second father to him... I think I may have been. But if so, the son has grown, and now stands taller than even the father ever dreamed. Today, he values knowledge more than a dwarf values gold, Haifa. And his treasure hoard of accumulated knowledge is now *very* broad and *very* deep, indeed."

"I see..." Haifa said, thinking.

"Oh - and of course, friendship. He is, in the end, a very lonely man, and always was. He killed himself when his quest for Dyarzi failed, ending his first life. And he nearly did again twice in his second life, before Joy entered his life and gave him someone to love, again. He is the Raven of Yorindar, Haifa, and the mask Yorindar's necessity has forced on him weighs heavily on his soul. You and I are both from his time. We *remember*. And we can share those memories, and share friendship with him. That, he would value much."

Haifa smiled. "Is he still as picky about his looks as he was when I knew him?"

Frarim grinned. "More so, if anything. But, that's as it should be. The Raven of Yorindar is literally Yorindar's *Krigat*, his Warrior in the vast *chatto*-match the gods play among themselves - and often, his King. An immaculate appearance is a must, for him, so his mask will always give the proper impression to mortals he has to deal with."

Haifa leaned in to her husband, kissing him lovingly, then lay back, smiling. "Ah, husband... Everything is perfect. Better and stronger alliances for our people, joining the growing trade network, knowledge and learning..." she said, then smiled again as the sound of distant drums and pipes came to her ears. "And even a lovely young man you brought us from the Southlands. Quite wonderful."

"Err... My dear," Frarim said, looking to Haifa, "that young man has other things to do. He's only here to learn how to fly the ornithopter, that's all. He is destined to be the mate of Sasha and Marilith, and in time will be their rock, much as Joy is for Eddas. I told you of Sasha and Marilith - they are servants of the Ocean, Yorindar's ally, and a strong bond between Yorindar's servants and the servants of the Ocean is quite important." Frarim chuckled. "I *sincerely* hope you didn't decide it was alright to allow the younger girls to perform the dance of seven veils for him, my dear, that would cause quite a bit of unnecessary complications."

"Ummm... Oops!" Haifa yelled, then leapt out of bed, reaching for her robe. "I'll be right back!" she called, pulling on her robe as she dashed out of the room.

Frarim lay back on the bed, and laughed loud and long.

Epilogue III - The Ocean.

"He's dead?" Calla asked, gazing at Absor with an eyebrow raised.

Absor nodded. "Yes, Calla. Two of the children... Err... Jocko's boys... Well, you know them, tell them where they can't go, and they'll go there without fail."

"Much like you, when you were a boy," Calla said, her eyes narrowed.

"True, true. I'm not proud to admit it, but still, I did eventually grow up," Absor replied, smiling. Calla nodded, and Absor continued. "Well, the boys said they peeked in his windows, and he lay on his bed, unmoving. Dead."

"Not asleep?"

"No, the little brats broke his window with rocks because they thought it would be amusing to have him run out and chase them. He didn't. They went back to the window, he hadn't moved. So, naturally, they then tossed rocks at him through the broken window to get him to wake up and chase them. Which, he did not. He's dead, Calla."

Calla snorted. "Well, you're village master, Goddess help us. What do you intend to do?"

"Nothing, Calla," Absor replied, gazing into her eyes. "The village agreed long ago that he would be shunned, and he still is. I told Jocko to beat those boys of his for going where they had been forbidden to go, and I told him if they did it again, I'd punish *him*, not them, and fine him that fat cow of his he's so damn proud of. It's over, Calla. Malik is dead, and we're going to leave him there to rot. Perhaps someday the Goddess will send a storm to wipe the stain of his presence from the south beach. Perhaps she'll leave his shack there as a reminder, until it collapses with age. I don't know. But no man of the village will bury him. I liked Sasha, and I liked Orissa. And with any luck, Malik will pay for them both with an eternity in hell," he said, and spat into the dirt outside Calla's house. After a moment, he shook his head. "I just thought you had a right to know first, Calla, before the rest of the village. You, of all people."

Calla looked Absor over. Gone was the bullying boy of his youth. In his place, a man had emerged, and village master. Perhaps he still had a few rough edges, yes. In fact, quite a few. But as she looked at Absor, she realized he had grown into a good man. Not a perfect man, no. But, still a good man. Slowly, Calla nodded. "Thank you, Absor," she said, and laid a hand atop his forearm lightly. "I appreciate it."

"You're welcome," Absor replied, then smiled. "Now, I'd better get out of here before Hamat comes home, I'd hardly like to have him think I was trying to steal his lovely wife from him."

Calla blinked - she was hardly the beauty she had been in her youth, and she knew it. After a moment, she swatted Absor's shoulder. "You dog! You tease me."

Absor laughed for a moment, then paused as the air shimmered beside them. "What on earth...?"

In the twinkling of an eye, Sasha and two Vilandian women appeared. One, Absor recognized as the woman Sasha had introduced as her sister, when she had visited a month before. The other, Absor did not recognize. She was beautiful, however, appeared to be in her thirties. Somehow, though... She seemed somehow vaguely familiar...

Calla gaped, her eyes wide. "I... *Orissa?!'*" she shrieked.

"*Momma!'*" Orissa replied, holding out her arms.

Calla clutched her chest, staggering. "Goddess... My heart..."

"No, no," Sasha's sister said, reaching out swiftly to catch Calla as she collapsed. "No, no. You'll not die just yet," she said, laying Calla down and gesturing over her. "Beat, heart. Beat, and be strong. You'll not die just yet, Calla. Now would be a particularly bad time. Easy... Easy... There. Heal, and be strong. Yes. Open your eyes... There we are, much better."

"Momma..." Orissa said, kneeling beside Calla, tears streaming down her face.

"Oh, Orissa... I hoped and prayed for this day..." Calla wept, sobbing.

"Come, Sasha - let's help Orissa get Calla inside the house, shall we?"

Sasha smiled. "Yes, sister."

Absor finally managed to find his voice. "Sasha, you... You *found* her?! I know Calla said you left to find her... And you *found* her?!"

Sasha looked to Absor as she and Marilith gently lifted Calla. "No, Absor. I did not find her, for she was never lost. She was in the hands of the Goddess all along, doing what the Goddess needed to be done. Now, she has released her back to Woe. No, Absor, I didn't find her, for she was never lost. The Goddess simply gave me the honor of bringing her home."

"Orissa..." Calla called, reaching out to her daughter as she lay in Sasha and Marilith's arms.

"Yes, Momma?" Orissa asked, wiping her eyes as she stood beside her.

"Swat Absor for me and run him off to fetch your father and brothers, please."

Orissa nodded, reaching out to swat Absor on the shoulder. "You heard Momma, Absor - go fetch Daddy and my brothers."

Absor grinned, then laughed. "Gladly, Orissa, gladly - I hope you don't mind if I fetch the entire village, as well. This is a time to celebrate! Malik is dead, and Orissa and Sasha have returned!" he shouted, then turned to dash away, shouting the good news at the top of his lungs. "*Ho, people of Woe! Orissa and Sasha have returned!*"

"Malik is dead?" Sasha asked.

Calla nodded. "Dead as stone, Sasha, and left to rot in his house on the beach."

Sasha smiled as she and Marilith carried Calla into the house. "Well, Marilith and I can stay for the celebration, but not after, Calla. We have to get back."

"Oh, put me down, girls, I feel fine, now!"

"Sister?" Sasha asked, looking to Marilith.

Marilith nodded. "She should be fine now, Sasha, but rest would be best. Let's place her in that rocking chair I see over there."

A moment later, the deed was done, and Orissa knelt beside her mother's chair, holding her hand. Calla looked to Sasha and Marilith. "Go back, you said? Go back where?"

"Home, first, to the Windward Isles, and my tribe."

"The mer-people you told me about, last time, yes?"

"Yes."

"You showed me... You showed me you could make a tail like a mermaid... Hard to believe, but I touched it, it's real. But you didn't tell me much about your sister, then."

Marilith grinned. "And we still won't," she replied, her eyes twinkling. "I'll tell you that I was in a magical prison for a long, long time - then, Sasha rescued me. We have been together ever since," Marilith said, and hugged Sasha briefly.

Sasha nodded. "More would just be frightening, Calla, and Marilth really is a wonderful person."

Calla nodded. "I imagine it would be, since we found hoof-prints on the beach the day after you left, heading to Malik's shack and back again - and you had no horse when you were here," Calla replied. "Show me anyway."

Marilith nodded, and shifted to her humanoid-equine form, her black dress vanishing to reveal the apodesmos and loincloth she wore.

Calla gazed into Marilith's glowing red eyes for a long moment. "Were you human, once, before that prison?"

"*No. This is my natural form,*" Marilith replied, her voice hollow and eerie as it always was when she was in either of her two normal forms.

Calla gazed at her awhile longer, then nodded. "Not so frightening, though the villagers would likely chase you out of the village with torches and pitchforks just on general principles, I suppose."

Marilith laughed, then her form blurred, returning to that of a barefoot Vilandian woman in a plain black dress. "I suppose they would, yes."

"I know their story, Momma," Orissa said. "I can tell it to you, if you like?"

Calla shook her head, smiling. "No. Hear that? Sounds like the whole village is coming. There will be a celebration, Orissa. We'll dance and sing and feast for awhile, and forget the name of our village for awhile. Everyone will want to hear your story, Orissa - and Sasha's, too. And I suppose you'll likely snip a bit here and there, so as not to frighten us too badly. We are a simple people, at heart. Then these two will go off to Goddess-knows-where, and likely we'll never see them again. But after, Orissa... After. When all the excitement has died down... Then tell me. Tell me your story, and Sasha's, and her sister's. Tell me everything."

Orissa nodded, smiling. "I will, Momma. It's really a lovely story."

Calla nodded. "Good. I'll make sure I have plenty of kerchiefs handy. I can feel a good long cry coming even now. I think-"

But at that moment, the door burst open, Hamat dashing into the house, followed by his sons and a stream of villagers. "Where is she?! Orissa?!"

"Here, Daddy, with Momma!" Orissa shouted, rising.

Hamat dashed into the room, then wrapped his arms around Orissa and hugged her tight, sobbing with joy. "Orissa! My daughter! You're home! You're home! Praise the Goddess!"

"Yes, Daddy, I'm home - home forever," Orissa replied, kissing away his tears.

Sasha and Marilith smiled, exchanging hugs with everyone. And for the rest of that night and into the dawn, the Village of Woe belied its name.

~*~