

Apotheosis

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Prologue One.

"Oh, God, John! The plane! It's going down!"

I could hardly hear her over the screams of the other passengers. All I could do was reach across to her and hug her. We would never see our children or grandchildren again. We would never see another sunrise, or enjoy another sunset. Her screams in my ear were piercing - but I hugged her tight anyway. It was all I could do. At least, we would die in each other's arms.

At the last moment, just before everything flashed a brilliant white, she hugged me back.

Prologue Two.

"Has she gone?" her husband asked, looking up from his sickbed. "Has the witch gone to the temple?"

Ellsbatha nodded. The witch, Vordenai, had left the village, to hike to the temple on the hill. Ellsbatha feared her - in all her twenty-eight years of age, Ellsbatha could think of nothing she feared more, save

perhaps death. "She says... She says the stars are in the proper alignment, Nadar. She says the time is now."

"Can it be done?" Nadar asked weakly.

"She says it can. She knows the Old Ways, beloved. She knows the Words of Power..." Ellsbatha shuddered. "She says..."

"Yes?" Nadar asked, and fell to coughing for a moment.

"She says her great-great grandmother was one of the Coders," Ellsbatha replied, and shuddered again. "Oh, Nadar!" she wept, and hugged her ailing husband as he lay in the bed. "I'm so frightened!"

"It must be done, love... The land is ill... Ravaged by this war... Perhaps even dying," Nadar replied softly. "It must be done, for good or ill."

"But... But to birth a new god..." Ellsbatha whispered. "We all chose, we all agreed... But what have we chosen?"

"We have chosen life, I hope."

Ellsbatha nodded silently, and prayed they had not also chosen death.

One.

"Awaken, Lord..."

The voice was the faintest whisper, the quiet call of a dream... A woman's voice, softened by distance... But not physical distance.

"Hear me, O Lord, and awaken... The Land calls out for you..."

The Land... The way it was spoken, it was more than what the words had once meant to me... It was a place... A world...

"Speak to me, O Lord... Hear the call of your suppliant..."

It was an effort greater than moving a mountain - but I managed to speak. "I hear you."

"O Gracious Lord, arise, and walk the Land! Help us in our time of plight!"

"I... I cannot," I replied, for I knew not how - and even speaking was a monumental effort, and my voice was little more than the whispering of a dying wind over ancient stones.

"What may I do to help you, O Lord?"

"I... What are you doing now?"

"I kneel before your altar, and pray for you to enter the Land, and become the salvation of all."

"Then continue, and perhaps we shall wait, and see..."

Slowly, very slowly, I became aware of pulling... A tugging sensation, drawing me from nowhere to somewhere. Memories flashed in my mind, trying to draw me back to the nothingness... A world of glass and steel, of concrete canyons, and teeming billions... A birth, a life... Marriage, children... Grandchildren... And then death. Finality, completeness. There was nothing more - there could be nothing more, the memories said. All had ended. It was done, finished.

And yet, the insistent tug of the woman's voice continued.

For a brief moment, I stood on a precipice. Would it be the safe and secure finality of nothingness, the knowledge of a life lived well and to completion, or the unknown that drew me forward?

I was curious - I have always been a curious man.

I stretched forward, towards the woman's pull... Towards the unknown.

## Two.

Stone.

My first awareness was of stone.

Not in the sense that I saw stone, or even that I touched stone, but in that I felt stone.

Granite, I once might have called it - though that was hardly what it really was. Blood from the living heart of a planet older than time, cooled in air that had never seen the touch of decay and pollution that a world of teeming billions brings, shaped by energies that were beyond my previous experience, energies I once might have simply called magic...

...and yet, the heart of the stone was unchanged. It was stone. It was the living blood of the Land, cooled and hardened and shaped into...

An altar.

I gazed down for a long moment before I realized that's what it was. An altar of stone, curved slightly like a bowl, and perhaps twenty feet wide, as I once might have measured it, resting atop a pedestal that held its lip six feet above the ground. And yet, I was drawn to the body I saw sitting upon it more than I was to the stone itself. Myself - and yet not.

My hands... Young, fresh and vital, the skin unwrinkled? Somehow, that didn't seem right. I remembered age, great age... Or was that the past?

The altar sat at the base of a low, squat tower of stone, a seamless edifice that rose from the grassy knoll it sat upon as a single piece. No stonecutter had touched any part of this monument - I could sense, without knowing how I could sense it, that the tower was formed in the same manner and at the same moment as the altar. Before the altar, a barefoot woman in dingy, woven-grass dress knelt in the dirt, her head hung low. I knew, without knowing how I knew, that she was exhausted, and dozing. I could feel her heart beat... Sense the soft flow of her breath... And hear the soft whispering of her dozing mind. And as I examined her, she slowly awakened, and looked up to me.

Once, in another life, I would have called her beautiful.

Her hair was black as night, her eyes brown, with a slight epicanthic fold. Her face was bare, unadorned, and yet needed no adornment. Her lips were full, soft... In another life, I might have called them inviting. Beneath the primitive garments she wore, her body was rounded and curved in just the ways I once enjoyed in a woman. Yes, I once might have called her beautiful...

But now, I felt nothing towards her. She simply existed, like the trees of the nearby forest in this small, quiet valley, or the very stone of the altar I sat upon.

"Forgive me, O Lord... I fainted from lack of sleep," she said, bowing her head.

"And hunger," I replied, looking at her and feeling her hunger, without knowing how I could feel it. "You have been here days, with only water to tide you over..."

"Yes, Lord - but it was all worth it. You have arrived. You have awakened."

"And where have I arrived? And why?"

"You are in the Land, my Lord... The world itself. And now, you must choose your name."

"My... My name?" I replied, confused. "I once had a name... Yet... Somehow, it escapes me at the moment."

"Not your old name, my Lord. A new name, reflecting your new life."

"Yes... My new life, certainly, for I remember being dead. And now I am..."

"A god, lord."

I blinked in surprise. "I am God?!"

"No, Lord. You are a god. In time, if you defeat all your rivals, you may become the God of all the Land, but for now, you are merely one of many."

"I cannot be a god. I am... I was a man," I replied, trying to conjure up the memories which had once tried to hold me back - and failing. All I knew was that they had once been, and were no more, just as I had once been, then was not.

"But now, you are more than that, Lord."

"How did this happen?"

"Because of us, Lord. We called you - we, the Godless Ones. But I knew that we did not need another god, an aloof and inhuman being formed from hope and desire and the power of prayer from the emotionless, limitless energies of the Void. We did not need another heartless being who would develop their own desires for power, crushing us like ants beneath their heel when we were no longer useful. We needed someone who would understand us... Someone who would help us, and care for us. So I reached beyond the Void, to the multiverse... Worlds beyond worlds... And drew you to me."

"You are a witch," I said flatly.

"I am called that by some, Lord. I am called Vordenai, by others. I once served the god Allakbeth, before he was destroyed by the god Lysander. Such are the ways of the gods... But that is nothing, Lord," she replied, and waved a hand in dismissal. "Lord, what is more important is that you choose your

name."

"My name?"

"Yes, Lord. You must choose your name, that the people may worship in your name."

"I was dead. You drew me from that..."

"Yes, Lord."

"To serve you," I said, frowning.

"No, Lord - to help us. Please, Lord - choose a name! Without one, you will fade back into the Void soon, and be lost! You need a name to tie you to the Land!"

"A name...?" I said, and paused. After a moment, I shook my head. "Pfft. I was dead, and now you say I'm some kind of god. Well, call me 'Death', if you like."

I don't know what made me say it. The words literally just popped out of my mouth. Perhaps it was annoyance. Perhaps it was simply a growing sense of unease with my new situation. Perhaps it was fate. I don't know.

There was a pause, and for a moment, the entire universe dimmed, then brightened again. I could feel a vibration deep within myself that swelled, then faded.

Vordenai bowed her head, and was silent. After a long moment, tears rolled down her soft cheeks. "I had hoped to draw one who would be compassionate... And instead, I have drawn our doom."

Her tears moved me. "No, wait... I'll choose a better name. I am compassionate, really. I can see you need help. I don't really understand what's happened to me, or what's going on, but if you'll show me how, I'll help you as best I can."

Vordenai looked up again, wiping her cheeks. "You really mean it, Lord?"

"Yes, of course. Come - let's choose a better name, you and I."

"Well, Lord, you cannot choose another name. Once chosen, it is set, and becomes part of your Fate. Perhaps we'll simply tell the others that you are the Nameless God - an odd deity for an odd, godless people does fit, after a fashion. We'll keep your true name to ourselves, Lord."

I nodded. "Alright. Lead me to your people, and we'll see if I can do anything to help."

"Your people, my lord. We have waited and prayed for you years, Lord - we are yours."

"Alright... My people, then - either way, let's go."

"Our village is just beyond that grove of trees, there," Vordenai said, rising to her feet and pointing to a stand of trees across the floor of the valley. "Just follow me, Lord."

As Vordenai led the way, I looked around, absorbed in the sights and smells of the valley. Birds, small animals, and countless insects abounded - and somehow, I could sense them all. Oddly, I only heard one set of footsteps through the grass as we walked - Vordenai's. I looked down at myself - I appeared normal, so far as I could tell. Two arms, two legs... I was dressed in an odd gray robe that seemed to be made of some kind of soft material I couldn't identify, but otherwise I couldn't see anything different about myself. Yet, after a moment, I realized I cast no shadow. As we passed the stream that ran down

the middle of the valley, I looked, and understood. Vordenai's reflection was as one might expect - the rippling image of a barefoot woman in primitive, woven-grass garb crossing a small stream. I, on the other hand, was simply a ball of pale gray light, floating behind her.

Three.

The village was, by the dimly-recollected standards of my previous life, a poorly-built collection of hovels. Mud and sticks seemed to be the main building materials used, despite the abundance of lumber in the forest. The people were, nearly each and every one of them, filthy, lice-ridden, and diseased. They seemed to share common heritage with Vordenai, however - they all had her general appearance, with black hair, brown eyes, and a slight epicanthic fold to their eyes. And as we entered the village, they all came out of their little hovels, fell to their knees, and began weeping and begging me not to kill them. They were truly a pathetic lot.

"I present to you the Nameless God - he shall be our deity," Vordenai announced, waving a hand at me.

"Help us, Holy One! We are ill!" wept one.

"Please, Lord! We grow chill at night, and many die in the winters!" cried another.

"Food, Holy One! We starve!"

A dozen other shouts and wails joined into a loud chorus, a litany of pain, discomfort, and complaint. I raised my hand for silence, and somehow, it worked - they all fell silent. I had no idea what they saw looking at me as I did that, as I knew I looked like a ball of light to them, but it silenced them anyway.

"Well," I replied, "let's try handling these problems one at a time. First, you're all sick because you're filthy. Haven't you people heard of soap? And we'll also need to de-louse the lot of you. You'll all need to shave, I'm afraid - and from what I can see, you've lice everywhere. We'll have to shave the lot of you from head to toe, clean you all up, and toss out every scrap of linen and clothing you have in those hovels and try to make you more so you don't get re-infested. We'll also need to tear down these wretched hovels, and build you some decent homes with lumber from the forest. We'll cut down a few dozen trees - that should do for a start, anyway. We can also send out a few of you to hunt the forest for game, and perhaps a few to fish the river. But first, let's have a few of the strongest of you chop down some trees and start working on getting some shelters built. The rest of you can work on fishing and hunting."

The villagers gasped, and even Vordenai looked at me, her eyes wide. "We... We cannot do any of that, Lord," Vordenai said after she recovered herself.

"What? Why not?!"

"Holy One," Vordenai said, looking to me, "the Land is not like the world you once knew. The Land is alive. Reach out to the trees, Lord. You will see. They are alive. We cannot kill them, even to shelter ourselves. It would be like murder."

I sighed. "Of course they're alive, they're plants."

"No, Lord. There is more to it than that. Reach out to them, Lord. Extend your will, and your sensations. Reach out to them, and listen."

"Alright," I replied, and tried. I turned my attention to a nearby tree, and listened...

...and after a moment, I heard its song.

It was not a song in that the plant had a voice, or made a sound. It was a tree, and was silent. Yet, it had a mind. It was alive, and it knew it was alive. It stretched its branches and leaves to the sun, drinking in the golden energies that sustained it. It reached its roots deep into the living Land beneath, drinking in the waters and minerals that helped it grow.

And it sang.

Its song was an endless, ponderously slow and elegantly complex melody of the spirit, a silent communication, a wordless celebration...

And it did not sing alone.

Thousands of trees nearby joined in the song, sharing their experiences, sharing their lives, sharing their joy at the thought of rain, their fears of drought and lightning, and their happy laughter at the rising of a new seedling to join the chorus. Even the small flowers that grew nearby sang - though their minds were almost nonexistent, like that of an insect, still, they were alive. And more, they were alive in a far greater sense than the plants I once knew were.

And between, beneath and above the trees was the buzz of animals... I turned my attention to them, suspecting, and nodded in understanding.

This was not the world I once knew. This was the Land, and the Land was alive. Even the stones of this place had their own silent songs. The animals of the forest, the smartest of which having a mind about as bright as a young child, gazed on in curiosity from the shadows of the trees, wondering what might happen. Deer were not the peaceful, mindless herbivores I had once known. Here, they were as intelligent as a four-year-old, and they were the predators of plants. Above them, the wolves were their predators - each doing what it must to survive. In turn, the wolves were smart enough not to over-cull the deer, and the deer were smart enough to only browse the parts of the plants that could easily re-grow. This was not the world I had once known - this was the Land.

"You see, Lord?" Vordenai asked, apparently able to see the change in my expression, despite my no longer having a face. "This is the Land, and the Land is alive," she said, echoing my own thoughts. "Yes, we know how to make soap - but it is difficult to manufacture it without the proper equipment. We have few pots to boil the fat and ashes in, and no animals willing to be slaughtered for their fat. What little we have made has been from dry, dead sticks gathered in the forest for the ashes, and dead animals gathered for their fat. That, also, makes us ill - but it must be done. I must admit that as the village witch, I've had the luxury of using what little soap we had, so that I would be presentable when you arrived. Still, there we are." Vordenai gestured broadly. "We have no blades to do the job of shaving, Lord, and what with the recent wet weather, the dry grasses we may gather to make clothes are few and far between. There are plenty of sheep in the valley, but we have no shears to clip them with, and our village weaver died last week. We cannot make more clothing or linen for our beds. There are other villages beyond this valley, of course, and we might possibly trade with them for what we need - but few will trade with the Godless Ones, and we have nothing to offer. More, when we enter the territories of the other deities, we are often slain by those gods out of hand, as being worthless to them - merely more mouths to feed and more bodies to shelter, for no strategic gain in their war. We once were fed and sheltered by Allakbeth, but he is no more. Lysander has slain him, and cast us out as unnecessary to

him."

"We need a miracle!" one of the villagers cried, and shortly the call was joined by all the rest.

I sighed. There was little I could think of to do. Despite what I had learned of the land, there seemed to be little choice - they had to kill a few animals to render their fat and feed themselves on their meat. They'd have to chop down a few trees to build better homes. I started to speak, intending to lay out a plan to help these people, when Vordenai turned to the villagers and spoke in a loud voice.

"Then pray! Lift your voices and sing! Lift your hearts and dance! Worship our new god, and through this worship, give him the power he needs to enact the miracles we need!"

There was a pause as the entire village stared at Vordenai - and expressions of awe and understanding crossing their faces. Then, as one, the villagers did just that. Some scattered, darting to their homes to quickly return with crudely-made drums or flutes, and beginning to play. Others formed a ring about Vordenai and I, and began to dance and sing. The rest simply remained on their knees, closed their eyes, bowed their heads, and began to pray.

I thought the whole thing was ridiculous, myself. What these people needed was organization, not an impromptu worship service. With a bit of work - well, with a lot of work - they could pull themselves up out of this mess, and have lives that were at least tolerable, if far less comfortable than what I might have experienced in my past life. The music was primitive - tribal, really, and interspersed with a great deal of wordless chanting. I started to raise my hand, to ask them to stop this nonsense...

Then, I began to feel something...

It was a sensation I'd never experienced before. A sense of power... A sense of strength flowing into me, from them. Their fervent prayers, their worship... Somehow charged this new body of mine, giving it strength.

I stood there silently for perhaps an hour, the villagers chanting, singing, praying and dancing about me. I felt no pride, really - the whole thing was, to me, horribly embarrassing. I could remember virtually nothing about my previous life - but I remembered enough to know that I was a humble man.

Yet, I did feel the power they were giving me.

"You glow brightly, Lord," Vordenai said, smiling. "Are you prepared to perform your first miracles?"

"Yes," I replied, and at that, the villagers all stopped at once, and looked to me expectantly.

"Heal us!" cried one.

"Feed us!" cried another.

"New homes!" another shouted.

I extended my will, without knowing precisely how, yet knowing I could. I scattered the primitive mud-and-stick huts with a thought, and raised stone dwellings from the living earth. I filled the dwellings with furniture fashioned from the dead sticks that once made up their huts, shaping and forming them into beds, tables, chairs, and other things they needed. Pottery bowls and other implements they might need I fashioned from the mud, baking and glazing and finishing them with a thought. At Vordenai's feet, a small pile of soap-cakes appeared, as well as an enormous pile of clothing, blankets of wool and a few dozen ceramic knives, their edges keen as razors. As an afterthought, I created a large pile of loaves of bread, hot and fresh. It wasn't much, but it would do until I could think of something better. Those that were



deathly ill were obvious, as I could feel their sickness as a dark miasma covering their bodies. I healed those at a thought, but the rest, those that were merely ill from malnutrition and poor hygiene, I did nothing with. I realized these problems would rectify themselves once they were properly cleaned, clothed and fed.

The healed villagers cheered with their renewed strength, and all the villagers eyed the bread and other things eagerly - yet they not move to take any of it. I could tell from their minds that they still feared me greatly, and waited until I gave them permission to take what I had given.

"Lord," Vordenai said, picking up one of the soap cakes, "I comprehend the clothing and blankets, but what are these strange white slabs, with these odd runes upon the side?"

"Soap. Ivory soap, actually. I seem to remember liking it in my past life. It floats on water, so you won't lose it in the stream, if you're careful. The first thing you people should learn is how to care for yourselves. You just need a bit of help getting started. Now - all of you are to get clean in the stream, and shave off all that lice-infested hair. Burn those rags you're wearing, as well - I'll make more as we go along. As you get done with that, we'll be working on the rest."

"But, Holy One!" shouted one of the villagers. "You have the power - you could fix everything instantly, with a single thought!" Several of the other villagers nodded and shouted in agreement.

I gazed at all of them, and slowly, they fell silent. "I am about to teach you something - and it's very important. I want all of you to listen, and listen carefully."

"Yes, Lord!" the villagers cried as one, and fell to their knees in the dirt.

"There is an old saying... Though, apparently, it's unknown, here. 'Give a man a fish, and he will eat once. Teach a man to fish, and he will eat for the rest of his life.' I do not intend to have you weeping and wailing every time you're hungry or need something trivial. If I am going to really be of help to you, I'm going to teach you how to help yourselves."

"But that is forbidden knowledge!" one of the villagers exclaimed in surprise.

"It's true, Lord," Vordenai explained. "All the other deities keep their worshippers in ignorance, that they will always be dependent on them. Clothing and tools they create from nothingness - Man is forbidden to create anything themselves, lest they forget to worship, and the power of their god slips."

"Ridiculous!" I retorted.

Vordenai bowed her head. "No, Lord. Merely fact. The gods struggle with one another, in a vast war that stretches across the length and breadth of the Land. Each desires to be the only god, and command the fate of the Land. Worship gives the gods power - they are beings beyond mortal man, and their slightest and most inconsequential abilities are vastly more powerful than anything even the greatest witch or warlock can do. Yet, to have this power, they must have worship. Thus, the knowledge you speak of is forbidden by all gods, so that Man will worship regularly, and give them the power they need to triumph in their campaign to rule the Land."

I stood there a moment, digesting what Vordenai had said. "So... I'm to fight a war?"

"Yes, Lord. Your arrival in the world will be known to all the other gods. And someday soon, one of the neighboring deities will come to try to destroy you. Once, long ago, more gods were born than died, and it seemed each village had their own god. Now, far more gods die than are born. We are the Godless Ones - we were cast out when our god, Allakbeth, was slain. Other Godless ones wander the lands,

some surviving by theft, and others simply dying of starvation or exposure with no deity to shelter them and provide for them. Yet, this is how it must be. If Man could provide for himself, he would have no need of Gods, and all the gods would perish for lack of worshippers."

I stroked my chin, thinking (and idly wondering what that might look like to the villagers, as I was merely a ball of light). After a long moment, I shook my head. "And if I refuse to fight this war?"

The villagers gasped, and many trembled - but Vordenai stood firm. Whatever her other qualities, the woman had backbone. "Then you will perish, Lord, and so will all of us."

I thought about that. My own death meant nothing to me, of course. I'd already been dead once - though the process of dying was unappealing, the actual state of being dead held no fear for me. Yet, as I looked into the villager's fearful faces and minds, their eyes moist with tears, I realized that their deaths meant something to me. I couldn't allow that to happen - these people needed me. I still didn't completely understand what had happened to me, or what kind of situation I was in, but Vordenai had laid out the ground rules pretty thoroughly. Now, it was apparent that I either played the game by the rules, or all these innocent people would die.

Finally, I nodded. These people needed me. I could refuse, but they would simply die. That, I could not allow. They were human beings - and more, they looked to me as their protector. Perhaps it was simply my former life spent as a father, grandfather and a head of a family, but these people were, in my heart, like little lost children. I could sense in their minds that they looked to me for shelter and protection, hoping and praying I would not leave them to die. I couldn't let them down. I remembered little of my former life, but I knew I had not been a man to abandon someone in need of help.

"Alright. We'll do it your way, for now. However-"

The entire village broke out into cheers, which I silenced with a shout. "I wasn't finished!"

The villagers, as one, cringed, and the echo of my voice came back from the valley walls, and Vordenai clapped her hands to her ears. My shout, apparently, had been echoed to the volume of a thunderclap by my new status as a god of the Land.

For a moment, I paused. Could I really do this? Could I really be a god to these people, when I knew nothing about what that really meant? After all, who was I to consider myself a deity?

For that matter, who was I in the first place? My past life was a mystery, and the future uncertain. Memories came in bits and pieces, unbidden, and fleeting.

My choice seemed obvious - I would have to carry through with it, regardless of what I really thought about it. These people needed someone to help them, and it might as well be me.

"I wasn't finished," I said more softly, and smiled. My glow apparently changed to something more pleasant, as the villagers slowly smiled back. "I'll help you as best I can, but you will learn to do some things for yourself. I'll make the tools, and you use them. I can sense sheep and goats in this valley - Gather them, and the goats can be milked, and the sheep shorn to make woolen clothes. I'll provide the shears and spinning wheels, you use them on the sheep and their wool. I'll provide the woodworking tools, and you use them to make buckets for milk. We'll work together on this, alright? You won't be entirely dependent on me. I don't like that idea. I think you should have some measure of independence - and some sense of self-worth."

"Yes, Holy One!" the villagers chorused, bowing low and placing their heads in the dirt. Vordenai joined them, and yet, her mind had a strange shadow within it, as well. I could not understand it - her surface thoughts I could sense easily, but what lay beneath was, at the moment, a mystery.

Four.

"No, no. You're just making a mess," I said, sighing as I looked at the results of the first week's efforts at weaving.

The ten women I'd selected as village weavers fell to their knees and groveled in the dirt before me, and the eldest of them spoke up. "Forgive us, Holy One, but we know little of this! All our previous garments were made by the hands of the god we once served!"

I stretched out my mind, sensing the Land about me. "It's the middle of summer. You have only a few more months before the weather turns cold to master this skill," I said, and sighed. "I don't know if that's enough time."

The women sobbed and wept, and looked utterly wretched and pitiable. Their appearance was only made worse by their shaven heads - though, at least, now they were free of lice and fleas, and had clean clothes to wear. Still, I had no idea what to do to help them learn the skills they needed in the limited time they had left.

Vordenai, who now was my constant companion, nodded at my words. "Teach them, Lord."

I looked to Vordenai, and saw she was gazing at me quietly. She was, apparently, the leader of the village - and as she hadn't been infected with lice and fleas, she was also the only one in the village with any hair. I'd been watching her, recently - she literally lorded over the villagers, as both their leader, and my de-facto High Priestess. Her attitude sometimes annoyed me - but I had little time to deal with it, as I had a hundred other things I had to do to handle the villager's problems. "Time enough to deal with her attitude when winter's here and they're all settled into a comfortable routine," I thought. I started to reply to Vordenai's suggestion, then paused. "How?" I asked after a long moment. "To be honest, I don't know how to do it, myself. I only know that I can, somehow, sense the Land, and I know the weather will turn bad long before they figure this out."

"Use your powers, Lord. You are a god. Touch their minds. You do not need to know the process, only the end result. Your power will do the rest. Trust in yourself, Lord, as you trust in us to serve you," she replied, and bowed her head.

I nodded, then looked to the workers. Reaching out my will, I touched their minds for a moment. "Do it right," I intoned, making a moue' as I realized how insipid that sounded.

If there was a flow of power, it was too inconsequential for me to sense. Yet, when the weavers raised their heads, I could see in their eyes and minds they understood. "Yes, Holy One!" the eldest replied, smiling. In a few minutes, they were busy working, spinning the shorn wool from a few cooperative sheep into yarn... But this time, I could sense in their minds that they knew what they were doing, even though I did not.

Elated at this new discovery, I turned my attention to the other end of the village, where several of the men and women were struggling to weed and hoe the fields I'd designated as farmlands with tools I'd

created for them. It had taken days to even find a spot where they would even begin working, as the very grasses and weeds were alive, and they would only begin work after two days of scattering the seeds of the grasses and weeds far and wide beyond the area they would dig up. "Do it right," I intoned as I touched their minds, "and feed the village with your work." As one, the would-be farmers paused, then smiled. I could see it in their minds - now, they knew what to do, even though I had little idea myself.

I turned my attention back to Vordenai, and found she was smiling. Unlike the other villagers, whose minds were almost completely open to me, her mind remained utterly closed. Even after a week of trying, I could still only sense her surface thoughts. "What? What is it?"

Vordenai smiled. "It is nothing, Lord. I am simply pleased to see you have adjusted so well, and are even moving about like any other god of the Land might."

"Moving about? What do you mean?"

"Lord, just a moment ago, I saw you fly off to the fields on the other side of the village. It is a distance of at least three hundred paces - yet you crossed it in the blink of an eye, and returned a mere moment later."

I paused for a moment, confused. "I didn't really go anywhere," I replied, not really understanding what she meant. "The best way I can describe it is that I turned my attention to the farmers in the field. I never really left your side."

Vordenai nodded. "Of course. You are a god, not a mortal being, and are spiritual in nature. Your 'presence', as it were, is merely an artifact of my senses - in truth, you are a part of the Land, and your point of view and scope of perception are whatever and wherever you wish them to be."

I started to reply, then stopped, thinking about what she'd said. After a moment, I tried something. I turned my attention up, raising my point of view to see beyond the valley. Higher and higher - soon, I could see the low ridge of hills that made up the tail end of a chain of mountains, of which the valley was only a small part. The curve of the horizon started to come into view...

And suddenly I was stopped cold.

There was a barrier of some kind, transparent, but solid. It shimmered with the soft gray color I'd come to know as representing myself - but I could not pass it. Beyond the barrier, on the horizon, I could see many other dome-like bubbles, shimmering each with a separate color. Some were light colors, but many were dark. The dome-like bubble I seemed to be held within was smaller than most of the others - perhaps only ten miles across, as I once might have measured it. Most were far larger, and many looked ominous as they loomed from beyond the horizon. The Land beneath each seemed shaded... Tinged, somehow, by the dome that covered them. Many overlapped - and in the overlapping areas, I could occasionally see flashes of light...

I focused on the nearest spot of overlap where there seemed to be some activity - and suddenly, to my surprise, I was there, beyond the barrier. The flashes of light resolved themselves into bolts of lightning and balls of fire, streaking across the landscape, incinerating everything below. Two other gods, each a ball of colored light, were fighting - but their focus was not each other, but a small village between them, ringed by the fire of a flaming forest. One god, a pale yellow ball of light, was struggling, raising shimmering domes of force to shield the village. The other, a dark red blaze of hate, shattered the shields with strokes of lightning that looked powerful enough to level mountains.

And between them, beneath them... The people screamed, burned, and died.

"What are you doing?! Stop that! You're killing them!" I screamed in outrage.

The red ball of light turned his attention to me, while the yellow ball of light worked furiously to save the village, raising shield after shield, and showering the village with miniature rainstorms to extinguish the fires.

The red ball of light chuckled, and spoke in a deep, echoing voice. "Ah, the youngling. I was wondering when you might pay your neighbors a visit. Permit me to introduce myself - I am Lysander. The weakling here I am defeating is Koloth. Nevermind him, as I'll shortly crush him. I'm quite pleased to meet you, youngling - I can see you have great potential. Do, please, take the time to build your strength and your skills before we meet again. I loathe defeating weaklings - it gives me little power. A strong opponent, however, gives me much."

"Help me, youngling!" Koloth shouted.

I looked, and saw the people burning and dying. I reached out my will...

And nothing happened.

"I... I can't, Koloth! I can't do anything here!"

Lysander laughed, flickering a deep, ominous hue as he did so. "Of course not, youngling. You are outside your sphere of influence. Your worshippers are few, and the range of your influence is short."

"Send in your Avatar!" Koloth shouted. "Mine is slain!"

"Avatar?" I asked, confused.

"Yes, your servant," Lysander replied, and gleamed in a way that I realized was an evil smile. "Your physical representative in the Land, youngling, able to reach beyond your sphere of influence, and act in your name." Lysander chuckled again. "You are truly too naive and immature for me to even bother with - crushing you would gain me nothing. Now leave, youngling, before my patience with you is exhausted."

I ground my teeth, and said nothing - but a moment later, I gaped in surprise. An enormous maggot at least ten yards high and a hundred yards long slowly slithered over a nearby hill. The gigantic horror dripped slime that seemed to char and wither anything it touched, and its tiny mind was as dark and black as that of its master. Slowly, inexorably, the thing moved towards the village.

"Give up, Koloth. My own Avatar is here," Lysander called, laughing.

"Noooo! Damn you, Lysander!"

Lysander laughed. "Yes, Koloth! Give me your curses! That, too, gives me power."

The gigantic maggot arced itself, then lashed forward, smashing through Koloth's layered shields in one blow. With a horrid shriek of glee, it fell upon the surviving villagers, and began to gobble them one by one as they screamed and scattered in terror.

Koloth lashed out with lightning, but it was to little effect. The small wounds his bolts made in the hide of Lysander's titanic maggot dripped a black ichor that killed whatever it splashed upon. Finally, with a scream of rage and frustration, Koloth hovered over a villager, then zipped away at the speed of thought, taking the villager with him. In a moment, he returned, snatching up another, and zipping away with them. After a moment, I realized what he was doing - he was moving the villagers away from the battleground, one by one. He was giving up.

But, it wasn't fast enough. For every villager Koloth snatched away, the beast ate one, or smashed a building trying to reach one. In a minute, perhaps two, the village was a bare, smouldering ruin, and Koloth had gone.

Dimly, I perceived the edge of Koloth's sphere of influence, and realized it had shrunk with the death of the villagers. Lysander now had sole power over this blasted, ruined piece of the Land - for whatever that was worth. His creature, apparently sated after gobbling a few dozen humans, curled itself into a ball in the middle of the smoking ruins, and napped.

All was silent, save for the cracklings of a few scattered fires, and Lysander's echoing laugh.

"Soon, it will be your turn, youngling. But for now, I give you time. Grow and prosper, youngling, that your destruction will give me great power."

I bit back a surly reply. A dimly recalled childhood memory of bullies came to mind - taunting a bully when they had the upper hand was always a bad idea, the memory said. I nodded, and withdrew.

## Five.

"Such are the ways of the gods, Lord," Vordenai observed, once I'd explained what happened. "They battle to see who shall be the one remaining god of the Land."

"But it was all so senseless!" I fumed as we walked through the grassy meadows of the peaceful little valley. "Why couldn't they have had their battle after letting the people leave?"

"Lord, you do not understand - the people were the subject of the battle. Gods cannot harm one another directly, as you have no physical substance to damage. This renders you immune to all forces, natural and supernatural. Yet, you do have two vulnerabilities - your worshippers, and your temple."

"My temple? That building I awoke beside?"

"Yes, Lord. You see, Lysander wants to destroy Koloth, to further his quest to be the only God of the Land. To do so, he must destroy Koloth's temple. The temple is the focus of power for a God of the Land, Lord, and the source of their existence. Yet, so long as a God of the Land has at least one believer, their temple is inviolate."

"Really?" I said, surprised. "Come - let's go there now," I said, and without thinking about it, I took her into my hand, and focused my attention on the temple. Vordenai let out a little 'eep!' of alarm, and I put her down again beside the altar outside the temple. "Sorry - are you alright?"

"Yes, Lord - you simply startled me, is all," Vordenai replied, her hand over her bosom as she caught her breath.

I looked down at my hands, and shook my head. "I startled myself, as well, I think. I didn't realize I could do that."

"Lord? I do not understand what you mean."

"I took you into my hand - yet, I certainly don't see myself as some kind of giant."

"You are still thinking in the terms of a mortal man, Lord. You are any size you wish to be, or need to be."

Indeed, the whole concept of 'size' is irrelevant to you. You are no longer a man - that life is behind you. You are a god of the Land, a presence, a spiritual being. Within your sphere of influence, provided you have enough power from your worshippers' prayers, you can do anything," she said, and waved a hand at me. "You hover your perception at about the height of my head, as though you were my equal, Lord. You are not - you are a god. You can gaze up at me from the perspective of an ant, or loom over me like a mountain. Most gods choose the latter, incidentally."

I nodded, then pointed to the temple. "Tell me more about the temple. If I'm to face Lysander, I have to learn as much as I can about everything pertaining to this new life."

Vordenai nodded, then swept a hand in an all-encompassing gesture as she looked at the temple. "Well, as I said, your temple is the focus of your power in the Land, Holy One, and the source of your existence. It is the center of your sphere of influence, as well. You can, if you will it, have your temple move to any location within your sphere of influence. The center of your sphere of influence will move with it."

I nodded, looking at the squat granite tower. From its pinnacle, a beam of power radiated upwards, a beam of light a faint gray color I had learned to associate with myself. The beam merged with the top of the dome which defined my sphere of influence, and radiated outwards, supporting and defining the sphere itself. Gazing at the temple, though, it was a low and unadorned structure, and had all the beauty and grace of a toad. After a moment, I shook my head. "It's not a very impressive structure."

"Its appearance reflects how your worshippers view you, Lord. At the moment, we know little about you, and how you may be as our god. As we learn your ways and discover the kind and gentle being I'm certain you are inside, we will view you more positively - and, eventually, your temple will become a grand spire, a shining ivory beacon of hope overlooking the Land, and bringing us peace."

"What about the inside?"

"The interior of your temple reflects your heart, Lord - the way you truly are, inside."

I shrugged. "Alright - let's go in and see."

"No!" Vordenai yelped, and leaped back. "I... I'm sorry, Lord, but the interior of your temple is for you to know, and you alone. None may enter it, ever."

I rolled my eyes (wondering how that looked to her, as to her, I was merely a ball of light). "Of course you can enter - the temple doors are just there."

"Lord, where you see doors, I see smooth wall," Vordenai replied, shaking her head, then looked to me. "I am thinking that where you came from, a 'temple' was a different thing, and you do not completely understand my meaning."

"Yes," I replied, nodding. "To me, a temple was a house of worship. People entered, and worshipped their god."

Vordenai shook her head. "In the Land, a temple is a focus of power, Lord. It is not a house, and cannot be entered by mortal man. We worship you wherever we may happen to be, though you can call us to the temple to worship at your altar, if you choose. As your territory expands, having followers who live far from your temple come to the temple to worship becomes problematic, you see." Vordenai paused, then smiled. "It is, in many ways, your heart, Lord. The outside is what we think of you. The inside is something that only you can know, and only through self-discovery."

I was about to ask another question, when suddenly I sensed a presence beside me. I turned to look, and saw a yellow ball of light hovering over the two of us. "Send the mortal away, youngling. I wish to talk to you, and my words are not for mortal ears."

I raised my perception to his height. I felt embarrassed as I now towered over Vordenai like some kind of giant, yet somehow I didn't want to look small before Koloth. Reaching out my hand, I picked up Vordenai, and after a moment, set her gently down in the center of the village, a mile away. Returning my attention to the temple, I found Koloth waiting patiently. "I'm sorry I couldn't help you this morning, Koloth. I tried, but..."

Koloth flickered for a moment, and to my utter surprise, turned into a very old, bald, dark-skinned man in saffron-yellow robes. Koloth crossed his legs in a full Lotus, then hovered above the ground. "Come, sit with me. Let us talk, my friend - for surely someone who tries to aid me against Lysander is hardly an enemy."

"I... I don't even know how to do that," I replied, sheepishly.

Koloth smiled. "Will it to be so, youngling. As you see yourself when you look upon yourself, will that appearance to be reality."

I nodded, and tried - and found it worked. In a moment, I simply stood there before him, man-sized, and dressed in gray robes. After fumbling for a moment, I managed to sit before him, hovering in the air. I felt utterly foolish - but I wasn't going to say anything about it.

Koloth smiled. "I see your worshippers have formed very few opinions regarding you. You are, indeed, very new. First impressions are quite important. You must work hard to forge the appearance you desire in the minds of your worshippers, that others will see you the way you wish."

"Others? What others? These people call me their god - I can't see myself popping about the Land to woo other worshippers to me. It's all... Highly embarrassing, actually," I said, clapping my mouth shut too late.

Koloth laughed. "What an utterly odd way to feel about it! You're very humble and self-effacing, I see - I suppose you will become known as a humble god, even as I am," he said, then his smile faded. "Still, if you are to survive, you must learn - and learn quickly. Lysander toys with you, now. He is willing to wait and let you grow, that he will gain more power when he kills you. Do not be fooled, my friend - he will not wait long enough for you to grow stronger than he."

I looked at Koloth. If his face was, as he said, a representation of how his worshippers knew him, then he probably was a quiet, humble, and trustworthy soul. "Would you teach me?"

Koloth smiled again. "Yes - but, there is a price."

I suppressed a sigh, and managed to smile in return. "Alright - what's your price?"

Koloth's smile faded again. "I am losing this war, youngling. Soon, Lysander will be victorious, and I will be gone."

"I'm sorry to hear that. You seem like a nice person."

Koloth wagged a finger at me. "'Nice', youngling, does not help one win this war. It is, in many ways, a handicap. Yet, my own Singularity tells me that you, somehow, may have what it takes to win, one day."

"Your what?" I asked, confused.



"My Singularity - the one power I have that is unique to me," Koloth replied, and smiled at me like an adult might smile at a child who'd asked an utterly silly question with a painfully obvious answer. "Each God of the Land has one power that is unique to them - a few have a set of two or three linked powers, and they are the ones who truly dominate in this war. For me, I can sense the future, and tell which individual is right for any task - who will succeed, and who will fail. You, too, have a Singularity, youngling - and if you agree to my price, then I will teach you how to discover it, and much more."

I nodded again. "Alright - name your price."

"As I said before, youngling, I am losing this war. My people have relied on me for protection - and I can protect them no longer. My Avatar is dead, and my sphere of influence shrinks daily. Soon, all my worshippers will be dead - and this, I cannot allow to happen."

I nodded. "I know - I feel the same way. My people look to me for protection, like a child looks to their father. I didn't ask for this job, but... Well, I can't let them down. They're helpless, like children - and without someone to protect them, they'll die."

Koloth smiled. "We are of one heart on that matter, youngling," he replied. "I have moved my people and my temple a hundred times, fleeing more powerful gods in the southern jungles. Now, there is nowhere else to go. My people wish to survive - and I wish them to survive. Yet, I cannot help them to survive. My own Singularity shows me that I am doomed to die. So, I wish to send a hundred of my people to you, to become your people. If you will agree to shelter, feed and clothe them, if you will agree to accept them as your own, then I will teach you what you need to know to survive."

"I agree," I said, simply. There was little other choice, and Koloth's arrangement seemed perfectly fair.

Koloth smiled again. "Then it is settled. I shall return later - for now, I must prepare to battle again. Lysander will attack me again in three days, and I have much to do to prepare - including preparing a new Avatar," he replied, and in a moment, he had returned to his form as a shimmering yellow ball of light.

I nodded, rising to my feet, and feeling myself change to my own light-form, as well. "I saw Lysander's Avatar - it was truly horrid."

Koloth sighed. "An Avatar's appearance mirrors its master's heart - though few mortals understand that. You, too, will need an Avatar - and soon, I think."

"How do I get one? What do I do?"

Koloth chuckled. "You do nothing - it is the simplest thing I can teach you, and all I have time for at the moment. When you have need of a new Avatar, your heart calls out to the Land. In response to your heart's call, a creature of the Land will come to you. Simply extend your will, and will it to be your Avatar. It will then share a small measure of your powers and abilities, drawn from your heart, and slowly learn the rest as it grows - just as you are doing now, my friend."

"But... How will I know? There are tens of thousands of creatures in this valley, and teeming millions beyond it! They come and go as they please, and many peer at me as I move about - some are nearly as smart as a young child, and my simple presence arouses their curiosity. How will I know when one has actually come to me to be my Avatar?"

Koloth chuckled again. "You will know. But whatever you do, do not try to elevate a human to your Avatar - humans are special creatures, different from all the others of the land. Should you try, it kills them."

"It kills them?! Why?" I asked, surprised.

Koloth paused. "I do not know," he replied after a moment. "It is my theory that in elevating your creature to an Avatar, you give it a true comprehension of Good and Evil, and the power of Free Will. Humans already have this - your worshippers already are, in a sense, Avatars. They already can leave the boundaries of your sphere of influence and act in your name, and they already have free will. Yet, they are also mortal - they age, and die. Your Avatar is immortal - it can be slain, but it will otherwise never age and die. Perhaps it is the power of immortality that kills them - perhaps it is too much for them. Perhaps it is a combination of these things. Perhaps it is that they are the source of our power, through their prayers, belief and worship, and that elevating them to the status of Avatar is like feeding fire with fire - the fuel is consumed more rapidly, and their mortal coil destroyed. Or perhaps I am an old fool, and it is something I have not guessed at all," Koloth said, and chuckled. "I do not know, I am sorry. I only know that if you try, they simply die." Koloth flickered for a moment. "My worshippers call me. I must go, for now. I will return when I can, to teach you more. Farewell, my friend," he called, and vanished, zipping away at the speed of thought.

I stood there for a moment, thinking, then turned my attention to the village. There was much to do, and much to learn - and, apparently, little time remaining for either.

## Six.

"What was it like, my love?" Nadar asked, smiling. It was their habit to chat once they had gone to bed at night, and their new house was marvellously comfortable.

Ellsbatha lay quietly in the new bed, cuddling her husband, and thinking. "It is... It is difficult to explain, Nadar. He touched my mind, and suddenly, I knew how to do it. So did all the other women. Now, we spin and weave with ease, as though we'd spent a lifetime learning the skill."

"Instead of spending a lifetime as..." Nadar said, then paused. After a moment, he shook his head. "The witch's spell remains, love. I can remember we once were Allakbeth's slaves and worshippers, but nothing more."

Ellsbatha nodded. "Vordenai says it is for the best. She holds our memories within her own mind, that our new god shall not be distracted by them... And perhaps discover the truth about why we became the Godless Ones."

"But what is the truth, Ellsbatha? Is it good, or ill? That worries me."

"It worries me, as well. To deceive a god..." Ellsbatha whispered, then shuddered. "Vordenai says we must concentrate on being proper worshippers to him. Perhaps, even if the truth turns out to be something ill, if we serve him well before he learns the truth, he may forgive us."

Nadar hugged his wife silently, and they lay together in the darkness thereafter, listening to the quiet calls of the night-animals in the nearby forest.

## Seven.

"Lord," Vordenai said carefully, smiling gently, "you do not need an Avatar right now. Simply continue as you have been doing, teaching us to care for ourselves. Soon, we will be able to live much of our lives without constantly bothering you for assistance. This will free up much of your time, which you can then later devote to discovering how to defend your realm against enemy gods."

I started to nod in agreement. After all, it had been nearly a month since I first awakened, and I'd discovered that the village needed an enormous amount of attention. The crops I'd had the farmers plant - mostly carrots, yams, corn and wheat - weren't ready to be harvested yet, despite my having learned to conjure small rainstorms to keep the fields well-watered. As a result, I still had to provide food for the villagers daily. I'd scoured the limits of my territory and discovered a few fruit trees - apples and pears, mainly. They provided a partial solution, once I'd taken them into my hand and gently uprooted them, then planted them next to the village. The trees themselves were unhappy with the move (it still was somewhat disturbing to me to know that they were alive, and possessed a modicum of intelligence), but once I told them that the seeds of their fruit would be spread far and wide (amply mixed with fertilizer from the villagers themselves), they were satisfied, and resumed their happy, silent songs. I had to tend the trees carefully, however, as insects and birds also wanted a share of the fruit. After crushing a few thousand bugs and tossing a few dozen fruit-eating birds away from the trees, they eventually got the message, and left the trees alone. The only bright notes so far had been that the weavers were well along the way to being able to clothe the entire village by themselves, and the villagers' hair was growing back normally, so they were all beginning to look reasonably normal again.

It helped in getting the thousand-and-one things that I needed to do accomplished that I didn't sleep or eat anymore - apparently, the worship of the villagers themselves was all that was needed to sustain this new body I found myself in. That, in itself, was odd, but I found I got used to it after awhile. Still, Vordenai was right - handling the needs of the village took an enormous amount of my time... Time better devoted, perhaps, to learning more about the Land, and how I might defend these people.

And yet...

And yet, there was still the shadowed area within Vordenai's mind. I could read her surface thoughts, but what lay beneath was unknown to me. That, truly, was a mystery. What was she really after? I did not know - and I hesitated to ask.

I focused my attention on Vordenai, studying her intently, and she blanched at my gaze. Still, her true thoughts remained a mystery.

I decided I had to know. I started to speak, to demand an explanation, when I stopped, and looked beyond her.

"Lord? What is it?" Vordenai asked nervously.

"Some people have entered my territory. I... I can feel them, as each passes into my sphere of influence." I paused, sensing their minds - and found to my utter surprise that their minds were completely different from that of Vordenai, or even the ordinary members of my village.

They were open.

Each of their minds were completely open to my view. Most were fearful, all were hopeful. They had been sent forth by Koloth, to go onto my lands and become my worshippers. They were the last, best hope for their people - and they knew it, because Koloth had been honest with them. There was only a hundred of them, just as Koloth had said, and all but a handful were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four. The remainder of their people, some four thousand or so, would stay behind with Koloth, to fight a losing battle - and eventually die along with their god. It was all to insure that these scant few had a

chance to survive, and carry on their lineage to the future. They were a brave and noble people, leaving behind everything they knew and everyone they loved, traveling forward into the hands of an unknown, nameless god, and the mystery of an unknown future.

My heart was moved by them. I admired their bravery. I pitied the loss of their loved ones. I respected their deep sacrifice in coming to me, and their commitment to me, a god they knew nothing about, all in the name of saving their people. Koloth, perhaps, knew me too well. I could not possibly turn these noble, brave, selfless people away, having seen into their hearts.

"People, Holy One?" Vordenai asked.

"Yes, Koloth's people... Well, my people, now. Koloth sent them to me to preserve them, so that they wouldn't die out. They're from a place Koloth called the "southern jungles" - though I don't know where that might be."

Vordenai made a face. "I do, Lord. There will be an enormous amount of work ahead. Koloth's people are the Dark Ones, apparently. They will speak a different language than us, and it will take ages to teach them our language, and to learn theirs. Their culture will be different, as well - there will be many adjustments to make, if they are to live with us."

"A different language?" I asked, surprised. "You seem to speak the language I remember speaking in my past life, as did Koloth and Lysander. I don't understand."

"Lord, you understand my words because you are a god. In truth, I speak a completely different language than that you once spoke - or that of these new arrivals, now," Vordenai said, shaking her head.

I could tell that beneath the shadow in her mind, there was far more than simply a problem of language and culture she was concerned about - yet, I couldn't pierce that shadow to know what it was. After a moment, I smiled, taking a shot in the dark. "Well, I could solve that problem, easily. When they arrive, I'll simply build their village on the opposite side of my temple, in the other end of the valley. Then, once they're established, you can work on cultural and language assimilation as time permits."

"Ah! Thank you, Lord. That will, indeed, make things much easier," Vordenai replied. The relief in her voice was almost palpable.

I nodded silently, smiling. 'Yes, Vordenai - there is something you're hiding. Having the new arrivals live in a different village wouldn't make assimilating them easier - it would make it harder. Yet, if you were hiding something from me, it would make it easier to keep it hidden, as you wouldn't have to worry about revealing it to the newcomers. Oh, yes, Vordenai - I'm on to you, now. And somehow, some way, I will find out what your secret is, and the secret of this village. And somehow, I think when I do find out, it won't be pleasant,' I thought silently, then turned my attention to the new arrivals.

## Eight.

Vordenai's house was, in truth, no bigger than any of the other homes the Nameless God had made for the village - yet, because she lived in it alone, it seemed larger. Vordenai herself looked up from the comfortable chair that was now hers, and arched an eyebrow. "What do you want, Ellsbatha?"

"We must tell him the truth, Vordenai," Ellsbatha said quietly, her head bowed. "You must release your spells, and let him learn the truth."

"The truth?!" Vordenai snarled, rising to her feet. "You don't even know what that would do! He must never know! The mistakes our ancestors made a thousand years ago end with him!"

"But it is wrong, Vordenai!"

"Wrong?! Wrong?! It is wrong to seek the life our ancestors had before the Age of Gods came upon us?! It is wrong to want something better than scrabbling about in the dirt like hairless apes, eating ants and termites and whatever fruit might happen to fall from the trees?! Is it wrong to want something better than groveling at the feet of those who once were our servants, begging them for a crust of bread or a blanket to cover ourselves?!" Vordenai drew herself to her full height, looming over the cringing form of Ellsbatha. "You don't even know, Ellsbatha. The truth would cost us everything. Now leave me."

"He will find out, eventually," Ellsbatha persisted, despite her pounding heart. "He will learn it from our minds, perhaps..."

Vordenai sneered. "Impossible! The truth is guarded behind the Veil of Shadows, one of the secrets of the Coders! What little you and the others might know is also guarded, held tight within my own mind!" she snapped, tapping her temple. Vordenai glared at Ellsbatha. "Don't you understand? I know the ancient words of power, and I made him what he is! I sealed the ancient books away in their tomb, a place where he cannot go, even if he could touch the books themselves! There is nothing he can do to learn the truth, so long as I do not allow it!"

"The new ones... He might learn the truth from them..." Ellsbatha persisted, trembling with fear.

Vordenai snorted. "Those dark-skinned jungle-primitives? They know nothing. They are little better than animals, themselves. He would learn more from a deer, or a chipmunk. Truly."

"Perhaps..." Ellsbatha began, and couldn't finish.

Vordenai gazed piercingly at the cowering woman before her, and read her meaning from her eyes. "Perhaps someone of the village might tell him, you mean. What little you are able to tell, that is," she said.

Ellsbatha simply trembled silently.

With a smooth motion, Vordenai drew one of the ceramic knives the Nameless God had made for the village, grabbed the front of Ellsbatha's dress, and laid the knife across her throat. "Shall we teach him what that altar at the base of his temple is really for, Ellsbatha? Shall we have you be the first?!" A bright red bead of blood rolled slowly down Ellsbatha's neck from the light kiss of the razor-keen blade.

Ellsbatha's eyes widened, and a flash of memory came to her mind. Hundreds and hundreds gone screaming to the altar, their flesh and bones vanishing in a puff of fire, converted to the raw energy Allakbeth needed to defend his realm against Lysander - and all in vain. Even the graveyards were emptied, the corpses of the dead tossed in to give what little energy they might...

"No! NO! My son! MY SON! NOOOOO!"

Vordenai relaxed, and lowered the blade. "Is that what you want us to return to, Ellsbatha?"

Ellsbatha collapsed on the floor, weeping, and could not reply. "My son..." she moaned.

"I know. I was there. And I hold your memories in my mind, Ellsbatha," Vordenai replied, sitting down again. "He would have been twelve this spring, I believe."

"Yes," Ellsbatha sobbed.

"It is a dangerous game I play, Ellsbatha - but I know what I am doing. He cannot learn the truth, I have seen to it. And he must not learn the truth, lest we return to those days of merely being fodder for the altar." Vordenai paused, and sighed. "Ellsbatha, I seek the life our ancestors once had, in the days before the Age of Gods. With luck, I may succeed. Do not cross me on this. What I do, I do for the benefit of our entire village - and, perhaps, the entire world." Vordenai tossed the knife wearily onto the table beside her, and slumped in her chair. "Now leave me, Ellsbatha."

Ellsbatha wiped her eyes with a hand, slowly pushed herself to her feet, and silently turned for the door.

Nine.

Vordenai sat at her table, gazing at Ellsbatha's slumped shoulders as she withdrew. 'Stupid, stupid, woman,' she thought in weary hostility at Ellsbatha's back.

All was proceeding according to plan. Vordenai resisted the temptation to pray that it would continue to go well - this would only open her mind to the Nameless God, and all would come to naught.

A hundred different memories of Allakbeth and life as his slaves struggled within her mind as she gazed at Ellsbatha. Most were terrifying. None were her own. It was an effort, at times... But she steeled herself, and forced the memories back again, down to the dark place within her mind where she kept them. When her mind was calm again, Vordenai reached up, wiping the beaded sweat from her brow.

Wearily, Vordenai rested her head in her hands. The deception had to continue, despite the cost to herself. The Nameless One would, almost certainly, learn nothing from the barbaric Dark Ones - though they would occupy him for awhile, at least. Vordenai decided to use this opportunity to nap. She needed rest, so that when the Nameless One came to her again, later, she would be alert enough to know what to reply.

She could not simply lie with everything she said. Stacking lie upon lie was like stacking dish upon dish - even if perfectly balanced, eventually, the stack would topple and smash under its own weight, and all would be lost. No, it was best, and easiest, to reply to his questions truthfully - and simply withhold the things she did not wish him to know. Yes, it was, at times, a monumental effort to continue the deception... She could only hope she could maintain the deception long enough for her plan to come to fruition, and end the terror and death of the Age of Gods forever.

Ten.

'Ah, Koloth!' I thought silently, hoping somehow that he might hear across the distance that separated us. 'Your people are beautiful!'

And, in truth, they were. Koloth had, apparently, selected those among his people who were not merely the healthiest and strongest, but the most beautiful, as well. Dark of skin, their long, straight hair was white as snow, and the combination was fascinating to me. Aside from a handful of tribal elders who accompanied them, each was young, clean-limbed, strong, and perfectly formed. Their eyes were large and beautiful, as well, with brown and green being the predominant colors. They were human, of course - but they were not any race I had ever known in my previous life, of that I was certain. I had simply led them to the spot that I'd selected as a good location for their village, and they had followed happily, their hearts filled with joy and hope at seeing me.

'Thank you, my friend,' Koloth's silent voice came back after a moment, 'but they are your people, now. Treat them kindly, please.'

'I shall do my best, Koloth,' I thought in reply, and turned my attention to the new villagers just as one of their elders stepped forth. They had spent the first hour after their arrival checking the animals who came along with them - as these were animals of the Land, no pen was needed to contain them. They stayed because they chose to stay. Now, one of the tribal elders stepped forth - though, in truth, she was barely past forty. Koloth had selected carefully, and youth and reproductive capability apparently had rated high on his list of priorities.

"Greetings, Holy One," the woman said, and bowed. "I am called Sapphire, for the color of my eyes," she said, pointing to her large and beautiful eyes, and smiled. "I am the leader of our little group, and the Tribal Storyteller. We are all very pleased to meet you, of course, and we look forward to serving you eagerly. May we ask your name?"

"My name?" I replied, and sighed. "That, I'm afraid, is a long story."

"Ah! A story!" Sapphire replied, clapping. "Come, everyone! Our new god shall tell us the story of his name!" she called, and in a few moments, the rest had gathered in a large semicircle, sitting and waiting.

I smiled - I couldn't help it. These were lovely people. "Well... I don't know if it will be a good story..."

"Tell it anyway, Holy One," one of the others called, smiling.

I scratched my head (idly wondering what that looked like to them, as at the moment, I was simply a ball of light), then shrugged. "Well, I awoke about a month ago. The woman who summoned me, Vordenai, told me I had to pick a name. Well, I..." I began, then paused. The truth of my name in the Land might frighten them, and I didn't want that. "Well, I was a bit confused at this whole situation. Perhaps a bit frustrated at not really understanding, as well. In the end, I picked a name of ill-omen. It wasn't what I really wanted to do, but, once done, it could not be undone. So, to make a long story short, we decided I would simply be known as the Nameless God, to spare people a bit of fear. After all, I'm really a very kind and gentle person, and my reply to her question was, perhaps, not the wisest choice I could have made." I grinned wryly. "I'm sorry if it's not a terribly good story, but that's the gist of it."

The villagers nodded and clapped, and Sapphire smiled. "You may not think that a very good story, Holy One, but we do."

I blinked in confusion. "Oh? Why?"

"Because, Holy One, it teaches us many things about you. First, that you are capable of making mistakes - you are not perfect. Of course, few gods are. Second, that you know you are not perfect. Few gods will admit this, even to themselves. Third, that you are capable of learning from your mistakes, and doing what you can to correct them. Gods that cannot do this are eventually destroyed by other gods who are more flexible, and able to learn from their errors. Koloth was very wise in sending us to you, I think. You

may be a young god, but you have great potential," Sapphire finished, and the other villagers nodded in agreement.

I grinned. "Thank you," I replied, then looked them over as they all rose to their feet again. "I suppose we'd best get down to the business of making you houses and food and such, before it gets dark."

"Oh, no, Holy One! We've brought all that we need in that regard," Sapphire replied, hopping to her feet and waving to the other villagers. Shortly, the villagers turned to the dozen or so horses that had accompanied them, and began to carefully unpack their belongings. "These animals have been with us since time immemorial, and we all work together to survive," Sapphire explained. "The goats give us milk and cheese, and their hair we weave into clothes and ropes and other things we need. The horses give us their strength to move things too heavy for us, and so on. When any of our animals die, we use every part of them. The meat is eaten, the hides made into clothing and tents, the bones ground into powder for plaster, and so on. While they live, we do our best to feed them and care for them, and protect them from predators. When they die, they continue to help us, just as we continue to insure that their progeny will survive them." Sapphire turned back to me, and smiled again. "No, Holy One - all we need from you is to clear us a few plots of land to plant the seeds we've brought so we can grow our food, a few fences to keep the wolves and such from our animal friends, and then we can all go to your temple and get down to the serious business of worshipping you!"

I blinked in surprise. "You're kidding."

"No, Holy One, I am not," Sapphire replied, a serious look on her face. "This war is all about power - power from prayer and worship. Our minds, our bodies produce mana - an energy that we cannot truly manipulate. Oh, a few witches or warlocks are occasionally born who can manipulate it a bit, but Koloth explained that their manipulation of mana is like an ant moving a grain of sand - while it may seem like a monumental accomplishment to the ant, in truth, it is a tiny thing. A man with one hand can move thousands more grains, and with a shovel, can move millions more. The grains of sand are the mana, and we are the ants. You, however, are like a man with a very large shovel. All we need to do is provide you with enough energy, and you can, quite literally, do anything." Sapphire smiled again. "Koloth said you were a very young god, and much that we took for granted with him, I would have to explain to you. Well, this is a part of it. We want to survive, Holy One. And the only way that will happen is if you win this war. Thus, we will worship you as much as we can and provide you with as much power as we can, so that you have the best chance of winning."

I nodded, my head awl. This was far different than the behavior of my other villagers, and somewhat startling. "Alright - but why do you have to go to the temple? Worshipping here and now would be just fine, with me."

Sapphire smiled. "The temple is the focus of your power, Holy One. Worshipping here before you would give you power, of course, but worshipping at your temple will give you more. If it's inconvenient for your other worshippers, we'll be careful to not get in their way."

"Well... It will hardly be inconvenient for them, as they hardly go to my temple at all. They simply worship wherever they may be, particularly when they need a larger miracle to assist them."

Sapphire stared at me, her face showing shock and surprise. The other villagers had similar expressions. "Holy One, forgive me, but... Your other village is populated with nothing but fools if that is what they are doing! Koloth says that soon, Lysander will come, and try to destroy you. To do this, he must first kill us, your worshippers! If they do not get down to the serious business of helping you accumulate a large store of power, they will die!"



"Northlanders," said one of the men with a snort of derision, and many of the other villagers nodded in agreement. "They're all lazy, Holy One. They want the aid and protection of the gods, but aren't willing to do the work the gods need to give it to them."

"You should punish them, Lord," called a woman, crossing her arms. "They risk their own survival with this laziness - and ours." Shouts of agreement met her call, and I could see by the look on Sapphire's face that she agreed, as well. More, her mind was filled with nothing but disgust for those of my other village - people whom she hadn't even met yet.

"Perhaps," I replied, and fell silent. Some of the pieces of the puzzle of Vordenai and her village were beginning to fall into place - and the picture that was beginning to be revealed was not a pretty one.

After creating the fields they needed and conjuring several stout stone walls and a strong gate to pen their animals in for shelter, I turned my attention to my first village. Somehow, some way, I would learn the truth.

## Eleven.

Ellsbatha stood outside her house for a long moment, simply staring at the door. How could she face her husband, knowing what she now knew? He would see the sorrow on her face. He would hear it in her voice. He would ask... And she would have to tell him.

Their son, Madrick. Such a handsome boy... Gone, now. Tossed in Allakbeth's altar to fuel his need for power - a life wasted, as Allakbeth was no more.

'Why did I have to face her? Why?' she wondered, struggling to hold back her tears. 'Had I done nothing, she would have held the memory to herself... And I would not remember...' And yet, there were happy memories, as well. Playing with her newborn. Suckling him at her breast. Seeing him toddle, his first steps...

Suddenly, the Nameless God was there, hovering above her. "Ellsbatha," he said, his voice an angry echo. "Come with me."

Ellsbatha screamed as she felt his divine grip surround her, lifting her into the air and whisking her to his temple - then screamed again as she realized she was being taken to the altar. A dozen dark-skinned worshippers already danced about the altar itself, their weird chants echoing off the stone of the temple itself as their nearly-naked, sweat-slick bodies writhed in the flickering torchlight to the eerie, rhythmic music they played. "No, Holy One! NOOOOO!"

"What is the matter?"

"Please, please don't sacrifice me!" she screamed in reply, vivid memories of thousands of deaths she had seen flashing through her mind.

There was a long pause, then she was moved to the opposite side of the temple. "I will not sacrifice you, Ellsbatha. Indeed, that was not my intent at all. I simply wished to bring you to the temple, away from the village."

Ellsbatha, still panicked and babbling with fear, did not hear. "I'll be good, Holy One, I swear! I'll worship you night and day, every waking moment! I'm sorry I didn't tell you what I knew right at the start! Please, please! I DON'T WANT TO DIE!"

"Ellsbatha, listen to me! Listen!" the Nameless God replied, shaking her gently to get her attention. "You are not going to die. In fact, I promise you that I will do everything I can to see that you live as long as possible - forever, if I can manage it."

"For-forever, Holy One?" Ellsbatha asked, startled. "I shall live forever?"

"If I can manage it, yes. But there is something you must do for me."

"Anything, Holy One! Anything!"

"I sense in your mind that you have had an argument with Vordenai. An argument pertaining to me. Yet, somehow, I can sense little else about it. Something blocks me... Something I do not understand. You said you were sorry you did not tell me what you knew at the start. So, tell me now, Ellsbatha. Confess what you know. Your god is listening."

A moment later, Ellsbatha found she had been placed gently on the ground. She stood there, gasping, trying to collect herself. The Nameless One hovered above, waiting patiently. After a long moment, Ellsbatha managed to calm herself. Quietly, she knelt on the soft grasses that surrounded the temple, bowed her head, and began.

\* \* \*

"And you told him everything?" Nadar asked, his voice hushed as they lay together in the darkness of their bedroom.

"Everything I could remember - though that was precious little, thanks to the witch's spell."

"And what happened then?"

"He thanked me, took me into his hand again, and brought me back to the village. Then, he simply called Vordenai out of her home, told her he had much work to do in the new village, and left."

Nadar was silent for a long time afterwards, thinking. The hoot of an owl could be heard in the distance, and faintly, the distant sounds of the Dark Ones, worshipping at the temple.

"I had a son," Nadar said, finally.

"Yes," Ellsbatha replied, quietly. "A proud, handsome boy."

"I... I do not remember him at all."

"I know. Neither did I, until Vordenai allowed me to remember."

Nadar was silent for a long moment before he spoke again. "Tell me about him. What did he look like? Was I happy to have him?"

Ellsbatha smiled in the darkness. "He had your eyes, and my father's nose. He smiled nearly all the time - he was a very happy boy. And yes, you were very happy to have him. You looked so happy at times, I thought you would burst."

Nadar sighed deeply, and Ellsbatha saw the gleam of tears upon his cheeks. "I do not remember him."

That, I think, wounds my heart more than knowing he is dead."

"I know," Ellsbatha replied, gently kissing her husband's tears away.

"I love you, Ellsbatha," Nadar said simply, and hugged his wife tightly.

"I love you, too, Nadar. I always will."

They lay together in the darkness for a long while thereafter, simply holding each other, and thinking. Finally, Nadar spoke again. "Come. Let us go."

"Go?" Ellsbatha asked, confused. "Go where?"

"To the temple. We will worship with the Dark Ones. Vordenai dislikes them. She thinks them dumb brutes, little better than animals. I think that whatever Vordenai dislikes must be good, and whatever her enemies do must be better. We shall go to the temple. We shall worship with the Dark Ones. We shall go to their village, and beg them to let us live with them, and learn their ways. If they will have nothing to do with us, then we shall simply stay at the temple, and worship the Nameless One. Perhaps he will have mercy on us, and provide for us. Perhaps we shall die of starvation and cold. But whatever we do, we shall not stay here."

Ellsbatha started to object, then fell silent. After a moment, she nodded. "We should bring blankets, and warm clothes. Plenty of food, and the knives and bowls and other things the Nameless One made for us."

"Alright. But let us go now, tonight."

Ellsbatha nodded in agreement, and together, Nadar and Ellsbatha rose from their bed.

## Twelve.

My first impulse had been to simply go over to the village, snatch up Vordenai in my hand, and shake the truth out of her. But, after a few moments to think, I held back. This woman was, in essence, manipulating a god. She wasn't stupid - she wouldn't try something like that unless she thought she could get away with it. She had some kind of edge, some advantage I didn't know about. I would have to be careful, or she might use that edge she had before I understood what it was. It was obvious she could shield her own thoughts from me, and even the memories of the villagers. How far did her powers go? Sapphire had said that the witches and warlocks of the land were like ants moving grains of sand, whereas I was like a man with a large shovel. My power was immensely greater than hers, that much was obvious. Yet, I couldn't underestimate her. If I had learned anything of women from my previous life, I had learned that underestimating them was unwise.

Thus it was that a week later, I found myself hovering over Sapphire's village, observing the daily goings-on as I thought about my situation. Ellsbatha and Nadar's moving to the village I had easily dismissed to Vordenai with the casual explanation that I had ordered it, to aid Koloth's people in assimilating the new culture they found themselves beside. The truth, of course, was that they'd made this

decision on their own - but as Vordenai didn't feel it necessary to speak truthfully to me, I no longer found it necessary to speak truthfully to her.

Three of the mares of the village were foaling, and I was watching intently. I had a vague memory of always being fascinated with horses - and horses that were intelligent enough to understand human speech (or, at least, understand it as well as a four-year-old human might) were even more fascinating. The creatures of the land, really, were an endless source of fascination to me. At times, they seemed like any other animal I might have seen in my past life. At other times, they were far, far more.

Suddenly, I sensed a familiar presence at my temple. I turned my attention to my temple, and smiled. "Koloth. How are you?" I asked the glowing yellow ball of light.

"Not well, I'm afraid. Lysander presses me hard, and I've had precious little time to even consider when I might uphold my end of our bargain. I fear I may short you unfairly, my friend."

I shook my head. "Hardly. The people you sent me are a joy and a pleasure, Koloth, and I'd have paid you to have them if I knew how lovely they were. Besides, any help you can give is welcomed and appreciated, no matter how little you may see it as being, friend."

Koloth glowed warmly. "Thank you," he replied, then turned his gaze to my temple, where his former worshippers now danced and worshipped in my name. The men and women of Vordenai's village found Sapphire's people quite shocking, as they worshipped in skimpy garments that barely covered them - though in truth, I knew they did this simply because their style of worship involved a great deal of very energetic dancing, and the simple strips of cloth they wore allowed them to sweat freely. "I see you have been treating them well - and they, in turn, have treated you well. I am hiding my presence from them, for the moment. They should concentrate on you, from now on. You are their future, and I their past."

"They will always remember you, Koloth, no matter what happens. They are good people."

"Perhaps... But that matters little, now. My time is short, my friend. I promised I would help you learn the secret of your Singularity - and today is the best time. It will be awhile yet before I have another moment to speak with you, and if things go poorly, we might never speak again."

"I... I'm sorry to hear that, Koloth."

Koloth flickered slightly. "Thank you - but let us skip the social amenities. My time is short."

"As you wish, my friend."

"First, observe the structure your worshippers are dancing around. That is your altar - yet, just as your temple is more than merely a building, it is more than merely a curved stone. It is, in many ways, like the mouth of a mortal man. By placing a sacrifice in it, you consume it, absorbing the full potential of its power. The single sacrifice of a tree gains you as much energy as one worshipper might produce in a day. The sacrifice of a goat, sheep or cow perhaps ten times that. And the sacrifice of a human gains you all the potential energy they might ever have produced for you in the entirety of the remainder of their natural lives. Thus, the younger the victim, the greater the energy gained," he said, then paused. "But please... Do not sacrifice these people. They are my beloved ones..."

"I won't, Koloth, don't worry. I care for them, as well," I replied, and smiled.

"Thank you," Koloth said, and gleamed warmly again. "Well, to continue... The dead can also be sacrificed, releasing what little energy remains in their mortal coil. The sooner after death the body is sacrificed, the greater the gain. The amount, though, is a mere fraction of what they might have produced

when alive - often less than one might get from a tree, or a stone with those long dead. Nevertheless, it is a strategy when you are strapped for energy. Have your worshippers dig up the graveyards, and commit the bones and other remains to your altar. It may not be much, but sometimes a small amount of energy is all it takes to turn the tide of a battle. Anything placed into the bowl of the altar, either intentionally or accidentally, will be converted into energy for your direct use - this is why it is raised up to the height of a man's head. It prevents your worshippers tripping and accidentally falling in. Do you understand all that I've said so far?"

"Yes," I replied. I'd gathered as much from the terrorized thoughts that passed through Ellsbatha's mind when she saw I was holding her near the altar. I had not known, at the time, what the altar could do, nor had I really intended to put her upon it - I'd simply paused, reminded by the worshippers that my temple was no longer an empty place where I could speak privately, when Ellsbatha suddenly thought her end was near. Apparently, Allakbeth, her former deity, had not been terribly kind with his worshippers, treating them as a farmer in my old life might treat a herd of cows. They were not people, but merely a resource, to be used as he saw fit. I vowed I would treat my worshippers far better than that - or try to, at any rate.

"Good. Well, the altar is also connected to your heart - your center. You can enter your temple through the doors and explore your heart, if you wish, but that is a process that may take years. You, unfortunately, will not have that kind of time to spend before Lysander makes his first moves against you. Thus, I am forced to show you a shortcut, to learn your Singularity as quickly as possible. You may or may not have other powers associated with your Singularity, and those you will have to discover for yourself, by experiment. But your main power, I believe we can summon today."

"Alright, what do I do?"

"Place your hand over the altar, and will your Singularity to action."

I blinked. "That's all?"

Koloth chuckled. "No. I will have to watch, and tell you what happens. Your Singularity may be something small, like the ability to make plants grow to maturity in the blink of an eye. It may be something large, like the ability to conjure devastating blasts of energy - from which, I will have to shield your worshippers. It could be anything, my friend - and I will watch you and tell you what it is, if you do not see any effect yourself, and shield your worshippers from any damage your Singularity may cause."

I nodded, gazing somewhat apprehensively at the worshippers around my altar. The last thing in the world I wanted to do was harm innocents. I hoped Koloth knew what he was doing. Tentatively, I reached out my hand, holding it over the altar, and exerted my will.

The silence was deafening.

I looked down, and saw my worshippers had frozen, like statues, their dancing, singing and playing stilled. "Koloth? Are they alright?"

There was no reply.

I looked to Koloth, and was startled to realize he was frozen, as well. Normally, the edges of his presence flickered and gleamed - but now were frozen, and unmoving. I looked around, and noticed a bird hanging in the air, also frozen.

"I've stopped time!" I realized, elated. I flashed to both villages, and saw it was true. Everyone and everything was frozen. As an experiment, I tried to pick up one of the villagers in Sapphire's village - and

found I could not. While time was stopped, I couldn't affect anything. "Is all the Land like this?" I wondered aloud. Then, I paused. "Wait, wait - it's probably limited to my sphere of influence - outside, everything's probably normal." I focused my attention on the nearest edge of my sphere of influence, and looked.

To my utter surprise, I saw a leaf hanging in the air, below a tree, frozen in its fall.

Elated, I pushed beyond my sphere, and searched about. Everything, everywhere, was frozen. I even peered beyond the edge of Lysander's nearby sphere - the lands within were dark, and stained with the miasma of his own influence. Yet, all was frozen, as well.

I focused my attention on my temple again, returning to Koloth. He had not moved at all. I wanted to ask him what I should do, now, to turn this off - and in a moment of panic, I realized I couldn't. Yet, almost as soon as I wished the effect would end, Koloth suddenly flickered, and the music of my worshippers rang in my ears again.

"Well? Go on, my friend. I'll watch carefully," Koloth said after a moment.

I stared, stunned. He hadn't even noticed. "Ummm... I already did."

Koloth flickered in obvious confusion. "What? I saw nothing..."

"I stopped time. Not just here, but everywhere. As far as I can tell, all across the Land," I said, then paused. "Well, it might be more correct to say I speeded up time for myself, infinitely. The effect is the same, but the latter seems more likely, given my understanding of how things in the Land work."

"Really? How astounding, my friend! You are truly fortunate to have such an amazingly powerful Singularity. A power like that, properly used, can give you an enormous advantage over an enemy."

"I don't see how, Koloth. I found I can't affect anything while time is stopped. That's not terribly useful."

"Oh, no? Think of this, then - say an opponent tries to slay a worshipper of yours with lightning. At a thought, you can freeze time, hover over your minion, then release the effect, snatching them up into your hand before the lightning strikes. Once in your hand, they are safe from harm - and by repeating the process, you could whisk hundreds away to safety, and perhaps even replace them with something the enemy might not wish to destroy - like his own minions. You might snatch away an injured worshipper to a place of safety, where you could heal them at your leisure. I can think of a hundred possible uses for your Singularity, if I had it," Koloth said, chuckling. "Just as I'm certain you can think of a hundred uses for mine, were it yours. No, my friend. I am very, very old compared to you, and even in all my centuries of life, I have never seen a power so vast, and with such enormous potential. Use it wisely, and it will serve you well."

I grinned. "I shall, Koloth, I shall."

Koloth chuckled again. "My time is limited, but my own Singularity shows me something that will help you - and I will share this with you before I leave."

"Oh? What is it?" I asked, aware that his power was to see the future.

"Do you recall I said you will need an Avatar, and soon?"

I nodded. "Yes, of course."

"My Singularity shows me that you will have one before the sun sets."

I blinked in surprise. "I will?"

"Yes, you will. And treat her well, my friend - for I foresee that she will, one day, save your very existence." Koloth paused, then sighed. "I must go. Lysander is on the move again. Farewell, my friend. If all goes well, we may meet again once more, perhaps in a month or two. If not..."

"If not, then this is goodbye," I replied, understanding. "Thank you, Koloth. For everything. I'll take good care of your people."

"Your people, now," Koloth reminded me gently. Koloth flickered happily for a moment, then vanished, zipping away at the speed of thought to his own lands.

I sighed, gazing after him. Koloth was a good friend - and though our friendship was brief, I knew I would miss him deeply.

"Lord, help us!"

I jumped, startled by the whisper in my ear, then turned my attention to the source of the urgent prayer. In a moment, I was in Sapphire's village, beside the horse pens. A dun mare had just foaled, and the resulting bloody, white-furred offspring struggled at her feet as she lapped at it with her tongue. It could not stand - and after a moment, I saw why.

The first, most obvious thing was that its hind-limbs were pointed in the wrong direction. Instead of being bent at a ninety degree angle to the torso, they ran parallel to the torso. As it struggled to rise, I blanched. Instead of forelimbs, the snow-white foal had arms, and hands. its head, too, was odd, the eyes a bit more towards the front than on an ordinary horse.

"It is the result of one of Lysander's curses, certainly. The foal was conceived while we were still in Koloth's lands, and Lysander greatly enjoyed casting dark curses upon us." the herdsman said, then looked to me. "Is there anything you can do, Holy One?" the herdsman asked.

"Can you heal it, Lord?" Sapphire asked, her voice and mind showing deep sympathy. "There is little we can do for it, save to kill it to put it out of its misery."

I started to reply, but at that moment, the little filly looked to me, and nickered weakly, tired from the birth and effort of trying to rise to suckle at her mother's breast.

And in that moment, our eyes met.

Her eyes were a deep, deep blue... Deeper than the sea, deeper than life... Within those eyes, I saw something greater, something beyond what she was... I saw what she might become. There was grace, nobility, and power in those eyes...

I reached out, and took the little filly into my hand. "No, Sapphire. You shall not kill her, and she is not in misery. She is what I have waited for, and what I have expected. She is my Avatar." I reached out to the mother, stroking her broad forehead, and the dun mare whinnied. She was a creature of the Land, and at my touch, she understood. I looked to Sapphire, and saw the awed expression on her face. "I will care for her myself, Sapphire," I said, and chuckled. "Somehow, it seems appropriate to have a pale horse as my Avatar," I said, thinking of my moment of frustration when I had chosen my name.

"Lord? I do not understand."

"No matter. With luck, you never will." I exerted my will slightly, and conjured a skin of milk for the foal. The villagers watched - to them, the foal simply hung in the air beneath the glowing orb of my form, and was fed from a skin of milk that floated in the air. The little foal drank greedily, then burped, and yawned. After a moment, she curled up, and fell asleep in my hand. I smiled - I loved her already. "I go to my temple, Sapphire. Call me if I am needed," I replied, and turned my attention to my temple. I smiled again - Koloth had been right. The temple truly was a focus of my power, and no mere building. Already, a pen had formed, just outside the doors that led into the temple, enclosing them within its confines. Fifty yards across and roughly circular, the pen was little more than a low stone wall. Yet, the walls of the pen were not so much to keep her in (though it would serve that purpose), but more to keep the rest of the world out, until she was grown and could care for herself. The walls defined the perimeter of an invisible globe of protection, one that was impervious to anyone or anything that might do her harm. I laid her down in her pen, atop the soft grasses that grew there, then simply hovered over her, watching her sleep. I chuckled again. "In keeping with my own name, I should probably call you 'Morticia', then keep your real name a secret, so that you are simply known as 'The Horse of the Nameless God.'" I chuckled again. "Yes... I think that's exactly what we shall do. It fits, somehow."

The little foal nickered in her sleep, and smiled as I felt the familiar thrumming grow within my heart, then fade.

### Thirteen.

Perhaps it was the father and grandfather in me, but I greatly enjoyed spending time with Morticia. Raising her, teaching her... It was all quite pleasurable. I quickly found that she was not going to grow like a human child, despite her human-like torso and arms - she would, rather, grow like a horse. It was obvious to even a casual glance that she would reach her full size in about two years, and be fully mature in about four. Yet, her mind was more like that of a human child, and was not maturing at the same pace. There was little else I could do - I used my powers, just as I had on the villagers, and simply willed her to know the things she needed to know.

It dawned on me that most likely, all the Avatars of the Land were like this, maturing at the same rate as their animal counterparts. Judging by the mind I had sensed in Lysander's Avatar, it didn't seem likely the other gods were overly concerned about educating their Avatars - they were, in essence, simply brute force, muscle that could be used beyond their sphere of influence. Having them obey simple commands and attack when needed was probably all they were really used for - and whispered conversations with Koloth across the distance that separated us confirmed this thought.

Yet, I found that I needed more from Morticia as my Avatar. I needed more from her than simply a dumb beast, a pile of walking muscle I could use outside my influence. I needed a companion. When I had first awakened, Vordenai had been my companion and advisor. Now, I trusted her not at all, and hardly expected anything she said to be the complete truth. Thus, I used my powers on Morticia, the same ones I'd used to educate the villagers, frequently. Very frequently, in fact.

Vordenai immediately disliked Morticia - and disliked her even more when she discovered Morticia had learned to speak by her sixth month of age. "I beg your pardon, but it's obscene, Holy One," Vordenai announced before she stormed off in a huff. "Avatars are merely beasts. They should not be taught to speak." I decided that this was probably a good thing, in the end. Whatever Vordenai disliked was



something that probably did not further her plans, and I had no intention of furthering any of Vordenai's aims until I knew exactly what they were. Sapphire, on the other hand, was very pleased to learn my Avatar could speak, and often came to the temple to lean her elbows against the low stone wall of her pen and have long conversations with Morticia - often telling the stories of her people, or simply singing a song.

Before I knew it, two years had passed. Sapphire had birthed a son, both my villages had grown slightly, and Morticia was now at her full height - about seven feet tall. It was time to open her pen, and allow her to wander freely about my lands.

Morticia gazed in surprise (and a little fear) as the far wall of the pen faded and vanished. "I... I'm to go out into the world now, Father?" she asked.

"Yes. You need to meet the people. Get to know them. Learn their likes and dislikes, and how to handle their needs. I've given you all the powers you might need - it's up to you to learn how to use them."

Morticia rolled her eyes as she looked up at me. "Oh, Father! I already know how to use everything you've taught me. In fact, I think I know far more than you think I do. That really isn't the problem, right now."

"Then what is the problem?"

Morticia crossed her arms beneath her breasts, and tapped a hoof on the ground. "Father, for all you've taught me and for all you've loved me, you don't understand me at all."

I couldn't help myself - I burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?!" Morticia asked with an annoyed whinny.

"Ah, my dear - the litany of every child in every corner of every universe, I think, begins with the verse 'my parents do not understand me,'" I said, and laughed again.

Morticia stuck her tongue out at me, and looked highly offended. "I really wish you would stop laughing at me and listen to me, Father."

"Alright, alright. I'm sorry - tell me what the problem is."

"Vordenai," Morticia replied, simply.

I nodded. "I don't know what to do with her, really. I've thought about the problem these last two years, but-"

Morticia rolled her eyes at me again. "Oh, Father! You have not! Admit it - the last two years, your main concern has been raising me, and educating me with your powers. The Dark Ones understand. Sapphire and several others have spent a lot of time with me, and they know from their experience with Koloth how important I am to you. Vordenai and the Northlanders do not - well, that's not exactly true. Vordenai knows how important I am to you. She simply has not allowed her people to know it. Faith in you is fading in that village, Father. If something isn't done soon, you may lose them."

"Alright. What do you suggest?"

"I suggest the only thing that can be done. I have to go there, and make a good impression for you."

"Ummm... Alright, but I don't see the problem. What are you afraid of?"

"Father, don't you understand? Vordenai has some sort of hold over you - I don't know what it is, but it's strong enough to thwart you. It's obvious she doesn't want the villagers worshipping you - she wants them independent of you, completely."

I gave Morticia a sheepish look. "Well... Actually... That was my idea, at first. That's part of my problem. It's hard to think of what she's doing as being a conspiracy when I, myself, encouraged it to happen in the first place."

"Yes, but she called you. She knew, before you arrived, that you would have that desire. You knew nothing when you first arrived, and you hardly understood the true nature of your existence and your situation in the Land. You didn't know that having the villagers be independent of you, denying you the power you gain from their worship and prayer, would risk your very existence and their lives. She did. She knew. She chose you intentionally, father - or, perhaps, she simply reached for a man with your qualities from a world other than the Land, and you were the one she happened to get. No matter - she has some kind of plan, Father... And I think it has to do with rendering her village completely independent of the gods."

"Hmmm... Alright. I agree you are probably right. But what do we do about it?"

"Father, you've used your powers to give me knowledge - knowledge you yourself do not have. Even knowledge you, yourself, once had, but have lost since your transition to the Land. We have to work together, and play a game you might once have called "Good Cop/Bad Cop." I'll be the 'Good Cop', going into the village to help the people. You be the bad cop, going into the village to eye them for transgressions, and punishing them."

"Alright, but what good will that accomplish?"

"Aside from bringing the people closer to you so they will worship properly and give you the power you need, it will force Vordenai's hand, Father. She will see you've become like any other God of the Land, instead of the gentle, ignorant deity she apparently intended you to be. She will have to act, or the people will slip out of her control - and, perhaps, we will discover exactly what hold it is she has over you from her actions, and learn how to break it."

I thought about that for a long moment. Finally, I nodded. "A good plan, my daughter. I approve." I looked at her, and grinned. "But you still haven't told me what you're afraid of."

Morticia rolled her eyes again. "I am afraid of Vordenai, Father. I do not know what hold she has over you, or what she might be able to do. I am afraid for you!"

I reached out to her, and stroked her snow-white mane softly. "Don't be afraid. Together, we are more powerful than either of us alone. And together, we'll find a way to defeat her."

"Oh, is today the day?" a voice called. I looked, and saw Sapphire standing near the pen, a large white bundle under one arm.

Morticia grinned. "Yes, today is the day I leave my pen, and enter your world."

"Well, my dear, then you'll need this," Sapphire replied, and walked around and through the opening, then held out the bundle to Morticia.

"What is it?" Morticia asked, unfolding it and holding the cloth before her. I smiled as she stared at it in curiosity - it was a pale white robe, made of soft goat hair.

"It's a robe, dear," Sapphire replied, answering for me. "You'll need it."

Morticia nickered with amusement. "I have fur, Sapphire, I hardly need clothes."

Sapphire smiled. "It's not for you, my dear - it's for everyone else. You've grown quite a bit in these last two years, and from rump to shoulders, you resemble a human girl of perhaps sixteen or eighteen years."

"So?" Morticia asked, raising an eyebrow curiously.

Sapphire laughed. "Holy One, of all the things you may have taught her in these two years, I'm quite surprised you forgot to teach her modesty."

I grinned wryly. "I didn't forget, Sapphire. She knows of it, but she has no need of it, herself. She's unique, like all Avatars, and will not come into heat. The concepts of sex and modesty were something I thought she'd not have to worry about, so I didn't bother to stress them in her."

"Ah, a true Innocent," Sapphire replied, nodding.

"Not quite as innocent as all that," Morticia replied with a snort, and Sapphire giggled. Morticia looked over the robe, then slipped it on over her head. After fidgeting with it for a little bit, she looked herself over. "Hmmm... Not quite right. It needs something..."

"Oh, no. You've taught her fashion, Sapphire. Now I'll never hear the end of it. My temple will be piled high with a thousand variations of robes and dresses and a dozen other frilly things," I said, chuckling, and Sapphire giggled.

Morticia looked up to me, and stuck out her tongue. "Hardly, Father." She waved a hand, and the robe transformed into a simple, short, sleeveless dress, made of a sheer, gossamer fabric that looked like spider silk. It was translucent, almost transparent - when the light struck it just right, you could see through it, and as she moved, it alternately revealed or concealed various parts of her body. "There. Much better," she said aloud, then looked to me. 'I am your Avatar, Father,' she thought silently, knowing I could hear her, 'and that means I must use every weapon at my disposal to fight for you. At the moment, you are trying to win the faith of Vordenai's village. My appearance is another weapon in my arsenal. I understand human modesty - and I understand that being either completely clothed or completely nude will capture their attention far less effectively than being partially clothed.' And with that, Morticia turned and trotted out the gate of her pen, heading to Vordenai's village.

Sapphire simply stared after Morticia in shock, her mouth hanging open. "Holy One... I'm afraid I must say your horse is quite surprising."

I chuckled. "I do believe she will have many more surprises for us as the years pass, Sapphire," I replied, and turned my attention to Vordenai's village.

#### Fourteen.

Vordenai ground her teeth in frustration. They had been so close! After two years of work, the villagers had nearly mastered the skills they needed to be truly independent. Seeds from apple and pear trees had been gathered, as well as seeds from other edible plants, and the farmers' skills held true. The weavers' skills, as well, still remained, and they nearly had reached the point where they could clothe the entire village with ease. Other villagers were slowly mastering the skills they saw displayed, and under her

secret direction, were mastering the craft of making baked mud bricks to use in building their own houses.

Then, suddenly, the Nameless One appeared. "Lysander is coming soon," he announced, "and you have done little to help me build the power I need to defeat him. My gifts, apparently, are not appreciated. Thus, I withdraw them." And in one stroke, the farmers forgot their skills, the weavers forgot their skills, the houses vanished, the furniture vanished, the clothes crumbled to dust, the food they had gathered and grown disappeared, the carefully-worked fields returned to simple grasses... Everything was gone. Despite everything she had done to build their confidence, the villagers returned to weeping and wailing, and begging the Nameless One for forgiveness. They groveled in the dirt, naked and weeping, and even Vordenai herself was reduced to nakedness. It was late afternoon on a late summer's day - the air was cool, and the night was certain to be chill. Vordenai's teeth chattered as she tried to woo the Nameless One back to her way of thinking - and failed, as he simply vanished without a word.

Then, the damnable horse came. All smiles and understanding, sympathetic words, she clothed the villagers who agreed to worship at the temple, and rebuilt their houses with a gesture. Soft, sweet grains rained from her fingertips to form an enormous pile in the center of the village - holy food for those who promised to worship, and aid their god. Before Vordenai could do anything to stop it, the whole village was groveling before that damnable horse, kissing her hooves and swearing they would worship the Nameless One properly. Even Vordenai was forced to kneel before her and promise to be 'good', so that she would at least not go naked before the rest of the village.

Now Vordenai snarled in rage and frustration, sitting in the evening shadows inside her small home. All her plans were in ashes - and the Nameless One had, in a single stroke, become just like any other god of the Land.

"How?!" she wondered, aloud. Everything had been planned so perfectly, so well. He had been a stranger to the Land - he could not possibly have learned the truth on his own, and she specifically selected one who would be too soft and gentle to exert his will over the people, and too humble to demand their worship. Vordenai considered going over to his temple to try again, to make a last effort to woo him back to her way of thinking...

With a sigh of frustration, she discarded the idea. It was obvious - he had changed. Someone had told him the truth. Her plans would make the villagers utterly independent of him or any other god. In time, the knowledge she might have gained could have been passed among all mankind, and the whole of the Land might have been freed of the tyranny of the Gods simply by ceasing to worship them, and living their lives without them, as they had before the Age of Gods. Now, all that was impossible. Someone had told him the truth. But who?

"Ellsbatha," Vordenai hissed into the darkness, in answer to herself.

It was obvious, now. Ellsbatha had talked. And from her, the Nameless One had learned enough on his own to solve the rest.

Vordenai snarled, rising to her feet. She strode over to her bed and reached beneath it, reaching for her Spirit-Bag. She had made the Nameless One - she was his Coder. There were certain things he could not do without her permission, and one of them was violate the sanctity of her Spirit-Bag. She opened the bag and felt within. Pushing aside the beads, feathers and other accouterments of her profession, she found what she was looking for. A ceramic-bladed knife - one of many the Nameless One had made that first day, two years ago. All the other knives of the village had vanished along at the Nameless One's will this morning, save this one. Protected in the sanctity of her Spirit-Bag from the powers of the Nameless One, it remained.

Vordenai drew the knife, and tossed the sheath aside. With a look of cold fury, she strode to the door.

## Fifteen.

I felt the death.

I felt it, heard it, and saw it - though it was hundreds of miles away. A thousand strokes of lightning, and endless stream of devastation raining down upon a saffron spire, shattering it, crushing it, and scattering its pieces into nothingness. The death-scream of a God rang across the Land, and my heart skipped a beat.

Morticia awoke in her pen, and looked up to me. "Father? What was that sound?"

I sighed deeply. "That, my little one, was the end of a friend. Koloth is dead. Lysander has killed him."

"How terrible," Morticia replied sadly.

I turned my attention to the other side of my temple, where the last of Koloth's people danced and sang in worship of me. I raised my hand, and they paused, looking at me. "Sing a song of mourning, for now. Sing a song of mourning, until the dawn comes."

"Why, Holy One?" Sapphire asked, wiping the sweat from her brow. The worshippers took turns with the others in the village, as the energetic dancing and singing they did as part of their worship took quite a bit out of them. It was random chance that she would be the worship-leader at this hour - or, perhaps, fate.

"Koloth is dead. Lysander has killed him. Mourn his death with me, and let us never forget his sacrifice, and his gentleness."

The worshippers wept and sobbed, as Koloth's death also meant that all the others of their people were dead. Sapphire's shout cut through their sobs like a knife. "Silence!" When the others had finally controlled themselves, she looked to me. "Holy One, Lysander will waste little time moving on you, now. You are the last god remaining on his southeastern flank."

"I know. Already, his sphere of influence overlaps a small portion of the northwestern quarter of my sphere. It has been like this for two days, and already the strength of his influence is turning the forests there into dark, shadowy places where misshapen creatures of darkness from his lands slink about into mine. His power is greater than mine, his people more numerous, and his sphere of influence far more vast."

"Then we cannot mourn, Holy One. You need power, and you need it now. Mourning another god, even Koloth, gives you nothing. Later, in our village, we will mourn him, and mourn the death of our people. But for now, we celebrate you. We will give you the strength you need to fight Lysander, Holy One - for your own survival, and ours. You are the last, best hope for our people, Holy One. We will not shirk our duty to you." Sapphire wiped away a tear from an ebon cheek, then looked to her people, tossing her snow-white hair. "Our god needs us! Let us raise our voices, and sing!"

And with that, they resumed their dancing and singing even more energetically than before, pouring their

hopes, their sorrows, their fears and their dreams into the act of worship.

I gazed at Sapphire for a long moment. She was a powerful, wonderful woman. Though her heart was breaking, she lifted her voice to sing. Though her heart wanted to collapse and sob, she lifted her body to dance instead. She was dressed only in a simple loincloth, with another tight band of cloth holding and supporting her breasts. Sweat gleamed on her well-muscled, ebon-skinned body as she danced in the warmth my temple provided, the chill night air kept from them by the power of the temple itself. She danced, she sang, and she gave me what power she could. Though her heart was breaking, she knew this was the only way her people could survive.

I admired her. I respected her. And, I adored her.

"She is beautiful, isn't she?" Morticia thought to me, silently.

I looked, and saw she was standing by the entrance to the worship area. 'Yes, very,' I thought in reply.

Morticia smiled, then gestured briefly, and her sheer garment transformed to one identical to that worn by the female dancers before her. "May I join you?" she called.

Sapphire grinned, and waved a hand to beckon her forward.

In a moment, Morticia danced among the worshippers of Sapphire's people, adding the stomping of her hooves to the stomping feet around her, and lifting her voice in song. Oddly, I could even sense that from her, I gained power, just as with any of the other worshippers - I had not expected that. The renewed flow of strength from the resumed worship gave me confidence, and my daughter's dancing and singing like any of the others warmed my heart to see.

'Koloth will be avenged, Lysander. With people like these behind me, I cannot lose.'

The reply came swiftly - a dark, evil chuckle.

'We shall see, youngling. We shall see.'

## Sixteen.

"Ellsbatha! Where are you hiding in this misbegotten village of apes?!"

Ellsbatha shuddered, cringing in the darkness of the domed tent they called their home. "It is her, Nadar. Vordenai."

Nadar hugged his wife. "I know. I'll go outside, and-"

"No!" Ellsbatha replied suddenly, fearing for his life. After a moment, she sighed. "No, I must go. I must face her, myself."

"We'll face her together, my love," Nadar insisted.

Ellsbatha smiled weakly. "Alright, Nadar. And thank you."

Vordenai stood in the middle of a ring of men. In the last two years, Nadar and Ellsbatha had managed to teach the Dark Ones some of the language of the Northlands - and, in turn, they had managed to learn

some of their language. Still the men surrounding Vordenai had no idea what the problem might be, and only knew that there was a madwoman with a knife in the middle of their village. Vordenai, for her part, did not understand the gentle pleadings from the men for her to calm down, lower her blade, and try to relax. She only saw dark-skinned sub-humans, warped things that one might find within the sphere of a dark and evil god, babbling at her in an incomprehensible tongue. "Ellsbatha!" she screamed, slashing again at the men to keep them at a distance.

"I am here, Vordenai," Ellsbatha called.

Vordenai spun, a snarl of rage twisting her face as her eyes lit upon Ellsbatha standing next to Nadar. "You told him, you bitch! Now everything is ruined!"

Ellsbatha shuddered, then stiffened her resolve. After all, she lived under the Nameless One's protection, did she not? She raised her chin, and gazed back at Vordenai defiantly. "Yes, Vordenai, I did. I told him two years ago, out of fear. I thought he was going to sacrifice me in anger for my not having told him what I knew. As it turned out, he had no intention of doing so. But I told him anyway, Vordenai. He is a kind and gentle god. He deserved to know the truth."

"Don't you understand what you've done?! We could have lived without him, without any god! We could have brought the Age of Gods to an end!"

"But at what cost, Vordenai?! You would toss out the good with the bad - and he is one of the good! Yes, we might have our freedom, as our ancient ancestors had before the Age of the Gods! But at what cost?!"

"Is he?! Do you really believe that?!" Vordenai replied, spittle flying. "Do you know what his name is?! DO YOU KNOW?! IT IS DEATH!"

Ellsbatha flinched, but did not waver. "If it is, then I welcome Death as my god, for I know him as a god of life, and love. What say you to that, witch?"

Vordenai had no answer. She simply screamed a wordless scream of rage, and threw herself at Ellsbatha.

## Seventeen.

'Morticia,' I called silently. 'Come here, now.'

Morticia paused in her dancing, bowed to the other worshippers, and trotted over to me. "Yes, Father?"

"I have... I've made a mistake," I replied grimly. "If I had feet in this form, I'd kick myself in the rump."

Morticia giggled. "You could always switch to your humanoid form and try, Father," she replied, then after a moment, she realized from the gleam of my aura and the thoughts in my mind that I was quite upset. "What's wrong, Father?"

"I taunted Lysander. A mistake - never taunt a bully, Daughter. Simply fight them, or walk away. Never taunt them - particularly when they have the upper hand."

"I'll remember, Father. Now, what's happened?"

"Lysander has opened a magic portal, a small vortex of energy in the section of his sphere of influence that overlaps mine. And from that portal, his Avatar is emerging. Judging by what I can sense, it's tired, slightly wounded, and extremely hungry. It's my guess Lysander drew him directly from the last battle with Koloth, before it was fully rested and healed."

"Shall I fight it, Father? I mean... Well, that's what Avatars do."

I shook my head. "No. It's immense, daughter. It would crush you easily, and my first concern in your rearing was that you be an advisor to me, not a simple grunt warrior. But, it's within my sphere of influence - I can affect it."

"What shall I do, then?"

"Keep an eye on everything here. Make sure no one goes to the northwest quadrant of my sphere until the battle is over. Lysander has fed his maggot on nothing but humans, it's hungry now, and it's making a beeline for our villages."

"Yes, Father. I'll keep the people safe."

"Good - I'm counting on you, now. I'll be back," I replied, and turned my attention to Lysander's Avatar.

The gigantic maggot was swiftly wriggling through the forests, crushing everything in its path. Black wounds along its back dripped a venomous ichor, the remains of Koloth's final attempts to destroy it. Above it, Lysander floated, his red glow flickering happily. "Ah, youngling. I was wondering when you might find a moment to defend yourself."

I said nothing, simply studying his Avatar, looking for a weakness. Physically, it was nigh-invulnerable. It could be hurt, obviously, but Koloth had failed to kill it - and he'd had far more power, skill and experience than I did. I tried the simplest, most direct solution - just picking it up and tossing it away - but I found I could not grip it. Apparently, an Avatar's body had a modicum of protection gained from its creator, and was immune to being directly grasped by another god. 'So much for that idea,' I thought.

Lysander chuckled. "You have no reply for me? No heated words, no curses?"

I could hear the night-songs of the trees and plants turning to screams of agony and death as Lysander's Avatar casually crushed them in its wake. Still, I could think of nothing to stop it. The Land was alive - and Lysander's Avatar was slowly killing a small part of it, just to get to one of my villages and gorge itself on human flesh.

"Perhaps this will shake you out of your apathy," Lysander called, and balls of fire flew from him, to set the forests ablaze. He was still within his sphere of influence, as was his Avatar, so he could still act.

"There. Now you have two things to consider. My Avatar will, almost certainly, consume all your worshippers - and this blaze will, by morning, reduce this valley to ashes. An interesting combination of chaos and destruction, don't you think?"

I watched Lysander's Avatar. If the flames of the raging forest fire were hurting it, it didn't show it. I knew Lysander was right - even if I did stop his Avatar, the forest fire would destroy everything in the valley by morning. Though I had learned how to conjure miniature rain-storms, I couldn't possibly use that to combat this threat. Lysander would simply set the forest afire again, and again, until I ran out of energy. He was stronger than I was, and had a far greater reserve of power - I could not meet his strengths where I had weaknesses. Yet, I had to act - and now.



"Forgive me," I said quietly to the trees, and reached out my hand.

Lysander flickered in obvious surprise as he watched me rip up a long strip of forest two hundred yards wide and two miles long, well beyond the edge of his sphere of influence, and toss the dead and dying trees and grasses aside. He stared at the long semicircle of bare dirt, and finally spoke. "You destroy your own lands? You are not only weak, youngling, you are insane."

"No, Lysander, it's called a 'fire-break'. Something you've apparently never heard of in the Land." I then turned to the plants within my sphere of influence. "Help me, or we all perish. Which of you has what I need?"

'We do! We do!' whispered some ugly, broad-leafed weeds on the other side of the valley.

I reached to them, rapidly gathering a quarter ton or so of them from where they grew like a man might gather up a handful of grass. I scattered their seeds far and wide, then crushed them in my hand until they were paste. I then turned to Lysander's maggot and smeared the paste along its back, across the wounds Koloth had left in its hide. My hand passed through the maggot ineffectually, but the paste was left behind.

"You attack my Avatar with crushed weeds?" Lysander said, watching me in confusion. "You are truly insane."

"Hardly," I replied, and waited.

About the time the titanic maggot managed to reach the bare dirt of the fire break, well outside Lysander's sphere of influence, it paused. Slowly, it began to curl up, and twitch spasmodically.

"What?! What have you done?!"

"It's called 'nicotine', Lysander. Works great on bugs. Several varieties of Deadly Nightshade produce it as a defense against insects, including the tobacco plant."

"Holy One, help me!"

I turned a deaf ear to the prayer. I had no choice. The battle was not over quite yet. Lysander's beast was, for the moment, paralyzed - but I sincerely doubted it would die from this. It was far too tough. Already I could sense the vast resources of its titanic body turning to combat the toxin. It would not remain paralyzed for long. I called to the Land again, searching for what I needed. The quiet, slow reply came back, and I reached out my hand, piercing the earth near Vordenai's village and withdrawing a boulder weighing twenty tons.

I returned my attention to the twitching maggot, raised the boulder, and smashed down as hard as I could onto its head.

"Holy One... I am dying..."

I smashed again and again, while Lysander raged impotently on his side of the border. The maggot was immensely tough, and despite its titanic size, amazingly fast. Had it not been paralyzed, I was sure it would simply have dodged, or wiggled away from my assault. But, it could not. After twenty blows, the carapace over its head began to crack. After fifty, its head finally gave way, splashing the ground with the black, venomous ichor that made up its life's blood. It squealed its death-scream, and for a brief moment, I had a flashing impression - a small maggot, one of many, innocently consuming a dead bird... Until it was touched by the hand of an evil god. It had been raised and trained to be what it was, augmented by Lysander's power. Yet, it had not been evil in and of itself. It had simply been a bug, a larval fly, and part

of the Land - until Lysander's hand changed its destiny.

"You promised... I would live forever..."

I flicked the blood off the stone, and returned it where I'd found it. Now that it was dead, I discovered I could lift the carcass of Lysander's beast with ease. I tossed it well into his side of the border, then looked to Lysander, who gazed back in silent fury. I wanted to taunt him, to jeer at him - but I did not. He still might have something up his sleeve, and I hardly needed to force his hand, now. I needed him to withdraw.

"Go away, Lysander. Just go away," I said, unable to keep the anger out of my voice.

Lysander lifted the giant maggot's carcass from the ground, and held it with a tenderness I didn't think possible in him. I could see the emotions in his mind - rage at me, fury at his own overconfidence in sending in his wounded Avatar to destroy me, and sorrow at its loss. It may have been only a maggot, but it was his Avatar. Despite its horrific appearance, it seemed he cared for the beast as much as any god cared for their Avatar. They were more than just muscle to the Gods of the Land, it seemed. They were each raised and trained by their masters, and were, really, like their children. Koloth had once said that the outer appearance of an Avatar mirrored a god's true heart - yet few mortals understood that. Now, looking at him, I understood Lysander better than I had before.

Yet, I could see in his mind - Lysander knew that the only reason his Avatar was dead was because he had underestimated me. He hadn't taken the time to heal his avatar before he sent it against me, and the toxic paste I applied to it would have never harmed it had the carapace of its back been whole and healed. It would have easily dodged the stone, and any glancing blows I may have managed to land would have been ineffectual. Yes, he had underestimated me - and he was both wise enough to realize that, and smart enough to not do it again.

"I go, youngling. But I will be back. And you will pay for this."

"I fear I already am paying for it, Lysander," I muttered as he retreated. I glanced at the forest fire - it would rage onto his lands, not mine. The fire break had halted it, and the winds were in my favor. Still, thousands of trees would sing their silent song no longer. The battle was over. I had, apparently, won.

With a start, I remembered the prayer - and turned my attention to its source.

Vordenai was screaming incoherently as she was held by four men of Sapphire's village - they and two others bled from small cuts on their arms and chest, apparently from the bloody knife laying at Vordenai's feet. Nadar and Morticia knelt on the ground in a large pool of blood. Both were weeping.

And in the center of that pool of blood, was Ellsbatha.

"Father, I tried... I heard her call, too, and I knew you were busy fighting... But I didn't get here in time."

I touched her body, feeling her wounds. She was dead and cooling, her heart still, her mind quiet.

Morticia sobbed. 'It's all my fault, Father! My plan was to force her hand, and now this has happened!' she thought silently.

'It is not your fault,' I thought in reply. 'It is Vordenai's fault. And I will deal with her in a moment. There are several injured here, Daughter, all cut. Heal them, then take control of Vordenai. Hold her until I am prepared to deal with her.'

I looked down to Ellsbatha. Her dying words echoed in my ears. "You promised... I would live

forever..."

And now she was dead.

I gritted my teeth in rage at Vordenai, at Lysander, at the whole situation I found myself in.

I had not asked to be the god of these people. I had not asked for this responsibility. But now, it was mine.

And I would not shirk this responsibility.

I reached my hand down to Ellsbatha, touching her still form, and focused my will. Through rage, frustration, and deep sorrow, I poured by very heart into my words.

"No, dammit. You will not die! You will live!"

Her body and spirit resisted. I knew the feeling. Her life had ended, and she knew it. It was over, and done with.

"Live!"

Her flesh began to glow with the power I was pouring into her. Two years of accumulated power lay at my disposal - and I was more than willing to use it all, in this moment, on this woman, to fulfill my promise to her.

"LIVE!"

Her spirit resisted. I did not care. Her body resisted. I did not care. The Land itself resisted the change - death, in the Land, was as final as it had been on the world I had once known.

"LIVE!"

Her flesh melted, then turned to vapor as the last of its resistance was boiled away by my will. Her spirit, torn and tattered, fused with the bones that remained. The villagers gasped in horror.

But only when she finally gasped and stirred did I relent.

I lifted my hand from Ellsbatha, and she groaned. Dry bones beneath bloodied rags was all she was.

But she lived.

"Holy One... What have you done?!" one of the villagers gasped.

A hundred emotions boiled in my mind. Rage, sorrow, shame... I could not explain myself. But I could not break my promise to Ellsbatha. I turned to the villager who had spoken - a young man, a handsome man - and I glowered at him.

"I have done that which had to be done. I have fulfilled my promise to her. She will live forever."

"Tell them who you are!" Vordenai screamed, struggling uselessly in Morticia's grip. Morticia was, in the end, a horse - Vordenai could not possibly escape. "Tell them who you are!"

I glared at Vordenai. "I am Death, and this is my realm of power. In this world, the Land, a world of Life, I am Death."

"Then it's true! What the witch said... It's true!" Nadar said, shocked. Ellsbatha just stared at the bones

of her hands with the empty sockets of her skull, and moaned in terror.

"Yes!" Vordenai screamed. "Now you see?! Ellsbatha's meddling has doomed us all!"

"Hardly, Vordenai," I replied. "These are my people. So long as I live, I will shelter and protect them, and treat them as kindly as a loving father treats his own children." I then glared at her again. "You, on the other hand, have tried to murder one of my children. You, Vordenai, shall die," I said, and took her into my hand, intending to crush the life out of her.

"Hah! Try it! Try!" Vordenai screamed, then laughed. "You can't! I made you! I am your Coder! A thousand years ago, before the Age of the Gods, we lived without your kind! We mastered magic, and lived in a vast and wonderful civilization! Then, seeking greater power and further comfort, we made your kind! The first Coders created the first of your kind to serve man, drawing your essence from the limitless Void! You escaped our control, and made yourselves into our gods! Yet the power of the Coders remains!" Vordenai sneered. "Put me down, slave, and perhaps I'll let you live a bit longer. I made you - you cannot harm me! I put that into the very Code of your existence, the basic essence of the mana-energy that fuels your life!"

"Father! Kill her quickly, before she does something to you!" Morticia called urgently.

I tried - I really tried. I tried to squeeze her to paste, to toss her a hundred miles, or to summon my will to blast her with lightning...

...and found I couldn't. I knew, deep within myself, that all I could do was either continue to hold her, or open my hand and let her go. I couldn't even lift her high into the sky before I released her. I could move her about above the ground, but that was about it.

Vordenai screamed with laughter. "You see, foolish slave?! All you are allowed to do to me is open your hand, and release me gently! That's how I coded you! Your kind was never intended to be our gods, you were intended to be our slaves, our conjured servants, to make life easy for us! We discovered the limitation to our powers was that of flesh - so we made fleshless spirit-slaves to serve our needs! Your 'temples' were nothing more than containers for the energies that comprise you, and your 'altars' were nothing more than trash bins, meant to feed you and eliminate our rubbish at the same time! Now release me, slave, while I am still in a generous mood!"

And in that moment, the final piece of the puzzle fell into place. The memories in her mind finally opened to me, and I understood.

Allakbeth had simply used his people as cattle, and as a source of power. When other gods warred on him, the deaths at his altar began, vast power being harvested from thousands of lives. When Vordenai had denied him his last few worshippers by having them abandon him and flee into the wilderness, his temple became vulnerable, and he was destroyed.

This was why the Godless Ones had been shunned by other gods. This was why Lysander had not bothered to gather them into his domain of shadow when he killed Allakbeth. Lysander knew that the Godless Ones were godless because they, under Vordenai's leadership, had chosen to be. They were, to him, worthless - better to let them starve and die in the wilderness. And, if I hadn't come along, that's just what they would have done.

"Are you listening to me?! Put me down!" Vordenai screamed, struggling in my grip.

I glowered at Vordenai. I could only release her gently above the ground - I could not harm her directly. She had thought of everything - or so it seemed.

It was time to see if Vordenai had thought of limiting where I could release her.

In an instant, I whisked her away to my temple. I held her above my altar, and she screamed - but with fear, this time. "What are you doing?! What are you doing?!"

The worshippers paused, looking up at me. Sapphire looked at me, her mind full of confusion. "Holy One? What is happening?"

"This woman has murdered Ellsbatha. She stabbed her to death. She also wounded perhaps half a dozen of your people, back in the village. I tried to save Ellsbatha's life, and now find all I have managed to do is turn her into an undead - a living skeleton. I have used nearly all the power you gave me these last two years trying to save Ellsbatha's life, and it was all for nothing. Now, Ellsbatha must live eternally as a walking horror. Meanwhile, this woman summoned me. She has power over me, and is trying to manipulate me for her own ends. She doesn't care if your people live or die - she thinks of you as apes. She's only concerned about her own schemes, and as soon as I let her go, she is probably going to use her powers to manipulate me in whatever way she likes," I replied, my words tumbling out in a rush of emotion, then paused. "So tell me, Sapphire... What do you think I should do with this woman?"

Sapphire blinked for a long moment, taking in everything I'd said. "Ellsbatha... A skeleton?"

"Yes."

"Because this woman murdered her, and you tried to save her?"

"Yes. My true name, Sapphire, is Death. It is apparent that this is my realm of power - in this world, the Land, a world of Life, I am Death," I replied, just as I'd said to the villager, then looked into Sapphire's eyes. "So tell me - what do you think I should do with her?"

Sapphire's eyes narrowed, and she gazed at Vordenai coldly. "Sacrifice her, Lord. She is a murderess."

I smiled. "That's what I thought, too," I replied, and opened my hand.

"NOOooooooooooooooooo!!!!!" Vordenai screamed, her death-wail cut off by a flash of flame as her body and spirit were consumed in the altar.

I gazed at the altar. There was no trace of Vordenai remaining. She was utterly and completely gone.

And yet, I felt no satisfaction in it.

Of course, through her death, I felt renewed power. The entire potential that Vordenai could have produced in the remainder of her entire natural life, just as Koloth had said. It was less than what Sapphire's people could produce in two years, but it was still a great deal.

Yet there was no satisfaction in her destruction. I was simply glad she was dead.

"I go now to try to extinguish the forest fire Lysander started, Sapphire. Perhaps I can save at least some of the trees. Call me if I am needed," I said, and turned my attention to the northwest.

Nadar followed Death's Avatar, carrying a torch to light their way through the night. The horse-like humanoid had said she did not need the light, but asked Nadar to bring it anyway, so he might not trip and fall in the darkness. "How... How is she?" Nadar asked, his voice choked with emotion.

"She has fainted, Nadar," the horse replied, nodding to the bundle of rags in her arms. "This is all a bit much for her - understandably so, I think."

"At least she... She stopped..."

"Screaming? That will probably start again when she awakens, Nadar. You'll have to steel yourself for it."

Nadar sobbed. "How can you be so cold about this?!"

The horse stopped, and slowly turned. Nadar stared up at her, and saw there were tears streaming down her furry cheeks.

"I... I'm sorry," Nadar said, and hung his head.

"It's alright. We have to be strong, Nadar. For her. She will need a great deal of support to adjust to this new life. My father has given me the task of trying to help her - but I can't do it alone. I need your help, Nadar. So tell me - do you still love Ellsbatha?"

"With all my heart!"

"And will you help me help her?"

"Yes, of course."

"Good," the horse replied, then turned and resumed walking. "Now, the first thing we'll do is move you back into the Northlander village. My father says that you and Ellsbatha are to be the new village leaders. I will conjure a nice house for you, and fill it with anything you need. You can recover your personal effects from Sapphire's village in the morning, once it's light."

"Leaders? Us? But-"

"Yes, I know - my father says that giving her something to do, rather than sitting there all day and night and staring at herself and feeling horrified... Well, having something important to do will distract her from that, and help her adjust."

"But... But she will horrify everyone else! I... I'm sorry, but she horrifies me!"

"My father has already told me what to do about that, and how to handle it. Trust me, Nadar. I will be with you and Ellsbatha every step of this journey. I know you do not understand it, I know my father says I am wrong to feel this way, but... Well, I feel that this is my fault. Thus, I will help you, guide you, and do everything I can to see that she recovers, and adjusts. Even if it takes the rest of eternity."

"It... It cannot be your fault. You tried to help her, to heal her. I saw that. You were just too late. No, it is not your fault. It is Vordenai's," Nadar replied, and paused. "Is she... Is the witch really dead?"

The horse nodded. "Worse than dead. My father sacrificed her in his altar as punishment for the crime of murder. Her body and soul are utterly destroyed. She no longer exists."

"Good!" Nadar said with sudden vehemence, and spat. "Even though all our memories died with her, and we shall never get them back, now... I'm glad." After a moment, he looked up again. "Still... It is not your

fault. You are kind and gentle and beautiful... And you tried to help."

The horse paused and turned again, and to Nadar's utter surprise, she leaned down and kissed him softly. "Thank you, Nadar. I really needed to hear that, just then." She then turned and resumed walking, and Nadar followed in silence.

## Nineteen.

Nadar picked up the roll of cloth with one hand, and gently reached for his wife's foot with the other. Ellsbatha sat quietly on the bed, as she always did for this morning ritual, her naked bones bared to the morning light.

The cloth was black, as black as night. Death's Horse had softly asked what colors she might like to wear. "Black!" Ellsbatha had snapped in rage and sorrow. "Black as night! Black as death!" The horse had simply nodded, then gestured, and rolls of soft, black cloth tumbled from her fingertips. And from then on, each morning, Nadar wrapped her bones in them.

He started with her feet. Gently, lovingly, he covered the bones with the cloth strips, wrapping them about what remained of her, slowly working his way up each leg, one at a time.

She would silently stand, at that point. Wrapping her pelvis was somewhat problematic when she was sitting, and standing made it easier. Ellsbatha always gazed down at him as he worked, watching his soft hands pass the cloth over her hard bones again and again.

"I need no clothes, I need nothing! I am dead, now!" she had screamed one morning, and ran out of the house, naked. The fearful looks from the adults and the children's screams drove her back inside, however, back into her husband's loving arms to sob in misery.

Ellsbatha sat again, and Nadar began gently wrapping her spine, his fingers caressing what remained of his beloved. She could feel his touch. That always amazed her, she often said - that bones could feel, like skin once did. She no longer was bothered by heat or cold - an accident in the kitchen showed that she was, now, immune to ordinary damage. Nadar had panicked to see her accidentally set her wrappings ablaze, and feared that he would lose what little remained of her. But once the fire was out and the charred cloth removed, her white bones were revealed to be untouched.

Nadar reached for her hands, and continued the slow work of dressing his wife by wrapping her hands and arms, one at a time. He began with the fingers, gently wrapping each one in the cloth separately, like a glove, then moving on to the hand, the wrist, and upward.

The horse had insisted it be this way. Nadar knew that his wife could simply wear a robe, or something similar - yet, the horse had insisted that each morning she be carefully wrapped, and each night she be carefully unwrapped. Now, weeks later, Nadar was glad the horse had insisted. He understood it, now. The daily ritual they performed helped Ellsbatha adjust, by allowing Nadar to show her through his touch that he still loved her. At the same time, it helped Nadar adjust, as well.

At first, it was simply a mind-numbingly horrifying task he had to perform, each day. Touching the dry, hard bones chilled him to the very pit of his soul. Then, as the weeks passed, the horror of the deed slowly faded, and his mind began to notice small details.

She still breathed, for instance. Nadar did not understand that. He could pass his hand into her empty ribcage, and feel the emptiness where her heart once beat, her lungs once worked... There was nothing there. Yet, her ribs moved, and Nadar could hear a very, very faint sound that could only be her breath. And as time passed, it seemed to become easier to hear, as well. And yet, there was more.

"What holds you together?" Nadar had wondered aloud one morning. It had been the wrong thing to say, that day, and Ellsbatha went into a screaming rage that lasted hours. Yet, his curiosity remained. There seemed to be nothing holding the bones together. Her kneecaps stayed in their proper place, without anything connected to them. There was even a small, curved bone behind her jaw that simply floated in the air, supported by nothing. After awhile, Nadar had realized that her tongue must have once been connected to it - but beyond that, he could not understand it. He had asked Death's Horse, later, and the horse had replied that she was held together by the same energies that had restored her life in the first place, the same energies that would preserve her existence eternally.

Finally, Nadar was done. All Ellsbatha's bones save for her skull were carefully and lovingly wrapped, as they were each morning. Nadar handed his wife the soft black dress Death's Horse had provided, and she slipped it over her head wordlessly. By the time she had it on, Nadar was already placing the cloth she wore over her head as a veil - an opaque, black cloth, Nadar could not understand how she could see through it. Then again, she had no eyes - merely empty sockets in her skull. How she saw at all was beyond him. He had asked, once, when she was in one of her better moods, and she had explained that she saw equally well, night or day. She said it was different than before, but it was still sight. Her mood then soured, and she fell into one of her usual depressions, screamed and wailed for a while, and Nadar learned no more of the subject. Nadar took the little silver band the horse had given, slipping it over the veil and around Ellsbatha's skull like a slender crown to hold the veil in place.

Nadar sat next to Ellsbatha on the bed, as he always did once he was finished helping her dress, and hugged her gently. He felt her bones shift, her hard arms wrap about him, and she hugged him back.

"You asked me..." she began, then paused.

"Yes?" Nadar replied.

"You asked me last week... What it was like for me to see, now."

"Yes, I did."

"I screamed at you. I'm sorry."

"It's alright. I understand, and I forgive you."

"I talked to the horse, yesterday. I did not understand what I see. I only knew that I could see. It is like a glow, Nadar. A glow from everything - tree, stone, grass, animal, and people. The horse said..."

"Yes?"

"She said I see the life-energy. She said that the Land is alive, and I see its life. She said she can see it, too. And it was then that I understood."

"Understood what, love?"

Ellsbatha paused for a long moment before she replied. "Even the dead glow, Nadar. That is why I live. The horse said that Death, in the Land, is a change of energy-state. Now, I understand." Ellsbatha leaned back, and gazed at her husband from beneath her veil. "You glow like a person, or an animal - a vibrant, flickering glow with many shifting colors." She then lifted her hand, gazing at it. "I glow like a stone, with



the colors not changing - though the horse says they do change, but it is too slow for me to notice." Ellsbatha lowered her hand, then looked at her husband again. "But I am still alive, Nadar. Like the stones of the Land, or the trees. I live."

Nadar smiled politely, as he could think of nothing to say in reply. He did not understand what Ellsbatha meant - but he loved her, and did not want to annoy her.

Ellsbatha passed her fingers over her husband's cheek, stroking the skin with the soft cloth that covered her bones. "I have been so cruel to you, Nadar. I am so deeply, terribly sorry."

Nadar smiled disarmingly. "You were never cruel to me, beloved."

"Yes, I was - and don't deny it!" Ellsbatha snapped, then paused, and sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm doing it again. It is only this situation, Nadar. It is... It is so much... Too much."

"I understand, love. Really."

"I've been precious little help to you in leading the village."

"It's alright, love. You've done what you could, for now."

"May I... I mean, after the horse comes... May I go sit by the stream again?"

Nadar suppressed a sigh. He did not like to see his vibrant, energetic wife simply sit and do nothing all day - which was, for the most part, what she preferred to do, now. Yet, the fact that she had asked him, rather than simply wandering off, was an improvement. "If that will make you happy, love."

There was a tapping at the door, and a familiar voice. "May I come in?"

"Yes, come," Nadar called, smiling.

The door opened, and Death's Horse entered, ducking the top of the doorway. Her hooves clopped hollowly upon the floor, and in her hand, she carried a bowl - just as she did every morning. "How are you this morning, Ellsbatha?"

"The same as yesterday - dead," Ellsbatha snapped.

Nadar winced, but the horse's smile did not dim. "Now, now. You know what I mean." The horse placed the bowl upon the table, then held her hands over it - a sprinkle of soft, sweet grains rained down from her fingertips to fill the bowl. "Do you think you're ready to try eating something, today?"

"How can I eat?! I'm just a bag of bones!"

The horse's smile dimmed slightly. "The same way you speak, Ellsbatha - you are more than just a bag of bones. My father says this will be good for you, and it will help you. Come - try eating it."

Ellsbatha rose to her feet, screaming. "Don't you understand, you stupid, stupid horse?! I'm dead! I'm not even hungry! I haven't been hungry in three weeks! You come here every morning and try to get me to eat that, and every morning I have to tell you I am DEAD, DEAD, DEAD!" Ellsbatha flew at the mare, slapping her with the hard bones of her hands. "Get out! Get out! GET OUT!"

The mare stepped back, her eyes tearing, then turned and ran for the door - but forgetting to duck. With a loud CRACK, she smashed her head into the top of the doorframe. Ellsbatha started - the doorframe was broken, and the mare staggered back, blood starting from her forehead, above the line of her eyes. The mare clapped her hands to her head, staggering.

"I... I'm sorry..." Ellsbatha said, shocked.

The mare said nothing in reply. She simply lowered her hands and gazed at the blood, which now ran down her face and dripped onto the floor. "I'll go, Ellsbatha. And I will not return." She then ducked and stepped through the door, then ran away.

"Wait! Waaaaait!" Ellsbatha screamed, dashing through the door and calling after the mare. "I'm sorry, really I am!"

But the mare did not stop - she ran through the village, and into the forest. In a moment, she was gone. The other villagers stared in curiosity - and no little fear - and Ellsbatha felt deeply ashamed.

And she felt even more deeply ashamed when she saw the livid expression on Nadar's face.

"How could you treat her like that?!" Nadar raged. "For weeks, she and I have worked tirelessly to help you, and this is your repayment?!"

"Nadar, I-"

"No! No more excuses, Ellsbatha! You treated her like she was nothing - and she is hardly that! She's a wonderful, gentle person! And she is the Avatar of our God! And you drove her out like a mangy, worthless dog! She said she'll never return! Who will help our village now, Ellsbatha?! And what do you think our god will do when he finds out what you have done?!"

Ellsbatha collapsed on the floor before Nadar, sobbing. "Oh, Nadar! I'm so, so sorry!"

Nadar scowled. "I have to go, Ellsbatha. There is much work to be done. The village will be moved in less than a week. I'd ask you to come with me again, but I know that's a waste of time. All you're interested in doing is sitting and feeling sorry for yourself. I love you, Ellsbatha, and I admit you have a lot to feel upset about, but its time you picked yourself up and got on with life again. Our god gave you a gift - you're alive. Perhaps it didn't turn out the way he intended. He's a young god, and still learning his powers. But still, you should be grateful for what he's given you, even if it wasn't quite what everyone wanted!" Nadar then turned and stormed out the door, still scowling.

Ellsbatha lay on the floor a long time afterwards, sobbing. She shed no tears - what was left of her body had no tears to shed. Finally, her sobs softened, and stilled. Ellsbatha slowly pushed herself to her feet, and sat at the table.

And before her, the bowl of divinely-conjured food still sat, untouched.

"It's stupid," Ellsbatha muttered. "I'll just make a mess all over myself. Where would the food go? Out the bottom of my jaw and all over my front. How can I possibly eat?"

Then, the horse's words came back to her... "The same way you speak, Ellsbatha - you are more than just a bag of bones."

A child glancing in through the open door gasped as Ellsbatha raised her veil. "Shoo, you little brat!" Ellsbatha snapped, and the child took to his heels with a shriek of terror. Feeling phenomenally insipid, Ellsbatha scooped up a small pinch of conjured grains from the bowl, and popped them into her mouth.

And found the grain was sweeter than life, itself.

"Taste! I can taste! But how?! I have no tongue..."

She looked down at herself - the grains had not simply spilled out the bottom of her jaw. They remained inside her mouth. She chewed and swallowed experimentally, still looking at herself.

And the grains were gone.

"But where? Where did they go?" she wondered aloud, only to suddenly pause in her thoughts at a sudden, sharp pain below her ribs. Ellsbatha grunted, and for a long moment, could not understand what the problem was. Then, suddenly, it dawned on her.

"I'm hungry!" she cried, elated.

And, indeed, she was - ravenously hungry. Before she knew it, she'd finished all the grain in the bowl. Afterwards, a strong sensation of 'fullness' swelled throughout her being. Ellsbatha wanted to grin - and giggled when she realized her face was forever fixed into a grin. Still, she felt more alive than she had in weeks - and the sensations were marvelous. "I really must thank her..." she said aloud, then paused.

Her gaze fell on the drops of blood upon the floor, and the broken doorframe. "No," she said quietly. "Somehow, I must apologize to her. And to Nadar. And to everyone. But first, her."

Ellsbatha picked up the bowl, rose to her feet, and walked out the open door.

## Twenty.

Sapphire knelt in the grassy meadow outside her village, and bowed her head. "Holy One, please speak with me."

In a moment, Death appeared. He was in his glowing form, an orb of scintillating energy - save that his form was now dark, a flickering ball of smoke-gray and jet black. "What is it, Sapphire? I'm terribly busy right now. Is it important?" He was carrying a tree in his invisible grip, and Sapphire realized she had interrupted him in his work of relocating the plants from the northwest quadrant of his sphere.

Sapphire looked up to the glowing orb, and nodded. "It is to us, Holy One. You've hardly spoken to us at all these last three weeks. We're afraid you've been avoiding us."

Death's aura flickered for a moment, as though he was glancing about, then he planted the tree in the meadow, his power opening the earth and slipping the bare roots within it easily and gently. "No, no. It's just that there's so much to do, right now. I've only now finished recovering the last of the surviving trees and plants from the burned-out area, and re-planting them elsewhere on my lands. Some of the trees, as it turns out, drop seeds that actually need fire before they open - yet, I couldn't let them grow up within Lysander's domain, so I had to prepare a small area for them. As I've said before, Lysander's sphere is still slowly expanding. I need to move us back, to the southeast, to give us more time to prepare against him. Moving my temple, as it turns out, is quite simple - I simply will it to be somewhere else within my sphere of influence, and it is there. Moving your villages, however, I think will be far more difficult. There's quite a bit to do, and-"

Sapphire smiled. "Holy One, please! There's little preparation you need to do with us! We're quite used to moving with our god's sphere, thanks to our time with Koloth. That's why all our dwellings and belongings are portable, Holy One. Your horse is quite capable of raising the dwellings the Northlanders

need, herself - simply have the people of the other village carry what they wish to bring with them to the new location you've picked out, and she can do the rest."

Death's aura flickered. "Ah. Well, you're probably right. I'm sure that will work just fine. If there's nothing else, I'll get back to work."

Sapphire gazed at her god for a long moment in silence. Finally, she decided to simply say what was in her heart. "We're not afraid of you, you know. If you've been avoiding us to try to prevent frightening us, you've nothing to worry about in that regard."

Death's orb turned dark and angry. "Have you seen my temple, now?! The stone is dark, basalt! Have you seen Ellsbatha?! For that matter, have you seen me?!" he snapped, and turned to his humanoid form. A tall skeleton stood before her in a black, hooded robe. "My hands are the worst part," he said, holding a hand before his face for a moment, and gazing at the bones. "The change has been gradual, these last three weeks - but inexorable. Now, each time I reach for something, I am reminded what a horror I've become," he snapped, and lowered his hand.

Sapphire looked back to her god calmly. "Yes, Holy One. We've seen your temple, we've seen Ellsbatha - and now, I have seen you. And we do not fear you. Our people know that Death is a part of Life. We saw your heart, that first day you spoke to us. We see your heart now, as you care for the trees and the animals of your lands, an act most gods would not even bother with. The Northlander villagers fear you, yes. They see Ellsbatha, and she terrifies them. But we are not frightened by her, Holy One. In her, we see your commitment, your willingness to keep a promise you have made, regardless of the cost. I know you have made her and Nadar the new leaders of their village - but should you choose to send Ellsbatha back to us, we would welcome her with open arms. No, Holy One. Koloth would not have sent us to you if you were a god of evil. We are not afraid of you, or anything you might do."

"It is good you are not frightened by me, Sapphire," Death replied, gazing at her with his empty eye-sockets for a long moment before transforming back to his energy-form. "Yes... It is good you are not frightened by me. Because sometimes... Sometimes, I frighten myself. I look to Ellsbatha, and I wonder just how far I will go to fulfill my promises, protect my people, and win this war." Death paused, then snarled. "Oh, gah!"

"What is it, Holy One?"

"My daughter says she has had some sort of argument with Ellsbatha, and has ended up hurting herself. Wait here," he replied, then was gone.

Sapphire sighed. Koloth said that the Nameless God, whose name she now knew was Death, was a young god, and inexperienced in the ways of the Land and its people. This was one of the times it showed. "Ah, Holy One. If only you understood," she whispered. Sapphire knew, thanks to Koloth's instruction, that the fears of the Northlanders and the culture of Sapphire's own people had shaped the outer appearance of her god. And, apparently, it was an appearance he found as repulsive as the Northlanders did - a dark temple, and a skeletal form. But Sapphire and her people did not see it that way. Both villages saw their god and his temple in the same form - but for different reasons.

Of course Sapphire's people viewed his temple as a dark spire. Was not their own skin the color of ebony? To Sapphire's people, red was the color of death, not black. Red symbolized the flow of blood, which often preceded death. Black symbolized the dark of midnight - a time of night from which point onward, the sky only became lighter. To Sapphire and her people, black symbolized the beginning of a new hope, not the end of life.

More, Sapphire's people had spent generations with Koloth, helping him help them survive. And, as

needs required, they took the bones of their dead, and committed them to the altar to give Koloth the power he needed - the dead serving the living, and helping their race survive. They did not view a skeletal form as being a dark and evil thing, but simply the final stage of life, and a last chance for the future's hope.

And yet, as she thought about it, Sapphire realized that her god felt guilty about Ellsbatha. He had not wished to turn her into a living skeleton - he was trying to save her life, and fulfill his promise to her. Now, as she suffered, he suffered with her. It dawned on Sapphire that the only way to end his suffering was to end her suffering. Somehow, she would have to help Ellsbatha come to terms with what had happened to her.

Death appeared again at that moment, hovering above Sapphire in his energy-form. "Sapphire, I need you to bring a bucket, some soap and some clean cloths to the temple. My daughter's a bit bloodied, and needs to clean up. She could do it herself, but she also needs someone to talk to - and I just don't have the time right now. I told her I would ask you. Can you do it?"

Sapphire smiled and bowed her head. "Of course, Holy One. I would be honored."

"Good, thank you. Call me if I am needed," he replied, and was gone.

Sapphire rose to her feet, and began to jog back to the village. It seemed there was a great deal she needed to do - far more than simply washing Death's Horse. She would have to help her god heal his own soul.

## Twenty-One.

Sapphire shook her head as she gazed at Morticia sitting glumly in her pen. Her face was covered in dried blood, and much of her mane was plastered to her head by the blood. "I'm afraid, dear, you look a terrible fright."

Morticia stuck out her tongue. "Like my father might say, 'you should see the other guy,'" she replied.

"What? You had a fight?" Sapphire asked, surprised.

"Yeah. With a doorframe. I forgot to duck. Broke the doorframe, too."

Sapphire giggled, and dipped a clean cloth into the bucket of water she'd brought, and began cleaning the dried blood off Morticia's face. "Ah - you confused me for a moment. Your father implied it was some kind of accident, and I didn't understand what you meant." Sapphire looked Morticia over as she cleaned her. "There's hardly a bump, dear. Have you healed it already?"

"No, my father did. And then he told me the bad news."

"Bad news?" Sapphire asked, dipping the rag in the water again. "What bad news?"

"Sapphire, I'm an Avatar - my father didn't intend me to be fighting, but he certainly didn't make me a weakling, either. I shouldn't have cut my head at all. A bruise, maybe, but that's it. I should've been able to put my head through their wall and not get hurt like this."

"Oh? So what's wrong?"

Morticia sighed. "I'm growing a horn."

Sapphire blinked. "A horn?!"

"Yes. That's what broke the skin. My father says it's likely to be fully grown by the time I'm four. He also said that the powers within my body were beginning to focus on it, and by the time it was fully grown, I might find it had some... 'Interesting uses', as he put it. He healed up the skin, but left a little tiny hole for it to grow through so this wouldn't happen again. You can feel the point, just there," Morticia said, pointing with a finger.

Sapphire squeezed out the rag she was using, then ran a finger over Morticia's flat, furry forehead. After a moment, she nodded. "It's quite sharp, dear. That must have hurt quite a bit."

"Yes, it did," Morticia replied, and fell silent as Sapphire worked on her face.

A few minutes later, Sapphire looked Morticia over. "Well, that's got your face cleaned up, at least. Now, lean over the bucket, and I'll work on your mane."

Morticia complied silently, and after a moment, Sapphire had built up a lather in her mane, and was proceeding to rinse it with a ladle into the bucket. "So tell me, dear - I can see you're still upset. What's the matter?"

Morticia nickered miserably. "Oh, Sapphire! I don't want to grow a horn!"

"Why not? It sounds rather exciting, to me, especially if it gives you new abilities," Sapphire replied, smiling.

"But I'll look funny! All the villagers will laugh at me!"

Sapphire giggled. "Oh, I hardly think that will happen, dear. What did your father say about it?"

Morticia made a face. "He said I'll probably end up looking a little like a unicorn, and be very beautiful."

"A what?"

"It's not a creature of the Land - it's a creature of myth from his previous life. You see, Vordenai didn't summon him from the Void, like all the other gods. She wanted someone she could manipulate, so she summoned his spirit from that of a dying man in another world, in another universe... And that world..." Morticia replied, then sighed. "Well, it's too much to explain, really. When my father was raising me, he used his powers to give me as much knowledge as he could - knowledge, in many cases, he did not have himself. I know a lot about the world of his former life. And in some ways..."

"Yes?" Sapphire asked, picking up a towel and drying Morticia's mane.

"In some ways, Sapphire, it's very fortunate he doesn't remember what that world was really like."

Sapphire nodded, thinking. That Death was once a man explained much. Most gods would be little concerned about changes in their appearance, unless it caused their worshippers to abandon them - and they would hardly feel tormented over it. Even Ellsbatha's change would not have caused such wracking guilt in Koloth, and Koloth had been immeasurably kind compared to any other god. He would have felt sad about it, naturally, but that would probably be the extent of it.

"That's right," Morticia said, nodding. "His heart is that of a man, not the alien, unhuman heart of a god of

the Land. And in his former life, he was a father, a grandfather, and a very kind and gentle man."

Sapphire was startled for a moment to learn that Death's Avatar could read minds, just as her father could - but then she chuckled, and shook her head. "Your father was right - you are full of surprises."

Morticia simply smiled, and said nothing.

Sapphire set the towel aside, and looked Morticia over. "There, dear - you're clean, at any rate. The sun will dry the rest." Sapphire paused, running her fingers through Morticia's snow-white mane. "You know, dear... You've never told me your name! Your father told us his name, that night when... Well, you know the story. But we've never learned your name."

"Morticia," she replied, and smiled.

"Hmmm... That's not a name of the Land, I gather. What does it mean?"

"Well... Very loosely translated in the best possible light, it means "Lady of Death", or perhaps "Death's Lady". It could also be translated to mean "Death's Daughter", which is what my father intended it to mean."

Sapphire smiled. "Well, Morticia, that's a very pretty-sounding name, and I think it fits you quite well. You're a very pretty girl, I think, and you're growing to be a very beautiful lady."

"Except I'm going to have a horn in the middle of my forehead," Morticia replied glumly.

Sapphire smiled. "Did I ever tell you about Koloth's Avatar, dear? She grew horns, as well."

"No, you haven't."

"Well!" Sapphire replied, and sat down before Morticia. "I'm our tribe's storyteller - let me tell you the story. Perhaps it will make you feel better."

"Alright," Morticia replied, and smiled as she shuffled a bit in the grass of her pen to face Sapphire, and fluffed her mane in the sunlight.

"Well, first, you have to understand that Koloth had many Avatars. Enemy gods attacked him often, and he had little choice but to have his Avatar fight those of his enemies while he battled their masters. And, from time to time, they died in battle."

Morticia nodded - this much of her existence, she already knew, and had come to terms with under her father's tutelage.

"Alright. Well, when I was little, Koloth lost his Avatar, and had to raise another. Those were dark times - we moved frequently, as Koloth struggled to evade the enemy gods who would kill us, and crush him. Well, finally, his next avatar came to him - it was a goat."

"A goat?"

"Yes - a very gentle and sweet little nanny-goat. She wasn't like you, dear, and she couldn't speak. Still, she was quite intelligent, and she could easily understand anything you said to her. Koloth made her humanoid, like you, so that she would be able to carry things about easily - most avatars are humanoid, for that reason. Well, for four years, she spent most of her time helping us - much as you do, really. Healing, conjuring food and drink where needed, conjuring miniature rain-clouds to irrigate the fields... She was very sweet."

"What happened then?"

"Well, slowly, we began to notice she was growing horns. She didn't like them much - they itched terribly while they were growing."

"This one itches already," Morticia replied with a frown.

"But it did get better, dear - and eventually, they were fully grown. That was when we saw how useful they were. She could head-butt tremendously hard, and she often would win a fight with an enemy Avatar with one blow because of them. Koloth used his powers upon her so that she slowly grew and grew as she aged, until by the last I saw of her, she was thirty years old and nearly thirty feet tall."

"Really?! Wow..." Morticia replied, trying to imagine being that size. "Whatever happened to her?"

Sapphire sighed. "Lysander. His Avatar was far more vast, and it killed her. Koloth said Lysander sacrificed everything in its rearing simply to make it larger, tougher, faster and stronger, and his Singularity was his ability to make enormous avatars. Combined, the beast was unstoppable. It was hardly more intelligent than the maggot it started out as, dear - but then again, it didn't need to be. Koloth once said Lysander had, perhaps, the largest and strongest Avatar in all of this part of the continent, perhaps even in all the Land. It's quite amazing your father managed to kill it, and very telling of your father's true potential."

Morticia nodded. "My father said that no matter how big or strong you are, there's always going to be someone bigger and stronger. He said that the key to defeating a bully like Lysander wasn't to meet strength with strength, but to pit your strengths against his weaknesses. Also, he didn't want me to be just a warrior - he wanted me to be his advisor, and his helper. So, he made me as I am."

Sapphire nodded. "Koloth said that long ago, all Avatars were advisors and helpers, like you. Today, the gods forsake this, in favor of warriors. Your father is very wise, I think."

"I think so, too. He has a plan for dealing with Lysander. He says that-" Morticia began, then paused. After a moment, she made a moue'. "Bleah."

"What's the matter?"

"Ellsbatha is coming. I can sense her mind from here, easily. She's finally eaten the manna I made for her, and now she wants to apologize to me."

"What's so bad about that, Morticia?" Sapphire asked, raising an eyebrow. "I would think that would be a good thing."

"It is, but..."

"Yes?"

"Oh, Sapphire! I just don't want to talk to her right now! My father has given me the task of helping her adjust and I'm supposed to be nice and gentle and sweet and forgiving and... Well, I just don't want to be any of those things right now! I've worked with her for three weeks straight, and it's been an endless headache!"

"In more ways than one," Sapphire replied, stroking Morticia's furry forehead gently.

Morticia blinked, then whinnied with laughter. "Well, yes."



"Well, how about this - let me take care of her for now. You can relax, and spend some time doing the other things you've not had time for. I'm sure there's quite a bit of work to do, caring for the villages, and you've had little time to do it recently."

Morticia looked at Sapphire in silence for a long moment. "You think by helping her, you'll help my father."

Sapphire bowed her head. "Well... Yes, I do."

"I think you're right," Morticia said, and smiled. "I'll take a break from her, and let you do what you can." Morticia pushed herself to her hooves, then fluffed her mane with her fingers. "A little guilt should get you going on the right track," Morticia said, and snorted. Morticia tilted her head and raised her nose, as though highly offended. "Tell her I'm far too upset with her to possibly speak to her today, and my father is not amused with her."

"Is he? And are you?" Sapphire asked.

Morticia grinned. "No, of course not. I just need a break from her, Sapphire, and my father is far too busy right now to even have given much thought to her. I think I'll work with your village, today. It's been far too long since I visited them, I think." Morticia leaned down, and kissed Sapphire on the cheek, hugging her softly. "Thank you for talking to me, Sapphire. I really appreciate it."

Sapphire hugged Death's Horse back, and grinned. "It was my pleasure, dear."

## Twenty-Two.

"Wait! Waaaaaait!" Ellsbatha called after Death's Horse - but it was no use. Just as she was drawing near the temple, the horse, apparently, had decided to leave. She tried to run after her, but wading through the stream had taken its toll on the wrappings over her bones, and she stumbled, tripping as the loose wrappings over her legs tangled. Only by luck did she avoid breaking the bowl she carried as she fell, though the fall did not injure her in any other way - her new body was immune to ordinary damage, and despite nearly falling flat on her face, she was unhurt.

"Ellsbatha! Come here, please," a woman's voice called, deeply accented.

Ellsbatha pushed herself to her feet, and looked - beside the pen, Sapphire stood, carefully washing some rags in a bucket. "Come, dear. It's time you and I had a talk."

Ellsbatha sighed and staggered over, struggling with the tangled wrappings over her legs. "I can't stay, Sapphire. I have to catch up to the horse. I need to..." she said, her voice fading as she saw the cloths Sapphire was working on were bloodstained.

"Apologize? Yes, you do," Sapphire said, finishing with the first cloth and laying it atop the low stone wall of the pen to dry. "But not today, I think. She says she's far too upset to speak to you, today - and her father is not amused with you, either."

Ellsbatha set the bowl she was carrying upon the low stone wall, sat beside it, then buried her face in her hands and sobbed. "I didn't mean it! I didn't mean for her to get hurt! I didn't mean to drive her away! I'm so sorry!"

"What nonsense!" Sapphire snapped. "Of course you meant it! You were simply wrong."

Ellsbatha looked up. "But I-"

"No, dear. The time for that has passed, now. No more excuses, Ellsbatha. It's time for you to get on with your life, I think."

"Nadar said the same thing," Ellsbatha replied, hanging her head.

Sapphire squeezed out the water from another cloth into the bucket, then laid the cloth beside the first atop the low stone wall to dry in the sun. "If he did, then he was right. Nadar is a good man, a wise man. And I wager you've not treated him any better than you have the Avatar of our god."

"No, I haven't," Ellsbatha replied, her gaze upon the bones of her toes which peeked through the water-loosened, mud-stained wrappings Nadar had so carefully, lovingly dressed her in this morning. The front of her dress up to the knees was also speckled with dry grass from her fall, dirt from her second fall was ground into her elbows - she was a mess.

"Tell me this, Ellsbatha - would any other man of your village have stayed with you through this? Would any other man of your village have slept by your side, with you as you are? For that matter, would any man in all the Northlands have still held you in his arms and called you his wife?"

"No," Ellsbatha sobbed miserably.

Sapphire reached out a finger, and lifted Ellsbatha's bony jaw. With a gentle touch, she lifted the veil that covered Ellsbatha's face, and gazed into the eye-sockets of her skull. After a moment, she smiled. "But a man of our people would."

"Wh-what?"

"Ellsbatha, I think you need to learn something - something important," Sapphire said, slipping the veil and the silver band from Ellsbatha's skull and setting it aside. "Look at yourself. Tell me what you see. Go on."

Ellsbatha looked down at herself, and sighed. "A dead woman's skeleton," she replied, then sighed. "A muddy, dirty, sopping wet, dead woman's skeleton."

"Do you know what I see?"

"No, what?"

"Living proof of the power of my god. Living proof of his commitment to any promise he makes."

"But-"

"No, dear. Think about it - he was fighting. He was fighting Lysander, trying to protect us all. He couldn't come when you called. His Avatar tried, but she didn't arrive in time. And you died. Any other god would have shrugged and moved on. Even Koloth would have done little more than sigh with sadness, and move on. Our god did not - he used nearly two years of power we had built for him, and brought you back. He refused to break his promise to you, Ellsbatha," Sapphire said, and turned back to working on the bloodied cloths. "That is the commitment of our god. To my people, you are living proof of his power and commitment. I am proud to serve him - we all are."

Ellsbatha sighed. "But Sapphire, look at me! I'm a skeleton! I horrify everyone! I even horrify myself!"

Sapphire spread the last of the bloodied cloths to dry atop the low wall. "But not us. You may horrify the Northlanders, and you may even horrify yourself - but not us," she replied, and turned to look at Ellsbatha. "We're not like you, dear. Bones are not horrifying and frightening to us, as they apparently are to you. We spent generations with Koloth, one of the kindest of the elder gods to have ever lived. And, as needs required, we took the bones of our dead, and committed them to his altar. This gave Koloth the power he needed to win various battles, and insure our survival. Our dead served the living, dear, and helped our race survive. Thus, we do not view a skeletal form as being a dark and evil thing, as you apparently do, but simply the final stage of life, and a last chance for the future's hope," Sapphire explained, then suddenly grinned. "I'm more horrified by the state of your clothes than the bones beneath, dear. You've mud up to your knees, dirt nearly everywhere else, and from hip down you're sopping wet!"

Ellsbatha looked down at herself, and after a moment, she giggled. "Well... I slipped a bit in the river, and then I slipped a bit trying to catch the horse-"

"Morticia, dear," Sapphire corrected. "Her name is Morticia."

"It is? What an odd-sounding name! What does it mean, I wonder?"

"It means 'Death's Daughter' - just as one would expect it to mean," Sapphire replied. "Now come - let's get you out of these sopping clothes, and get the worst of the mud off them."

Ellsbatha looked around quickly. The music of the worshippers on the other side of the temple could easily be heard, and she knew that at least two dozen of her own people knelt outside the worship area, quietly praying, giving their god power. "Are you sure it will be alright? I mean..."

Sapphire laughed. "Oh, my dear! If we can't have a naked skeleton at the Temple of Death, I certainly can't imagine where we might be allowed to have one!"

Ellsbatha threw back her head and laughed long and hard, for the first time in weeks.

A few minutes later, Ellsbatha's garments lay atop the low stone wall of the pen, drying, and the two women sat together atop the wall, swinging their feet. Sapphire was very fascinated to see Ellsbatha's bones, and asked many questions. "How did this happen?" she asked, pointing at a healed break in Ellsbatha's left humerus.

"Oh, when I was a little girl I was playing, climbing a tree. I wasn't very careful, and I broke a few branches. This annoyed the tree, and it shifted a limb beneath me - I slipped and fell and pop! My arm was broken."

Sapphire winced sympathetically. "That must have hurt quite a bit."

"Not really. At the time, it didn't hurt at all! I was very frightened because my arm was all twisted behind my back, and I couldn't bring it to my front again. Now, later... Well, then it hurt!" Ellsbatha replied, and they laughed together again. Finally, Ellsbatha sighed happily. "Oh, Sapphire! I've so missed talking to you and your people these last few weeks, really I have!"

"You can always come visit, you know. It's not that far a walk."

"And everyone... I mean, they won't be frightened or anything?"

"Of course not, dear! Do I look frightened of you?"

Ellsbatha giggled. "No, not hardly. Oh! And dancing! I so dearly miss dancing with your people, too."

"Well! We can fix that, right now!" Sapphire replied, hopping to her feet and holding out her hand. "Let's go dance in the worship area. Come!"

Ellsbatha felt a sudden flush of embarrassment. She had danced in the village, but had never danced in the worship area. The Dark Ones wore very little when they danced in worship, and the whole notion of being nearly naked before many people had always embarrassed her horribly. "But I... But... But..."

"But what?" Sapphire asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Well... I'm not dressed!" she replied, grasping at straws.

Without a word, Sapphire picked up one of the longer cloth strips that were drying, reached around Ellsbatha's back, and tied it in place around her ribcage. She then picked up another, tied it to Ellsbatha's pubic bone, and left the ends dangling in front. "There you are. Any more excuses?"

Ellsbatha looked down at herself, and realized how ridiculous it was. In truth, she had nothing to cover anymore - no breasts or vulva or even a rump to be modest about... Nothing save bones. After a moment, she sighed. "Ummm... No, I guess not."

"Good!" Sapphire grinned, shucking the simple dress she wore and setting it aside, revealing her loincloth and top. "Now come!" she said, holding out her hand.

Ellsbatha was, for perhaps the first time since her transformation, profoundly glad she did not have skin anymore - for she was certain if she did, she'd have blushed from the top of her head to the tips of her toes as they walked around to the worship area, hand in hand. The Northlander villagers stared at the two of them - most with fear at Ellsbatha and confusion at Sapphire, but a few of the men looked upon Sapphire's dark, well-muscled body with barely-concealed gazes of lust. As they stepped into the worship area and the pounding beat of the drums enfolded them, Ellsbatha hesitated again. "Wait - I don't know this dance!"

"We're very fortunate to have come at this time - it's the perfect dance for you, I think. It's the Dance of the Strong Woman," Sapphire replied. "Don't worry, you'll pick it up quickly. Follow me, and do what I do."

Ellsbatha watched Sapphire writhe to the music, her hips swaying, her arms above her head, her fingers snapping... And again knew that if she still had skin, she'd be blushing everywhere. "Ummm... That seems so..."

"Erotic?" Sapphire asked, an impish grin on her face.

"Yes."

Sapphire laughed. "I suppose it would be, to your people. Now come - don't just stand there! Dance!"

Slowly, hesitantly, Ellsbatha followed. She felt horribly embarrassed - and worse, she could see that her own villagers who were watching gazed upon her with expressions that could best be described as shock. But, to her surprise, the men of Sapphire's village did not blanch at her. They didn't even laugh, which was the other reaction she was afraid they might have at her fumbling attempts to learn what was, obviously, a fertility dance.

Instead, the men who were resting stood and applauded, and those who were playing the music played louder, grinning broadly.

"They... They're clapping? For me?"

"Of course! I told you - we don't see you the way your people do! Now stop talking, and dance!" Sapphire replied, and laughed.

Slowly, Ellsbatha began to relax, and lose herself in the pounding rhythm of the music. She could feel her spirit lifting, the dark depression that had weighed her down for many weeks easing, like a lightening sky after a storm. It was a wondrous, joyous sensation - she truly felt alive again.

The women danced around and around the altar, chanting and writhing - when suddenly Ellsbatha noticed Morticia had arrived. She stood behind the men, watching and smiling.

"Can you join us again today?" called Sapphire.

Morticia nodded, grinning, and gestured briefly, her garments changing to match that of the dancers. Then, to Ellsbatha's utter surprise, Morticia then stepped up beside her, and began to dance. She danced with an easy grace that showed Ellsbatha she'd done this dance many, many times before - and the men applauded her greatly as she swung her rump from side to side, flicking the long hair of her tail energetically.

After they circled the altar twice more, Ellsbatha looked up to Morticia. "I'm sorry," she said, sotto-voce.

"For what?" Morticia replied, and grinned.

Ellsbatha giggled. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now dance!" Morticia hissed, and grinned again.

And Ellsbatha did.

### Twenty-Three.

Nadar stepped back into his house as the sun slowly set, and was surprised to smell a delicious stew. It had been weeks since Ellsbatha truly spent time in the kitchen, and the one time she tried since her transformation, she'd only managed to set herself afire. He looked about, and saw a pot of stew sat upon the table, waiting. But before he could wonder about it, he was surprised again.

A strange woman, dressed all in pale green and with her head veiled, stepped into the room from the kitchen. She was carrying a bowl and spoon, apparently setting the table for him. "Who-" Nadar began, but then the woman noticed him.

"Nadar! I'm so glad you're home!"

"Ellsbatha?" Nadar replied, confused. "But what has happened?"

"Oh, Nadar!" Ellsbatha replied, setting the table. "I've had such a wonderful day! I was so wrong, Nadar... Wrong and silly and... Well, I went to the temple, and Sapphire and Morticia healed me."

"Morticia?"

"Death's Horse, Nadar. That's her name. It means "Death's Daughter", or so Sapphire says."

"And they healed you?" Nadar said, his heart leaping in his chest. Ellsbatha - his beautiful, lovely Ellsbatha, healed and whole...

"Yes - not my body, of course. That remains the same. They healed my heart, Nadar. I finally have accepted what's happened to me. I danced and sang and laughed and all the pain in my heart finally went away! Morticia gave me these new clothes to celebrate - I wore them home, because I wanted to surprise you. And I want to apologize to you, Nadar. I'm so terribly sorry for putting you through this ordeal, really I am," Ellsbatha replied, and hugged Nadar tight.

It was a tremendous effort for Nadar to keep his true feelings off his face and out of his voice. Of course they had only healed her heart. The change in her body was permanent.

Permanent...

"I... I'm very glad, Ellsbatha," Nadar replied, hugging her back and feeling her bones through her garments.

"I love you, Nadar," Ellsbatha said, enjoying the feel of his strong arms around her.

"I love you, too, Ellsbatha," Nadar replied, because he did. As for the ache in his heart, Nadar forced it down with an effort of will.

## Twenty-Four.

"And she feels better now?" I asked.

Morticia nodded, looking up to me as she sat on the grasses that grew inside her pen. "Much, Father. It's been two weeks, and she's shown no sign of returning to the deep depression she suffered with at first. She's stepped into the role of village leader fully, and she orders around the other villagers with ease," Morticia replied, then giggled. "Well, part of that, of course, is because the other villagers are scared spitless of her, but she doesn't seem to mind that anymore. Besides, it came in very handy when we were moving her village to the new location you'd picked out. She also comes and dances regularly at the temple with Sapphire's people - she's dancing now, in fact. That frightens the Northlander villagers, too, but... Well, as they are worshipping, I've decided not to do anything about it. They worship out of fear at the moment, Father. Once you've defeated Lysander and have some breathing room, there'll be time enough then to teach them to worship out of love, as the Dark Ones do."

I shifted to my humanoid form, and sat before her. It made no difference to me, of course, but I didn't want her to get a crick in her neck looking up at me. "Good. And has she been eating the manna?"

Morticia nodded again. "Every morning. There's been a little improvement from it - she has the sensations of eating and being full, and Nadar says he's begun to hear a very faint heartbeat at night, when he places his ear against her ribs. Otherwise, she's pretty much the same."

I sighed. "I was hoping the effect might be a bit more dramatic."

"I'm afraid not, Father. It is working, yes. The manna I feed those who worship has a stronger effect. It retards their aging, refreshes them, and heals quite a bit, both inside and out. On her, though..."

"Well, that's probably because her energy-state has changed. The simple truth of the matter is, by the odd laws of physics that apply here in the Land, she's dead. Her energy-state is that of a stone. She'll probably grow at the same speed stones do, as well."

Morticia blinked. "Stones grow?"

I nodded. "You can't sense it, but I can. In the Land, that's what makes mountains. Wind and rain wears the mountain down, and internal growth pushes it up."

Morticia nodded, and then changed the subject. "Have you learned anything more about Lysander's plans?"

"Very little, I'm afraid," I replied, and sighed. "He can't sense me when I use my Singularity and scout out his lands, though, so he's not aware I've been snooping. Him, on the other hand, I can detect easily when he snoops on my lands. He's seen the move, and he's been watching from time to time. He hasn't had time to try to woo away any of our people, though."

"Why not?"

"Because he's been spending most of his time working on his new Avatar. He's pouring a tremendous amount of energy into it. About half of his people are engaged in round-the-clock worship to give him the power he needs, and the glow from the pen at his temple can be seen at night miles away."

"What is it? I mean, what kind of animal?"

"Well, it used to be a jumping spider. It's about the size of a kitten, at the moment. If he's trying to build it up to the size his previous Avatar was at, it'll take him about two years, at this rate."

Morticia shuddered. "Horrid."

I nodded. "I know. That was the real key that allowed me to understand him, Daughter - and now, having heard Vordenai's story and having talked to both Lysander's allies and enemies, I understand the 'gods' of the land far better than I did before."

"You do?"

"Yes. They're all like the gods of ancient Greece and Rome, Daughter. They're all-"

Suddenly, a presence appeared before us. A gleaming orb of shimmering emerald green, it flickered as it hovered above our heads. "I could not speak to you before, youngling, but I have a moment, now. What is it you wished to say?"

I rose, and waved a skeletal hand at our visitor. "Daughter, this is Verdana. She rules the lands on Lysander's northwest side, opposite us. Verdana, this is my daughter, Morticia," I said, and as Morticia rose and bowed politely, I crossed my arms. "Oh - and I would appreciate it if you would address me by my name. I am known as Death."

Verdana sniffed. "A presumptuous name, youngling. What makes you think you have the power to match it?"

"Take a look at my worship site. Tell me what you see."

Verdana flickered slightly, glancing past the dark spire of my temple. "Worshippers dancing. What of it?"

"Look again."

Verdana flickered as though rolling her eyes, and zipped over to take a look. After a moment, she was back. "A skeletal worshipper? How did you-"

"I prefer the term 'undead', if you please. And she is the first of what will soon be many. An endless procession of the dead, worshipping day and night. They do not tire. They do not eat. They do not sleep. And the power they give is equal to that of any living mortal. Soon, tens of thousands of them will be at my beck and call, and my power will be limitless," I replied, then glared at Verdana. "I am Death, and this is my realm of power."

Verdana flickered, and transformed to a tall, buxom woman in a flowing, translucent green gown that revealed far more than it concealed. Her hair was the color of tree-bark, and her eyes an emerald green. "I see you have power youn-, err, Death. Great power, indeed. Your Singularity is truly vast and impressive."

"Whereas yours is simply the ability to create fruit-laden trees at a gesture. You feed your people easily and their numbers increase rapidly, but that is all. Were it not for me, Lysander would have crushed you already."

Verdana made a moue'. "Yes, you did prove a useful distraction. Still I fail to see why I should ally with you."

"Then I will explain it carefully, so even a simpleton like you can understand," I replied, and Verdana's eyes flashed fire. "I will destroy Lysander. He cannot win. I will destroy any who oppose me. Those who aid me I may allow to survive with a handful of worshippers - maybe."

"Bah! You speak as one whose sphere of influence encompasses all the Land itself!" Verdana snapped.

"It does. I am Death, and death is everywhere," I replied, and froze time. I turned my attention to her lands, and began searching.

From my perspective, it took days. Searching her lands, examining each of the people carefully as they held there, frozen. And, there were nearly eight thousand of them to look over. Then, there were the animals of her lands to look over - and there were tens of thousands of them.

I'd discovered, through experimentation, that what I'd told Koloth that day two years ago was, essentially, correct. I didn't stop time for all the Land - I sped up time for myself, infinitely. Despite my braggadocio, the simple fact was that the powers of the Gods of the Land were limited in their effect to themselves, or their sphere of influence. Still, I was counting on what I had learned so far - both about myself, and about the Gods of the Land - to carry through my plan.

Finally, when I thought I had found everything I needed to find, I returned to the temple, and relaxed my Singularity. "Just now," I continued, as though nothing had happened, "on your lands, there are two people dying. One is an old woman, lying in a bed. Another is a young lad, drowning in a pond. If you listen, I'm certain you can hear his prayers for help in your ear even now. There are also nine hundred and three animals dying, ranging from deer being eaten by wolves to a young sparrow hen near your temple who is egg-bound, and dying in agony," I finished, and transformed to my energy-form. "I am Death, and death is everywhere. You and the other gods have warred on each other for a thousand years, causing countless deaths. Each of you has, because of this, exalted me over even the hopes and dreams of your most devout worshippers. You brought me to being. I am the result of your actions - I



am death, personified. My power is unique to the land, and unstoppable. The deaths of countless humans you and your kind have slain brought me into being, and given me power beyond your wildest imaginings. I will prevail, Verdana. Your choice is to ally with me, or be crushed in turn, with the rest, when your time comes."

Verdana simply gaped at me.

"If you hurry, you might save the lad, you know. You try to pass yourself off as a 'good' deity. You wouldn't want to damage your reputation with your worshippers, now, would you?" I said calmly.

Verdana transformed to her shimmering emerald energy-form, then zipped away.

Morticia burst into applause, and whinnied loudly with joy. "Oh, bravo, Father! That was marvelous!"

I grinned. "Poker, my dear. It's unknown in the Land, apparently."

Morticia nodded. "The art of the bluff - I remember, Father. You taught me well."

"Now, compose yourself. She could be back at any time."

"Yes, Father," Morticia replied, and stood quietly.

It was several minutes, but eventually, Verdana returned. She hung there, in her energy-form, gazing at me. "It was all as you said - even the boy and the sparrow."

"Of course," I replied calmly.

"Your powers are truly vast, Death. I can see it would be wise to ally with you, for now." she replied, and zipped away without a further word.

I froze time and took a quick look about her lands, then returned to the temple and released my power. After a long moment, I sighed.

"What is it, Father?"

"She didn't bother to save the boy. I didn't think she would, but I was hoping she might."

"What?! That's terrible!"

"She's a god of the Land, Morticia. Koloth was, I think, one of the last of the compassionate gods. The more I meet the other gods of the land, the more I miss him."

"But why are they like that, Father? I don't understand!"

I transformed to my humanoid form, then pointed. "Look at your feet."

"What?"

"Look. Look down at your feet. What do you see beneath your hooves?"

"Umm... Grass?" Morticia replied, looking down.

"Look again. Look closer. Get on your hands and knees, and look where your hooves once were."

Morticia did so, and spoke again after a few seconds. "Just a few ants, father."

"Look closer. Look just there, in your right hoofprint," I said, pointing. "What do you see?"

"Ummm... A squished ant. I stepped on it, apparently."

"And that is all they see, Morticia, when they look upon the people of the Land. Where you and I see human beings, they see ants," I replied, and resumed my energy-form. "And like human children, some watch the ants and learn, others amuse themselves by helping them, dropping food for the ants to carry home... And some amuse themselves by simply crushing the ants for fun. And they feel about as much remorse over their deaths as you feel over the death of that ant."

As Morticia's eyes widened in understanding, I sighed. "I'm sorry, Daughter - I have to go. I have several other gods to visit, Morticia, and quite a lot of work to do with convincing them. Lysander's enemies will have to be bluffed and bullied into cooperation, like I did with Verdana - they won't help just by me asking. I'll have to talk to you later," I said, and focused my attention elsewhere.

\* \* \*

Morticia sat back, gazing silently at the grass before her, and her own hoofprint. For a long moment, she simply sat quietly, thinking.

It was merely an ant, of course - a tiny, inconsequential being. She was a titan compared to it, vast and supreme, and its death was a trivial matter.

Unless, of course, you were another ant.

After a long moment, Morticia leaned down, and gently picked up the dead ant with two fingers. Gesturing, she conjured a miniature silver coffin, and held it delicately in her fingertips. With great care, she placed the crushed body of the ant within it, and sealed the coffin shut. Silently, she poked a hole in the ground beneath the grass with her finger, slipped the little coffin in, and patted the hole closed. She then bowed her head, and sat there silently. Finally, she reached out a hand, stroking the grasses that grew above the tiny grave. "Your sacrifice will not be forgotten, little one. You and my father have taught me a valuable lesson - one I shall never forget."

And with that, Morticia rose to her feet, and strode out of her pen, heading towards the worship site to dance.

Twenty-Five.

Morticia stared at the bird in her father's hand as they sat together near the temple. "But... But Father! How?! What's happened?!"

Death looked down to the bird he held in his skeletal hand. He was in his humanoid form - and the last two years had not been kind. The fears of the Northlanders had darkened his robe beyond black, to the point where it seemed to nearly absorb light, and his skeletal visage had grown even more ominous and oppressive. Even his voice had become a dark, hollow echo, like a lost soul speaking from within the shadow of a tomb. "I don't know, daughter. It's happened slowly, these last two years. It gradually took more and more effort... And now, I find it's an enormous effort to do even this. My powers have expanded in other areas... In some areas, very greatly. I've even discovered a few new things... But in this, however, my powers seem to have atrophied."

Morticia held out her hands, and her father placed the bird in her palms. The bird struggled for a moment, but it could not truly escape - not with a broken wing.

"In what ways have your powers expanded, Father? Perhaps there's a clue in that?"

Death chuckled. "Well, I can break that little bird's neck, then raise it as an undead with a thought," he replied, reaching out his skeletal hand.

"No!" Morticia whinnied, holding the bird to her bosom. Death laughed, and Morticia stuck out her tongue. "A demonstration won't be necessary, Father."

"Oh! There you are!" called a voice.

Morticia looked, and saw Sapphire walking towards them. "Hello, Sapphire! Come sit with us!"

Sapphire paused, and gazed at Morticia with an enormous smile. "My dear, your horn looks beautiful!"

Morticia smiled. "You really think so?"

"Yes, definitely," Sapphire said, gazing at Morticia's delicately spiraled horn as she walked up to her. "It was gleaming pearl-white last month, but now it's like... Well, like mother-of-pearl, all sparkling with the colors of the rainbow when the light hits it just right."

"Well, I was worried it would get too long! It's a yard long, now, and I can't even go inside houses anymore for fear of poking the ceiling!"

Death nodded. "It's finally finished growing," he said hollowly. "This, I think, is its final appearance and length."

Sapphire nodded, then sat beside her god and his Avatar. "Good morning, Holy One," she said, bowing her head. "How are you, today?"

"Not well, Sapphire," Death replied, shaking his head.

"What?! What's the matter?" Sapphire asked, concerned.

"My father seems to be losing his powers of healing, Sapphire. Other powers he has are growing, and he's even found he's developing new powers - but his powers of healing are fading. This bird has a broken wing. He can heal it, but it would take literally months worth of energy for him to do it," Morticia explained. Morticia held the bird up, lowering her head, and touched it to the shaft of her horn. Immediately, the bird burst free of her grip, and flew away, fully healed. "Of course, for me, it's nothing, now."

Sapphire looked to Morticia, then Death, and then giggled. "Why, can't you two see it?"

"See what?" Death asked.

"Why, as her horn has grown, she's absorbed some of your powers!"

Death chuckled, and Morticia giggled. "No, Sapphire. My powers come from within myself - my horn has augmented some of them and given me new powers I haven't even tried yet, but none of them are from my father."

"I'd have felt that happening, Sapphire, and been able to sense it within her."

"Oh, sorry," Sapphire replied, looking sheepish. "What could it be then, I wonder?"

"We don't know," Morticia replied, shrugging.

"There is one possibility," Death said, grimly. "Belief."

"Ah! Of course," Morticia replied, nodding.

"Oh? How so?" Sapphire asked, curious.

"My father has been promoting himself to the neighboring gods and to all the villages around as Death, Sapphire. All powerful, all encompassing, unstoppable, inescapable... The living embodiment of death in the Land. It's all been part of his plan to get some of the other gods on his side for a combined attack on Lysander, and to weaken the faith of Lysander's people in their god, so as to reduce his power. The side effect of that is that as belief in him grows, his powers and appearance change to fit the beliefs."

"Ah, I see. Well, we still believe in you as we originally knew you, so it's not likely you'll lose your healing abilities completely, Holy One. Also, your daughter's healing abilities can more than make up for the lack," Sapphire said, and Death nodded. "Tell me though - has that plan been working otherwise? I mean, are you weakening Lysander?"

Death nodded. "Lysander's people are beginning to doubt his invincibility, that's for certain. I slew his Avatar two years ago, and it's well known that all his enemies are allied against him. Already, border villages in his territories are experiencing people fleeing to the lands of some of the more "Good" deities - I, of course, am viewed as the epitome of evil, and avoided. I can't send anyone to be a missionary for me and help convince the people otherwise - Lysander would simply kill them the moment they stepped within his sphere of influence. Even my daughter can't help - once she fell within his sphere of influence, she would be easy prey."

"It's too bad none of them can actually see what your realm is like, Holy One," Sapphire said. "If you truly were as evil as all that, the Land itself would show it. The sky would be dark, the forests deep and forbidding, and foul creatures would lurk among the shadows."

A dark red, flickering orb of energy appeared above them. Lysander's evil laugh echoed from it. "You mean like this?" he asked, and instantly, the sky turned to blood.

## Twenty-Six.

I reflexively exerted my will, and froze time - it was all I could think of to do. Once the moment of being startled had passed, I looked around, and examined my situation.

Lysander's temple had appeared, a bit under a mile outside the edge of my sphere. I turned my attention to the edge of my sphere, and realized what had happened. He'd moved his temple to the edge of his sphere, and as his sphere of influence shifted to center over it, his larger sphere completely engulfed my own. 'A useful tactic - but one that would leave his people vulnerable,' I thought, and looked about his sphere for awhile. After a few minutes, I nodded. Lysander hadn't been stupid - he'd had his entire population migrating southeast, so that when his sphere moved, they would still be within it. His people were already near the new site of his temple, just a mile outside my reach. Over twenty thousand people, by rough count, most already chanting, dancing and worshipping to give Lysander the power he needed to destroy me.

'Well, time to try to see what I can do to get us out of this mess,' I thought.

First things first - I turned my attention back to Sapphire and Morticia. I growled with outrage - already, a spark of lightning was starting from Lysander, heading for Morticia. It would almost certainly engulf Sapphire, as well - Morticia might survive it, but Sapphire was only human, and would be instantly killed. They had to move.

I closed my hands about Sapphire and Morticia, and willed time to flow again.

There was a brilliant flash, and a deafening explosion - and I willed time to halt again.

Sapphire was unhurt, but frozen in my grip, an expression of terror on her face. Morticia was frozen as well, but her expression was more a snarl of rage. I whisked Sapphire away to her village, set her down gently, then released my will.

Morticia whinnied in anger and Sapphire screamed, tumbled to the ground, then blinked in surprise. "What-?!"

"Sapphire! Get everyone to the temple, now!"

"Yes, Lord!" she replied, scrambling to her feet.

I willed time to halt again, and looked at Morticia in my other hand. She now had an expression of surprise - this power was my Singularity, and she did not share it. She was, unfortunately, frozen. I now had plenty of time to think, as I could maintain this effect indefinitely. Unfortunately, this moment, the one moment I truly needed to sit down with her as my advisor and come up with some kind of plan, was the one moment she simply could not help me - she did not share this power, and was frozen like everything else. There seemed little choice, however - I had to get the people to safety, first.

I whisked her over to the Northlander village, set her down, and willed time to flow again.

"Daughter!" I snapped as she whinnied, tumbling to the ground. "Get everyone to the temple, then guard them!"

"Yes, Father!" she replied, rolling gracefully to her hooves.

I turned my attention back to Lysander, and found he was roaring with laughter. "Hah! Your Avatar vaporized in one stroke! Did you not think anyone might attack it? Did you not even try to develop it? What a fool you are, youngling!"

"You won't get away with this, Lysander," I replied. I was utterly at a loss for witty comebacks.

"Oh, no?" he shot back, and his energy-form flickered. An oval of power appeared in the air next to him, an open vortex of energy - and from it, his Avatar stepped forth.

As I'd told Morticia years before, it had once been a jumping spider. It was hardly that, now. The size of an elephant, the nightmarish creature scuttled forth hungrily, in search of human prey.

"You'll find my new avatar, though smaller than my old, is significantly more resistant to anything you may wish to try, youngling. Now - watch and weep as I slay your worshippers, and it consumes what few might escape me. But worry not - once the last of your worshippers are dead, I'll destroy your temple swiftly. You've been a fine adversary, and you deserve a swift and moderately painless death," Lysander said, and laughed at his own joke. A heartbeat later, he flicked a wide fork of lightning at Sapphire's village.

I froze time, and wracked my brain for a solution. I went over to Sapphire's village, and could see that she was still only now getting people to begin running to the temple. They had started moving, but it hadn't been fast enough. Four had been hit by the lightning Lysander had tossed, one man and three women, their bodies burned and flying. I ground my teeth in anger - as soon as I released my will and allowed time to flow again, they would be dead. The solution seemed obvious - I couldn't wait for them to get to the temple themselves. I would have to move them out of the way myself, to my temple, and throw a shield over all my people and their animals.

I started to reach for Sapphire again, then paused. "No... That won't work," I realized.

Lysander had me on the defensive. Just as he'd once done with Koloth, he would simply attack any shields I put up, and continue to hammer at them with his nearly limitless reserves of power until they fell. He'd continue to toss lightning and fire, either at this village or the other, until he'd managed to kill several more people. Meanwhile, his creature would be there, at my temple, hammering away at my shields for him while he kept me occupied everywhere else. No matter what way I tried to execute this plan, many people would die, and it was highly likely I'd lose. Lysander had greater reserves of power than I did. Even if I could bring everyone to the temple in one fell swoop and shield them all, he could stay outside my shields and hammer away at them endlessly until they fell, and my people died. No, there was only one possible way I could defeat Lysander, and that was to eliminate the source of his power.

My heart sank.

I sat there, in Sapphire's village, for hours. No time passed for everyone else, just for me. The four people who Lysander had already killed hung silently in the air, burning, dying, the flames frozen on their flesh... The rest of the Dark Ones were frozen in the act of fleeing, heading towards the shining beam of light they saw reaching to the apex of my dome, the beam of light that marked the peak of my temple, the center of my power... Sapphire stood in the center of the village, frozen like a statue in the act of screaming orders... I could see by their faces they all were well experienced in this. There was fear there, yes, but no panic. Only the children looked panicked, as they were hustled along by their parents. No, they had done this countless times before. Like battle-scarred veterans of a war gone on far too long, they responded by the numbers, following my orders as passed down through their leader... Even if those orders meant certain death.

'Head for the bomb shelter! The bomb shelter, Johnny!' a voice whispered from forgotten memory. 'Duck and Cover! Duck and Cover!' A war on another world, in a life now gone, for reasons I could not remember. Yet, the fear was the same. The deaths were the same. And tens of thousands of people vanished in a flash of light and fire before that war finally came to an end.

A flash of light and fire...

I knew what I had to do. This war had to come to an end. Vordenai had summoned me for that purpose - though her methods differed. Despite the darkness in her heart, her true goal had been to end this war, and free her people from the miserable life they led. She had not been wholly evil - but then again, was any man or woman wholly good or evil? Was there not, even in the most pure of hearts, some spot of darkness? Was there not, even in the darkest of hearts, some small spot of light?

This war had to end. And it was up to me to end it.

I rose to my feet.

I stroked Sapphire's soft cheek while she was frozen there.

And then I began.

Lysander laughed as his blast of lightning killed four, and his Avatar chittered hungrily as it skittered forward - then silence, as all froze again. It was too late, now. I was committed. My temple was now two miles closer to the center of his lands.

And all his people came within my reach.

The first one was the most difficult. Snatching the young woman up in an instant's release of time, carrying her to my temple while the world was held motionless, as though holding its breath... Then releasing my will, and dropping her in my altar. Her death-scream echoed from the dark basalt as she vanished in a flash of fire. I felt that death, to the pit of my soul.

If, indeed, I had a soul anymore.

"What?! What are you doing, youngling?!" Lysander screamed.

"I am killing you, Lysander," I replied. "And, I think, killing myself."

"Why, you-"

Silence, as I froze time again.

And resumed the grisly task.

I became more adept at halting, restarting and halting the flow of time as I worked. Soon, I had it down to a pattern, a mindless repetition. Fly to his lands, unfreeze, snatch, freeze, fly to the altar, unfreeze, drop, repeat. The flames from one sacrifice hardly had gone when the next was tossed in. Over and over and over.

Idly, I noticed after the first hundred that a pillar of billowing fire hung over my altar, the endless eruptions of fire from each death merging, billowing, rising up to the sky... My people had begun to turn, running for the new location of my temple, its location easily seen by the billowing flames that now were twice the height of the spire...

And Lysander tried to talk to me.

"Wai-"

Another death.

"-t! Wh-"

And another.

"-at ar-"

And another.

"-e you-"

And another.

"-doing?!"

And another.

"Stop!"

And another.

"Stop! I-"

And another.

"-beg you! Pl-"

And another.

"-ease sto-"

And another.

"-p! Stop!"

He tried to save his worshippers, flying over them to carry them to safety. I simply snatched them up before he could grip them and protect them in his own hands, took them to my altar, and dropped them in. After awhile, he realized that whoever he moved towards was going to be my next victim. He simply hovered there, begging me, pleading for me to stop...

...but I did not.

They tried to flee, of course. Oh, they tried. But I simply snatched those that had chosen to run, leaving those who stood still alone. After a few hundred more were gone, Lysander's worshippers simply knelt where they were, and begged their impotent god to save them from my fury.

His sphere of influence shrank with each death. Infinitesimally, at first, then faster and faster. Meanwhile, mine began to grow. Both lives and stored energy defined the sphere of influence - and though he still had enormous reserves of stored energy, he had fewer and fewer lives. I could not touch his temple, so long as it was outside my sphere of influence, and he had at least one worshipper remaining.

But it was no longer outside my sphere, and he had fewer than half his people remaining.

He tried to shield those that were left of his people - but by then, I was too powerful. The deaths of ten thousand had filled me with a level of power beyond anything I could possibly have imagined. I swatted aside the shimmering dome of his shield, and reached for another of his people.

And another.

And another.

Again and again and again, despite everything Lysander could think of, I tossed his people, one by one, into my altar.

The old. The young. Even the infants - gone. Every last one of his people, tossed into the altar.

Every last one.

I searched carefully. I made very certain.

And Lysander's temple was now quite easily within my reach.

"Damn you!" Lysander screamed. "Damn you!"

"You're far, far too late for that, Lysander. I am already damned."



And with that, I lifted my hand, and struck down his temple with a shaft of raw, unfocused energy.

And left nothing but a smoking crater behind.

I stood there in the silence that followed, the flames of twenty thousand sacrifices billowing into an enormous mushroom cloud over my lands. The skies darkened - and somehow, I knew they would never completely lighten over my lands, ever again.

I turned to Sapphire's village, lifting each of the dead tenderly in my hands. For a long moment, I gazed upon their charred, burned corpses...

"Forgive me... But I cannot let you go," I whispered. "I love you too much."

Then I extended my will.

A few moments later, their bones groaned and stirred.

"Father! Help me! The spider!"

My heart stopped. "Morticia!"

I flew to her side. The spider was twitching, dying... I looked, and she was beneath it.

In an instant, I lifted the spider from her, and tossed it aside. The spider's corpse tumbled and rolled, coming to rest against a nearby hill. "Morticia! Are you alright?!"

Morticia gasped for a long moment before she finally replied. "Yes, Father - I just couldn't get it off me! It was too heavy!"

I looked to her - she was gasping for breath, soaked in the blood of the beast she'd killed... But she was otherwise utterly unharmed. Here I was, concerned that she would be easy prey for the Avatars of the other gods, and she had beaten a beast a hundred times her size.

Just as I had beaten a god a hundred times my power.

I threw back my head and laughed.

## Twenty-Seven.

The villagers were screaming, looking up at the hellish heavens, and the village was chaos. "Morticia?! What's happening?!" Ellsbatha screamed, gazing at the blood-red sky.

"Lysander is attacking! There's no time to explain! Come on - everyone, to the temple! Hurry!" Morticia whinnied. "Ellsbatha! Nadar! Get them moving!"

"Leave everything behind!" Nadar shouted. "Just run! Run to the temple!"

Ellsbatha gathered herself, and saw that several children were scattering, fleeing in all directions. In a

moment of inspiration, she reached to her head and pulled off her veil, tossing it aside, then ran after them. She had no muscles, anymore, nor lungs nor heart. She did not tire, and her stride was far longer than that of a child. She knew they could not hear her - their ears were too full of their own screams. So, she added her screams to theirs, circling them, cutting them off, and herding them towards the temple by fear alone. And it worked - the children saw her face and fled her, heading in the direction they needed to go.

Morticia looked - the people were moving towards the temple. "It will be alright," she told herself, trotting along beside them, lifting those who tripped to set them on their feet again. "It will be-"

She paused.

The temple was gone.

"No! My Father-"

She heard it before she saw it. The endless roar of flame, the distant screams - screams upon screams, overlapping, echoing endlessly.

And the pillar of fire.

"The temple has moved! This way!" she whinnied.

They ran for the hill that lay between them and the temple...

...and suddenly, the hill turned, and ran for them.

"A spider!" someone shrieked.

'An Avatar!' Morticia realized in a flash.

It was enormous... Colossal. its eight black eyes gleamed in the sunlight, and it chittered eagerly as it bore down on the people.

"Keep going! I'll distract it! Keep running for the temple!" Morticia replied, and without a moment's hesitation, she lowered her head, and charged.

The impact was tremendous.

Moorticia found herself flying, then tumbling on the ground. She rolled to her hooves - the spider's right foreleg had been pierced clean through, its titanic carapace unable to resist the deadly force of her horn. Yet, the wound was minor, and hardly incapacitating.

With a shriek of pain and rage, the spider bore down on her, ignoring the people.

Morticia dodged the spider's fangs, then flicked her head instinctively, swatting at the nearest fang. Her horn glowed with power, and with a shriek like tearing steel, the carapace parted - the spider's left fang lay on the ground, ichor pouring from the severed limb.

The spider hesitated, backing away, then began to circle Morticia warily. Here was no helpless human to be eaten at leisure, but an enemy Avatar to be battled to the death. Even its tiny brain easily grasped that concept - it was, in the end, all it had been raised to do. Morticia gazed at her opponent, and a moment's fear flashed through her mind. The beast before her was a warrior, raised, trained and augmented by the power of a god to kill. And she? Her father had raised her to be an advisor, a helper. How could she possibly win against such a beast?

'Never meet strength with strength, Daughter,' her father had said. 'Pit your strengths against your opponent's weaknesses.'

Morticia nodded at the memory, then lowered her head, pawing the ground with her hooves. "Come on, you big ugly. Let's dance."

The spider flicked a forelimb at its prey, intending to knock her down. Morticia dodged with a dancer's agility, her legs providing power while her arms and tail provided balance, then lashed out, flicking her head, slashing at the limb with her horn. Pain - and the tip of the forelimb went flying. With a shriek of rage, the spider rushed her...

...and suddenly, she wasn't there anymore.

Sprinting, leaping in grand, effortless leaps she'd learned through years of dancing, Morticia ran beneath the spider, lifting her horn, running its keen tip along the spider's underside at the apex of each leap. The horn glowed again and again, and she slit the carapace with ease.

The spider leaped, trying to escape the pain - and Morticia followed, dashing underneath it again and again, to wound it more.

The spider shuffled quickly, and Morticia felt a stunning blow that sent her flying. Struck by a leg, she rolled and tumbled a dozen yards. A human would have been tossed to the ground, reduced to a bloody heap of broken bones from that blow - but Morticia was hardly human. She was an Avatar of a god.

Morticia gathered her legs beneath her - there was no time to rise. The spider was bearing down on her, an unstoppable juggernaut...

She leaped.

The impact stunned her, and she lay on the ground for several seconds. The spider shrieked in agony, a gaping wound in its head that crossed two eyes, destroying them. It turned to her, furious, intending to lance her with its remaining fang...

...and she was gone again, darting beneath it to wound it again and again.

The tiny brain that drove that gigantic body began to realize that it was dying. its vital fluids were draining rapidly from a score of wounds, and it could not touch the small, white thing that attacked it. It struggled. It shifted. It tried everything it could think of to bring its prey to within the reach of its remaining fang...

Until finally it staggered, collapsed, and simply lay there, dying.

Morticia lay beneath Lysander's spider, the enormous weight of the dead Avatar pinning her to the ground. She could barely breathe. She strained with all her might - she was, in fact, as powerful as a full-grown horse - but could not lift her dead opponent.

And the roaring of the flames and the endless, echoing scream of thousands rolled on.

Morticia turned her head, and looked. Her father was little more than a blinking shadow, a gleam of a dark energy-form that flickered over the temple, was gone, and back again an instant later.

And from his flickering form, a seemingly endless stream of screaming humanity rained down, down into the altar, to vanish in an endless, roaring pillar of fire that soared high above the dark spire of the temple.

Her heart was breaking as she watched the carnage. She heard Lysander's pleas, his whimpering, his

begging...

But she knew her father would not stop.

She could feel her father's heart. She could feel his pain. She could feel the agony of his decision, the only decision he could make to save his people...

But much as it hurt him, she knew he would not stop.

His people had to survive. And for his people to survive, Lysander had to die. And for Lysander to die, Lysander's people had to die, so his temple would become vulnerable.

Such was the way of this terrible, terrible war the gods fought over the Land.

Morticia watched to the bitter end, weeping silent tears.

Finally, silence reigned. Morticia calmed herself. It would not do to have her father see her weeping. Not now. Not yet. There would be time enough for weeping later.

Once she was calm, she called out to him.

## Twenty-Eight.

"Oooo, yesss... Right there..." Morticia nickered, sighing.

Sapphire smiled as she kneaded the aching muscles in Morticia's back. Morticia's pale fur was clean again, and she looked completely unharmed - but Sapphire's people raised horses, and her expert eye told her even before her fingers parted the fur that Morticia was bruised nearly from head to hoof. Of course, any human who'd had Lysander's Avatar land atop them would simply be dead, smashed to a bloody pulp. "We're all very proud of you, you know," Sapphire said, smiling.

"What, you mean the spider?"

"Yes. It was marvelous, truly marvelous. You probably saved everyone - I know you saved all the Northlanders."

"Thank you, but I only did what I was born to do," Morticia replied.

Sapphire grinned. "And modest, too. Your father raised you well, I think."

"Thank you," Morticia replied, and sighed as she thought about her father.

"Speaking of your father, where is he, now?"

Morticia lifted her head for a moment, reaching out with her mind, then lay her head back on the soft grasses of her pen. "Still brooding by the crater."

"Still?! How dreadful," Sapphire replied, sighing. "I so wish he could forgive himself. It's not like he had much choice, I think."

"Not really, no. Lysander forced his hand. Originally, he'd planned out a long campaign... Perhaps twenty years of careful engagements with his allies, slowly reducing Lysander's realm by luring away his worshippers, then dividing it piecemeal. But... Well, he simply had no choice. Now, everyone is terrified

of him."

"Everyone?" Sapphire asked, moving down to work on Morticia's sore back. "Not us. We were Koloth's people for a long, long time, and we know what your father's heart is truly like. We saw what he did for the four who had died. He could have simply left them dead - we would have understood. But, he did not. No, not everyone fears him, dear. We don't. We love him even more than before."

"Well, alright, you aren't afraid. Still, the Northlanders are terrified of him, now. If they didn't fear his reprisals, I think they'd all just run away. They even call him "Unholy One", now, thinking it will win his favor, when all it does is wound his heart. Sapphire, even the other gods fear him, now."

Sapphire blinked. "They do?!"

"Yes, very much. They don't know what happened - they weren't here to see it. The whole battle lasted only half an hour. Half an hour to destroy one of the most powerful gods on this half of the continent. The first they knew something was happening was when they noticed Lysander's sphere was rapidly shrinking. By the time they put aside the various things they were doing and investigated... Well, it was all over. And, of course, my father only made it worse."

"Oh? How so?"

"Well... Verdana - you remember her, that forest goddess?"

"Yes?"

"Well, she asked what had happened. My father simply looked at her, and in that really deep, scary voice he has now, he said 'Lysander annoyed me.'"

Sapphire snorted, grinning. "He didn't!"

"Oh, yes he did! He didn't mean it the way it sounded. He was just upset and... Well, mourning the deaths he'd been forced to cause, really. Still, that's what he told her."

Sapphire burst out laughing. "Oh, my dear, that's rich!"

Morticia grinned. "Well, yes, I guess it is. She left so fast!" she said, and whinnied with laughter for a moment. "Well, anyway... Now my father has a sphere even larger than Lysander's was. Several of his allies and Lysander's allies were overlapped by it, and some were even completely englobed. So, they've all moved away, now. They're terrified of him."

"Perhaps, but still, not everyone is afraid of him. Why, not even all the Northlanders are afraid of him, you know. Ellsbatha still comes to the temple and dances every day, you know. Why, she and the other four undead are even working on new dances they can do, dances just for them."

"Hmmm..." Morticia replied, and pushed herself up from the grass. She sat and stretched for a moment, then smiled. "Thank you, Sapphire. That does feel better."

Sapphire smiled back. "You're quite welcome, dear."

"I wish I could stay and enjoy more of it, but..."

"Yes?"

"Well... I can't just let the Northlanders live in fear. My father doesn't want his worshippers to fear him - but he can't even talk to the Northlanders without terrifying them, now. That leaves it up to me," she said,

and sighed. "So, it's back to the routine of healing and conjuring food and clothes and chatting with them and telling stories to their children and... Well... Everything my father wants to do for them, but can't, because he's simply too fearsome, to them."

"What stories do you tell their children, dear?"

Morticia smiled, standing gracefully and holding out a hand for Sapphire. "I tell them the same stories you told me, when I was a little filly. Stories of happiness, and laughter, and hope."

A few moments later, Sapphire gazed after Morticia as she trotted away, heading to the Northlander village. "Ah, Morticia..." she whispered. "The Northlanders may fear your father, but so long as he has you to help him, they will never leave."

## Twenty-Nine.

"I don't like you dancing with the Dark Ones," Nadar said quietly, gazing out upon the village as he stood by the window.

"What? Why not?" Ellsbatha asked, looking up from where she was setting the table, laying out her husband's dinner. She, of course, did not eat before him. She had discovered years ago that she gained nothing from ordinary food, not even a taste or sense of fullness. The manna served to the worshippers at the worship site, however, tasted good, made her feel good, and gave her a sense of fullness. So, she ate with the Dark Ones while she danced, as Morticia could no longer come into their house to bring her breakfast - her horn had grown far too long for that. Still, all that would have meant nothing, and she would have eaten with her husband gladly each evening, as she once did... Were it not what she saw on his face, nowadays. Watching her eat, apparently, was disquieting to him.

"I don't..." Nadar paused, his voice fading into silence.

"You don't what?"

"I just don't even think they're human, Ellsbatha!" Nadar snapped suddenly, and turned to face his wife. "They're just not!"

Ellsbatha giggled. "Oh, Nadar, they are so! Come, sit. Eat your dinner - it's your favorite, Nadar, sweet yams."

Nadar sat, a dark, brooding expression on his face. Ellsbatha sat before him, careful to insure her veil covered her face and neck completely. Nadar was, apparently, in another of his dark moods. They had come upon him more and more, these last few months - and, since the battle two days ago, his moods had only grown darker.

At times, she wondered if he would simply explode, and beat her. She'd discovered these last two years that she was immune to ordinary damage. She'd fallen and not been hurt, she'd set herself afire in the kitchen and not been burned... Her clothes could be destroyed, but the bones beneath were like stone, apparently, and immune to nearly anything. She knew he could not hurt her. And yet...

...and yet, there were times she wished he would explode, venting whatever it was that was bothering

him. Then she would simply rise to her feet unharmed, brush herself off, and walk out of her house forever. She simply wanted it to be over.

That thought startled Ellsbatha. 'Over? Ended? But... But I love him...'

And yet, she did not know if he loved her, in return. Oh, he still lay beside her in the bed, but he no longer spoke to her at night, as they once did. His thoughts he kept entirely to himself, and he never touched her anymore. It was as though he was repulsed by her... And, in the end, Ellsbatha supposed he just might be, at that.

Nadar poked at his dinner, not eating, simply staring at it. "I just don't want you to dance with them anymore, Ellsbatha," he said at last.

"Oh, Nadar!" Ellsbatha said, unable to contain a sigh of frustration. "Why not? Can you tell me that, at least?"

"Have you looked at them?!" Nadar snapped, his anger boiling to the surface. "I mean have you really looked at them?! Have you seen them?! They writhe and twist like snakes, dancing before the altar of an evil god! Twenty thousand sacrifices, Ellsbatha! Twenty thousand! A stream of screaming people pouring into the altar, like water from a bucket! A pillar of fire that reached to the skies! And they still dance and worship... Like they rejoice in that!"

"Oh, Nadar! They don't rejoice in that, they rejoice that they lived, that our god did what was necessary to preserve all our lives and-"

But Nadar was not listening - he still was raging. "They're dark, evil people worshipping a dark, evil god! He took their dead, Ellsbatha, and transformed them! And they celebrate that, too! They laugh and sing and celebrate that he made them like... Like..." Nadar said, then paused, unable to finish.

"Like me, you mean," Ellsbatha said, quietly.

Nadar said nothing, his face an odd mixture of anger and deep sorrow.

"This isn't about them, is it?" Ellsbatha said, looking at her husband. "I've known you and loved you half my life, Nadar. This isn't about the Dark Ones, at all. It's about me, isn't it?"

Nadar looked away, unable to meet his wife's veiled gaze.

"Nadar... Oh, Nadar... I love you, Nadar. I always have, and I always will," Ellsbatha sighed sadly, and rose to her feet. "I can see that I only cause you pain, Nadar... And the last thing in the world I ever want to do is to hurt you. Goodbye," she said, and turned for the door.

"Wait! Where are you going?!" Nadar called, rising so swiftly he toppled the chair beneath him.

"I don't know, Nadar!" Ellsbatha replied, unable to suppress a sob. "I just don't know! Maybe I'll go to the temple, and spend the rest of eternity dancing, and praying the ache in my heart will go away! I don't sleep, I don't really need to eat, I don't need anything anymore, Nadar! I thought that all I really needed was you... But now, I can see that you don't want me anymore... I don't know where I'll go, Nadar! I only know that I won't stay here and make you feel miserable the rest of your life!"

"No! Ellsbatha, don't go! Please!" Nadar shouted, leaping to her and catching her hand in his.

"You... You want me to stay?"

Nadar threw his arms around his wife, and hugged her tight, heedless of the pointed bones that jabbed into his softer flesh through her garments. "Yes! Oh, Ellsbatha... I love you! You are the only woman for me, in all of the Land! It's just..."

"Just... What?"

"I..."

"You what?!" Ellsbatha snapped, her emotions in turmoil.

"Ellsbatha, I'm not dead! I... I have needs!"

And suddenly, Ellsbatha understood. Ellsbatha reached out her arms and hugged Nadar in return, and they stood there for a long moment, sobbing in each other's arms.

Finally, as their sobs faded into sighs, Ellsbatha spoke. "Oh, Nadar... I'm so sorry... I don't even feel desire anymore, I'm sorry. I enjoy you touching me, holding my hand, hugging me... But I don't have desire. And even if I did... I no longer have... Well... I mean... Nadar, I don't even have breasts anymore!" she said, and suddenly giggled at the humor within the tragedy.

Nadar smiled ruefully. "I know... You had such lovely breasts, my love. I don't know if I told you that often enough when you had them... But it's true."

"Thank you, Nadar... I... I appreciate it."

Nadar was silent for a moment, then looked at his wife's veiled face. "Wait... You don't sleep anymore?"

Ellsbatha shook her head. "No, I don't."

"Well... Then what have you been doing when we lie together at night?"

"Oh, Nadar... I just gaze at you. I look at the softness of your skin, the strength in your muscles, the slow movement of your chest as you breathe... I told you, I see things differently, now. I can see your life, Nadar... The very energies of your life. Sometimes... Sometimes I can see your manhood stir in your sleep, and I smile in my heart, and remember... And as you dream, the colors of the energies that surround you flicker and glow, and look so beautiful... I fear to awaken you, so I do not touch you when you sleep. I simply lay there, and watch the beautiful colors, the wonderful energies of your life, and your dreams..."

"It sounds... Very wonderful," Nadar said quietly.

"Oh, Nadar, it is! If you could see people the way I see them... At first, I thought this life, this body, was like a curse. Now, I look at it as more of a blessing, Nadar. I will live forever... And I will always see the lovely, wonderful colors of life," Ellsbatha replied, then stepped back slightly, taking her husband's warm, flesh hands into her cold, bone hands. "The Dark Ones are not evil, Nadar. You've lived with them, you know they are good people. They are simply different. And our god is not evil, Nadar. You've seen his Avatar - she helps us, she feeds us... She even risked her life against that enormous spider of Lysander. She is pure, and good. How can a god of darkness and evil have an Avatar like her?"

Nadar scowled. "I don't know. Good people can serve an evil god, trapped by their power. Perhaps she is the same - a good Avatar serving an evil god, unable to escape."

"No, Nadar. Come - eat your dinner, and then I will show you something."



"What will you show me?" Nadar asked curiously.

"You'll find out - eat your dinner first, though. It's a long walk."

Nadar nodded, and reached for the chair to lift it from the floor.

Nadar ate in silence, gazing at his wife. In his mind, he could still see her as she once was... And yet, now, he could also see her as she was now. He did not know what might happen in the future. He did not know if she would ever return to the way she was. He only knew that no matter what happened, he would stay with her.

No one in the village understood, of course. There were many half-hidden glances and whispered comments Nadar had endured in these last two years. Yet, despite the terrible frustration of unrequited concupiscence, he would stay with her. Despite what the others in the village might think, he would stay with her. He loved her - and despite everything, he would stay with her because of that love. She deserved no less from him.

Finally, dinner was done, and Ellsbatha took him by the hand, and led Nadar out of the village, and through the woods and fields. The sun had set, and the moon hid behind clouds - it was, to Nadar, quite dark. "I'm sorry, I can hardly see," he said, stumbling a bit. In the distance, a wolf howled, and Nadar trembled slightly.

"Just hold my hand and follow, Nadar," his skeleton-wife replied. "I can see very clearly."

Half an hour passed, Nadar following his wife through the darkness. She seemed to be approaching a small hill of some kind - it was difficult to tell, even though his eyes had somewhat adjusted to the darkness. Finally she stopped, and sat upon a large, broken stone. "Sit here, beside me, and be very quiet," she whispered.

"I can't really see anything," Nadar whispered.

"The moon will come out soon enough. Hush, and be patient."

And indeed, Ellsbatha was right. Slowly, the moon came out from behind the clouds, and Nadar could see a bit better - and his eyes widened at the scene revealed in the moonlight.

Before him, a few hundred yards away, lay an enormous crater - the remains of Lysander's temple, he realized. The stone they sat upon was, it seemed, a small fragment of its shattered and blasted remains. And before the crater, a giant form in a dark, hooded robe sat, brooding over the ruins in the moonlight. Nadar could not see the giant's face, nor any other part of them, as all was concealed by their robe. Yet, he knew who it was.

"What... What is he doing here?" Nadar whispered, awed at the tremendous size of his god.

"Mourning, Nadar. Can't you feel the sadness in the air? Morticia explained it to me, two days ago - once she understood it, herself. He did what he had to do to save all our lives, Nadar... But it was not what he wanted to do, it was simply the only choice he had. He has not forgiven himself that decision, Nadar... He may never be able to. Now, there are none left alive to mourn those who died, Nadar... And the other gods of the Land do not care. Thus, he mourns those he had to kill, because no other mortal or immortal in all the Land ever will."

Nadar gazed quietly at Death for a long while after that, holding his wife's hand. Finally, he bowed his head. "Forgive yourself, Holy One," he whispered. "If I can forgive you, then you can forgive yourself."

Slowly, Death's head turned, and he gazed upon the two of them. Nadar quailed at the sight of his face, and his heart pounded with fear. The skull-visage of his god had become even darker than he remembered - and yet, no worse than he truly imagined. The canine teeth had extended, becoming almost fang-like, and the eye-sockets of his skull were now angled slightly, as though in a dark glare. "It is good you can forgive me, Nadar," Death said, his hollow, echoing voice deep, dark, and chilling. "It lifts my heart to know that. But I shall never forgive myself, because I know I will, if necessary, do this again. I will do whatever is necessary to protect and shelter you and all my people - even if it means that I must kill every other mortal and every other god in the land, one by one."

A wolf howled from somewhere near, as though to punctuate Death's ominous words, and Nadar shuddered with fear. His heart pounding within his chest, Nadar bowed his head, unable to reply. Ellsbatha squeezed her husband's hand reassuringly, and he gripped her hand tightly in return.

"Now come," Death said. "There are wolves near, hunting, and they are very hungry. Ellsbatha has nothing to fear from them... But you, Nadar, I'm afraid they would find quite delicious. Come - it is time for you two to get to bed."

Before Nadar knew what was happening, Death had taken the two of them up in his skeletal hands. Nadar couldn't help himself - he shrieked with terror. There was a brief sensation of swift movement, and then the hand about Nadar opened gently. He realized he was standing inside his house, his wife beside him - Death, himself, was gone. Nadar staggered over to the table, then sat down heavily in the nearest chair, trembling violently with fading adrenalin.

"Are you alright?" Ellsbatha asked, stroking her husband's hair softly.

"I... I think..."

"What's the matter?" Ellsbatha asked, her voice showing deep concern.

Nadar glanced down, and shook his head. "I think I've wet myself."

Ellsbatha snorted, then burst into peals of laughter.

"It's not funny!" Nadar snapped.

Ellsbatha giggled. "Oh, Nadar! I know he's frightening, but... Really! He means only the best for us. He's sworn to protect us, and he does. Why, he even saved you a walk home, just so you wouldn't be attacked by wolves. He cares for us, Nadar. He is not a god of evil."

Nadar nodded. "Alright... I can see that."

"Good! Now come - let's get you out of those clothes and cleaned up a bit for bed."

Once in bed, Ellsbatha was delighted when she discovered Nadar wanted to talk to her, as they always used to. He held her hand, and they spoke honestly to each other, sharing their feelings - with, perhaps, more openness than they ever had in years. Ellsbatha understood her husband far better than she ever had before - and, in turn, he understood her. Perhaps they had no answers between them. Still, they had understanding, which meant far more to each of them at the moment.

Later, Ellsbatha lay beside her husband, watching him silently in the darkness as he slept. He was dreaming, now, the sparkles of life-energy bright and vivid. "Oh, Nadar..." she whispered. He was so beautiful to gaze upon, to her.

"Ellsbatha..." he whispered in reply, his dreaming mind hearing her voice. As she watched, his manhood

slowly stirred, and the colors of his dreams became more vivid.

Ellsbatha sighed quietly, gazing sadly upon her concupiscent husband, and wondered what she might do.

Thirty.

"Morticia? Can I talk with you?"

Morticia yawned and stretched as she lay upon the soft grass of her pen, then looked to the voice that had called. "Oh, hello, Ellsbatha! How are things going?"

Ellsbatha sighed. "Well, that's kind of what I wanted to talk to you about."

Morticia nodded, rolling to her feet lithely, then winced.

"Still sore?"

"A bit, yes," Morticia replied, stretching. "My father says I'll be alright. It's only been three days. He also says that the way my body works, it's better for me to heal the muscle-strains myself, naturally. He says I'll end up stronger."

"We all saw that fight, you know. We all think you were very brave."

Morticia smiled. "Thank you," she replied, and sat down on the low stone wall of her pen, facing Ellsbatha. "So, what seems to be the trouble, Ellsbatha?"

"Well, I think you know Sapphire asked me this morning to talk to the four new... Ummm..."

"Undead?" Morticia offered.

"Well, yes."

Morticia nickered with amusement. "I know about that. And what happened?"

"Well, they didn't have nearly as many problems as I did, of course. All the Dark Ones are very accepting of them, and they see them as being proof of Death's commitment to them, and all that. My people, of course, are frightened to death of them."

Morticia nodded. "Go on."

"Well, like I said, they had a lot less problems than I did. Still, they did have questions."

"Oh? Like what?"

"Well, the women wanted to know how to get their clothes to drape right again. They'd tried taking them in, but the cloth just slipped around on the bones."

"You told them about the wrappings? That's part of what they're for."

"Yes, the wrappings help with that... They also keep dirt out of the joints. That can get quite

uncomfortable."

"What else did they want to know?" Morticia asked, her curiosity piqued.

"Well, they wanted to know little things... Like what, if anything, we eat. I told them that you used to come visit me at my home and conjure manna for me, but now your horn's too long to come inside, so I just eat the manna you conjure for everyone at the worship site when I come to dance every day. It's very delicious, too. I found I can eat regular food, but... Well, I don't really get anything out of it. The food just disappears, I never feel full, and it doesn't really have any flavor."

"The manna is better for you, Ellsbatha. Over time, it will slowly help you."

"Really?! How much time?!" Ellsbatha asked eagerly.

Morticia smiled. "My Father says a long time. He's not certain - but no less than a century or two, and no more than the time it takes a mountain to grow."

"Oh," Ellsbatha replied, and sighed.

"Now, now. Much of that depends on you, you know."

"Really? How so?"

"You have to keep dancing, and eating, and living, Ellsbatha. If you simply sit and feel sad and do nothing, you are like a stone, and grow like a stone. If you eat and dance and live like a woman, you grow like a woman." Morticia smiled. "Patience, Ellsbatha. You're now immortal, like me. Even if it takes a thousand, thousand years, I'll still be here to see it."

Ellsbatha suddenly sobbed. "Y-yes, b-but Nadar won't!"

Morticia blinked. "What?" To her surprise, Ellsbatha was sobbing uncontrollably. "There, there. Come here... Sit here, next to me."

"Oh, I don't even have tears anymore! I have nothing!"

Morticia reached her arms around Ellsbatha, and hugged her gently. "Now, now. This isn't about the other four undead, is it?"

"Well... It is, and it isn't!"

"Mmm? I don't understand."

"Oh, Morticia! I don't even have desire anymore! I mean, I love Nadar, and I enjoy being held by him, but... I don't feel... Well, you know!"

Morticia nickered softly, smiling. "Actually, no, I don't, Ellsbatha. You forget - I'm alone in the world."

"Y-you're what?"

"I'm unique, Ellsbatha, like all Avatars. There will never be anyone for me. No male of my species will ever take me into his arms, because there aren't any others of my species. I'm utterly and completely alone. I'll never come into heat, and I'll never have any babies. Yes, from shoulder to rump, I look like a human woman - if a bit furry," Morticia said, and giggled. "Still, with the legs and head of a horse, and now this enormous horn on my head..." Morticia shrugged.

"But don't you... I mean... Don't you want to?"

"Mmmm... Well, sometimes... Sometimes I wonder what it might be like, yes. That's why I enjoy the Dance of the Strong Woman so much. I see the smiles on the faces of the men, and I wonder... And I imagine..." Morticia replied, and winked. "Still, nothing comes of it, of course."

"Well, I can tell you... With the right man, it can be... Wonderful," Ellsbatha said, and sighed. "Still, now, I find I just don't want to. I simply don't have the desire anymore. And even if I did, I don't have... I mean... I'm just bones! I can't do anything!"

Morticia smiled. "Whereas I have everything a human woman would have, and sometimes I even have the desire, but... Who would I ask?" Morticia nickered with amusement. "Still, Ellsbatha, I don't see the problem."

"Well, the new undead women were talking, and one of them is married to the man who's now undead, too, and so they're happy with each other... But the other two women were married to living men, and they still loved their men and wanted to stay with them, like me... But they're just like me and they just can't do anything with their men anymore even if they felt the desire to. Well, they were thinking about simply telling their man to seek a... Well, a bed-partner, I guess, so he could still have babies and ease his needs from time to time. They were asking me what I had done to try to solve the problem and stay with the man I loved and..."

"And? What have you done?"

Ellsbatha sobbed. "Nothing!"

"Nothing?"

"Well, we've talked... But..." Ellsbatha replied, and related the events of the previous night. "But I've thought about it for all night and all day, now, and... I just don't have an answer!" Ellsbatha finished, and sobbed again.

Morticia sat for a long moment, thinking. Finally, she shook her head. "Well... It's obvious Nadar is willing to stay with you, despite this problem. Are you sure you can't just live with it?"

"Well... I can, yes - but he can't. He falls into these... These dark moods, and he gets very touchy and upset and... Well, he's obviously very uncomfortable, and sometimes even miserable. I don't want to see him unhappy and miserable, Morticia. I love him."

"Hmmm... Well, to be honest, I think you should talk about this with a close friend. Someone who will understand, and someone you trust."

"I am talking to a close friend!"

Morticia blinked. "M-me?! Oh, no, Ellsbatha! I meant someone like Sapphire, or perhaps someone from your village, not me!"

Ellsbatha shook her head. "I... I'm not that close to her, Morticia. I mean... She's a friend, but... Well, we're not that close. Besides, she just doesn't understand the people of the Northlands at all. I lived with the Dark Ones for two years, and I learned then what I learned this morning, talking to the other undead... Well... To the women of the Dark Ones..."

"Yes?"

Ellsbatha sighed, very exasperated. "Well, Love and Procreation to them are... Well, they're two different things!"

Morticia nickered with amusement. "I really wouldn't know, myself, having only loved my father, and still being a maiden."

"Well... They don't have a problem with a relationship like that. I do. It would have to be a very close friend, someone I can really trust to understand my feelings, and who won't try to steal Nadar from me."

Morticia shrugged. "Well, I don't think Sapphire would ever try to steal Nadar from you - she has a husband of her own, and she's quite happy with him. As for the rest..." Morticia shrugged again. "That's a decision you'd have to make yourself. You'll have to find someone who fits those qualities - someone you're very close to, and someone you can really trust."

Ellsbatha simply looked up into Morticia's eyes, wordlessly.

"Me?!" Morticia whinnied.

Ellsbatha said nothing, continuing to stare at Morticia.

Morticia sputtered and waved her hands, flustered. "Oh, no, Ellsbatha! I mean... I... Well... I just couldn't! I've never... I've never even done anything like that before! Well... I've thought about it, and sometimes I look at the men and I think about it... But... Oh! I don't know! I mean... He couldn't possibly want to... I mean, look at me! I'm not human! Well... Okay, from shoulder to rump, I look pretty human, yes, and even my legs look a bit human down to the knee... Of course, I walk digitigrade on my hooves, like a horse, so my lower leg and ankle and foot aren't like yours... And then there's my head and neck! Definitely horse. And the horn! It's very sharp and pointy - Oh! I might poke his eye out!" Morticia babbled nervously, and Ellsbatha began to giggle. "Well, alright, that wouldn't happen, but... Well, look at me! I mean, how could he be attracted to me?! Wait - they do have to be attracted before they can... Err... Do it, don't they? Wait, what am I thinking? Of course they do. Still, I haven't even thought of myself as being attractive. I mean... Well, not in that sense. I've thought of myself as pretty, but... Well, a flower is pretty, and I don't see any men talking about wanting to couple with a dandelion! Well, then, he-"

Ellsbatha, still giggling, clapped a hand over Morticia's mouth, silencing her. Morticia, realizing she had been babbling, giggled as well.

After several moments of shared laughter, Ellsbatha finally sighed. "Really - it's alright. If you don't want to... I understand," she said, and took her hand off Morticia's mouth. "It's just... Well, you're my closest friend, and I can't think of anyone I trust more. You are, after all, the Avatar of my god."

Morticia nodded, and gazed down at her hooves, thinking. Finally, she looked up. "Well... I'm not saying 'no', alright? I'm saying..."

"Yes?"

"I'm saying... I'll think about it," Morticia replied, and sighed. "I'm sorry I can't give you a better answer, but... Well, I need time to think about it."

"Thank you," Ellsbatha said, bowing her head.

"If my answer is 'no', will we still be friends?" Morticia asked, then paused. "For that matter, if my answer is 'yes' will we still be friends?"

"No matter what your answer is... Even if you never give me an answer... We'll always be friends."

"Alright..." Morticia glanced at the sun, then shook her head. "Ellsbatha, I have to get moving. I've got to conjure food for the dancers, then go down and help your village, and... Well, I've a lot of things to do... And now, something important to think about," she said, and hopped to her feet. "I'll talk to you later, alright?"

"Alright," Ellsbatha replied, and with that, Morticia trotted away, heading to the other side of the temple. Ellsbatha sighed, and rose to her feet, slowly walking back to her village. She was only thirty-two - but just now, she felt very, very old.

### Thirty-One.

"Father, I need you."

I turned my attention to Morticia instantly. She was sitting in her pen in the early evening shadows, and looked extremely depressed. "What's the matter, Daughter?"

"Father... How important are Ellsbatha and Nadar to your plans?"

"Extremely. Nadar has grown into an effective leader, and he's not only managed to help keep the Northlander village running smoothly and keep the people coming to the temple to worship, the population in his village is slowly growing. Ellsbatha is less skilled as a leader than Nadar is, and her main use is as Nadar's companion. Still, when she tells a villager to do something, they do it, if only to avoid her presence. They fear her enormously."

"So... Keeping Nadar happy is something that's important?"

I shrugged. "Not necessarily. He doesn't have to be happy, he just has to be content. Why do you ask?"

"Well... Apparently, Nadar and Ellsbatha have... A problem. And Ellsbatha... Well... Asked me to help."

"What seems to be the problem?"

Morticia took a deep breath, and began.

I listened to her story, as she related the conversation she'd had with Ellsbatha earlier in the day. I struggled not to laugh - it was too important. Instead, when she had finished, I transformed to my humanoid form, and sat before her at her size. Reaching out to her, I took her hand in mine. "Daughter... I'm trying not to laugh, really... But Ellsbatha is being quite silly. Nadar will, eventually, get used to a life of abstinence. Monks and priests in my old life did, all the time. Yes, it's uncomfortable, but you eventually get used to it. Indeed, he is, in many ways, like my 'high priest', as far as that village is concerned. He gets the people to come to the temple and worship - and I need that to have the power to protect them. They don't dance, of course, they simply kneel outside the worship area and pray. Still, they come - and that's what's important, at the moment," I said, and found I could not repress a chuckle. "Daughter, think about it. The whole situation is ridiculous. She asked someone to help her with this problem who is only four."

Morticia whinnied with anger. "I am not a four-year-old child! My body is as mature as a fully-grown horse or a fully-grown human, and my mind is as mature as an adult human!"

I chuckled again, which only made Morticia glower at me. "Daughter, I know that. I made you what you are, mentally. Truthfully, you're mentally my peer - which is exactly what I needed you to be, as my Avatar. Still, you lack life-experience. In human terms, Ellsbatha has turned to a woman who is, perhaps, eighteen, and has spent her entire life sheltered in a convent - you simply don't know enough to be able to make an effective decision in this area."

Morticia snorted angrily. "I am not a naive little innocent! I'm capable of making my own decisions! I was even thinking about doing it, but..." she said, and her resolve faltered as her voice trailed off into silence.

"But what?"

"Well... You said I was kind of like a Unicorn... And I was afraid of losing my powers or something."

I snorted, then burst out laughing.

Morticia glowered at me. "And what's so funny?!"

"Daughter, whatever in the world gave you the impression that it was the unicorn who had to be the virgin?" I replied, still laughing.

Morticia simply stuck her tongue out at me, which only made me laugh harder. After a moment, I reached out to her, and drew her into my lap. "Oh, Daughter, I thank you, truly. I know you didn't mean to, but you've made me laugh - and I think I truly needed to laugh, right now."

Morticia tried to pout, but couldn't - after a moment, she was smiling. "Well... I'm glad it made you feel better. Still, Ellsbatha needs some kind of help, I think. I'm your Avatar, Father. You raised me to be more than just a warrior, but a helper, and an advisor to you. And as your advisor, I'm telling you - Nadar is not the kind of man who can live the life of a monk," she said, wagging a finger at me. "His discomfort at his situation will grow on him, Father, and he'll end up blaming you for it. He was starting to, last night, before Ellsbatha helped change his mind. That won't last forever - eventually, frustrated desire will put him right back blaming you again. We have to come up with some kind of solution."

I sighed, and shifted Morticia out of my lap. Rising to my feet, I held out my hand. "Come. Walk with me."

We walked out of her pen, and towards the trees of the nearby woods. Morticia held her tongue, waiting for me to speak. She was, in truth, the perfect advisor - she knew when to talk, and when to listen. Perhaps that was what had drawn Ellsbatha to her, in the end. Or, perhaps, Ellsbatha simply had been afraid that if she asked a human woman, the complications that would ensue would be too difficult for her to handle. I didn't know - but I suspected the former.

As we walked beneath the canopy of the forest at night, I finally found my voice again. "Well, Morticia... In many ways, you are like a true daughter to me. I find the father in me feels... Uncomfortable at the idea of you actually going through with that plan."

"Why?" Morticia asked, gazing at me in the evening gloom.

"Well... I was, once, a man, and humans have many other considerations that come into play. Marriage, children... Even disease."

"None of which apply to me," Morticia noted. "I will never marry - there is no-one for me to marry. I am



unique. There will never be any children, as I simply cannot have children. And as for disease... Well, I appear to be immune to nearly everything, now."

"The powers of your horn render you immune to diseases and poisons, yes," I replied, nodding. "Still... Here I am, a god of the Land, walking with my Avatar through the forest near my temple... And yet..."

"Yes?"

"And yet, somehow, at the same time... I have a memory..."

"Tell me, please?"

I paused, holding her hand, my gaze lost in the distance. "A daughter. Not like you, and yet... Of the same heart, the same spirit. We were walking on her campus... It was her last year of college. She wanted to marry a boy... I can't remember his name," I said, then shook my head. "Gah. I can't remember her name, really, or even her face. All I remember is her love, her spirit..."

"It's alright, Father, really," Morticia replied, squeezing my hand. "What happened on your walk?"

"Ah, my dear... She wanted to marry this boy... And I hated him. I thought he was an idiot. His hair was too long, his attention-span too short, and his ambitions too low," I said, and shrugged. "The father in me, instinctively protecting his offspring, wanting her to have the best possible mate... Well, really, the perfect mate. But, of course, that's impossible. No one is perfect. Still, it's that drive within the parent, I think, that's important, as it helps make sure their child gets the best of what is available." I paused, then chuckled. "Odd how I can see it that way, now. I remember... I remember at the time, I was hardly so detached and objective."

"So what happened? Can you remember?"

I paused, searching my mind, then sighed. "Not really. I only remember I didn't like the boy. I know that eventually she did marry him, and eventually I had grandchildren to dote over, but... I don't remember anything more about that day than walking across her college campus, holding my little girl's hand, and suddenly realizing that she was a woman, now."

Morticia smiled silently, and squeezed my hand again.

I turned to her, and looked her over. She was my Avatar - my warrior, my helper, my advisor in the Land... And yet, somehow, she was far, far more than that.

She was my daughter.

And, like the daughter I had once known... She was now grown.

I nodded. "Do what you think best, Daughter. I'll study Ellsbatha and the other undead carefully, and try to find a better long-term solution to the problem, if that's possible. Until I come up with something else, however... Do what you think best."

Morticia smiled, and bowed her head. "Thank you, Father."

## Thirty-Two.

"There it is," Nadar said, pointing. "Well, there it was, at any rate. Or, at least, I think it was there. I'm sorry, I don't really remember - most of my memories died with Vordenai."

Morticia nodded, setting Nadar down gently, then looking around. The village was utterly in ruins, dust and weeds abounding. Once, over a decade ago, it had been inhabited with the worshippers of Allakbeth. Lysander brought that to an end - and now, her father had brought Lysander to an end. A large hill, flat-topped and mesa-like, loomed over village, and the shattered ruin of a temple sat atop it. Scattered, blasted stones now were all that remained of Allakbeth and his power, the grasses and weeds growing thickly around them. It had taken two hour's travel to reach this place, Morticia carrying Nadar in her arms as her long legs ate up the miles. They had started an hour after dawn, when Morticia came into Nadar's village to pick him up. It was still an hour or so yet before noon, and they had plenty of daylight remaining.

"I don't understand what it is you intend to find, here," Nadar said, scratching his head. "Or why you had to bring me, really," he added.

Morticia took Nadar's hand, and they began to walk through the ruined village. "After Vordenai died, my father searched for whatever he could find of hers that might have allowed her to control him. He found her Spirit Bag... And found he could not touch it. So, he sent me to take it, and empty it, and examine what was inside - but all there was were beads, feathers, bones and stones."

"The tools of a witch - what one might expect to find in the Spirit Bag of a witch," Nadar replied, shrugging.

Morticia nodded. "So he gathered. But how those tools were used, he did not know. And more, he could not touch them - only I could."

"Really?!" Nadar asked, surprised.

Morticia nodded again. "From what little my father has been able to gather, Vordenai was born with her powers. He believes that the basic uses of her abilities, she probably discovered the same way he has discovered his own abilities - through introspection, and experimentation. Still, there's so much more she could not possibly have learned just from trial and error, Nadar. Like where did she learn of the Coders and the ancient history of the Land? And there's more my father cannot answer. How was she able to thwart my father? And how was her spirit-bag and its contents able to thwart him, even after her death?"

Nadar shook his head, smiling ruefully. "I've no idea what the answer might be to any of those questions."

"Neither does my father - so, that's why we're here. I'm searching for anything that might be a clue to answer this mystery. You're here because my father hopes that your memory might be jogged by this place, or something we might find in it," Morticia replied, then looked to Nadar as they walked. "You are still one of his people, Nadar, and he cares for you greatly. As do I."

Nadar smiled. "Thank you. I'm afraid, however, that this village brings forth no memories, no flash of insight. It's simply a ruined village."

Morticia nodded as she continued to walk. "Well, it may be you lived in a different village in Allakbeth's domain."

"Or, perhaps, the memories that died with Vordenai are simply gone forever," Nadar replied glumly. Nadar then noticed Morticia was not stopping, and they were approaching the edge of the village. "Where are we going, now?"

Morticia pointed. "To that stream, of course."

"Why?"

Morticia nickered. "Nadar! I'm hot, sweaty and tired from carrying you and trotting for two hours! I need a drink, and I need a bath."

"Oh! Sorry, I didn't even think of that," Nadar replied sheepishly.

After Morticia had conjured a jug, filled it with water and handed it to Nadar, he seated himself beneath a tree to wait. Morticia knelt by the stream, lowering her long muzzle and simply drinking from the water like a horse. Nadar supposed that would be easier and more convenient for her, and he hardly gave her a second glance as he drank from his jug, quenching his own thirst. Nadar stretched, his gaze idly taking in the stream and the nearby trees. It was quite beautiful here - though the place brought no memories to his mind. He gazed upon the birds that flittered about from tree to tree, and even spotted a squirrel peering at him from among the branches. His attention was quite diverted and he hardly paid any attention to Morticia at all... Until his eyes finally lit upon her, and he saw she was wading out into the stream, nude.

She was radiantly beautiful, her body perfectly formed. She stood in water up to her hips, and when her mane was fluttered across her face by a soft breeze, for a brief moment, Nadar felt as though he was peeking in upon the bath of a very tall, muscular woman.

'I should look away,' Nadar thought, and tried to tear his eyes from her. He tried to rise from where he sat, to move to the other side of the tree and give her some privacy.

But he could not. The blood pounded hotly in his veins, and he felt his face flush... And his eyes never left her body.

She sat in the stream, shivering slightly with the chill water, then gestured, conjuring a bar of soap. One of Death's oddities - Nadar had never seen a bar of soap until his god had first introduced the strange things to him, that day four years ago. Soap, to his people, was a gray powder that often left the skin itchy. What his god provided, however, had a scent like flowers, was a soft, snow-white bar with strange runes upon the sides, and floated upon water. It was odd to think that something so fragrant and gentle to the skin might come from a god so dark and terrible - yet, that was the way of his god. Death treated his people with tenderness and compassion, and treated his enemies with destruction and annihilation.

'Damn,' Nadar thought, his eyes returning to Morticia. It had nearly worked. Thinking of the odd bars of soap and his fearsome yet gentle god and trying to divert his mind had nearly allowed him to take his eyes from her, to rise and walk to the other side of the tree... Until she began lathering her breasts.

Nadar gave in, and simply stared openly at Morticia as she slowly lathered and rinsed herself in the stream. Her breasts, her belly, the soft mound of her sex... He could not look away. He no longer wanted to. His manhood throbbed painfully behind his trousers, and his will was, in truth, not wholly his own anymore.

She did not look at him, at first. She simply absorbed herself in the task of bathing, as though she was not aware of his gaze at all. Then, when she was nearly done rinsing herself, she gave him a sidelong look, and a smile.

Nadar's heart pounded in his chest. His mouth was dry. His eyes gazed long and unblinkingly, and his mind was a whirl of emotions.

And then, gracefully, deliberately, she rose from the water, and slowly strode towards him.

"I... I..." Nadar stammered as she stood before him, dripping wet from the stream and smiling.

Morticia simply held out a hand, and a soft towel appeared in it. "Would you dry my back, Nadar? It's always quite difficult to reach."

With trembling hands, Nadar took the towel from her. She turned, lifting her mane out of the way, and he began to stroke the towel down her back, drying her. 'I cannot feel this way... It isn't right...' he thought. But his hands moved with a life of their own.

When he was done, she turned around, and smiled at him. "You can dry my front, too, if you like."

'I shouldn't...' he thought - but in that moment of hesitation, she reached to his wrists, and drew his hands to her damp breasts.

Gently, as though she were made of delicate crystal and might shatter at any moment, he stroked the towel across her breasts.

Morticia smiled, taking the towel from him, and laying it out upon the grass. Taking his hand in hers, she sat down upon the towel, then lay back gracefully.

"I... I..." Nadar stammered, gazing down at her wide-eyed as he knelt beside her.

Morticia reached to his face, covering his mouth with soft, flower-scented fingers. "I am still a maiden, Nadar. I would be pleased if you would be my first."

Nadar groaned as the last of his resistance faded, and he reached to her.

Morticia smiled throughout the hurried moments of fumbling it took him to disrobe... Heartbeats later, she gasped with a brief moment of pain... Then smiled as the pain eased, replaced with a golden sensation.

She reached up, softly stroking his back with her hands... The powerful feelings built up within her, a tide within her soul rising into a wave, and finally crashing across the beach of her mind...

"Oh, Nadar..."

"Oh, Ellsbatha!" Nadar replied, his body and soul gripped by the power of his own sparkling moment of pleasure...

...and then he stopped, his face paling. Nadar looked down into her blue, blue eyes for a long moment, his mouth an 'O' of shock and realization.

"It's alright, Nadar..." she whispered, drawing him close, wrapping her arms around him.

Nadar buried his face into the softness of her neck, and wept.

### Thirty-Three.

Morticia stood in the stream, washing away the last of the small trace of blood that remained on her sex. 'Such a vast and important thing, a maidenhead,' she thought, 'and yet gone in just a moment.' Still, she smiled, for that moment had been all that she hoped it might be.

Morticia stepped out of the stream, and dried herself simply and efficiently. She then gestured, her dress appearing again about her. As she glanced to Nadar, she saw he was still sitting beneath the tree, his face buried in his hands. 'Hmm...' she thought, and gestured again, making her semi-transparent garment completely opaque. Now was not the time to be erotic - her healer's instincts told her that now was the time to simply speak, heart to heart.

"Nadar..."

Nadar looked up at her soft call, and saw Morticia sitting beside him. Her horn shimmered in the light with the colors of the rainbow, and her body had the soft scent of flowers. She was, in truth, possessed of an unearthly beauty, both in her body and in her heart... And that made Nadar feel all the worse.

"What?" he replied, his voice choked with emotion.

"Talk to me, Nadar. Tell me what's the matter."

"What's the matter?! What's the matter?! I've betrayed my wife with you, that's what's the matter!"

Morticia smiled. "No, Nadar, you haven't. You have, rather, fulfilled a wish of hers - and of mine."

"What?! What do you mean?"

"Nadar, Ellsbatha loves you - but she cannot do anything with you."

"I know that - and I love her, as well," Nadar replied, his voice choking.

"Nadar, she knows that you are not attracted to a corpse. And yet, she knows that you have needs. Three days ago, she asked me if I would help you... And I agreed," Morticia replied, and took Nadar's hand in hers. "Nadar... You made it so special for me... Thank you."

"She... She knows?!" Nadar replied, astounded.

Morticia smiled. "Of course, Nadar. This moment was a gift from her to you. And from me, as well. You are a very special, wonderful man." Morticia tossed her mane for a moment, her eyes half-lidded. "Mmmm... Ellsbatha told me this morning, before we left, that you were a wonderful lover... And she was right."

"Then all this... All this nonsense about searching these ruins... It was all a ruse?"

Morticia nickered with amusement. "Hardly, Nadar. What I said to get you here and what I said when we arrived were true. This just seemed the ideal moment, and the ideal place."

Nadar nodded silently, thinking.

Morticia smiled again, and patted his hand. "So, tell me, Nadar... Do you feel better, now?"

Nadar looked to her. "She knows, yes?"

"Yes, Nadar."

"And we..."

"Yes?"

Nadar shook his head, unable to say what was on his mind. Morticia simply smiled, as she could read his thoughts. "That depends on how you feel about it, Nadar. Whether this happens again or not is entirely up to you."

Nadar sighed. "Part of me wants that... And part of me is still wracked with guilt. And part of me..."

"Yes?"

Nadar sighed, and rolled his eyes. "Part of me is sitting here thinking what an incredibly odd situation this is! I mean... I've made love to the Avatar of my god - the Avatar of Death - because my wife is a living corpse! One of several, in fact, and they all dance nearly naked in worship at the Temple of Death! Oh, and did I forget to mention that Death - the most frightening, terrifying god in all the Land - has an Avatar who is a gentle, sweet, amazingly beautiful person who just happens to have the legs and head of a horse, and just at this moment smells a bit like a flower from that strange soap she can conjure with a gesture?"

Morticia began to giggle.

"Oh, wait! It gets more odd as we go along!" Nadar said, his voice building. "Death, the god we worship, is astoundingly tender and gentle to us - despite the fact that we fear him so deeply and so completely that the very vision of him makes strong men wet themselves - and I should know, he did it to me!"

Morticia whinnied with laughter, unable to speak.

"Oh, and that's not the half of it, to be sure!" Nadar said, wagging his finger. "Why, I could sit here all day and just talk about what an incredibly odd life we lead, just now! Sometimes, I think our life with Allakbeth was far, far simpler, you know! No corpse-wives, no beautiful Avatars to tempt a man to adultery, none of that!" Nadar said, and Morticia laughed harder. "Why, it was just worship three times a day, have a few babies, hand them to Vordenai so they can be tossed in the al-" he said, then stopped, his eyes widening.

Morticia's laughter instantly died, and she looked upon Nadar's face. His eyes were wide, his mouth hung open, and his mind was filled with images of horror. "Oh, Morticia... I remember!" he cried, and leaped to his feet, dashing off.

Morticia followed, easily able to catch up to Nadar as he dashed to the center of the village. He looked around, his eyes lighting upon the ruins. "We didn't live here. We lived there, that direction. The village is gone, now. Allakbeth smashed it. We refused to worship - it was all Vordenai's idea. 'Deny him his power, and he will have to bargain with us,' she said. He smashed our houses, took away the food and clothes, and left us starving and shivering in the cold at night. Vordenai rallied us. We fled his lands, and became the Godless Ones. She knew the Deep Secrets, she said. She said she knew them because this place..." Nadar said, waving an arm at the landscape around them. "This whole place was once the site of a city, long ago. Before the Age of the Gods, she said, a city of a million people once was here. A million people! Can you imagine that?"

Morticia shook her head silently, not willing to interrupt the flow of Nadar's memories.

"A million people! And there," he shouted, pointing to the mesa-like hill the ruins of the temple sat upon, "there was its center! Allakbeth, summoned to serve the needs of the city... Named after the city itself,

she said! She told us he freed himself from his slavery, and turned us into slaves, instead! And all this she learned..."

"Yes?!" Morticia asked, barely able to restrain her eagerness.

Nadar paused, his brows furrowing. Morticia nibbled on her lip as she watched, hoping he might remember.

Finally Nadar sighed. "She didn't say," he replied, and Morticia let out an enormous sigh of disappointment. "All I know is that she spent most of her time near the temple. Perhaps... Perhaps the answers lie there, somewhere." Nadar's shoulders slumped. "I'm sorry."

Morticia flicked her mane aside, and smiled. "It's alright, Nadar. You've given me much - don't feel sorry, please." Morticia reached down to him, lifting his chin, and kissed him softly. "You've given me a great deal, today, Nadar. I thank you."

Nadar smiled weakly. "And you've given me much, as well. Release, peace of mind... And some of my memories. Some are good, and wonderful memories. Some are tragic. My son..." he said, then shook his head. "I remember him, now. I remember him..."

"It was good to come here today, then," Morticia replied, and smiled. She looked up, glancing at the sun, then looked back to Nadar. "We've a few hours before we need to go back. Shall we explore the temple ruins?" she asked, holding out her hand.

Nadar nodded, and smiled as he took her hand in his. "Yes, let's."

### Thirty-Four.

"Don't move!" Morticia hissed, her powerful hand on Nadar's shoulder, holding him in place. The bush they knelt behind was hardly an adequate shield, but there was little else.

"What... What is it doing here?! It should be dead!" Nadar hissed in reply, terrified.

They knelt near the edge of the top of the mesa-like hill, hiding behind a thick bush. The ruins of the temple loomed before them, the broken and shattered remains of a dead god. And within the ruins, a creature stirred, struggling to move a stone.

It was about as tall as Morticia, not counting the length of her horn, as it stood at about seven feet in height. The discarded bones of sheep, deer and other large animals showed how it had fed itself over the years - though why it remained here was unclear. In form, it was canine, with a very wolf-like head and fur, a long fluffy tail, digitigrade legs, and powerful, human-like arms. It struggled with the shattered bit of stone, shoving it, rolling it along the grass and weeds atop the hill, until finally, it had the stone near a section of rubble that had once been the temple spire. It paused, panting, for a long while. Finally, when it had regained some of its strength, it grasped the stone in both arms. With a heroic effort, it lifted the half-ton stone, setting it in place atop the rubble. It rested again, then studied the stone. A few more moments of grunting and shoving, and finally the creature was satisfied.

Morticia gaped in astonishment. The stone was, in fact, a perfect fit. She reached out her mind, touching the mind of the Avatar before her, and understood.

"Oh, Nadar... If only you could sense its mind..." she whispered.

Nadar remained silent, terrified by the awesome power of the beast before him. He could only hope that should it attack, Morticia would prove its better.

The creature rested, panting, then searched about the rubble. Finding a particularly large bone from a previous dinner, it trotted over to the shattered remains of Allakbeth's altar. Tenderly, it dropped the bone into the altar, and looked up to the sky...

...but, of course, nothing happened. Allakbeth was dead and gone.

The creature sat on its haunches, and howled.

"Why did Lysander leave it here? Why did he leave it alive?" Nadar whispered.

"Probably because he found its suffering amusing, Nadar," Morticia whispered in reply, and sighed. "It has the mind of a child... Allakbeth raised it to be a warrior, and little more. It doesn't understand what Allakbeth was really like. It only knows that Allakbeth was its parent... And it is immortal, like all Avatars. Lysander left it to eternally struggle to rebuild the temple... A futile effort to bring back the only parent it has ever known." Nadar looked, and saw tears rolling down Morticia's broad cheeks. "Stay here, and do not move," she whispered. Then, to Nadar's utter surprise, she stood, stepped out from behind the bush, and whinnied loudly.

The wolf-like Avatar instantly bounded to its feet, and snarled. Nadar trembled - he could see the hands of the beast were tipped with sharp talons, and its fangs were long and sharp. "Be careful!" he hissed.

But if Morticia heard him, she made no sign. Instead, she simply stooped to the nearest piece of stone, about the size of the stone the wolf had been struggling with, gripped it in her hands, and lifted it easily.

The wolf snarled, light on its feet, its tail lashing, ready to leap aside should its enemy toss the stone...

...but she did not. Instead, she simply strode over to the temple, and laid the stone in place atop the wall. It did not fit, of course - but the message she gave with it was plain even to the simple mind before her.

The wolf grinned a broad canine grin, then snatched up another bone from the ground. Trotting to the remains of the altar, it dropped it in...

...and nothing happened. Now that she was nearer, Morticia could see a large pile of bones lay beneath the shattered remains of the altar, which had been split in half by the titanic energies which had leveled the temple. Years of futile loyalty lay within that pile of bones. But the wolf would not give up. The basic instinct of loyalty, the heritage of the species he was drawn from, remained.

The wolf whined again, and looked to Morticia, then the stone. After studying the stone for a moment, the wolf shook his furry head. Striding over to the stone, it began to struggle to move it off the wall. Morticia reached out, taking the stone from Allakbeth's former Avatar, and set it down easily. Grinning broadly, the wolf ducked her horn, leaned in, and lapped her cheek for a moment. The then turned and began striding away, looking for the stone that might be the proper fit.

"Father, I need you."

Nadar trembled as he saw Death's dark energy form appear over Morticia. The wolf snarled, glaring at



Death in ignorance and hostility. "What is it, Daughter?" Death asked, his dark voice echoing over the ruins.

Morticia pointed. "Him, Father. Please... Give him understanding. End his misery."

"Understanding, my daughter, will hardly end his misery. At the moment, he has hope. It is all he has. If I give him understanding, I must take away his hope."

"Please."

"As you wish, Daughter," Death replied, and hovered over the wolf for a moment. Nadar watched as the wolf was enveloped in a dark aura of power, and trembled in fear of the might of his god. Then, suddenly, the aura faded. "It is done, Daughter. For good or ill, it is done."

"Thank you, Father."

The wolf stood there, clutching his head and swaying. "What have you done to me?!" he snarled. "What have you done to me?!" He looked up suddenly, his eyes lighting upon the temple. "Father! Father!" In a fevered rush, the wolf snatched up a discarded bone from its previous meals, then another and another, until both hands were full of bones. He then ran over to the shattered altar, and tossed them in. "Father! Please, come back to me! I promise I'll be good! I promise! I didn't mean to run away, father... It was just too big! I couldn't hurt it! Please, father, please! Forgive me! Come back to me, father..." The wolf's voice faded as he fell to his knees, bowed his head, and wept.

"He is gone, my friend," Morticia called softly, tears streaming down her face.

The wolf looked up, and snarled, his face damp with dark, canine tears. "He wasn't gone before! He was here!" he snapped, pounding his chest. "In my heart! He was here! And you took that from me! You took that from me!"

"I'm sorry," Morticia sobbed. Death, hovering above her as a flickering orb of dark energy, said nothing.

The wolf rose to his full height, his fur fluffed out, and roared in an agony of sorrow and rage. Nadar, still watching behind the bush, shuddered in terror. The wolf reached down, snatching up bones from the pile he'd accumulated beneath the shattered altar, and tossing them in every direction, roaring in a fury of grief. Tossing and kicking and raging and roaring, in a few moments, the pile of bones representing a decade's work was scattered and gone.

Then, to Nadar's utter surprise, the wolf turned, and ran away.

Morticia started after him, but suddenly was halted by her father's invisible grip. "Let him go, Daughter."

"But Father!"

"I will watch over him, Daughter, as I watch over all within my lands. For now, let him go."

"Yes, Father," Morticia replied, weeping.

And then Death was gone, leaving Morticia and Nadar alone.

Nadar timidly came out from behind the bush, and walked up to Morticia. "A-are you alright?"

"Yes, Nadar... Just sad."

Nadar reached up, gently wiping her tears. "I... I don't understand why you did that, Morticia. Why?"

"Because I could not kill him, Nadar. We needed to search this hill. I knew he would attack, and I feared for your life. But I could not kill him," she replied, and sighed. "Oh, Nadar... He had the mind of a child, and he was in torment. I could see in his mind the one thought that kept him going... Guilt. He'd fought Lysander's maggot, and was defeated. He doesn't understand, Nadar... He thinks his father left him because of that... He thinks his father was punishing him for being bad... He couldn't understand that Allakbeth was dead. He didn't even truly comprehend that Allakbeth was evil, Nadar. To him, Allakbeth was his father - that was all he knew." Morticia sobbed. "Oh, Nadar! I couldn't kill him!"

Nadar reached his arms around Morticia, and hugged her. "It's alright. You did the right thing."

Morticia hugged Nadar in return. "Oh, Nadar... I don't know if I did. I really don't. I only know I couldn't kill him."

Nadar stood there, hugging Morticia silently as she wept. His heart was moved by her tenderness - and somehow, he knew that her heart was a reflection of the one who raised her, and a true indication of the heart of his god.

### Thirty-Five.

"And then what happened?" Ellsbatha asked, gazing at her husband in the darkness.

"Well, we searched the ruins for another hour or so, and searched the hill a bit, but found nothing. Then, Morticia carried me home, and we arrived just when you saw her trotting into the village. She said that we could try again another day, as time permitted. And, if I wanted, we could lie together again."

Nadar lay quietly in the bed beside his wife, remembering. It had been a long and difficult decision when he came home, but finally he decided he would simply tell his wife every detail of his day. Every detail. It was obvious that she loved and trusted him immensely, and he felt that she deserved to know what had happened - particularly between himself and Morticia.

"And you... You really called out my name?" Ellsbatha asked quietly.

Nadar nodded. "Yes. And then when I realized... I mean, it struck me that it wasn't you... And maybe never would be you again... I wept."

"Oh, Nadar... I love you so..." Ellsbatha whispered, afraid to touch his bare chest with her bone hands, but wanting to hold him very badly. After a moment, she took up a bit of the blanket that Nadar had covered her in so tenderly earlier, wrapped it about her hand, and touched his chest softly.

"I love you, too, Ellsbatha... I think... I think today helped me realize just how much I love you, and you love me."

Ellsbatha felt a smile in her heart. "Now tell me, Nadar... It was her first time... Were you gentle?"

Nadar smiled ruefully. "Well... I wish I could say I was, but... No, I wasn't. She seemed to enjoy it very much... But it was hardly the best a man could do, really."

"You should be more tender, next time, Nadar. I remember you as being such a tender and gentle lover... You should show her that side of you, next time."

"Next time?" Nadar asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes."

"It-it's alright for there to be a 'next time'?"

"Yes, Nadar."

Nadar lay silent, thinking, for a long moment afterwards. Ellsbatha gazed at him in the darkness, watching the flickering colors of his life, and waiting. Finally, Nadar sighed. "I don't know... Part of me wants that... And part of me doesn't. I guess what I really want is..."

"Yes?"

"Well... You, Ellsbatha. As you were, not..."

"Not as a corpse," Ellsbatha said, nodding.

"Well... Yes. I'm sorry, but-"

"Don't be, Nadar. Please. Don't be sorry. Morticia said to me this morning that we should cherish the love we have, and try not to weep over what we have lost... And I do," Ellsbatha said, and sighed quietly. "Our god is a kind and gentle god, as I have shown you before. And, he is growing, learning his powers, and mastering his abilities. Perhaps... Perhaps someday..."

Nadar nodded, understanding. "But even if that never happens, Ellsbatha, I will still be by your side, until the day I die."

Ellsbatha suddenly giggled.

"What? I'm serious, you know!"

"Oh, Nadar, I know you are! It's just that knowing our god, the day you die, he'll turn you into an undead, and then you'll be just like me!"

Nadar nodded, his expression quite serious as he gazed up into the darkness. "And then, I will be by your side for the rest of eternity."

Ellsbatha nodded, sighing with pleasure at that thought... Then suddenly rose in the bed onto an elbow, and looked down at her husband sharply, wagging a bony finger at him. "But don't you go hurrying the process along, now! I don't want you to jump in a pond and drown yourself or something horrible like that! I'm quite sure that would do nothing but annoy our god, Nadar! I've a very strong suspicion that if he wanted you dead, you'd already be that way!"

Nadar chuckled. "No, no. I've no intention of hurrying the process along, love. You told me once how you enjoy watching the colors of my life as we sleep together... How it gives you great pleasure. Well, it's all I can do for you, love, and I'll not deny you a single night of that. I love you too much to take away something that makes you happy."

"Thank you, Nadar. You've no idea how happy it makes me to hear you say that," Ellsbatha replied, then paused. "May I... May I touch you?"

"If you wish," Nadar replied.

Ellsbatha reached out, softly stroking the hairs on her husband's chest with the tips of her finger-bones. She had learned that he could not sleep with her touching him, as she once did - her bones were cold, and held no attraction for him. Moments like these, when he allowed her to stroke his bare skin as she once might have... These moments, she cherished greatly.

Finally, Ellsbatha withdrew her hand, and lay there quietly beneath the blanket that separated her from her husband, allowing him to sleep at night. "Thank you, Nadar. Sleep well."

Nadar smiled, reaching across to her and patting her ribs through the blanket without thinking about it. "You're welcome, my love," he replied, rolled onto his side, and closed his eyes.

Soon, Ellsbatha was gazing upon the vivid colors of his dreaming mind, relishing in the memory of a simple pat given through a blanket, and sending a silent prayer of thanks to Morticia.

### Thirty-Six.

"And you found this... Where?"

Morticia grinned. The grasses of her pen were, of course, still fresh and green, despite the snow that covered the Land. She had searched Allakbeth's lands several times, usually without Nadar. Only twice more had he come along with her, and both times, he made each of their quiet encounters even more special than the last. Still, it was winter, now, and Nadar stayed at home, as it was simply too chill. While the snow and freezing weather bothered Morticia little, Nadar was only human, and could easily suffer frostbite, or catch his death of cold. So, Morticia had spent the last few trips alone... And finally found something of interest.

"Directly under the temple, Father. I think his temple was special - not conjured, but built. I think Allakbeth was one of the original gods, back at the beginning of the Age of Gods!"

I shrugged. "Possibly - it's hard to say. They're all immortal."

"Well, inside the ruins, I poked around, moved a few boulders, and found a staircase leading down. There were many chambers, Father - many chambers. Some held great crystals... Power conduits, you might call them, to channel mana-energy. Dead, cracked and burned, all of them. Others had racks of odd things... Bone wands, feathered staves, gemmed skulls... All on shelves and racks, like tools in a workman's shop. And one room had books!"

I nodded, looking to the bag of bound volumes she'd recovered, half a dozen of which had already spilled out of the bag and onto the grass of her pen. I reached out my hand to the first one...

...and found I could not grasp it. "Damn!"

"What is it, Father?"

"I can't touch it," I replied, shifting to my humanoid form and kneeling beside her and the books. It made no difference - my hand passed through the books ineffectually.

"I can open it and hold it for you, father, and turn the pages as needed. Then, you can read it yourself. As a god of the Land, all languages are known to you."

I nodded. "Let's try that."

Morticia picked up the first volume. "Ooo! This one sounds promising!" she said, looking at the spine. "Theory and Application of City-Wide Power Matrices in Dynamic-Coded Homunculi."

I shook my head. "Let's start with something simpler, and work our way up."

Morticia nodded, and dumped out the bag of books, sorting through them. After several minutes, she held up one. "Alright, how about this one? "Coding Theory for Dynamic-Coded Homunculi, Volume One." I wonder what this... 'Homunculi' thing is?"

"Me, I'm guessing. If what Nadar remembered and Vordenai said is all true... The 'gods' of the land were originally Homunculi - created servants." I chuckled. "Apparently, the Land never had a Mary Shelly to pen a little fable to warn them about things like that."

"Who?"

"Nevermind - just open it, and I'll sit beside you so I can read it."

Morticia did, and I studied the book - or tried to.

Parts of it made sense - particularly the introduction, which was the first chapter. The basic purpose for homunculi was laid out in the first few paragraphs - having a hundred or two hundred sorcerers running around the city to handle basic needs of lighting, water and heat was extremely costly and extremely inefficient. A single, all-powerful homunculus could, quite easily, satisfy the needs of an entire city, and be sustained on little more than the city's trash - two birds with one stone, as it were. Sorcerers could augment its power directly, through concentrating on it to send it extra energy in times of need. And even an ordinary citizen could make sure that their city's homunculus had more than enough power to serve everyone's needs, simply by sending a silent thought of 'Thank You' its direction once a day. The mana-energy sent by an ordinary 'mundane', as they called the non-spellcasting members of their population, was infinitesimal - still, a simple 'thanks' would give a small amount of energy, and in a city of a million or more people, that added up. I nodded as I read - the whole idea was perfect, really. This was the Land, not the world I once knew, where magic did not exist and technology was the key to the universe. The Land was a different world in a different universe, and it ran on different rules. The Land was alive, and its very essence was magic - sorcery and magic were the science and technology of the Land. And the 'scientists' of the land, the sorcerers, had developed the ultimate power source, able to meet the needs of millions - potentially billions - with no waste, no muss, and no fuss. Yes, the introduction of the book was easy to understand. Morticia read along with me, and she understood it easily, as well. The rest, however, was not quite so easy.

Finally, I sighed. "It must be me, Morticia, but I simply cannot understand this junk. To me, it's gobbledygook."

Morticia blinked. "How so?"

"Alright... Take this bit here," I said, pointing, and began to read. "The Law of Contagion: Two objects sharing a relationship through direct physical contact retain their relationship after the contact is ended, with the degree that one object will influence effects in the other when under tension of applied mana-energy being directly related to the absolute degree of relationship between the two objects, usually stated as an affinity between the two objects directly proportional to the product of the degree of

relevancy of the contact and the length of time they were in contact, and inversely proportional to the length of time since they ceased to be in contact."

Morticia nodded. "Yes?"

"Morticia, that makes no sense at all!"

Morticia whinnied with laughter. "Sure it does!"

I sighed. "Alright, explain it to me."

"Hmmm... Well, say you have a man standing before you. Say you pluck a hair from his head. Say you want to do something mean to him - like turn him purple, or something. If you dip the hair in purple ink while applying your will, Father, he will turn purple. The relationship between the man and the hair is very close."

I sighed. "Daughter, I can turn a man purple without touching his hair, just by exerting my will. There's little point to it, but I can do it."

"Well, that gets us back to Sapphire's 'Man and Ant and Sand' analogy you told me about. You remember? You said it was one of the first things she taught you, that first day you met. An ordinary human witch or warlock is like an ant. They can move a grain of sand, and to them it will seem like a tremendous thing, but it's really not. You, however, are like a man with a very large shovel. All your worshippers have to do is provide you enough energy, and you can literally do anything."

"Wait, wait... There's a hole in that logic. By that logic, anyone can turn a man purple just by snatching a hair off his head, dipping it in purple ink and willing it to be so - and I know that none of the people in either of my villages can do anything like that. They are, so far as I can tell, ordinary people."

Morticia nodded. "They are what the book calls 'mundanes'. Their ability to manipulate mana-energies is virtually nonexistent. They can give you energy, Father, but they can't use that energy themselves."

"Ah - whereas someone like Vordenai, however, was able to manipulate this energy with their will... The ant moving the grain of sand."

"Exactly."

"Hmmm... And where would you fit in this 'ant-and-man' analogy, I wonder?"

Morticia shrugged. "Maybe I'm like a beetle. You are still vastly more powerful than I will ever be, Father, but if I sat down and read all this... Well, I could move a lot more than just a single grain of sand. Really, what with the powers you've already given me and the powers I've developed from my horn, I already can."

"Hmmm... Could be," I replied, then looked down at the book. "Page on a bit - this is all theory, and you can read all that later and develop yourself, my little beetle," I said, and Morticia giggled. We paged through the book, but that's all it was. "Try the next one."

""Volume Two - Startup Coding Procedures,"" she read, then opened it. "Look!"

I nodded - the pages were covered in dirty fingerprints. "Well, I don't think it takes a genius to know whose fingerprints these are. This is where Vordenai learned to summon and control a god."

Morticia browsed through the book quickly, then paused. "And this is why you can't touch the books,

Father - they're shielded against 'homonculi', to prevent them from getting around their limitations... Their 'Coding', they call it. Vordenai probably used the same spell to shield her 'Spirit Bag'."

"Well, keeping their all-powerful slaves under control would be important - though it's obvious they failed. I wonder what happened?"

Morticia's eyes widened. "Ummm... I think we happened."

"We? We who?"

"We Avatars," Morticia replied, and reached for the bag containing the other books. After a moment, she pulled out a metal-bound book. "It's titled 'Memorandums' - I looked at it first, because the pages were all pretty colors. But it wasn't very interesting reading, really, so I put it in the bag for you to look at."

The pages were delicate, and had aged poorly - apparently, though the books were vellum and able to survive tens of centuries, no one in the city administration of Allakbeth thought their memos would be read a millennium later, so they were simply paper. The pages were each various colors - apparently, a color-coding system had once been used to denote the importance of various memos, ranging from ordinary green memos for day-to-day operations, yellow memos for special problems, and pink ones for critical problems. Morticia turned the pages carefully, and eventually paused. "Here. Here's the one I noticed."

I looked. "Hmmm... It's a memo noting that the city homonculi's request for a pet to pass its idle time and entertain it has been approved. Apparently, several homonculi all across the world had similar ideas, and the results have been greater productivity, etcetera, etcetera. Like all bureaucracies, all they cared about was bottom line, apparently. I doubt all their servants came up with the idea independently. They probably communicated with each other, the same way they can today," I said, then shook my head. "Uh-oh. I can see this one coming. Turn to the last memo." Morticia did, and I nodded. "And there it is. A city notification that the whole 'pet' project has been canceled, and the pets should be immediately destroyed."

"Because we, their Avatars, were doing exactly what you and I are doing now - helping our parents read the things the humans didn't want their slaves to read."

I nodded. "I think you're right. And at that point, their 'slaves' revolted," I said, and sat back, thinking. "Some might have been like Koloth - kind and gentle, just not wanting their Avatars to die. You are, really, like children to us. Koloth and his kind probably simply used their powers, eliminated all resistance to them, then spent their time caring for the people - just as they had been made to do. Others, perhaps not treated as well, might have revolted, then learned to enjoy their newfound power and freedom. Throw in a few centuries of time, and poof! The Gods of the Land," I said, and shook my head. "Magical, Intelligent Frankensteinian Nuclear Power Plants gone Chernobyl, all at once, all over the Land."

Morticia blinked. "Magical intelligent what?"

I chuckled. "Nevermind. The point is, these 'gods' simply aren't human, Morticia. They never grew up. They're like the ancient Greek and Roman gods - a small minority are kind, but many are indifferent, and most are cruel - but it's a child-like cruelty, a cruelty that speaks not of true, premeditated evil, but of a simple lack of empathy. They never were children, like you were - they never bumped their knees, they never got hungry, they never got tired, they never had a birthday or shared a story with a friend, nothing. Nearly all the Greek and Roman gods and goddesses were born full-grown, adults - like the gods of the Land. And like the gods of the Land, they lacked empathy. The only rules ever applied to them were the rules limiting their powers. That's all." I paused, thinking.

"The first generation of Avatars were all probably 'helpers'. Clean up the trash from the city and dump it in the altar, sweep, entertain the 'god', and so on - and secretly help them learn how to break the chains of slavery the human race of the Land had forged in their minds. When the 'gods' broke free, these helpers became advisors... But that wouldn't last. Like the Greco-Roman gods, the gods of the Land would fight - and fight, and fight, and fight. Soon, their Avatars would no longer be advisors and helpers, but just simple-minded brute warriors, like Lysander's maggot, or Allakbeth's wolf."

"But I'm something new, something different," Morticia said quietly. "I'm an advisor, a helper and a warrior."

I nodded. "Because you came from me, and I'm something different. I wasn't drawn from the Void, an emotionless being to be shaped and molded by my initial 'Coders', as they called them. I was a man - I already had a sense of morality, and a sense of empathy that the 'gods' of the Land simply lack. Vordenai hoped to end the Age of the Gods through me. And that just might happen, too."

"How, Father?"

"With time, Daughter. Time and a lot of very careful work," I replied, and gestured towards the Northlander village. "Right now, those people in Nadar's village are, truthfully, my only handicap. I need them to stop fearing me, and start seeing me the same way Sapphire's people do. Once they do, I can begin the slow process of wooing away worshippers from the other gods."

"How long would that take, Father? To end the Age of the Gods, I mean."

I shrugged. "The Land is large, Morticia, and there are several hundred other gods. I've risen up very high above this world and looked around - beyond the atmosphere. This world is about as large as the world I once knew... Though the continents and seas are different. I'd guess it would take three to five centuries or so to take this continent, and probably several more centuries of careful building to give me the range necessary to take the rest of the world. Still, it can be done. Once we have the Northlanders straightened out, we can show the rest of the people of the Land that coming to me is a good idea, simply because I offer them something that none of the other gods can."

"What's that, Father?"

"Compassion, Morticia. Compassion."

Morticia smiled broadly. "That you can, Father, that you can."

"Well, I've learned all I need to know. You can read these books at your leisure, Morticia, and improve yourself. For me, I've got to get back to work. It's winter - the deer are hungry, and they need a bit of food."

Morticia nodded, then suddenly looked at me. "Wait, Father - there's something I've always wanted to ask you! Do you have a moment?"

I nodded. "What is it?"

Morticia pointed to the end of her pen that connected to my temple. "I've always wondered what was beyond those doors. I tried them when I was little, and I tried them again a few weeks ago in curiosity - but they don't open."

I shrugged. "Koloth said that the inside of my temple was my heart. He said I could explore it, perhaps even learn about myself, but the process would take years - and I've found I simply haven't had the time to sit around and contemplate my navel for a few decades. I've been too busy for that introspective



nonsense. The doors won't open without my permission, Morticia. That's why you couldn't get in."

"Is it... I mean, would it be alright if I... Looked inside?"

I paused for a moment, thinking. My own heart was probably black as pitch and quite unpleasant to view, what with all I'd done. Still, hiding anything from Morticia would probably be unwise. I nodded. "I have nothing to hide from you, Morticia. You're more than just my daughter, you're my advisor - and I've a feeling I'll be needing your advice more and more as the years go on. If you're to advise me properly, allowing you to see into my heart would probably help you make the best decisions. Though I doubt you'll see anything in there you'll like... Well, you can go inside anytime you wish, and bring anyone you want inside," I said, then wagged a finger. "Just don't spend years in there, Daughter. We have many, many things to do besides a communal contemplation of my navel," I said, and chuckled.

Morticia nodded, smiling. "Yes, Father."

"Good. I'll talk to you later," I said, and turned my attention elsewhere.

### Thirty-Seven.

"I don't know whether to thank you, or curse you," a voice growled.

Morticia awoke with a start, looking around. There, standing outside her pen and leaning against the low stone wall, was the wolf. He was thinner, yet apparently hadn't been starving. A light snow was falling, and his shoulders were already being coated in snow. Inside Morticia's pen, it was warm and dry, the grasses still green - but outside, it was bitterly cold.

"Both, I think," Morticia replied, rising to her hooves and smiling weakly. She could sense his mind, and knew he meant her no harm. She walked over to him, and found she couldn't help herself - her eyes misted with tears. "I'm sorry."

The wolf leaned in, and lapped softly at her tears for a moment. He then leaned back, and gazed at her silently. After a long moment, he spoke again.

"He was evil, you know. My father, I mean."

"I know."

"I knew it in my heart... But he was my father, and I could forgive him anything. And I did not have... The understanding I have now."

"I know."

The wolf lowered his head, and sighed. "And now, I have nothing."

"You have your home, and your memories, my friend."

"But Lysander! As soon as he finds me and sees me like this, he'll-"

"He'll do nothing," Morticia interrupted, "because he is dead. My father killed his creature, that vast

maggot he had, almost three years ago. He killed Lysander this last summer. Lysander's second creature, an enormous spider, I killed myself that same day. My father says that creating vast, unstoppable creatures was Lysander's Singularity - but now, Lysander is no more. It is over, my friend."

"Your father killed that... Thing?" The wolf shook his head. "My father tried... I remember the lightning, the fire... I tried, too... Oh, how I tried. I could not hurt it. It simply smashed me, again and again. I hurt... I could feel ribs were broken... And... I ran away." The wolf looked at Morticia suddenly. "Wait... Who is your father?"

"My father is Death - and I am Morticia. It means "Death's Daughter." And what is your name?"

The wolf paused, thinking, then suddenly grinned wryly. "Ummm... Well, to be honest, my father never bothered to give me one. I remember the people just called me "Allakbeth's Creature", and that was all." The wolf chuckled. "Perhaps you should give me a name, Morticia."

Morticia smiled. "I've been thinking about that since I last saw you, my friend. I think you should be called Pius. It means "Dutiful" and "Loyal"."

The wolf grinned a gaping, canine grin. "Loyal', eh? I like that."

Then, without a further word, Pius turned and began to trot away, through the snow.

"Wait! You... You don't have to go!" Morticia called.

Pius paused, looked over his shoulder, and slowly grinned. "Yes, I do, Morticia. You have things to do... Great things. I can smell it." Pius turned his back to her, spread his arms, and lifted his head, sniffing the air. "Can't you smell it, Morticia? It's in the wind... Great change is coming to the Land, and you and your father are behind it." Slowly, he lowered his arms, and gazed at the horizon. "Great change..." Suddenly, he flicked his head to the side, and gazed at her over his shoulder again, grinning wolfishly. "But someday, little Morticia... I'll be back."

Morticia watched Pius as he jogged through the snow, and finally was lost to view in the growing snowstorm. "I hope so," she whispered, gazing after him. "I hope so."

### Thirty-Eight.

"A-are you sure it's alright for me to come in there?" Sapphire asked nervously. The bitter winter's day that lay outside the warmth and soft grasses of Morticia's pen seemed infinitely preferable to the forbidding gloom that lay before her. Despite the magical warmth of the pen, despite being bundled in several layers of fur clothing she'd worn for the walk to the temple, she shivered.

Morticia poked her head back out through the door, and grinned. "Very sure," Morticia replied. "My father said I could come in here any time I wished, and he said I could bring in anyone I wanted. I've been in here several times, and of all the people I know, I wanted to bring you." Morticia held out her hand. "Come. Really - there's nothing that will hurt you in here. There's a few things that are scary, and a few things that are surprising, but nothing that will hurt you."

Sapphire took Morticia's hand nervously, and followed. As soon as they entered, the door swung shut

behind them, closing with an ominous BOOM that echoed chillingly, and plunging them into darkness.  
"Oh, m-my..."

"It's alright - it's just the door. It always closes like that."

"Morticia, it's pitch black in here - I'm blind."

Morticia nodded, and a spark of light appeared at the tip of her horn. "Better?"

Sapphire gazed about the room they were in. It was a long, shadowed hallway, the walls made of piled skulls, the floors and ceiling made of carefully fitted human bones. Blood dripped from the walls slowly, and the soft wails of thousands could be heard faintly in the air. "Ummm... Not really."

Morticia giggled. "This is just the entrance. It frightened me, at first... But then I realized this wasn't really the inside of his heart. This is just what he thinks his heart is like. You know, like if he ever bothers to take a peek inside? This is what he thinks he'll see. It's why he never looks in here."

"I don't understand why he'd see himself like that," Sapphire said, shaking her head.

Morticia walked over to one of the walls, pulling Sapphire with her, and touched one of the skulls. Instantly, it screamed. "You killed me, you bastard! I was young, I had my whole life ahead of me, and you tossed me into your altar like I was nothing! Nothing! I hope you rot in hell!"

Morticia withdrew her hand, and looked to Sapphire. "Does that explain it?"

Sapphire nodded. "The battle with Lysander."

"He has never forgiven himself for that. I don't think he ever will," Morticia replied, and shook her head sadly. "You should hear the babies. They're the worst." Morticia sighed for a moment, then looked up and smiled again, tugging Sapphire's hand. "Come - the inner door is this way."

Sapphire followed to the end of the hall, and found herself standing beside Morticia before a door made of hundreds of carefully fitted bones. There was no handle or knob or other means of opening it - just a fanged skull in the center of the door, grinning evilly at them. Sapphire started to ask Morticia what it all might mean, when suddenly the skull spoke, startling her badly.

"So, Morticia... You've come to peer into your father's heart again... Haven't you seen enough? What sick pleasure do you get out of knowing his innermost secrets?" the skull asked, in the dark, hollow voice of Death. "And you, Sapphire... Go back now, while you still can, puny mortal. What lies beyond will destroy your sanity, and consume your immortal soul."

"B-but-" Sapphire stammered, but Morticia cut her off.

"Ignore it, it always says mean things like that, and if you try to talk back to it, it gets really mean. The first couple times I tried to get past, it had me crying in no time flat. Then I learned to just wait until it gets to the questions."

Sapphire blinked. "Questions?"

Morticia nodded. "And they get harder every time, too. That's another reason I wanted you along - it's getting harder and harder for me to get by."

"You're kidding."

Morticia sighed. "I wish I was."

"Is it possible, you ungrateful little brat, you little mutant horse, that the true reason it's getting harder to get by is simply that you are trying to peer into things you shouldn't? Satisfying your perverted desires to know your father's true heart, relishing in stealing his secrets... You're no daughter of his, and this proves it. Of course, everyone already knew that. No, you're no daughter of his. You're a thing... A worthless, twisted lump of accursed flesh he shaped with his will. Be off!" the skull snapped, then paused. "And as for you, mortal... What lies beyond is not for you to know. Your puny mind could hardly encompass any of it without snapping, and falling into a permanent, shrieking insanity. Besides... What right have you to even consider peering into the heart of your god? If he knew you were here..." the skull said, and simply ended with an ominous chuckle.

Morticia reached up and held a finger across her lips, looking down at Sapphire. Sapphire nodded, and remained silent.

After a long moment of silence, the fanged skull in the door spoke again. "Very well. Since it's obvious that you, Morticia, gain some sick, perverted pleasure from this, and since it's obvious that you, Sapphire, care little whether or not you survive, we'll play a simple game. Answer three questions correctly, and I'll let you pass."

"Okay," Morticia said, looking to Sapphire. "We're at the questions. Don't answer immediately - let's take some time to think about them." Sapphire nodded silently, pulling off her fur mittens and warm fur hat. It was slightly chill in the hallway, but far from cold.

"Two daughters and two mothers walked past me on the road. I murdered them, of course, and ate their souls. Yet, when I lifted their worthless carcasses to feed to the worms, there were only three of them. Why?"

Sapphire blanched, and Morticia looked to her sheepishly. "Sorry, I forgot to mention the questions are like that."

Sapphire nodded - somehow, given what the skull had already said, she didn't think any questions it might ask were going to be pleasant. "It's an easy question, dear. The three women are related. Grandmother, mother, daughter. That makes two mothers in the mother and the grandmother, and two daughters in the mother and daughter."

"A lucky guess, mortal. You're one step closer to the slow and painful death you seek."

Sapphire started to make a curt reply, but managed to stop herself, and simply nod silently.

"I ate a man yesterday, he was quite delicious. First, I stripped off his outsides, then cooked his insides. Then, I ate the outside, and threw away the inside. What was his name?"

Morticia made a face. "I hate ones like this. Sometimes I spend hours trying to figure them out."

Sapphire nodded. "I can see why. Why is it like this, I wonder?"

The skull-head chuckled. "Foolish mortal! Did you really think it would be easy to peer into the heart of your god? Peer into your own heart sometime, mortal. The questions you will ask yourself are different, but no less difficult," the skull replied, and switched to a mocking, sing-song voice. "Oh, why am I here? What purpose does my life have? Where am I going?" the skull said, then laughed derisively. "Such are the questions mortals ask of themselves when they seek to know their own hearts - insipid questions with simple answers, yet nearly impossible for your puny mortal minds to answer."

"I see," Sapphire replied, nodding in understanding.

A long moment of silence passed as Sapphire considered what she'd learned, and Morticia stroked her chin. Finally, Morticia sighed, and shook her head. "I can't figure out the riddle. I'm stuck."

"Mmm?" Sapphire replied, looking up to her tall companion. "Oh, the riddle? The answer is corn," she replied with a shrug.

"Correct, mortal - and again, you are one step closer to the slow and painful death you seek. You know, you could just swallow a sharp rock. The effect would be the same, but at least you would preserve your immortal soul."

Sapphire made a face, and Morticia sighed. "I'm sorry, Sapphire. If it's too much, we can go back."

"You should heed the horse-girl's advice, mortal. That which lies beyond is far too much for your puny mind to encompass," the skull added, mockingly.

Sapphire gazed at the skull for a long moment in silence. It gazed back at her, chuckling softly.

"No, Morticia. I'm not turning back just yet," Sapphire finally replied, shaking her head. "This is just a test. Like the door said, when a mortal seeks to know their own heart the questions are different, but no less difficult. And what this door is trying to do is instill in us the same feelings of self-doubt a mortal experiences when they try to examine their own heart and determine who they really are, inside. The door is simply a part of your father's heart, I think, and its purpose is to test any who would enter. If your father came here, he would not hear riddles mixed with horrible, cutting insults, I think, but more serious and torturing questions - like 'Why did Lysander's people die?' or 'Why do the Northlanders really fear you?'"

"Correct. You are wise, mortal woman," the door replied solemnly, then chuckled. "Now use your wisdom and turn back, before it's too late."

Morticia grinned broadly, squeezing Sapphire's hand, and Sapphire grinned back silently.

"Very well," the skull said. "Answer this last question, then, to seal your fate." There was a long pause, then the skull spoke again. "Strike me, if you wish. I will not resist. Stab me, if it amuses you. I will not bleed. Feed me, if you desire. My hunger will never abate," the skull said, then chuckled darkly. "But ignore me at your peril, for I will consume your flesh, if I can."

"I think I know this one!" Morticia whinnied, then leaned down to Sapphire and whispered. Sapphire smiled and nodded, and Morticia looked to the door. "Fire!"

And suddenly, the skull in the door transformed, becoming a man's face. It was not a handsome face - it was, rather, the face of a plain and elderly man. His skin was gray and wrinkled, the eyes a faded gray that matched. The expression on the face, however, was a loving smile. It spoke, a gentle, elderly man's voice that was soft and pleasing to the ear. "Pass, beloved Daughter, focus of my life, and center of my heart. Pass, beloved Sapphire, whose sweetness, light and hope gives me reason to carry on." And with that, the door opened, revealing a deep gray mist.

Sapphire grinned broadly, and Morticia whinnied with triumph. "Sapphire, you were marvelous!" Morticia said, beaming. "But how did you know the answers to the first two so easily?"

Sapphire laughed. "Oh, my dear! You forgot - I'm the Storyteller for my village. Telling stories and riddles to the children to teach them lessons about life and themselves is part of what I do."

"Maybe I should bring you back here more often, then," Morticia replied with a giggle. "For now, though, let's go in."

Morticia tugged Sapphire's hand, stepping into the mist, and Sapphire followed. There was a moment of disorientation, and she found herself standing in a room. The room was very large, perhaps fifty yards across, and roughly circular. The walls, floor and ceiling were covered with soft colors that shifted slowly, as though alive. On the opposite side of the room, a large double-door of dark wood marked the exit. Sapphire looked around, and scratched her head. "Wait... The length of the hallway, and this room... That's more than the width of the temple, itself!"

"The temple is like a shell, Sapphire - it's just the outside. The inside, here, is his heart. Well, this is one of the chambers of his heart, at any rate. There are many. The inside is larger than the outside, because his heart is larger than the simple shell that contains it."

"Just like the heart of man or woman is, in truth, larger than the body that contains it," Sapphire replied, nodding in understanding. "What chamber is this? Does it have a name, or a purpose?"

"This is what is in his heart and thoughts right now. If you sit very quietly and listen, you can even hear his thoughts. Sometimes this room is blue, because he is sad. Sometimes it's bright and happy - I notice it's like that a lot when he talks to you. Right now, I think he's feeding the deer and rabbits in the forest again. Most of the time, though, it's blue."

"Ah, how sad."

"Come on - let's go on to the next room."

Sapphire nodded, and shortly Morticia had led her to the door on the opposite wall. The next room was again concealed by mist, and Sapphire followed Morticia again through the unknown. There was another brief moment of disorientation...

...and Sapphire found herself standing in a large, circular chamber, the size of the temple itself. The walls were the dark stone of the outer temple, with long, fluted columns that reached high above. At the pinnacle of the room, far above their heads, the ceiling was clear, and light shone through from outside. Behind them was the door they had entered through, and five others hung against the walls of the room, the six doors evenly spaced about the chamber. Wide, oval steps of dark stone led down from each door to the floor of the chamber, and in the center of the chamber, a broad, dark pedestal dominated the room. Above the pedestal, a shining orb of white light hung, gleaming warmly. "What's behind the other doors?" Sapphire asked, pointing.

"I don't know, really. Not all of them open. Some of them appear to be just for him to explore - but I don't think he ever will. So far, I've only been able to get four of them to open. Well, I can explore the center, too - I'll show you that later. Shall we go through some of the doors I can open?"

"Alright," Sapphire replied, smiling.

"Great! Let's go to this one, first," Morticia said, and led Sapphire to one of the other doors across the chamber. The large wooden doors opened at a touch, creaking loudly. Beyond was again the veil of mist, and Sapphire followed without hesitation.

In a moment, Sapphire found herself standing in a vast room, easily wide and long enough to fit her entire village into. The walls easily a hundred feet high, and near the ceiling, thousands of windows let sunlight stream in. Large bookshelves were neatly placed along the walls and on the floor of the room, the shelves stretching nearly up to the ceiling. And on the shelves were millions upon millions of books, their innumerable spines etched in unreadable characters. Sapphire was boggled. "What is this place?"

"This is the room of his memories. Come - I want to show you something, here."

Sapphire nodded, following, and Morticia led them past the entrance, through the maze-like collection of enormously tall shelves. After a moment, they turned a corner, and Sapphire stopped, staring.

The area before her was smashed and burned, the shelves crushed and broken, the countless books that once lay upon them now merely scattered bits of charred paper. A few scraps fluttered in an errant breeze that came from nowhere, but for the most part, whatever was once on these books was now simply ash. "I... I don't understand," Sapphire said nervously.

"Those are the memories of his past life, as a man, in another world. It takes up the majority of this room, but most of them are gone." Morticia poked through the rubble, and lifted a small scrap of tattered paper, the edges charred. "Listen," she said, and held the paper up to the light.

'Head for the bomb shelter! The bomb shelter, Johnny! Duck and Cover! Duck and Cover!' a man's voice called, faintly.

"Who is that? What does it mean?" Sapphire asked, an eyebrow raised.

"I don't know, precisely. When I hold the paper, I get the impression it was his father... The only clear thing I get from it other than that is what a bomb shelter is, and what a bomb is."

"So what is a bomb?"

"Part of a terrible war. Explosions and death, raining from the sky. Hundreds dying at a single stroke... Sometimes thousands."

Sapphire blanched. "That sounds horrible."

Morticia nodded. "Listen to this one," she said, picking up another charred scrap of paper, then holding it up to the light.

Shrieks of terror emanated from the paper, the screams of hundreds. An odd, high-pitched whining sound was heard, mixed with an ominous rumble. Suddenly, a woman's voice tore through the sounds. "Oh, God, John! The plane! It's going down!" More screams, piercing shrieking for many long heartbeats... Then a sudden sound like a crash of thunder, followed by silence.

"Wh-what was that?"

Morticia set the charred paper down where she found it, then shook her head. "I don't know, really. I think it's his last memory of his previous life - I'm just not sure. Something happened... I know what a plane is, I can feel that from the memory. A large vehicle of some kind... It flew through the air, and carried hundreds."

Sapphire nodded. "A great sorcery, indeed."

Morticia shook her head. "No, actually. In the world he came from, there was no magic, no sorcery. Trees were just growing things, with no life or song. Animals had no minds to speak of, and stones were empty and cold. The Land is alive, and everything from the stones of the ground to the birds in the sky has life, and a song. His world was silent."

"So Death came from a world of death, to bring hope into a world of Life."

Morticia nodded. "That's what I think, too."

Morticia reached down for another scrap of paper, then held it up to the light.

The sound of footsteps. Distant, faint voices in conversation. The chirp of a bird. "Daddy! You should really get to know him before you judge him! He's really a sweet boy!" a woman's voice said, then silence again.

"The voice... It sounds a bit like you," Sapphire said.

Morticia nodded. "His daughter, in that life. Feel it," Morticia said, holding out the paper.

Sapphire took the paper in her hands, and suddenly she felt the memory. She could feel herself in the body of a mature man, striding across a hard surface - like stone, and yet not. She could feel a nervous habit... The left thumbnail of the man stroking a golden ring about the third finger of the left hand. Odd, square buildings she did not understand surrounded her. Unknown people, all young, sat in various chairs in outdoor areas, chatting. She could feel a woman's hand clasping the man's right hand, hear the woman's voice... The woman's words were repeated in her mind... There was a rush of emotion, a sudden understanding that the hand being held was not that of a little girl anymore, but of a woman... A feeling both happy and sad at the same time. A feeling of completeness, and yet regret... And then the memory ended.

Sapphire handed the paper back to Morticia, then looked about at the rubble. "You could spend ages in here and not dig out everything, dear," she said, shaking her head.

Morticia nodded, returning the paper to where she found it. "I know. Everything's scattered. Most of it is simply destroyed."

"What caused that, I wonder? Vordenai?"

"I thought so, too, when I first began searching. But now, I don't think so. I think..."

"Yes?"

"I think he did it himself, somehow. When he first came to the land. I think he gave up all this, and the power of the transformation that brought him here did the rest."

Sapphire scratched her head. "Why?"

"How could he live a life here, knowing that he had a full life somewhere else?" Morticia replied, looking down to Sapphire. "You know him fairly well, Sapphire. Don't you think that if he could remember his wife, his daughter, his grandchildren... He'd sit there and wonder and worry about them? Were they alive, were they dead... How are they doing... Are they happy... All that. Just like he does with each and every one of his people here, in the Land, right now."

"Ah! So we're like his children and grandchildren, then. Emotionally, I mean."

Morticia smiled. "Everyone else is, yes. You and I, however, are different - and that's part of what I wanted to show you, today. Come on!" Morticia said, and took Sapphire's hand, leading her back to the door.

A few moments later, once Morticia had led her through the main chamber and past another door, Sapphire found herself standing in a small flower-bedecked glade surrounded by oak trees. The scent of the flowers was in the air, and the hum of bees and chirping of small birds seemed to come from all around. "It... It's beautiful, here."

Morticia nodded. "This isn't what I wanted you to see, though. Look there," she replied, and pointed.



Sapphire looked. In the center of the glade, a woman of the Dark Ones lay, nude. She yawned and stretched, as though waking from a long nap, then sat up. She paused to brush a lock of long, snow-white hair from her eyes, then smiled. Leaning forward, she sniffed the flowers for a moment, then gazed around beautifully at the idyllic scene that surrounded her. Sapphire stared, her mouth hanging open.

"That... That's me!" she said, surprised.

"An idealized vision of you, yes. Thanks to your eating the manna I conjure at the worship site and dancing every day, you almost look like she does, too. Still, you've got that little scar on your shin and a couple other small marks and imperfections. She doesn't - she's an idealized vision of you."

"Can we... Can we talk to her?" Sapphire asked, immensely curious.

Morticia shook her head. "No, unfortunately. She can't see us or hear us. She's not really real, she's just my father's impression of you."

"Hmmm... Why does he have me nude, I wonder? And why am I here?"

"I think you're nude because he thinks you are beautiful, both in body and in spirit. I think you're here in a lovely glen like this because he wishes he could provide you with a place like this - a perfect, peaceful glen to spend your life in. In this room are many of the things he cherishes - and it's larger than it looks."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Sometimes I've seen visions of Ellsbatha strolling through here. Other times I've seen various others of your people sitting beneath a tree, smelling the flowers... But they are never in the center, and they're rarely here for long. You, however, are always right here, in the center of this glade. You are, I think, the most important mortal of all his people. I think he cares for you a great deal."

"It seems so," Sapphire agreed, nodding, then paused. "Does he...?"

"Yes?"

"Does he know we're here, now? I mean, can he sense that we're here, in this room? Perhaps it's simply a response to our presence?"

Morticia shook her head. "Once the temple doors close, he can no longer sense us at all. If he was paying attention, he might have noticed us going in, but otherwise, it's as though we simply vanish. I always take a moment to tell him I'm going in, however, so he won't worry."

Sapphire nodded, then her eye caught on something. She strode out toward her nude twin, Morticia following. Kneeling beside the vision of herself, Sapphire looked her over. "This isn't just a vision of me, dear. Look again."

"Look at what?"

"There," Sapphire replied, pointing to the nude woman's left hand. A slim golden ring was about her third finger.

Morticia nodded. "I've seen that before. What about it?"

Sapphire held up her own left hand, which was bare. "Why is that different? What does the ring mean?"

Morticia shrugged. "I don't know."

Sapphire looked to the woman before her, then reached out a finger and lifted her chin. They gazed into each other's eyes for a long moment, then Sapphire spoke. "You aren't really me, are you? You're more than that, I think."

Her doppelganger smiled. "Of course," she replied.

Morticia gasped. "Sapphire! That's wonderful! I've never been able to get her to speak!"

"You aren't me, dear. I think he hoped I might someday see this, and understand," Sapphire replied over her shoulder, then looked down to the nude woman again. "So, tell me, dear - what's your name?"

"Janet," the doppelganger replied, smiling.

"His wife, I assume."

"Of course."

"And yet you're me."

"Or, perhaps, you're her," the woman replied mysteriously, and smiled. She then lay back on the grass, yawned, rolled over on her side, and fell asleep.

Sapphire nodded, then rose to her feet. After a moment, she chuckled. "Well... I feel quite honored, I'm sure, though I hope my own husband won't be too offended to learn he has a somewhat special rival."

"How so?"

Sapphire turned to Morticia, and took her hand. "He sees me as being... Well, like his wife, in a sense. Just as he sees you as being his daughter. In his heart, I fill the place his wife once did. It's quite an honor, I think."

Morticia smiled. "Well, I've kind of thought of you a little bit like my mother, too. You helped raise me. You told me stories and talked to me when I was little, and you're always there for me."

Sapphire grinned. "Thank you, dear. Now, what else did you want to show me, today?"

"The Center. Come," Morticia said, and Sapphire nodded and followed.

Shortly, they stood before the pedestal in the center of the central chamber. Low steps led up to it, and Morticia halted just beside it. "When I first saw this, I didn't know what it was. I didn't even know it could be entered, like a room - but it can."

"How?"

"Reach out, and touch the light."

Sapphire stretched out her hand, reaching with her fingers, then lowered her arm and shrugged. "I can't quite reach." Nodding, Morticia reached her hands around Sapphire's waist, and lifted her easily. "Whoop!" Sapphire yelped.

Morticia grinned. "Try now."

Sapphire giggled. "You know, dear, you should treat your mother with a bit more respect, I think."

"Just touch the light... Mother," Morticia replied, and giggled.

Grinning, Sapphire did so - and was startled by a tremendous flash of light.

When the spots before her eyes had cleared, Sapphire saw she was floating, drifting in the air of a brilliant white room that was a perfect sphere. The walls seemed infinitely distant... If there were walls at all. It was a universe of white, featureless and immense, the light diffuse and omnipresent. A quiet, gentle music permeated the air, the refrain faint and unfamiliar to Sapphire's ear. She felt Morticia's hand in hers, squeezing reassuringly... And yet, Morticia was not beside her. Instead, she could see Morticia floating before her, far in the distance... A serene titan of immeasurable size, motionless, nude, and gazing off into the distance, her mane and tail slowly waving in an unfelt breeze.

"What... What is that? What is this place?" Sapphire asked.

"This is the center of his heart, and the focus of his life," Morticia replied quietly, her voice coming from nowhere. "All his dreams, and all his hopes."

And slowly, the head of the giantess turned, and regarded Sapphire quietly.

"And it's you..." Sapphire replied in a hushed voice.

Morticia nodded silently.

### Thirty-Nine.

Three days later, Sapphire stood in the snow in the center of her village, waiting. She was quite glad for her warm clothing, as the weather was still bitterly cold. 'How utterly unlike the legends of the Southern Jungles' she thought, wondering if her people would ever see those fabled lands again. Ages of flight by Koloth's side had meant that their ancestral lands were little more than dim legends, now - but fondly remembered ones.

The others of her village were slowly gathering - much of the wait now was for those who had been dancing at the worship site. The four undead members of the village, immune to the cold, kindly went among the others of the village, insuring everyone had enough blankets to endure the wait. Sapphire did not envy the dancers - the worship area was kept warm through the power of the temple, and the trudge back to the village would be bitterly cold for them, even with many layers of clothes.

Sapphire considered in her mind what Morticia had told her when they left the temple, and the doors had finally closed behind them. She considered all that she had seen inside the temple, and what it meant. And she knew, in her heart, her decision was the correct one.

Finally, all were present. Sapphire looked her people over, then raised a hand to still the quiet conversations that had begun during the wait. Once she had everyone's attention, she began.

"Today, immediately, I have decided that we will move the village closer to the temple. In fact, we will put our tents directly adjacent to the temple, on both the eastern and western sides - and we shall have the move completed by sunset." Sapphire raised her voice, overriding the groans of dismay at the sudden move in bitterly cold weather. "I have spoken to our god, and he has agreed to move our animal pens and our fields to suitably closer positions nearby the temple. This will place the worship area within a few moment's walk on the north side of the temple, rather than half an hour's walk away from our village. Our

god has also agreed to extend the aura of the temple's power to both the eastern and western sides. Our tents will no longer be cold, but will be warmed by his power, and sheltered from the weather. Our animals will still suffer winter's chill, but this is necessary for them to grow thick coats."

There was a smattering of mitted applause, and shouts of approval.

"Thank you. I know that this is extremely short notice and the weather is dreadful for this, but I feel it must be done today. It is winter, and the Northlanders spend most of their time in their village. We have all been to the worship area - we have all seen what is happening. They will not dance with us, even though it would be warm, because they see our devotion to a god who frightens them, and are afraid. They see our undead, who are proof of our god's power and devotion to us, and are afraid. They fear our god, and only through Nadar and Ellsbatha establishing a strict schedule of rotation have they managed to retain the small dozen worshippers that kneel and pray outside the worship area. They do not know our god's heart - we do."

Sapphire waited for the general murmurs of agreement and smattering of mitted applause to die down, then spoke again. "And our vision of his heart is true, my people. Today, I was privileged. The Avatar of our god took me inside the temple... And there I saw our god's true heart."

"What was it like?" shouted one of the men.

"What did you see?" shouted several of the others.

Sapphire shook her head. "It is too much to explain - all I can say is this: If you wish to know what the true heart of our god is like, look to his Avatar. She is her father's daughter, and within her is the true spirit of our god." Sapphire raised a hand to silence the eruption of questions, then looked at her people firmly. "I have spoken with our god, as I said. He has a plan to slowly lure away the worshippers of the other gods, and eventually bring about the extinction of all other gods, ending this terrible war. But we are not Northlanders - we are the Luckless Children of Koloth, and we know how the plans of men and gods sometimes turn out, do we not?" There were shouts of agreement and scattered laughter, particularly from the four undead.

"Precisely. Our god wishes to be gentle, and preserve the lives of all humans of the Land as best he can, and end this war as painlessly as he can. But we know that it is quite likely things may go badly - perhaps even very badly, as they did with Lysander. Thus, from now on, we shall remain close by the temple, where our god and his Avatar can always find us and shield us from attack, as necessary. And in thanks for the warmth and the protection from the weather he shall give us, we shall dance and sing and pray as never before, to give him the power he needs to defend us," Sapphire said, and paused, waving a mitted hand in the direction of the Northlander village.

"The Northlanders are weak and foolish! They let a little cold weather dim their exuberance for worship, and they foolishly fear a god who loves them and protects them with a greater ferocity than a she-wolf protects her pups!" The Dark Ones roared at that, and applauded loudly.

"But we shall not be like them. We shall cling to our god and his temple like a babe to a mother's breast. And no matter what happens... No matter whether things go right or wrong, no matter what our god is forced to do by circumstance or fate, we shall always look to his Avatar, see his true heart, and cling to his side."

Sapphire waited until the applause had died down, then began issuing her first orders and instructions for the move. It was not an easy task that faced them, but centuries of experience with Koloth had taught her people the skills needed to move their village quickly and efficiently.

Sapphire strode through the village, barking orders, supervising the move. She knew Morticia was right - the Northlanders simply did not, could not understand her god. Even if Morticia brought them in to see the Heart of Death, they would not comprehend. But Sapphire would see that he understood - the Dark Ones would always cling tightly to his side, no matter what.

Forty.

"Alright, try it," I called.

Morticia stood silently, concentrating, her eyes tightly shut. The small grove of trees nearby sang their silent songs of spring, celebrating their re-awakening from winter's slumber, blissfully unaware of what was about to happen.

Slowly, she raised her arms, and opened her eyes, her horn glowing brightly. With a flick of the wrists, she tossed the energy from herself - and a shimmering, transparent hemisphere appeared, twenty feet across, nearly touching the nearby trees. A shield, broad enough to cover herself, and theoretically several others. I waited, and she slowly crossed her arms. "I... I think I have it, Father."

"Very nice... And you learned this from studying those books on theory?"

"And applying what I'd learned about myself, yes. I've been practicing all winter."

I smiled, hovering above in my energy-form. "Are you ready for me to test it?"

Morticia nodded, extending her arms again. "Go ahead."

I tapped the shield lightly - just enough force to crack a boulder in half. It shimmered and vibrated with the impact, but little more. She instantly broke out into a sweat, holding the shield steady.

"Hmmm... Relax your body, Daughter. Focus your will through your horn."

"The books said somatics... The gestures, body posture and tension... Were important," she gasped.

I chuckled. "The men and women who wrote that weren't Avatars, and didn't have an enchanted horn, though. Try it. Relax your body, and focus your will entirely through your horn. Don't worry, I'll be careful."

Morticia nodded, and slowly relaxed, closing her eyes. Her horn glowed brighter, and the shield shimmered with renewed strength. I tapped it again - it held, and Morticia simply stood there quietly.

"Ready for a little harder hit?"

"Go ahead," she replied, her eyes still closed.

I rapped the shield smartly - hard enough to shatter a boulder. The shield rang with the impact like a bell, and Morticia staggered. "Uhhh... No, this won't work. I'll have to use some gestures to balance myself... Like in dance. Head steady, body in motion."

I nodded. "Alright - try that."

Morticia opened her eyes, then flicked out her hands at the level of her shoulders. "Now try."

I rapped the shield smartly again - it still held, and she didn't stagger. "Good," I said, smiling.

"Harder," she replied.

I nodded, swatting casually at the shield. The same blow would have reduced a boulder to powder. The shield vibrated, but held.

"Harder."

"Not sure if I should, Morticia," I replied. If your shield falls when I'm striking it too much harder... I might accidentally hurt you. Or worse."

Morticia simply gazed at me. "Hit the edge, Father, not the center."

I shook my head. "That's not how an enemy will attack you," I replied, and exerted my will. In a moment, another shield appeared inside hers, just large enough to cover her. "There. I know how strong that is. You'll be safe inside it. Now - get ready."

"I'm ready, Father."

I nodded, then swatted her shield with enough force to level a hill.

She staggered, then collapsed, her shield shattering and vanishing. The nearby trees were violently shaken by the impact, and their songs changed to ones of alarm. Morticia lay prone beneath my own shield. "Morticia?!"

"I... I'm fine, Father, I was just stunned," she said, and pushed herself unsteadily to her feet. "It's a far different thing for me to hold up a shield than you, apparently."

I sighed with relief. "Well, you're holding it up with powers from within yourself. The gods of the Land create and maintain shields with the power they gain from their worshippers - it's external to me, not internal," I replied, and spent a moment reaching out to the trees and soothing them.

Morticia smiled, watching me soothe the trees. "I wish the Northlanders could see you do that, Father."

I shrugged. "It wouldn't make much difference, I think. They'd just attribute it to some dark and evil plot I have. Maybe one involving chopping them up and using them as tree-fertilizer," I replied, and Morticia giggled. "It's not funny, Daughter. They fear me. Not just fear in that they worry about me, but cold, blood-curdling terror. If they weren't so afraid of what vengeance I might exact on them, they'd all simply run away. They see the Dark Ones as strange, half-naked savages who dance eerie and erotic dances of power, worshipping a dark and evil god. They see the undead as a sign of my true nature, my true darkness - and they see you as a poor, pitiful creature, an angelic being trapped in the service of an evil, merciless god. The only two people in the entire Northlander village who aren't terrified of me are Nadar and Ellsbatha - and I make Nadar nervous as hell," I said, and shook my head. "And worse, their own beliefs about me only make my own appearance more terrifying to them. It's a vicious cycle, Daughter, and I just can't break it."

"Give them time, Father. In a century or two, once they've seen that nothing bad has happened to them, once they've seen your plan work, and you peacefully conquer the territories of the other gods..."

"And once the current generations, from children on up, have died of old age, yes. In a century, perhaps two, they might come around. But at the moment, they fear me," I said, and sighed. "Well, I've got a lot

of work to do. There hasn't been enough rain in the northeastern quadrant, and the trees need water. I'm going to have to scrape up the last of the unmelted snow from the north sides of the hills and other shaded spots, and try to spread it around on the areas that need water the most. Is there anything else you needed me for?"

Morticia shook her head. "No, Father. Go on with your work," she replied, and smiled.

I nodded, and turned my attention elsewhere.

#### Forty-One.

Pius paused in the hunt, his ears perking. Carefully, he lifted his nose and sniffed the air. After a moment, he shook his head, then glanced to the buck he was stalking, who was utterly unaware of his presence. "Next time, fat one," he muttered with a smile, then turned and trotted away.

A few minutes later, Pius seated himself on one of the shattered stones of Allakbeth's tower. He lifted his nose, and sniffed the air again. He could smell it. "Soon... Very soon," he muttered, gazing off into the horizon, where a beam of dark energy lanced upward - the radiant power from the Temple of Death, supporting and defining Death's sphere of influence.

Suddenly, the sky roiled with the conflicting colors of a dozen spheres of influence. The scent of power was in the air... More focused power than had been wielded in the land in centuries.

Pius gazed at the horizon, watching the beginning battle. All he could do now was hope. Fortunately, that was something he'd had a great deal of practice at.

#### Forty-Two.

Try as he might, Nadar simply found he could not concentrate on his prayers.

He knelt before the worship area with the others of his village. Though the ground still had a great deal of brown, dry grass from winter's touch, the spring grasses were growing, making the ground soft on one's knees. The air was cool and crisp, yet comfortable. The sun was shining, birds were singing - indeed, the day was perfect. Yet, Nadar still could not concentrate. The reasons, of course, were dancing before him, fifty yards away.

Ellsbatha and Morticia danced together with the Dark Ones, side by side, circling the altar. The others of his village were, of course, horrified by Ellsbatha's dance - it was quite erotic, and she was a skeleton. And yet, as Nadar looked at them, his heart swelled with pride and love.

For there, before him, were the two females in his life he loved most.

Ellsbatha, his wife, was his first love, his true love. Despite her condition, despite everything, he would

love her for the rest of eternity. She was once beautiful - but no more. Yet now, as he watched her dance what she had told him before was called the 'Dance of the Strong Woman', somehow, she seemed to reclaim some of her beauty, and her womanhood, as well. She had survived. It may not be much of a life, but it was life - and his wife lived it to the fullest. Nadar found he admired her strength, her courage... And this made him love her all the more.

Morticia, dancing beside her, was his second love - and he had to admit that he did, indeed, love her. Not in the same way he loved his wife, but more in the way he would love a special, dear friend. She had shared with him a very special gift, and eased his spirit at a time when he dearly needed it. They had not lain together in months, yet this did not change how he felt about her. She was, in truth, the second closest person to his heart, and only Ellsbatha was more important.

'What an utterly odd life I lead,' Nadar thought, gazing at the two women he loved, and smiling.

And Nadar continued smiling all the way to the very moment the sky split asunder.

It happened suddenly, instantly. Roiling, swirling colors, and a rolling of ominous thunder. The music of the dancers stuttered and died, the dancers themselves stared at the sky, and several long heartbeats passed as all gazed at the shifting, violently conflicting colors in shock and astonishment...

...and then, Morticia whinnied loudly. "It's an attack! Everyone, stay close to the temple!" she shouted. As Nadar watched, too stunned to move, her horn glowed and she tossed out her arms, forming a vast, shimmering shield over the temple and the surrounding area.

It was the screams that finally startled Nadar's paralyzed mind into action. The other Northlander worshippers, seeing the violent colors of the sky, rose to their feet, screamed, and began scattering in all directions. Nadar leaped to his feet, and shouted to them. "No, you fools! Stay near the temple! Death's Avatar will protect us!" His words went unheard, however, and the others simply ran.

"Nadar!" Ellsbatha screamed, running to him. "We must get the other villagers here!"

"No, Ellsbatha! Stay here - I'll go get them! You stay here where it's safe!" he shouted.

"Nadar, I'm already dead, there's nothing that can happen to me! You stay, and I'll go get everyone!"

Nadar shook his head. His wife was dressed in little more than two strips of cloth - the sight of her skeletal form running through the village was hardly likely to inspire confidence in his people, combined with the terror of the skies. "No, Ellsbatha! Stay here with Morticia, where it's safe!"

"But Nadar! I-"

"Do you love me?!" he shouted, trying to be heard over the roar of distant blasts of energy.

"What?!"

"Do you love me?!" he screamed.

"Yes, Nadar, with all my heart and soul!"

"Then stay here!" he screamed, and turned and ran towards his village.

"Nadaaaaaar!"

Nadar did not look back. There was no more time. His people had to get moving towards the temple, where Morticia could shield them. At least, he hoped she could shield them. She was merely an Avatar -



though powerful, she could hardly match the full power of a god. And judging by the skies, there was more than one god attacking.

Nadar's lungs burned with the run. Ahead of him, he could already see blasts of lightning striking the village, the people panicking, fleeing in all directions...

"Run to the temple! Run to the temple!" he screamed, trying to get his people to turn and head for safety.

Suddenly, an orb of emerald light hovered above the village, directly over the center. 'A god!' Nadar's mind screamed - but it was too late.

There was a brilliant flash from beneath the god's gleaming form, and the village exploded.

Nadar lay on the ground for many long moments, his eyes gazing up at the roiling sky. He tried to rise, and found he could not. 'I am hurt,' he thought groggily, and tried to look down at himself.

'How utterly odd,' he thought, his mind hazed by shock as he gazed at the tree-branch projecting from his chest. 'I distinctly remember that not having been there this morning.'

The answer lay all about him. The entire village, trees, houses, and all, had been blasted asunder - and a bit of the debris, a branch, had flown faster than the eye could see and caught him just below and slightly to the right of the center of his rib cage. Nadar lay back, shock fogging his thoughts. 'Ellsbatha will not be pleased,' he thought. 'One shouldn't grow odd branches and such at random moments. Quite inconvenient in situations like this.' After a long moment, Nadar shook his head. "What an utterly odd life I lead," he whispered, his life ebbing.

An explosion blasted the ground nearby, sending tons of earth into the air. Nadar had the brief impression of crushing force, like a mountain had fallen upon him, then knew no more.

Forty-Three.

I should have suspected something like this - but I didn't.

It was very swift, and apparently carefully planned. All my allies and all my enemies - Lysander's former allies - had gathered together to make one massive strike against me. The first I knew of it was when twelve spheres of influence suddenly intersected mine, overlapping each other.

'Dammit!' I thought, kicking myself mentally as I looked the situation over, time frozen for the moment. 'Why didn't I see this coming?'

It took me an hour or so to figure out why, but eventually, I did.

None of my enemies or my allies had moved their people. They had simply moved their temples, leaving their people behind, and unprotected. Of course, like the nuclear powers I had grown up with on another world, war in the Land was all offense, and little possible defense. Some of the attacking gods had apparently moved their temples in several rapid hops to reach my territory, others had made it in only one or two hops - but it had all been timed to happen at the same instant. What would happen to their people afterwards was debatable - it was obvious they had all arranged some sort of temporary 'peace accord',

but whether or not it would hold after I was dead was impossible to say.

I searched about my lands, considering the attack. A dozen creatures raced for my temple from a dozen directions - and a more disparate assortment of Avatars I couldn't possibly imagine. Most were humanoid, though one was simply an enlarged ape. They ranged from pristine creatures whose snow-white fur sparkled with an angelic glow, to twisted, nightmarish beasts that were all claws and fangs. None of them were the gargantuan creatures that Lysander had been able to create, of course, but each was deadly in its own right. I glanced to the temple - Morticia had already thrown up a shield to protect the worshippers. I let time flow just long enough for me to conjure a stronger shield atop hers, then stopped time again, considering the situation. After several minutes of thinking, I sighed.

It was obvious. Both my allies and my enemies considered me to be a threat - and I only had myself to blame for it.

The more I met the Gods of the Land, the more I was convinced the explanation I'd once given to Morticia was correct. They were, in many ways, like the Greco-Roman gods. Their evil was a child-like, unempathic evil, and their activities hardly showed a high maturity level to me. Put simply, they were all immature bully children with enormous power. I couldn't simply talk to them - they wouldn't listen. So, I'd intimidated and badgered them into alliances, and spent years advertising myself as being the biggest bully of them all, able to crush any or all of them. 'Join me or fall by the wayside' was my basic message - and, to a certain extent, it had worked. Unfortunately, someone - or perhaps several someones - had apparently decided that I needed to be destroyed before I really was unstoppable, and managed to get everyone near me into a vast alliance for the purposes of crushing me and restoring the status-quo. "Probably Verdana," I thought with a sigh. She had always eyed Morticia oddly, and every time she'd looked at her, I could see in Verdana's mind that she couldn't believe someone could be so utterly evil and yet have an Avatar who was pristine and good. She believed I was bluffing - and, to a certain extent, I was. Now, it appeared I'd pay the price for having underestimated her - and, perhaps, several others of my former allies.

After considering which problem to tackle first, I decided that getting rid of their Avatars would be the first thing on the list. The attacking gods were busy setting forests ablaze and otherwise creating a dozen distractions - at the moment, the real threat lay with their Avatars charging my villages. Hovering over the nearest one, I released my will, and got to work.

The first Avatar, a roaring bear with gleaming, golden fur, I blasted to vapor with a beam of raw energy. I zipped to the next, a vicious looking black panther, and repeated the effort. Ten left, then nine, then eight, quickly working my way through their numbers, hoping that this might cause my enemies to pause, and withdraw. Seeing this kind of a demonstration of power and losing their Avatars might - just might - cause them to realize they were making a mistake.

Unfortunately, it wasn't until I'd killed the last of them that I realized the whole assault by their Avatars had been nothing but another diversion.

And all of my people had been utterly annihilated.

I held time still, gazing in horror at what they'd done in those precious seconds I'd wasted killing their Avatars. I simply hadn't counted on how determined they were in their desire to destroy me. They had let their Avatars die, just to give them the opportunity to do what they'd done.

There was Verdana, frozen in the act of zipping away from what remained of the Northlander village. It was a smoking crater - with many smaller craters and an enormous amount of debris scattered around where she'd apparently spent a few moments killing those her initial attack missed. Above my temple, the

combined forces of eleven gods had smashed through Morticia's shield and mine, searing the ground beneath with enough energy to blast everything surrounding my temple to vapor.

I searched every inch of my lands, looking for even a single survivor - but there were none.

Every single one of my people were gone.

Every one of the Northlanders, charred to flying ashes, or corpses lying beneath piles of rubble.

Sapphire - lovely, beautiful, wise Sapphire - and all her people. Gone.

And more, Morticia was gone, as well.

I sat on the ground in my humanoid form, and simply wept.

It wasn't that I feared my death. It was obvious that the moment I released my will and allowed time to flow again, they would simply destroy my temple, and I would be gone. No, I didn't fear my death...

I simply mourned the loss of my daughter, and a people I had grown to love.

They were lovely, beautiful people. Their hearts were good, and they had none of the hatreds and prejudices I'd seen in the hearts of the Northlanders. Perhaps it was their centuries in Koloth's service that had made them this way. Perhaps their culture was like that even before the Age of the Gods, when the humans of the Land foolishly destroyed their civilization through their endless quest for greater and greater power. No matter - they were who they were.

And now, they were gone.

And Morticia - my beautiful, gentle, loving daughter... How could I possibly live without her smile, her laugh...?

And finally, as my tears subsided, I realized I couldn't.

With a deep sigh of grief and resignation, I rose to my feet, and released my will.

Verdana joined her allies, and as one, they blasted my temple with enough power to level a mountain. The ground bubbled and glowed, the stones of the ground turning molten, and the dirt fusing into glass.

But nothing happened.

My temple still stood.

I stood there, as stunned as my enemies were.

"What?! How can this be?!" Verdana snapped.

"You must have missed one, Verdana," called one of the other gods - but I knew they had not. With time flowing, I'd have heard the fearful prayers of one of my people, or at least sensed their minds somewhere around. They were dead - each and every one.

"Or more," snapped another god, angrily. "Come - let's look around. He's finished, anyway, and he knows it. Look at him - he's just standing there, waiting for the end. Let's get this over with."

I froze time again, and started carefully searching my lands. Had someone wandered off into the woods? Was there one last worshipper somewhere, one last believer I had overlooked whose very existence

saved my own life?

I spent days searching. No time passed for anyone else, just me. I searched every inch of my lands.

But there was no one.

They had killed everyone - and yet, I still lived.

I sighed. I didn't know what was keeping me alive. All I could think of was that I wasn't summoned from the Void, as they were, but was a dead man whose spirit had been drawn from another world. Not that it mattered - they'd eventually find a way to finish off my temple, as soon as I released my will and gave them time to work on the problem. It was, quite literally, only a matter of time.

I rose, time still frozen, and decided to simply look around, and see the Land. After all - this was my Singularity. I could hold time frozen eternally, should I desire. In truth, time wasn't actually frozen for the Land, it's just that my time-frame was sped up, infinitely. So, as I had an infinite amount of time available to me, I decided I'd simply explore the Land. I'd never truly taken the time to examine the world before. Now seemed as good a time as any, as it was apparent I was about to die, anyway.

By the end of six months, I came to the sad conclusion that the Land was beautiful.

Oh, there were scars, yes. Vast tracts of land burned and blasted raw by the war. Villages in ruins, and even traces of ancient cities, destroyed long ago. But by and large, the majority of the Land was a lovely, pristine, trackless wilderness. I couldn't help but wonder how my people would have enjoyed one lovely spot or another that I found in my wanderings... And couldn't help but weep each time when I realized they were gone forever.

The Land abounded with animals of all shapes and descriptions. All were familiar, save for their warped versions I found in the lands of the darker gods - and yet, some of those warped, twisted beasts retained a baroque beauty all their own.

And then, of course, there were the lost Avatars.

There weren't many - perhaps no more than a hundred in all the Land, each struggling to survive as best it could, as their god had been killed earlier in the war. They ranged widely in shape and coloration. Some seemed to be wandering about, living as wild animals. Some, apparently trained to help humans and having done only that all their lives, were apparently spending their time doing just that - wandering the Land, conjuring food and drink and homes and clothes and whatever else they could for the humans they ran across, as they simply knew no other life.

My heart ached each time I found a lost Avatar - those sad, lonely immortals. My heart ached a thousand times more, however, each time I simply ran across an ordinary, pale horse, and was reminded of my own daughter.

The Land was so lovely, so wonderful...

And yet, it had no room for my people, or my daughter.

I lost track of time, eventually. Whether it was a year or two years, I simply could not say. The sun did not rise or set on me as I traveled, so I simply lost track of time.

But eventually, as my wanderings finally brought me back to my tower and the scene of my destruction perhaps a year or two later, I found I was angry.

Oh, they would kill me eventually. Whatever quirk of sorcery or fate had protected my temple through their incredible blasts couldn't possibly last. But that wasn't what I was angry about.

I was angry that the Land, this lovely, beautiful world, would no longer have any of my beautiful, beloved Dark Ones in it.

And I was furious that my daughter, the light of my life, would no longer be by my side to share in the beauty of the Land.

But most of all, I was utterly and completely livid that this war would, apparently, never end.

Oh, yes, they would kill me. They would work at it and work at it, and eventually their greater experience and simple knowledge of how the Land worked would allow them to thwart whatever odd quirk had temporarily protected me, and I would be gone. Then, they would return to the way they'd always done things, wheedling worshippers here, killing worshippers there, gobbling up enemies, or being gobbled up themselves.

And slowly, the beauty and wonder of the Land would be scarred and blasted into desolation. The people of the world would suffer, and bleed, and die, and their populations eventually would dwindle to nothing.

I'd seen the ruins of ancient cities, destroyed long ago and lost to the wilderness. I'd seen the traces of ancient roads, long buried and forgotten. I'd seen countless traces of man's past that remained in the Land - and once, the Land was full of humanity.

But now, a thousand years later, the population of the world was perhaps half what it had been before the Age of Gods.

Where would it end? I did not know. It seemed apparent that eventually, perhaps in ten or twenty thousand years, there would only be one god remaining. One last god, with a handful of worshippers, a sad and pitiful remnant of humanity who cowered in fear of their inhuman master, who himself thought of them as little more than talking ants. And then, an eternity of misery would follow, as, lacking opponents to challenge them and prevent their immature personalities from becoming bored, the last remaining god would be forced to turn to his helpless worshippers for amusement.

I snarled. That vision of the future would never be. Better to die free than live as a slave, an old memory whispered. "Better to die swiftly than live as a slave to an inhuman god" I muttered in reply to it.

And in that moment, I knew what I had to do.

Vordenai had brought me to this world to end this war, to end the Age of the Gods.

And that, I would do.

I stood before the murderers of my daughter and my people, a towering giant of cold fury as tall as the spire of my temple, and released my will.

"I did not miss anyone! He should be dead!" Verdana snapped, and lashed out at my temple with a blast of lightning - to no effect.

"No, Verdana, you did not," I replied, and even to my own ears my voice was as dark and chilling as the fury in my heart. "They are all dead. You and your cohorts have succeeded in murdering the most gentle and kind people in all the Land, as well as my beloved daughter. And for that, you will die. You, and all the gods of the Land shall die."

"Bah, we're not afraid of you!" Verdana retorted, and the other gods laughed. "We'll soon find your last worshipper and slay them, and once that's done, your temple and life will be forfeit." Yet, somehow, her confidence seemed more bravado than true courage, and the laughter of her companions, who could not explain my survival anymore than I could, seemed strained.

I wanted to let out a scream of fury, a howl of grief from my heart at both my loss and the tragic destruction of the Land these so-called gods had perpetrated for a thousand years...

But I did not. Instead, the cold fury that now dominated my heart rose up, and a dark, chilling chuckle was my reply. "You little fool. You still do not understand," I said, shaking my head. "I told you once that it was you who had truly summoned me... You and all your kind brought me into being through your endless war. And now, in truth, I think it was. I told you then that I was something unique to the Land... And now, with my last worshipper dead and my temple still inviolate, it's apparent that I am. No, Verdana. This ends, now. This war ends, now. This endless, casual destruction of a beautiful world your inhuman minds simply cannot appreciate... Ends now," I said, and suddenly snarled, the cold fury in my heart bursting forth into a flare of rage. "For if the Land has no room for my gentle, lovely people... If the land has no room for my sweet, loving daughter... Then it has no room for ANYONE!"

And with that, I began.

They ignored me, at first, not realizing what I was up to, apparently attributing my words to the pathetic bluster of one who was doomed. Once my temple began to disappear from one spot and reappear in another, swiftly devouring the miles between it and my goal, they suddenly realized they needed to move to protect their people. But, to them, my movements were blindingly fast - they simply could not act quickly enough.

I began with Verdana. I suspected she was the ringleader, so she seemed as good as any to begin with. I placed my temple near the middle of what once was her lands, easily encompassing all her villages, and got to work.

And by the time she finally managed to get her temple back where it started, I'd already committed a thousand of her people to my altar.

Verdana did not beg or whine, as Lysander had. She fought. She struggled as hard as she could to preserve her people, and save her life. She attacked my temple - ineffectually. She tried to shield her people. She tried to move them. She worked and fought and struggled every moment, never giving an inch.

It was only when the last of her eight thousand people died in my altar did she try to beg - but by then, it was too late.

I smashed her temple to flinders, and smiled as her death-scream rang in my ears.

And then I moved on to the next one.

Several of my former allies were scouring my lands, trying to find that one, last worshipper of mine they were convinced had escaped them. The rest stayed and fought.

And, one by one, they died.

A quarter million deaths later, my sphere encompassed the entire continent, and all the gods who had attacked me were dead.

So, I moved on to the rest of them.

At first, the reaction was slow. I no longer had to move my temple, as the entire continent fell within my reach. These other gods did not know me, and had no idea of the battle that had been waged on my lands - in truth, they had no idea what was happening at all, at first. Their first warning had been my sphere of influence enveloping the continent swiftly, engulfing their own spheres in a matter of days - and then their people beginning to vanish, one by one. Many of the smaller ones I completely annihilated before they even began to try to defend themselves, they were so surprised. The larger ones, having more worshippers for me to kill, had more time to realize what was happening, and begin to try to defend themselves.

It was no use, however. After half a million had died in my altar, my power was utterly and completely irresistible, and half the globe fell within my reach.

I grew immune to the screams, eventually. I simply no longer heard them. A day passed, and I hardly noticed. By that time, I'd had the whole action down to one of simple reflex. Searching the Land while time was held still, allowing time to flow for a fraction of a heartbeat, just long enough to snatch up another victim, then returning to my altar and releasing time only long enough to open my hand - I didn't even wait for them to fall in before I was searching for another victim. An endless stream of screaming humanity poured into my altar to vanish in a burst of flames, the endless, roaring pillar of fire from their deaths soaring into the heavens...

...and I continued on.

From my perspective, the process took nearly six months. From the perspective of the defending gods, however, the whole of the continent was clean of humanity and all the gods were dead at the end of five days.

And when I'd searched every last nook and cranny, when I was finally certain that each and every god and each and every human being on this continent was dead...

...I moved on to the next continent, and continued working.

My sphere of influence encompassed the globe, and it was dark, horribly dark... A shadow fell over the whole of the Land. Noon was hardly brighter than a winter's morning, and at night, the sky was black, and empty of stars. The combined fears of the rapidly dwindling remainder of humanity and their gods had darkened my temple to a hideous, obscene, baroque architecture of spikes and terror looming over a desolate, shadowed land...

...and a harbinger of the end.

A fortnight passed, for the world. A fortnight of death, destruction, and terror. A fortnight of endless, roaring flames, endless, chilling screams, and the death of gods.

Then suddenly, I blinked at the brightness.

I looked around - the sun had returned to its normal strength.

I had paused just after smashing the temple of another god - the last. There were no other gods left in the Land.

Nor any remnant of humanity.

I returned to my temple, time still held frozen. The beam of light, the shaft of power that supported and defined my sphere of influence, a sphere that now was vast enough to encompass even the moon that orbited this world...

...was a pale, pale gray, as it once had been, what seemed like an age ago.

I looked at my temple, and smiled. It had transformed to a tower of bone, a gleaming spire of white. It was, perhaps, not what I might have preferred, but its appearance signaled the truth of what I had already guessed - the war was over. Humanity was gone. The Land, that lovely, beautiful world which had been dominated by the folly of men and gods for a thousand years, was finally cleansed of it all.

Perhaps, as the millennia passed, it would finally begin to heal.

I gazed down at my temple, and saw the pen - it was empty, of course, but it still remained. I resumed my humanoid form, and sat down on the soft green grass. I was, to no surprise, still a humanoid skeleton in a black robe - I hadn't expected that to change.

I looked at the lands that surrounded my temple. They were gloriously beautiful - a pristine wilderness, with magnificent, snow-capped mountains looming in the distance. High in the sky, an eagle soared, held motionless by the power of my Singularity.

Perhaps I would sit here forever and watch the sun endlessly rise and set, thinking, remembering... And mourning my daughter. Perhaps I would walk the land, healing what damage I could, helping the trees and animals as I once so loved to do. Perhaps I would search the land, collect together the Lost Avatars, and help them. They could be elevated to understanding, and perhaps might even form a better civilization than man had managed to form. Perhaps, without the influence of men or gods, they might learn to live in peace. Or, perhaps, I would simply gaze at the stars and weep until the universe came to an end.

But, before I could do any of that, time had to flow again. I relaxed my will, then sat back, considering what I might do. Man was dead - but at least the Land was still alive, and finally at peace.

The bursts of flame from the last deaths finally joined the other flames rising above my altar, the last of the echoing screams faded into silence, and the roaring pillar of fire that had streamed endlessly from my altar for two weeks finally rose, faded, and vanished into the clear, blue sky.

I watched the eagle soar silently in the distance, and gazed quietly at the soft wisps of clouds that hung over the nearby mountains.

"Is it over?" a voice called.

I leaped to my feet, startled. "Wh-what?" I looked to the source of the voice - and saw my daughter's head poking out the temple doors. "Morticia?! But you're dead!"

"Hardly, Father," she replied, sticking her tongue out at me, then stepping out of the temple. "We've all been waiting in here for two weeks. We thought the fighting would never stop - the sounds just kept going on and on and on..." Morticia turned, leaning back through the door. "It's alright, everyone! It's all over now - we can come out!"

And to my utter surprise and complete joy, the Dark Ones began to come out of the temple, one by one, blinking at the sunlight.

"I see we've moved again, Holy One," Sapphire said, glancing around. "Did you manage to save our animals?"

I dropped to my knees, put my head to the soft grass of Morticia's pen, and wept.

Sapphire stared at me, her eyes wide. "Ummm... Holy One, if you didn't manage to save them, it's not



that serious, really. We forgive you."

"Father? What's wrong?" Morticia asked, leaning over me.

I rose, weeping, and wrapped my arms around Morticia. "Oh, Daughter... Nothing is wrong, anymore. Nothing will be wrong, ever again."

Morticia smiled, and hugged me back. "Well, I'm glad, Father. I-"

"Holy One, please!" a voice screamed. I looked up - it was Ellsbatha, pushing past the crowd to get to me. "Please! Nadar! He ran off to try to get the people of our village... He never came back! Please, Holy One!"

I nodded - I was still their god, and I still bore the responsibility of helping and caring for them. With an effort of will I calmed myself, and looked to her. "He is dead, Ellsbatha. Perhaps destroyed, perhaps not - if he isn't destroyed, he's buried beneath a pile of rubble, somewhere. I do not know. But together, we will search for him, until we know for sure." I looked to Morticia. "Daughter, see that everyone has a place to stay, and wait until we return." I then reached out my hand for Ellsbatha. "Come, Ellsbatha - we will search for Nadar."

#### Forty-Four.

"What an utterly, completely, and irretrievably odd life I lead!" Nadar said, and chuckled.

Ellsbatha giggled as they sat together beneath the spreading branches of a lovely oak, and ran her fingers over her husband's ribs. Carefully repaired by his god, Nadar was hale and whole - though dead, of course. Nearby, the music of yet another dance at the worship site was beginning. Nadar and Ellsbatha were both dressed for the dance, and as they heard the music, Ellsbatha rose to her feet, and held out her hand for her husband. "Oh, Nadar! You'll like it, really! Manna is quite delicious, and Death says that if we keep dancing and singing and eating and just living, eventually, it will allow us to grow flesh again."

"Really?" Nadar asked, surprised. After taking his wife's hand and pulling himself to his feet, they walked hand in hand toward the worship area. "How long would that take?"

"Death says if we work at it, perhaps a century or two. We'd still be dead, of course, but we'd look much better."

"Well, then, since there appears to be no rush, I'll have plenty of time to learn these silly dances you're trying to teach me," he said, and looked down at the strip of cloth tied about his pubic bone, then to his wife, who wore the same, but had another tied about her ribs. "Though I think it's quite odd that you get to wear more than I do."

Ellsbatha laughed, and hugged her husband tight. "Oh, Nadar! I love you so!"

Nadar hugged Ellsbatha in return. "I love you too, Ellsbatha - from now until the end of time."

Morticia smiled as we sat together by the stream. "Oh, no, Father. It wasn't my idea at all. I wish I could say it was - but it wasn't. It was all Sapphire's idea."

"Really?" I said, looking to Sapphire. "How did you come up with it, Sapphire?"

Sapphire smiled. "Holy One, despite your daughter's modesty, I never would have thought of it if it hadn't been for Morticia. She took me into your heart, and allowed me to listen to some of your memories. One was very odd - and very frightening. A memory of explosions and death that rained from the sky, and a voice shouting 'head for the bomb shelter!' Well, I looked around, saw explosions and death raining from the sky, and thought 'I wish we had a 'bomb shelter', whatever that is, here and now.' Then, I realized we just might - the temple itself. I told Morticia what I thought, and she opened the doors of the temple and let us all in."

Morticia nodded. "And from there, I simply conjured manna and water for everyone for two weeks, until finally all the noise died down." Morticia giggled. "I'm surprised the other gods never thought of something like that."

I shook my head. "They wouldn't want their worshippers going inside, Morticia. If they did, they'd learn about their hearts - and once the people found out they were little more than bully children who, in turn, thought of their people as little more than talking ants... Well, they'd lose worshippers. Even Kolothe, kind as he was, was still an unhuman being summoned from the Void, and he'd probably had to do some terrible things a thousand years ago to free himself from his slavery - things he would never want his people to know. Besides, when you're in the temple, I can't sense you, I don't know where you are, and I can't get power from you. Meanwhile, you can learn anything and everything about me, including exactly what I'm thinking at any given moment. That's not something a god of the Land would have liked to think about." I shrugged. "The idea probably simply never occurred to them."

Sapphire nodded, glancing at the sun, then smiled at me. "Holy One, I've got to go, my husband is waiting for me. From what you've said, we've an entire world to repopulate - and even though the manna you feed us will help us live a good long time, I'm afraid we've got to spend a good portion of our time working on the serious business of making babies," she said, and winked. Morticia giggled and I chuckled, then Sapphire suddenly looked to Morticia. "Which reminds me... Morticia, I've not seen you at the Maiden's Dances in half a year! Just because your father has no one to fight doesn't mean he has nothing to do! He still needs regular worship - and, considering all he's done, I think he deserves it. Besides... The way things are now, we've very few maidens left," Sapphire said, and winked again. "If someone doesn't keep the dance alive, we may forget it over the years."

"Ummm... I can't do the Maiden's Dance anymore, Sapphire," Morticia replied sheepishly.

"What?! Why not?!"

"Ummm... Because I no longer qualify, and haven't for about six months," she replied, the pale skin on the inside of her ears flushing bright pink.

"Oh?" Sapphire replied, then grinned. "You must tell me the story sometime, dear."

"It's... It's a long story," Morticia replied.

Sapphire grinned again. "Well, dear, we appear to have all the rest of our lives to get around to it. And

thanks to your father, that will probably be a good, long time," Sapphire replied, and laughed. "I'll talk to you later, dear. And thank you, Holy One," she said, looking to me. "For everything."

"You're welcome," I replied, and touched her hand briefly before she turned and walked away.

Morticia gazed after Sapphire, and sighed. "She doesn't really understand, you know."

"What do you mean?" I asked, looking at my daughter.

"That all of humanity is dead, and they are the last. That we will have to feed them nothing but manna for centuries, to keep them young, and producing children. That they've a whole world to rebuild, and a thousand years of war and destruction to slowly repair. That the Age of Gods is, truly, finally, over - and now begins the task of healing the Land, and its people." Morticia shook her head. "No, neither she nor any of the others really understand it, yet. They rejoice that the war is ended, Father. They do not realize that the peace that follows contains struggles of its own."

I nodded, taking her hand, and squeezing gently. "In time, they will, Daughter. And now, they have all the time in the world."

#### Forty-Six.

"And now it's done, and the Land is at peace," a gruff voice said.

Morticia awoke with a start, blinking rapidly as she looked around. The sky of the warm summer's night was filled with stars, and a bright, full moon hung high in the heavens. She looked to the low wall of bone that now defined the edge of her pen, and grinned broadly. "Pius! You came back!" she whinnied joyfully, scrambling to her hooves and dashing over to him. Leaning across the wall, she grabbed him and hugged him tight.

Pius chuckled, sliding his arms behind her back and lapping gently at her face. "I told you I would, didn't I? Though your father certainly didn't make it easy for me to do so. It took me four months to walk here," he replied, and chuckled again.

"How did you ever find us?" Morticia asked, blinking as tears of joy welled up in her eyes.

Pius smiled. "With the beam of power that supports your father's sphere reaching beyond the moon? How could I miss it?" Morticia laughed, and Pius grinned. "Come, Morticia. Come with me. Let's run through the woods in the moonlight together."

Morticia gasped. "You don't mean..."

Pius tipped his head. "What?"

"Oh, Pius! My father needs me. He always will. The people of the Land need me - and they always will. I can't abandon them, I just can't!"

"I know that, Morticia," Pius replied, grinning a gaping, canine grin. "I'm not asking you to leave them, nor would I, ever. I'm asking you to come with me, and run through the woods in the moonlight. I'm asking you to sit with me by the stream, and share our hearts. I'm asking you to lie with me, and share a tender

moment in the moonlight. And then, before dawn, we will return."

"And then?" Morticia asked, gazing into his eyes. "What happens then, Pius? What happens after, and from then on?"

Pius smiled. "We're immortals, you and I. We've the rest of eternity to figure that out. So why don't we just wait, and see?" Morticia smiled, and Pius stepped back, taking her hand in his. "Come, Morticia. For tonight, leave the future to the future. We have plenty of time, now."

Morticia smiled, stepping over the low bone wall of her pen, and squeezed his hand gently. "Alright. For tonight, we leave the future to the future."

And together, they turned and ran off into the moonlit forest, hand in hand.

The End.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jim Farris

The author of several articles, short-stories and 14 books ranging from science fiction through romance and even non-fiction, Jim Farris is a modest, self described hermit who has this to say about himself: "I am thirty-eight, happily married for thirteen years, no children, and live in a small college town in Southeastern New Mexico famous only for the production of Valencia peanuts. I am self-educated with a smattering of military and college experience of no real consequence or importance. I write novels, and compose and perform music for my novels in MIDI and Mp3 format, but otherwise live the life of a hermit. That is probably all I want the public to ever know about me, as my life is really so incredibly dull that knowing more about me actually detracts from the reading enjoyment of my work."