

Raven of Yorindar

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One.

"...and then, in the year 1675 NCC, or one thousand, six hundred and seventy-five years after the end of the Great War of Devastation by the New Common Calendar we use today, the Ancient One again entered the realm of man. As one might expect from a creature of darkness and death, the Ancient One chose to make their appearance by striding out of the blasted wastelands of Hyperborea, and standing before the Great Wall. From there, the Ancient One did take the prisoners of the War of the Twins, withered and frail old men who had served decades in prison, and spirited them away to within the blasted desolation of Hyperborea, where the final penalty for their hideous crimes awaited. It is said their deaths were painless... Though, once one realizes just what these men had done, and just who was their executioner... A cold, inhuman creature who has seen endless aeons pass before those night-black eyes... And when one thinks of the accursed, barren, beast-ridden lands those miserable wretches were spirited away into... Well, that their deaths were painless seems somewhat unlikely."

- Lord Caladis, The Eddasine Chronicles, 1817 NCC

The Great Wall loomed before me, a vast expanse of stone ninety cubits high and thirty cubits thick, stretching as far as the eye could see east and west. On the other side of the wall, there was a green scrubland, and the crystal-clear, babbling waters of the Wailing River. On my side of the wall, there was nothing but the bleak, barren, blasted desolation of the Great Southern Dead Zone - league after league of bare earth, blasted rock, and blowing dust.

I knew what the guards at the wall had to be thinking. 'Who or what is that black-robed, hooded woman coming towards us out of the wastelands? Is it a ghost? Is it a witch? What is it?' I know if I was in their shoes, I'd probably be wondering the same things. But I'd be wrong from the start. I, the person approaching them, was neither ghost, nor witch - nor even woman, if the truth were known. I was something these guards probably would never understand, even if I took the time to explain it to them. I was a Hyperborean battle-mage, risen from the Void and inhabiting the body of this half-elf female they saw slowly walking towards them out of the bleakness of the Hyperborean wastes. I was a great man, once. Sixteen centuries ago, I had respect, honor, and wealth. Now, I had nothing - not even my manhood. And here I was, about to perform the duty for King Darian, my friend, that was to a Hyperborean the lowest possible work that could still be called honest, a task that to a Hyperborean was only a small step above shoveling manure. Executioner.

I rolled my shoulders back, shaking off my maudlin thoughts. There was still the chance that this may work out for the best. The deaths of these men would be used for the rebirth of my people, a race and civilization cut short in the full of their bloom, over a millennia and a half before. My culture, my civilization might rise again from the ashes like a phoenix, to face a brave new world. Though my task today might be a low one, it behooved me to put my best face on it. I remembered King Darrak's executioner - I'd seen him perform his duties several times in the public square of Wilanda-city. He always held his head up beneath his hood. He did his duties with professionalism and pride, however low and base they may have been. I would not skulk about and act ashamed before these guards. Despite this body, I was still a Hyperborean male. I had my pride.

I stepped into the shadow of the wall to the gate, the only gate in the entire wall, and rapped loudly with my staff, three times. "Send out the condemned! Justice calls!"

After a few minutes, the gate slowly creaked open. Two guards stood behind it, eyeing me apprehensively. Their chainmail armor gleamed in the shaft of sunlight the gate let through, and their livery was that of the combined battalion of Arcadian and Larinian soldiers assigned to the duty of guarding the Great Wall. Between them they held an old man dressed in a ragged tunic and threadbare breeches, his

white beard hanging long and unkempt. His arms were tied to a stick passed behind his back, and he was barefoot. He was the first of the condemned, and the words I was about to say to him had been decided by King Darian over twenty years ago. "Justice for you, Torin Dorgosson. Justice calls this day. It was your lips that gave the order to slay the children of Thilo village. Now, after twenty-five years in prison, justice finally calls. What have you to say for yourself?" I asked, my hood throwing my face in shadows.

"Nothing. I have no excuse," he replied, his voice cracking and thin from disuse. "Twenty-five years has taught me that. Oh, they fed me and kept me healthy with many herbal teas. Even so, I was alone each and every day of that time. My food and drink passed through a hatch beneath the door, I never saw a living soul. My heart aches in loneliness, witch. All I ask is that the end be painless, as surely the fires of hell will pain me enough for all the rest of eternity," he finished, his voice fading to a whisper as he hung his head low.

"So be it. Come willingly, and your suffering shall be ended painlessly," I said, reaching out an ebon-gloved hand to him. Of course, he had to be willing. The Spell of Returning wouldn't work on him otherwise.

He flinched back a step, evading my grasp. "I am afraid," he said, his feeble, aged voice trembling.

"Go on, you mangy cur! Face your death like a man!" one of the guards swore, and pushed the prisoner at me.

Torin staggered, and would have fallen had I not clapped a gloved hand to his withered shoulder to steady him. I gave the guard a cold stare, and he couldn't meet my gaze. I could see he was frightened of me, and was covering his fear with this small act of bravado. "Enough," I said coldly. I needed the prisoner to be willing for my spell to work, and frightening him and shoving him around wasn't helping matters. I realized that Darian's speech, though appropriate, wasn't going to allow me to take this old man with me. I decided to take another tack.

Gently turning Torin around, I drew my knife from my side and parted the ropes that bound him, the enchanted blade slitting the stout cords as though they were mere thread. The stick fell to the bare earth with a dry clatter, and Torin rubbed his thin, bony wrists nervously. I gently turned him around again as I sheathed the blade, and lifted his aged face with an ebon-gloved finger. He looked up into my face for the first time, and his eyes widened. My eyes flashed like twin pieces of jet, and my ebon hair drawn back into a ponytail accentuated my aquiline half-elven features, making me look beautiful and dangerous. I'd estimated the age I'd first taken this body at was twenty-three - and at that age, it had merely been the body of a mundane half-elf rogue of remarkable beauty, but no remarkable physical prowess. Then, it had been beautiful and agile, but soft and weak. Now, at perhaps sixty-four or sixty-five years of age, it was in the prime of its half-elven youth - hard, fast, deadly, and astoundingly beautiful, with an alien cast to the features. And more, after forty-two years of living the ascetic life of a Hyperborean battle-mage, forty-two years of life with nearly every drop of water and nearly every morsel of food being conjured by sorcery, this body had been forged into something far greater than it once was, or ever could have become otherwise.

It was hardly what I'd intended, of course. I'd cared little for the appearance of this body, as for years I'd had none around me to care how I looked, nor did I truly enjoy being a woman in the first place, as my soul was still that of a normal man. My only concern had been to forge the strength of the feeble half-elf woman's body I had found myself trapped in, to build the pathetically weak body of a mundane thief I'd been saddled with into something that was as powerful as my old body had once been, that I might be able to cast my greater spells as I once had - and in that, my success had been satisfactory, as this body was now as strong as it could ever possibly be, and nearly as powerful as my old body had once been. I'd cared so little for the body's appearance, focusing only on building its power, that I'd even let my

robes grow threadbare before Arella finally returned that fateful night, three years ago, and I'd eventually restored my robes with a spell. Yet, beneath those once-threadbare robes, this body had been hardened and forged under the hammer of my will, beaten against the anvil of the ascetic life of a battle-mage - and the result was much like the smith who works on forging the strongest and sharpest blade, and ends up with a creation of surpassing beauty.

"You... You're beautiful," Torin whispered, his face a strange mixture of fear and desire. "I didn't think death would be beautiful."

I suppressed my reaction, and smiled instead. "I am called Raven. Come with me, Torin Dorgosson. I have waited for you for twenty-five years."

"Th-there will be no pain?"

"None," I said, stepping back and extending my hand.

His aged eyes gazed beyond me, to the barren wastes of the Great Southern Dead Zone. "Then lead on, and I shall try to follow - though I don't know how far I can walk," he said, taking my hand in his.

I incanted the Spell of Returning while he was still willing to follow, and the world blurred. In a moment, it was pitch black. Torin gasped. "Am I dead?" he asked fearfully.

"No," I replied, and chanted a brief cantrip, placing a spark of light at the end of my staff so we could see.

"I am in a tomb!" he cried in fear, looking around.

I nodded, looking about in the gloom of the first crypt on the list. Finding this tomb had been difficult enough - it had been very carefully hidden in what was once a wilderness area in eastern Hyperborea, within a few leagues of the Elflands. Yes, Gorol Qual had hidden his tomb well. It was not surprising. Despite my initial lack of confidence in his abilities sixteen centuries ago, he had turned out to be one of the wiser and more powerful masters of the Dyclonic Circle - and perhaps my closest friend. The last I'd seen of him was at the Battle of Chorim Keep, all these many centuries ago, now. He'd been slain when a company of skeletons raised by Vayanar overwhelmed him and hacked him to pieces. Now, his soul lay at rest in his animuary in his tomb.

Of course, there were well over a thousand tombs on the map that the ghost of Arlon-hap had copied out for me, but only a few could be of any use. Many of the tombs on the map were within the borders of a dead-zone, one of the blasted areas left in the final war between the Hyperboreans and the Invaders, and thus were destroyed. I was also limited in that I had to choose those I'd known in life, and who were friends. I'd little choice, unfortunately. If I awakened a stranger who had never known me in life, they might think I was an enemy out to destroy their animuary and crush their soul, despite every precaution I might take including knowing the words of recognition our circle used. I'd then suddenly find myself in a sorcerous battle that might bring their tomb crashing down around my ears and kill the both of us.

Gorol, like many masters, had conjured an eternal guardian for his tomb - his was a golem made from a marble statue, and armed with a sword. Four days ago when I first found the tomb, the thing had nearly taken my head off with its ensorcelled blade, and it had been a bit tricky dancing around with it and smashing it with bolts of lightning before it finally shuddered and cracked asunder, destroyed. It was a pity, too - the statue was a marvelous one, carved by an excellent Hyperborean artist, and depicted a nude female. It blended in marvelously with the decor of Gorol's tomb, a shadowed and dusty lair where dozens of life-like statuary stood as though stilled between one moment and the next by the bewitching eye of a gorgon. When I initially entered the tomb, the stillness and silence of the place, filled with so

many who looked so alive, had set my nerves on edge - it seemed as though at any moment, they might move with life and animation. When one finally did, I'd been truly startled. If the gleaming sword the golem had been carrying hadn't caught my eye, a blade untarnished by sixteen centuries of time, I'd probably have been utterly surprised by Gorol's eternal guardian and slain. I'd restored the statue with a Spell of Repairing, and used my Ring of Telekinesis to move it back into position - though Gorol would have to animate it again if he wished it to be a guardian, as its enchanted life had sped with its destruction.

After making sure there were no other guardians or traps, I'd sealed the place with my own sorcery to protect it while I waited for King Darian's first condemned man to be sent to the Hyperborean Wall. Now, days later, I'd brought the cowering wretch with me using the Spell of Returning, and led him over to the sealed door behind which Gorol's sarcophagus lay. The darkness of the tomb and the eerie stillness of the statuary made the ancient, feeble war-criminal of the Larinian-Arcadian war whimper with fear, and I turned to look at him. "Did you not say you wished your death to be painless?"

"Yes, I'm sorry. I was just frightened. I greatly fear my death, as I greatly fear the pains of hell."

"And if I can assure you that you will not feel the pains of hell? What would you say to that?" I asked, trying to make the woman's voice I was cursed with sound as smooth as silk and as sweet as honey.

"You can do that?" he asked, amazed.

"Only if you obey me."

"What shall I do?" he asked, trembling.

"Walk with me to those doors," I replied, gently leading him by the hand towards the enormous stone double-door that dominated the nearer wall of the tomb. The scenes of battle and chaos engraved upon it did little to reassure him, and he trembled violently.

We had taken just three steps when it happened - we were within the range of Gorol's animuary. I suddenly felt a twinge, as Gorol's will reached out from his animuary and swept over the two of us. In me, he found no space, just as though my soul was also linked to an animuary, like his, rendering me immune to the possession-attempt from the Spell of Hidden Life. It wasn't, however. The skull of Hyarlanoth, in the exercise of its ultimate power that also destroyed it, had bound my soul to this body as though it was my own, reducing my animuary to dust the same as it did for Vayanar - which had allowed Darian to kill him. Still, the binding itself had been in a strange manner, and something in its nature still protected me, somehow. I knew not what it was - I only knew that when I astrally projected from this body, my true form could be seen on the astral plane - my spirit was still that of a muscular, adult Hyperborean male, as I always had been, despite my body being that of a half-elf female. My research and study had revealed no explanation for this yet, but I was working on it.

Torin Dorgosson, unlike me, had no protection from Gorol's reach, however. He trembled violently as he felt Gorol's will upon him, his ancient frame shuddering as his feeble will attempted to resist the powerful one of Gorol Qual struggling towards light and life. I released him, and stepped back to kneel upon the stone floor, as per my plan. Beside me was the black robe I had left here before sealing the tomb - I picked it up and lay it in my lap quietly as Torin suffered his last moments of existence.

Torin groaned, then spasmed as Gorol's more powerful will crushed his, scattering his will and his soul to nothingness. His flesh then seemed to flow as Gorol's will, focused through the Spell of Hidden Life, followed the pattern laid down in his animuary to re-shape Torin's flesh and bones into his own. His threadbare prison-rags tore and fell from him as his flesh filled out and hardened into that of the Hyperborean battle-mage I had known many centuries ago, the skin smoothing and darkening from that

of a pale, wrinkled Larinian into the olive-hued flesh of my people. I dropped the cantrip I had cast before Gorol could return to full awareness, plunging the room into darkness again, and simply listened.

Gorol took a deep breath, obviously savoring it. "Hah! I live again!" he said in the tongue of the Hyperboreans, grinning broadly in the darkness.

"Indeed you do, my old friend, and I am glad of it. It is I, Eddas Ayar. It's good to see you again," I replied quietly in the same tongue, my native language. I hated the sound of my woman's voice in my ears, but there was little to be done for it. The only pleasant thing was that I didn't need to use my ring of translation to speak to him, and it was almost a joy to speak my native tongue after so long.

Gorol jumped, startled, then extended his hand, his wizard's staff appearing into it instantly. It was a candle about half a cubit long, lit. The enchantment of the Spell of the Wizard's Staff meant that it never went out and never grew shorter. I'd seen it sitting in a candleholder above his sarcophagus when I first entered his tomb - after sixteen centuries, it had made the air totally foul and unbreathable behind the sealed doors that protected his burial chamber, and if I hadn't had my Ring of Adaptation, I probably would have suffocated when I first opened the tomb days ago. Of course, I already knew it would be there, and I'd willed my ring of adaptation to protect me against the invisible threat. Yes, I knew... Because it was I who carried his limp and mangled body from the aftermath of the Battle of Chorim Keep, the tears rolling down my bearded cheeks, and it was I and High Master Frarim who sealed Gorol's tomb according to his last will, all these many centuries ago, now. Having his final defense as his staff was the type of ingenuity Gorol had become famous for in the circle during his life - such was the caliber of the mage I once knew, sixteen centuries ago.

Gorol dropped into an en garde stance, peering into the gloom by the light of his single candle. I held completely still, so as not to make him think I was attacking. My defensive spells were already prepared, maintained by a small effort of will, and I made no motion. This was the moment of truth.

"Who are you, woman?" Gorol growled at me.

"It is I, Gorol. Eddas Ayar. Risen from the void and inhabiting the body of this half-elf, for the nonce."

"Eddas?" he asked, squinting into the darkness.

"Indeed, my friend," I said, keeping my head bowed.

"The wind whispers in the trees..." he said, his free hand raised for a spell.

"...and brings with it the sound of laughter," I replied, giving the counter-sign. There was always the possibility that the circle might need to raise a man from the Void who did not know any living member of the Dyclonic Circle, so the system of sign and counter-sign had been developed ages ago by High Master Dyclon himself. "It is good to see you again, my friend," I repeated, raising my head and smiling.

Gorol grinned, lowering his hand. "By the gods it's good to see you, as well. For a moment, I thought I was in trouble," he said, and we shared a chuckle. "So, someone tried to raid your tomb, eh? They must have had a mighty will for you to be unable to re-shape their body into your own."

"No, my friend. This body was nearly dead when I took it four decades ago, a blow to the head having caused its owner's spirit to have fled just at the moment I took it. It was the strength of my will alone that forced this body to live, where its previous owner's will could not. It's a long story - I'll tell you after we have left this place," I replied, standing and holding out the robe to him. "I've brought you a robe, friend. Come - let us go into your burial chamber and recover your skullcap, candleholder and other items you retained."

He looked disapprovingly at the black robe I held out to him - Gorol had always preferred robes of brilliant crimson. "I had spare robes stored in a chest by my sarcophagus, they'll do for now, thanks," he replied, opening the great stone doors to his burial room with a spell of telekinesis.

"No, my friend, they've long since rotted to dust," I said, shaking my head.

"What?! Wait - the last I remember was falling at the Battle of Chorim Keep. What happened after that? How long have I been dead?"

"The former is a long story, my friend. As for the latter, I don't know precisely. At least sixteen centuries, I'm afraid."

Gorol seemed greatly taken aback by that, and after he donned the robe I gave him, we walked into the burial chamber in silence. He placed his candle into the holder above his sarcophagus, and slipped on the black robe I held for him before he spoke again. "Well, after sixteen centuries, I imagine I have a bit of a surprise in store for me. Our cities must be truly enormous by now, and our people and culture much grown and improved over the centuries, eh?" he said with a grin, telekinetically lifting the lid of his sarcophagus and setting it aside.

"No, my friend. All our people are dead. All our cities are in ruins, and much of our lands are blasted and dead, wastelands populated with fell beasts and ghosts," I replied quietly.

Gorol stared at me in shock and horror. "Wh-what? How?!"

"War, my friend. It's a long, long tale. Come - recover your things, and I shall take us back to my tower with a Spell of Returning. It truly is a long, long story, and I'm sure you'd rather sit by a warm fire with a mug of byallar in your hands while I share it with you. Your tomb is safe, I've sealed it with the Spell of Warding - though I had to destroy your golem to gain entrance, sorry. I've repaired the statue, and you can re-enchant it later."

"Aye, the golem is nothing - worry not. Tell me, though - in sixteen centuries, did you ever manage to bring your beloved Dyarzi back to you?" he asked, slipping the steel skull-cap of the Dyclonic Circle off his corpse, blowing some dust from it, then fitting it on his own shaven pate.

"That, too, is a long tale, my friend. I have the spell to do so, but cannot cast it just yet. I'll fill you in when we return to my tower," I replied as he picked up a hooded lantern made of brass and an enchanted leather bag and belt from his sarcophagus. All looked as good as new, protected from the ages by sorcery. Buckling the belt to his waist, he slipped a small knife from his sarcophagus into a sheath in the belt. The blade was also ensorcelled, as was my own knife, and it was still keen, bright and sharp. As he restored the lid to his sarcophagus telekinetically, I could see by his face he was very troubled and depressed by what I'd told him so far. I couldn't blame him. I'd lived with the knowledge of our people's fate for over four decades, and it rested no easier on my shoulders than it did his.

"That's all. Let us be off," he said, placing his candle into the lantern and shutting its cover before extending his hand. I nodded, taking his hand and casting the Spell of Returning.

Two.

"I remember that day well, now - the day I first met her. All I knew was that the court wizardess, Arella-tor, was to take us to meet my father's Hyperborean executioner, the one that would dispose of those ancient war-criminals from the War of the Twins. I was seventeen at the time, brash and young, and though I refused to admit it, I feared the visit. Hyperborea was, to all accounts, a barren wasteland populated with ghosts and fell beasts - a place to be avoided at all

costs. My mother was a woman of Hyperborea, by her own admission - and, as rumor had it even in her day, at least half giant. I suppose that would make me a quarter giant or more - I don't know. Certainly she taught my sister and I the tongue of the giants and much of their ways, so I suppose it may have been true. Anyway, at the time, I feared the trip, and did not wish to go. "Why should a king, his queen, and the prince and princess of the realm go visit a lowly executioner?" I asked. Yet, I went along quietly and was as polite as could be, for my father had told me this was his greatest and oldest friend, the one who taught him how to be a king and taught his court wizardess Arella-tor the art of sorcery, and he ordered me to make my best impression. My mother, however, gave me a strange, almost cryptic warning, and I can still hear her words today, over five decades later. 'You shall treat her with the greatest and utmost respect, my son,' she said. 'I am merely of Hyperborea. Raven is Hyperborea.'"

- King Noril, Autobiography, 1729 NCC

"Ah, Eddas. You still grow the best byallar in all the world," Gorol said, smiling as he sipped at his cup.

"Thank you, my friend," I replied, sitting down across from him at the table in the top of my tower. The sun nearing late afternoon, now, and the beams of sunlight streaming in the western windows brightly lit my room.

"So tell me, Eddas. What has happened while I slept in my tomb?" Gorol asked.

"It is a long story, my friend, so bear with me," I replied, and began.

Much of the tale Gorol already knew. Our people, the Hyperboreans, had once been the masters of warfare. We'd learned war through painful object lessons taught at sword-point and axe-edge from the elves and dwarves over the millennia, and had reached peace with our neighbors as we reached the pinnacle of our knowledge. We had even developed magitech - that curious blend of magic and technology - and had both wing-boats sailing the waters and ornithopters sailing the skies. Our most powerful units in battle, however, were the battle-mages - of which I was one. Each school or 'circle' of mages studied to be supreme in their ability to wage war and to assist an army in waging war, and of all the Battle circles, the Dyclonic Circle, the Circle I called my home, was by far the most powerful.

Then, about sixteen centuries ago or so, a strange race of humans I only knew by the name "The Invaders" arrived on our shores from the Western Sea. Their homeland was an island that was many hundreds of leagues from here, and it was always suffering volcanic eruptions. Their sages said that eventually the island would sink into the sea, so they fled, and ended up here. They were as skilled at warfare as we Hyperboreans were, and in fact, their magitech was far superior - they had walking war machines the size of ogres that could spit flame and death, smash down castle gates, stomp enemies standing nearby, and do all this tirelessly - our own mages tired fighting them, and were killed in the various battles. The war was long and fiercely fought, but one-sided from the beginning. Finally, we Hyperboreans were defeated and scattered, our civilization in ruins, when one lone battle-mage discovered the secret to defeating the Invaders. He developed a spell which would unleash raw Mana-energy in a single-devastating blast, their body vaporizing as their Talent was turned inwards self-destructively.

"Gods, Eddas," Gorol said quietly, shocked at that part of my tale. I simply nodded and continued - he had to hear it all.

Using the spell was suicidal, but the Hyperborean people were already near death as it was - we had nothing more to lose. This battle-mage taught the spell to what few other battle-mages remained, and they scattered and searched out the enemy army, using this spell time and time again to blast them to

vapor at the cost of their own lives. They even blasted the port-city the enemy had established, slaying all their women and children in a single stroke. Finally, the enemy assembled on the southern plains for a 'peace talk' with the few remaining Hyperborean soldiers and the last of the Hyperborean battle-mages. What was said was unknown, but the results were what is called 'The Great Southern Dead Zone' by the giants. The surviving members of the Invader's army, perhaps a hundred thousand men, collected what few surviving Hyperborean women they could find and fled southwards to escape the raging Mana-storms.

"Mana-storms?! Gods, how bad was the destruction?" Gorol asked, interrupting me.

"Bad, my friend. I spent two years searching our lands, locating the tombs of the Dyclonic Circle and the Followers of the White Witch of Iolo Mountain, hoping to find ones that weren't destroyed in the final war by being caught in a dead zone. The smallest dead zone I've found is over a league across, roughly circular, and is completely devoid of life. Most are larger, anywhere from ten to fifty leagues. Nothing lives in these zones - no plants, animals, insects - nothing. The astral plane in the dead zones is utterly chaotic and disordered - spellcasting is extremely difficult, for the inability to grasp a single frequency of Mana needed for the spell you may desire to cast. Enchanted items still function, but initiating a new spell or enchantment in a dead zone is extremely difficult. Also, they're rife with the ghosts of the slain, who haunt them fairly regularly. The Mana-storms have subsided over the last few centuries, but the ghosts yet remain. The land is only now beginning to heal the damage. Of course, my friend, all this happened after I was dead. I don't know how long I was in my tomb before the invaders first set foot on our shores, but my best guess is I had been dead no less than twenty years," I replied, and Gorol quietly shuddered. I refilled Gorol's cup, then continued my explanation.

I didn't bother to explain the parts that he already knew, only that which had transpired after his own death. The story of Vayanar was well known to him. Around the time I was thirty-eight, Gorol Qual and another man, Vayanar Eddahom, were the next in line for the position of master. One day, Master Uragdar Jorgal collapsed in the middle of a lesson on higher mathematics he was giving some apprentices, the sword he used as his wizard's staff collapsing into dust instantly. Sorcerous investigation revealed his animuary had been found and crushed, though by whom, nobody knew. We also found his grimoire had been stolen, compounding the scandal.

When each mage attained the rank of master, they were given the Spell of Hidden Life so that they may build their animuary. Each selected the location of their tomb carefully, and only the High Master knew where they were. If a Master died of old age, their body would become that of a liche and they would live on as an undead, subject to the call of the Circle should their particular skills ever be needed again in the future - and as a liche, each also was more powerful than they were in life, their will enhanced by UnLife energy. If they died of disease or violence, they could still be recovered through the use of condemned criminals (as I had done with Gorol) should their skills and knowledges ever be needed by the circle in the future. All this was done because each master represented years of investment in training, and also represented a repository of experience and wisdom that the Circle didn't want to simply lose.

Master Jorgal's destruction had been a serious scandal. It meant that the High Master's secret files of the locations of everyone's tomb might be compromised, so all the masters (myself included) moved their tombs and their animuaries with them over the next few months. Still, we knew not who had done the deed, so we waited until after we had moved our tombs before we would consider the matter of who would replace Master Jorgal. Then, we debated for several weeks over which of the two candidates should be chosen. I objected to Vayanar - he seemed suspicious to me, but I couldn't quite put my finger on what the problem was. Gorol was my friend, but he also was the inferior candidate - Vayanar was simply a stronger and more highly skilled mage. I couldn't in all honesty vote for Gorol, but I also couldn't bring myself to approve Vayanar. As time had passed, I had gotten to know Vayanar, and I felt he was

evil, somehow. I suspected he might even be guilty of Jorgal's destruction, though I knew not how. Finally, I bowed to the will of the rest of the masters and approved Vayanar, but only on the condition that I be allowed to administer the Test of Acceptance.

I took a crystal goblet and smashed it, then took a small shard of the crystal vial which was Jorgal's animuary and two shards from the goblet and set them aside for the test. I went to the king's investigator and paid him for the privilege of copying a spell he uses from his grimoire into mine, and the next day I administered the test. The king's investigator had given me the Spell of Contagion Comparison, which he used to determine murder weapons and similar comparisons. I had Vayanar cast the spell from my grimoire, telling him I wanted him to determine which of three shards of crystal came from the goblet. As casting a spell that the applicant had never seen before from a grimoire was a normal part of the test, Vayanar suspected nothing. Two shards leaped to the pile on the center of the table and clung to their mate, but one shard, the one from Jorgal's animuary, instead clung to Vayanar's wizard staff, the weapon he had used to smash Jorgal's animuary.

When I saw that, I raised my staff and struck that villainous bastard down like a dog.

The High Master was understandably upset, but after I explained what I'd done, I was forgiven. Vayanar wasn't killed by my blow, though he was rendered unconscious for three days and very nearly died. During that time, we searched his tower to find his grimoire, and discovered he'd stolen Jorgal's grimoire after he'd killed him. This only sealed his fate, and we turned him over to the king's justiciar to be handled by the king's law. It was a horrible scandal, and the Circle suffered terribly in the eyes of the public for years afterwards.

Vayanar was executed two weeks later. That's when we discovered the magnitude of his crime - his wizard's staff failed to disintegrate, and a few moments after he was beheaded, it disappeared as it was willed away. He'd already cast the Spell of Hidden Life on himself and concealed his animuary without the Circle's knowledge. We should have suspected it, but we were far too angry for thinking - if the law would have allowed it, we would have simply killed him ourselves. We found out later that Vayanar had sealed his animuary in an invulnerable, padded box and simply buried it beside the king's road, crushing the soul and stealing the body of an innocent passerby.

That was when Dyarzi was murdered, and my life changed forever.

Vayanar had murdered Jorgal to open up the position of Master for himself, and when I defeated his plans and struck him down, he decided to take revenge on me. He took some money he'd secreted and hired the Flame-Knives, a group of assassins who were very famous back then because they used knives with a wavy, flame-like blade. Unfortunately, he had little experience with the Flame-Knife assassins, and simply told them where my tower was without making sure that I'd be in it at a certain time. The Flame-Knives stole into my tower, slew all my household servants and stabbed Dyarzi in the back as she slept. They didn't kill me, as I was out fighting a battle for King Lothar and trying to help the Circle find Vayanar in between times. I mourned my loss alone for the rest of my days. I never replaced the household servants after their murder - I was too distraught to do so, and eventually learned to live without them.

The Dyclonic Circle spent fifteen years hunting him down after that, and finally killed him at the battle of Chorim Keep at great loss to ourselves. My friend Faral Balorim, my friend Master Gorol, they and many others died that day fighting off Vayanar's stolen spells and an army of undead he'd raised from an ancient battlefield. Even then, Vayanar's staff did not disintegrate. We knew he had concealed his animuary again, but we knew not where. We kept his staff for years after that, waiting for when it would be summoned away, but it never happened. We finally concluded that he'd buried his animuary in a tomb somewhere, and it might be ages before it was discovered again.

I lived forty-nine more years after Dyarzi's death from an assassin's knife. I managed to live without her, but I never forgot her. In my spare time I searched every tome and grimoire I could find, but never found a way to bring her back to me. I spent the rest of my life in quiet solitude after the Battle of Chorim Keep, teaching the apprentices, fighting the battles of the Dyclonic Circle, but otherwise never leaving my tower. All I did in my spare time was study every tome of magic I could find for a way to bring my love back to me, but I never succeeded. The apprentices heard the tale and passed it around among themselves, and ever afterwards they called me 'Gratinrelon' behind my back, which means 'he who weeps inside' in my language, and they bothered me little with their incessant chatter for fear of my temper. And indeed, my temper became quite short in my later years, though I think it was because Dyarzi and I had planned to have children of our own, and the silence of my chambers in my tower were sometimes more than I could bear.

As my end approached, I realized I had no desire to spend the rest of eternity as a moldering corpse, a liche who wandered his tomb in silence and alone, waiting for the Dyclonic Circle's call to fight their latest battle or to assist them in some thamaturgical research. I lay myself into my own sarcophagus and closed the lid over myself. Just as the end came upon me and I felt my soul being drawn to my animuary, I saw a brief vision of Dyarzi, happy and carefree in the afterlife. I reached out to her, but the pull of my animuary was stronger. I entered the Dreamless Sleep, and awoke in the body of a half-elf female, raped and bleeding from a blow to the head which caused her spirit to fly and prevented me from reshaping the body with the power of the Hidden Life spell. Had she not been so near death, the power of the enchantment would have allowed me to reshape her body as I took it, making it my own again. Unfortunately I lost consciousness beforehand, so that part of the sorcery transpired with no effect, lacking my will to shape it. I found my memories were scattered and lost from the blow to the head, and so I could remember little of my life at first. It took weeks for my memory to return, gradually and a bit at a time, like the sun slowly dawning in the east.

It was at this point I met Darian, the usurped King of Larinia. Darian's twin brother, Dorian, had stolen his throne from him with the help of Gorlon-mak, the court wizard. Little did anyone know but Gorlon-mak was, in fact, Vayanar - he'd stolen the wizard's body as he explored the Hyperborean Ruins. It was my belief to this day that when Gorlon-mak entered Vayanar's tomb, thinking to find the Secrets of the Ancients, Vayanar lashed out and overcame his will, crushing his soul (which killed Gorlon-mak's wolf-familiar in the process, as the soul and life of a familiar was tied to that of their master). Vayanar then used sorcery to determine whose body it was he had acquired, as I had done with the body of Ellysande Northstar, and assumed Gorlon-mak's identity.

When Dorian betrayed Darian, it was actually quite simple - Gorlon-mak merely threw a Geas spell upon Darian, geasing him to never speak of who he really was or what had really happened to him, casting him out of the kingdom saying that he was the "evil" Dorian, and assumed Darian's rightful place as heir to the throne upon their father's death. Darian wandered the wilderness of Arcadia for years as a simple hunter, trapper and fur-trader until he met me, climbing out of my tomb. Darian helped me come to terms with the strangeness and unfamiliarity of the woman's body I found myself in, and I in turn vowed to teach him the skills he lacked to be king, and help him regain his kingdom. Unfortunately, it wouldn't be as easy as all that.

First, we were shanghaied, then I was brutally raped for days and nearly died. Then, the Larinian army mobilized, intent on conquering Arcadia, and we had to flee the city of Greenhaven with Darian's sapphite friend, mage Arella-tor. After the sudden appearance of Dragonslayer the Giant and Karg the Terrible (an ancient drake who, fortunately, was a friend of mine from ages ago), it became apparent to me that Darian was at the crux of some matter between the gods. I eventually learned that my old deity, Morgar, God of War and Death, had changed with the destruction of my people, and had become a god of Chaos and Death. His opponent in this conflict was Yorindar, God of Wisdom. Yorindar, a deity

brought by the Invaders and now carried on by the Larinian and Arcadian peoples (who were not only the descendants of the Invaders, but also of the Hyperboreans, through our women), helped me survive. He also gave me the clues to help me carry on and not only restore Darian's kingdom to him and give the Hyperboreans a chance to live once more, but also to bring Dyarzi back from the void again - though I couldn't yet use the spell I had developed until I found a way to restore my old body. Dyarzi wasn't a sapphire, and I was certain she'd be unhappy at the idea of her mate being female.

"Morgar gone insane and evil? I find that hard to believe," Gorol said, shocked.

"It's true, my friend. It was the death of our people that did it to him. The people of the Southlands, our descendants through our women, merged their pantheon with ours. Morgar is an insane deity of chaos and death to them - and judging by everything that happened to me over the last four decades or so, I'd have to say that this is true."

Gorol shook his head, but said nothing, simply staring at his cup for a long while in silence. Finally, he spoke, his voice quiet. "So, I was the first you brought back."

"Yes, my friend. Of all the men I knew, I deemed you to be the strongest, the most likely to be able to adjust. I'll be receiving about one condemned man a week from King Darian for about the next five years. With luck, we'll be able to bring back many of our members."

"But what good will that do? We'll need women if we're to..." he said, his voice trailing off as he glanced at me. "You don't mean that I...?" he said, his face paling slightly as he glanced at me.

I made a moue'. "No, no! Not with me, Gorol. My body may be that of a woman, but inside I am still the same Eddas you knew, and I'm not a sodomite," I replied. Gorol started to apologize, but I waved him off. "Do you remember the White Witch of Iolo Mountain?"

"Vaguely. A healer, wasn't she?"

"Indeed, and she had her own order of witches, as well. They also used the Spell of Hidden Life, in imitation of the battle circles. I have located their tombs that survived the war, and I intend to awaken them with the condemned men, as well."

"Then there is hope!" Gorol said, his olive face brightening. "How many of us altogether will there be?"

"With luck, some eighty-nine women and eighty-five men. A pitiful handful, I'll grant, but it's something, at least."

"Aye, it's something..." Gorol replied, stroking his ebon beard, his dark brown eyes lost in thought. "When will you raise one of our High Masters?"

I sighed, and shook my head. "Never. I can't, my friend. Despite their being scattered hither and yon, as fate would have it all the tombs of the High Masters have fallen within the area of one of the many dead-zones - they're destroyed. I'll be able to raise their High Mistress, but for us, I'll be the de facto High Master."

"You?" Gorol replied, surprised. "But you're..." he said, then shook his head. "Sorry. In that body..." he said, gesturing expansively at me. "It's sometimes hard to remember who you really are, my friend. I can accept it, but I think that many of the others will not be able to. Our circle never had any female members," he said, shrugging.

"Only because none applied. It wasn't a rule of the Dyclonic Circle that prevented it, my friend. Merely random chance and the general tendencies of the women of our culture to avoid battle and war

becoming, over the centuries, the unspoken tradition of our order. Grand Master Dyclon, when he laid down the rules of our order, made no stipulation as to the gender of the members - the Talent falls equally to both males and females, as you well know," I said, then shrugged. "Besides, this is merely a vessel. Inside, I'm still me. The only reason I never went after the position of High Master is that I was too busy searching for a way to bring Dyarzi back to me. Now, I have that way - though I can't use it yet until I figure out how to resolve this," I said, chuckling as I looked down at myself.

"Well, you did destroy Vayanar, anyway - our greatest scandal, finally put to rest. You should be made High Master for that act alone. Or High Mistress, as the case may be," he said, and we shared a chuckle for a moment. After a few heartbeats, though, he looked down into his cup again, and sighed. I could see he was thinking about everything I'd said, and it weighed heavily on his heart. And again, I could sympathize - even after forty-two years, it still weighed heavily on me, at times.

Finally, Gorol set his cup down, stood, and walked over to the window. He was silent for a long while after that, just gazing out over my plantation of byallar trees. After a long while, he spoke, his voice showing deep sadness. "Eddas... It's just so hard to accept. Your lands look almost the same as they did when I last saw them - just a few months before I died, in fact, when I last visited you. Well... The bridge over the river is gone, and the houses of your servants that used to surround your tower and line the road are gone, as well. Still, it's hard to believe that... Eddas, is it all truly gone, now?"

"Yes, my friend. I'm sorry, but it is," I replied quietly.

"Show me, please."

I nodded, rising from my chair. Taking his huge hand in my small, ebon-gloved one, I cast the Spell of Returning, taking us up the road the giants had made through my lands, and to the point where it joined the king's road. It was all rubble, of course. The steady tread of giants over the centuries had kept it from becoming too overgrown, but there was little to be seen of it anymore. I looked down for a moment, then brushed off the top of a larger stone so the two symbols carved into it could be seen clearly. Gorol looked - it said '43'. "This is the king's road, my friend - or what's left of it. This part is actually in the best shape, because the giants walk here frequently, patrolling the edge of my lands for me. They like me and respect me a great deal, and don't wish to see anything happen to me. Other parts of it are almost completely overgrown - only a few stones protrude above the grass. If we go down the road a bit to league-marker 44, we can turn to go see the ruins of Dohbari - but we should probably wait until tomorrow to do that. The giants live there now, using the old fields to plant their crops in, and it will be dark soon - they might accidentally step on us. Their village, made of those enormous huts they live in, surrounds the ruins of the city like a mother's gentle embrace. They treat it as a place of great respect and sadness. Come. Let's go to Wilanda-city, now," I said. Gorol nodded, and I cast the Spell of Returning again.

In a moment, the late afternoon gloom of a thick forest surrounded us. I pointed with a gloved finger. "We are in the middle of the city, Gorol. Over there is where the temple of Vyleah once stood," I said, pointing to a white, cylindrical stone that was half buried beneath the earth and nearly concealed by the trees. "Over there is where the Street of the Armorers was. I went down it to look ages ago, but I couldn't find my parent's home. It's all rubble, buried beneath the grass," I said, pointing. "Over there is where the Street of the Silk-merchants was. Come, let me show you the Black Tower."

As we walked through the trees, Gorol cast his gaze about, looking here and there and everywhere for something that had survived, something familiar - but there was nothing. It was all rubble, most buried by time, and overgrown by the forest. Finally, I stopped and pointed. "There is what's left of the Black Tower, my friend."

Gorol gaped. It wasn't that the tower was in ruins, just a few large basalt blocks poking above the ground, but there was an enormous metal thing the size of an ogre huddled against the shattered arch of what once was the front door. "What in the name of nine devils is that?"

"That is one of the war-machines of the Invaders. Our mages and apprentices that were present in the tower blasted through its front armor plate and killed the pilot, badly damaging the machine. The invaders had so many of them, they didn't even bother to repair it. They just left it where it fell," I explained, walking with Gorol over to the machine. "The pilot once sat there, and operated it with those levers and controls you see just there. Don't touch anything in there, though. It assenses as damaged but partially operational. I don't know which switches make it spit gouts of flame and which make it scratch itself."

Gorol nodded, climbing up on the machine to take a closer look for a moment. He climbed down again after a brief examination, then came back over to me. "And that... That thing killed all our mages in the tower?"

I shook my head. "No. I used the Spell of Communication with the Dead and spoke with a few of the skulls of the mages and apprentices that are buried in the tower. That is only one of the three machines that attacked the tower. They stopped it, but the other two beating on the walls with their metal fists collapsed the tower and killed everyone inside."

Gorol sat on a broken basalt block that once made up the walls of the tower, hung his head, and sighed. I sat down next to him, wishing there was something I could do. For a long while, we were silent. Finally, he spoke. "I want to go home, Eddas."

"To your tower?"

"Aye. I want to see my tower and my lands again."

"It's in ruins, my friend. I've already looked. Everything is in ruins. Stay with me in my tower. In a few years, I'll have all our friends back from the void, and all the Mountain Healers, as well. We can then work on rebuilding our lives and our civilization."

Gorol sighed again, and slowly shook his head. "No, my friend. You've had time to get used to this - I haven't. I need some time... I'm sorry, Eddas," he said, and stood. "Let's return to your tower. I can pick up my things, then summon an invisible steed and ride to my own lands."

"As you wish, Gorol. Still, we should begin regular meetings. Perhaps once a month, our circle should gather at my tower, to discuss what plans we may have and try to work out how we will go about restoring our people and our civilization."

Gorol nodded. "A good idea, Eddas. I'll return at the full of the moon. For now, let us return to your tower so that I may be on my way."

I sighed and nodded, rising to take his hand. With a heavy heart, I cast the Spell of Returning again to take us back to my tower.

An hour later, I stood on the parapet of my tower, watching Gorol ride away on an invisible steed, heading down the lane. I understood how he felt - I'd felt the same way myself. I had just hoped that he would be able to adjust, and perhaps help me with the others. He was the strongest, emotionally, of all the men I had once known of the Dyclonic Circle, and I'd thought he'd have the best chance of being able to cope with what had happened. Unfortunately, he couldn't - or at least, not yet. No, it would take time for him to get used to the idea that everyone he knew, everyone he ever cared about, all his hopes and dreams, everything that mattered in his entire life was gone. Perhaps a great deal of time. Even now,

over forty years after I learned of what happened, I still had days when I caught myself simply staring off at the horizon, thinking of things that once were... And never would be, again.

Finally, Gorol disappeared behind the trees at the bend in the road. I sighed, and turned to go back inside my tower. I had only six more days to prepare for the next condemned man, and there was a great deal of work yet to be done.

Three.

"At first, of course, most of us were in shock. We'd been trained to accept much upon awakening - the hand of time on one's culture, language and history can be heavy and shocking, indeed, and those few ancient masters who'd arisen from their tombs over the course of our Circle's history had written many long works on what it was like to awaken in a world where everyone you knew was dead, and everything about you had changed. Still, nothing could have prepared us for what we encountered. Many of us spent weeks sifting through the ruins and poking about the rubble, hoping to find something familiar... But there was nothing. Some nearly went mad. I know I was close to it for several weeks as I struggled to make sense of it all in my mind. And, I think, perhaps some did go mad, in the end. Particularly Cordo..."

- Gorol Qual, Personal Diary, Date Unknown, presumed 17th century NCC

Arella poured me another cup of byallar as we sat in the shade of the tree at the base of my tower. Swift-wing, her raven familiar, sat quietly on her shoulder, still considering what I'd told them. "How annoying. Why are they like that, I wonder?" he grackled.

"They haven't had time to get used to what's happened," Arella explained, reaching up to stroke Swift-wing's feathers.

Swift-wing fluffed his feathers in annoyance. "Bah. They've had five years, now - or at least the first few have. You'd think they would have adjusted to this by now. After all, Raven did," he said, using the nom-du-guerre that Darian had given me years before, when we first met - and the name Arella still called me by out of affection, despite my having gently reminded her once or twice I would prefer it if she called me by my real name, Eddas Ayar.

I nodded. "I don't know what the problem is, either, my friend. I've tried very hard to get them to come to grips with this, but it's just not working. It doesn't help that the Mountain Healers have gathered together on Iolo mountain, instead of staying here with me. So far, the only woman they've seen is me. Well, and you, Arella, on those few occasions that your visits have coincided with our monthly meetings."

Arella shook her head. "I try to avoid them, to be honest. They don't seem to like me much," Arella replied, pouring herself a cup of byallar and sitting back in the chair I'd set out for her.

"Well, part of that is your origins, Arella. To them, you're a half-caste. Less, actually. Your people are our descendants, but our blood is so thin in your veins that it doesn't even show in you. Your people and Darian's people have pasty-white skin, like the elves. Our people were more olive-skinned, with black hair and dark brown eyes. My friends view the people of the Southlands as rapists, despoilers, and half-castes."

"You mean they're bigots," she said coolly, sipping her byallar.

I winced. "Well... Yes. They're my friends, but they're also normal Hyperborean men in that regard. Aside from what your ancestors did to our people-"

"Which no one alive in the Southlands today even knows about save for Darian, Swift-wing and I. The Larinians and Arcadians think they are the direct descendants of the Hyperboreans, and have no idea about their true origins," Arella interjected.

I nodded. "Well, we Hyperboreans were a proud people, and when I and my friends were alive sixteen centuries ago or so, there really weren't any other human races we knew of. I'm sure they were out there, of course, but we had never met any of them. So, as a whole, we never had time to get used to people with different skins. I traveled extensively in the lands of the elves and the dwarves, so I got used to seeing people who looked different than I did, and learned to accept them as being equal to me - but I did all that travelling because I was searching for a way to bring Dyarzi back to me. These men didn't do that."

Arella nodded. "Well, I understand it, but I don't know that I can forgive them for it. It's very annoying, to say the least," she huffed.

"Well... Well, give them time, Arella. They'll come around. They all know it was King Darian's contribution of the condemned men that made it possible for our race to be reborn. Once they've adjusted to what's happened, they'll see your people in a better light, I think," I said, then smiled. "Besides, not all of them are truly bigoted against you, I think."

Arella shrugged noncommittally, then Swift-wing spoke up. "I'm curious, Raven - how have the monthly meetings been going with your circle?"

"Not well, really. My friends seem... I don't know. Distant. Many of them show up only irregularly for our meetings, and many times all we do is argue various points of order or wrangle over the merits of one or another plans they come up with that run contrary to mine. I don't know if it's because they can't accept me as the de facto High Master, or if it's that they're just uncomfortable with seeing me in the body of a woman," I replied, then sighed. "Perhaps both. Only Gorol and Faral show up regularly, and often it's only those two. When it is, we often simply sit and sip byallar, and talk over old times."

Arella nodded, then smiled and changed the subject. "So, today is your big day?" she asked, gesturing at the rows of benches I'd set out. The giants had provided the wood to make them years ago, and I had worked very hard to have enough benches to hold all eighty-five men and eighty-nine women - the sole survivors of my people.

I nodded, smiling. "Yes. Today we'll bring together the Mountain Healers and the battle-mages of the Dyclonic Circle all at once. With luck, my plan will work and they'll pair off, and our race will be reborn," I said, then reached out to take Arella's hand. "I... I'd be very pleased if you'd stay here with me today, and share this moment with me, Arella."

"I'd be happy to, Raven," Arella replied, squeezing my hand and smiling. "When will they be by?"

"Well, the plan was we'd all meet here at noon," I said, glancing at the sky for a moment through the leafy canopy of the tree above us and guessing the time. "That's not long from now."

We waited quietly in the noonday shade, sipping our byallar and chatting of the events in King Darian's court, where Arella still served as Court Wizardess. Finally, the air before us shimmered, and a white-robed Hyperborean woman appeared. She was tall and quite beautiful, her jet eyes flashing from a regal, olive-skinned face. In her right hand, she carried her quarterstaff - it was more than a simple weapon, however, as I knew it to be her Wizard's Staff. It was, of course, Pelia Cydalion, the White Witch of Iolo Mountain. "Greetings, Master Eddas Ayar. Greetings, Arella-tor," she said, bowing.

We stood and bowed in return. "Greetings, High Mistress Pelia Cydalion. How are you today?" I

replied.

"I am fine, thank you."

Arella took a moment to cast a spell of translation, as Pelia was speaking in my native language, then smiled. "Would you like a seat, High Mistress Pelia? We have byallar already brewed," Arella said sweetly.

"No, thank you. I'm merely here to deliver a message."

"Oh? What message is that?" I asked.

"We of the Mountain Healers have listened to your plan to save our race, Eddas Ayar. You ask us to select from within the ranks of your circle potential husbands, by lot if necessary, and to birth as many children as we can. I will not allow this to happen. I have no desire to see the women of my order become mere millstones to be used by the men to grind out the next generation. Whether we choose to find a husband or not will remain our prerogative. Whether we choose to have children or not will also remain our prerogative. We are not like the Arcadian and Larinian women you have spoken of. We are not chattel. We are Hyperborean women, and we will not relinquish our rights under Hyperborean law and custom," she said with finality. "I beg your pardon, Arella-tor, I mean no offense," she said, nodding to Arella.

"None taken. The women of Larinia are still working for equality, and though my position as the Court Wizardess helps in that regard, we still have a long road to travel," Arella replied calmly.

I ignored the brief exchange between Arella and Pelia, speaking out as soon as I could overcome my shock and find my voice again. "But our entire race is at stake, here! If you refuse to have children, we are doomed!"

"We are not refusing to have children, Eddas Ayar. We are simply saying that we will not be reduced to mere breeding stock for these men. I will not allow the women of my Circle to be used in this manner, and as such I will not allow them to participate in your plan as it currently stands," she said firmly.

I struggled to keep my voice calm. "Look - with your skills as healers, this should not be a problem. Our best chance is to have each woman give birth to ten children - with luck, we'll have about four hundred female children who will come of age in a couple decades. If this process is continued for a century or two, we may survive."

"No, I'm sorry. I simply can't support that idea. I thank you for your attention," she replied, then cast the Spell of Returning and vanished.

I stared in silence for a long moment at the empty space where she had stood. Finally, I sighed. "I can sympathize with her position, I suppose. After all, I've been a woman for over forty-seven years, now. I've found during that time that just the thought of a man looking at me lustfully is very upsetting."

Swift-wing cackled as Arella shook her head. "Raven, you found it upsetting because your spirit is actually that of a man. Though as a sapphite I find I have no interest in men at all, we women aren't that upset by it. In fact, normal women find the attentions of males as interesting as you find the attention of females," she said, giggling.

I sighed again. "I don't understand the problem, then."

"The problem is that they feel they are being told 'You will pick from among these men, copulate, and have as many babies as possible.'"

I blinked. "But, Arella, that is exactly what I am telling them! The future of our race is at stake here!"

"They know that. Hmmm... How to explain it to you..." Arella said, thinking for a moment. Swift-wing simply began preening his feathers - the behavior of mammals was generally a mystery to him to begin with. Finally, Arella reached out to me, squeezing my gloved hand. "I know this is difficult for you to understand, because in some things, men and women think completely differently. I guess the best way to say it to you is that they feel they can't just lie down on their backs, spread their legs and have a dozen babies simply because it's needed. They want to meet the men, get to know them, build a relationship. They want to take their time, Raven, not just be told that due to the whims of fate, their bodies are no longer their own to command. They also need to take time to adjust to what has happened to your civilization and people - for many of them, their last memories were of everything being fine, and now they wake up and see it's all gone. Give them a few years."

"Pfft. How long will they take? Ten years? Twenty? We don't have that kind of time, Arella. They have a spell of rejuvenation - you should be familiar with it, as it's the same one I cast upon you to restore your youth and beauty, now copied to your own grimoire. They can constantly restore themselves to their youth, and easily take a century or so to make up their minds about whether or not they are interested in trying to restore our race. The men of the Dyclonic Circle do not have such a spell, and cannot do the same. It's been five years already. Most of our Masters were between the age of thirty and forty when they cast the Spell of Hidden Life. By the time these women realize that they have to choose, the men they will have to choose from will be old - some may be dead. And those that are dead, I won't be able to recover, as we have no more condemned men. More, if old age claims them rather than accident or something else, they will simply become liches, and spend eternity as a walking corpse until time or accident finally destroys their body, and returns them to their animuaries. Even should they kill themselves to prevent becoming a liche, the spell you and I worked on to bring Dyarzi back to me won't work on them, as their soul isn't in the afterlife, and never shall be - it's sealed into their animuaries."

"Well, I don't think it will take them that long, but you can give the same youth-restoring spell to your circle. They can restore their own youth, and eventually the women and men will meet and nature will take its course."

I nodded. "I intend to do so today, when our circle gathers here. Still, the plan would work. It's quite annoying that the Mountain Healers reject it."

"Well, try to imagine how you would feel if you, right now, still in the body of a woman, were presented with this solution. Try also to imagine you have an attraction to men in the first place, so the thought of a man isn't repulsive. Could you go through with it?"

I thought about it for a long while before I replied. "Well, I'm sorry, I can't really view men as attractive, so it's difficult for me to imagine it. Still, having considered it, I have to answer 'I don't know.' Logically, I would have to do it - it's a matter of survival of our race. Emotionally, I don't know if I could. Aside from the fact I simply don't find men attractive, Pelia is right - it would be somewhat dehumanizing, like being breeding stock. But I just don't know... Perhaps, if I was in their situation, I might suffer the indignities of being with a man for the greater good of restoring our race. Perhaps I wouldn't. I just don't know."

Arella giggled, and Swift-wing cackled. "What? What's so amusing?" I asked.

"The indignities of being with a man"? Oh, Raven, the things you say sometimes," Arella replied, and reached over to hug me. I hugged her back, chuckling at myself.

We waited, and the day slowly dragged on. "Where could they be? They were supposed to meet us here by noon," I wondered aloud.

It was well into the afternoon by the time I had an answer. The air before us shimmered, and my old friend Gorol appeared. I smiled, and stood. "Hello, Gorol. You're the first today."

"Hello, old friend. I'm afraid I shall be the last, as well," he said, declining my outstretched hand.

"What?" I asked, dumbfounded.

"My friend, the others will not be coming," Gorol said quietly.

"Why not? What's happened?"

"Master Cordo - you remember him, he drank byallar with us often in the Master's Lounge?" he asked, and I nodded. "Well, he sought out the towers of the others, and spoke with each. He felt that your rejection of Morgar was heresy, and feels that the story you told us may be made from whole cloth."

I gaped. "Look about you, Gorol! Our civilization is in ruins! I didn't make that up!"

"No, you didn't. Even the briefest of examinations shows that the war did indeed happen, and our people are, indeed, dead. But your insistence that Morgar has become a god of evil... That they cannot believe. Morgar is the deity all we of the Dyclonic Circle have given homage to since Master Dyclon founded the Circle ages ago. It's simply difficult to believe that he has changed, my friend. Cordo has convinced them that rather you have been corrupted, somehow, or are insane. They held a meeting a fortnight ago, elected a new High Master, and they..." Gorol said, and stopped.

"They what, old friend?" I asked, my mind reeling.

Gorol looked to me, his face sad. "They ejected you from the Circle, my friend."

I was too stunned to speak.

"Cordo claims that your story about why you failed to re-shape this body into your own is a mere fabrication to cover your own feeble will, and that a mage as weak-willed as yourself is unworthy of being High Master, much less a member of the Circle. He also claims that while it is not against the rules of our circle for a woman to be a member, it definitely is a violation of tradition. He has pointed out that you have declared yourself to be the High Master simply by benefit of your having returned from the void before any of us did, which he claims is a mere quirk of fate. And finally, he has pointed out that Arella-tor herself, whom you inducted as an apprentice and promoted to mage, then left the order to become the court wizardess of King Darian of Larinia - a serious scandal."

"But - but I can explain all of that, and have before!" I snapped.

"I know, my friend, and I accept your explanation. Cordo and many of the others, however, do not."

I couldn't reply. Words literally would not come - I was simply in shock.

"I did not support this action, Eddas. I voted against it, in fact."

"Thank you," I replied numbly.

"Cordo is the new High Master, of course."

"Of course," I replied, sitting in my chair.

"He's sent me here to ask you to surrender what records and documents of the old High Master you may have."

"Why? What do they intend to do?"

"Well, the first thing Cordo plans is to try to bring all those Masters whose tombs are not within the dead zones back from the void, not just those who knew you in life. Given there are over eighty of us in the Circle, there are more who were friends with those who have yet to be revived."

"But how? There are no more condemned men left to do that with."

"Cordo intends to simply appropriate a few of the people from the south-lands."

Arella gasped, and I stared at Gorol, dumbfounded. "But that would be murder!"

"I know. And I do not approve of it."

"Then why are you here?" I asked, my anger building. Everything had failed. Everything. Now, I wasn't even a member of the Dyclonic Circle. I was nothing.

"To tell you what has happened, my friend. I felt I owed you that much, at least. I intend to tell Cordo that the only information you had of the old High Master was what you said you had - a map showing the locations of the tombs. I intend to tell him that having recovered the last of us that you could, and lacking other condemned men to recover more, you destroyed the map to protect the location of the tombs of those yet discovered and insure that they would rest in peace."

I ground my teeth together in anger for several seconds before I managed to rein in my emotions. "Tell him that, Gorol. Because for the most part, it is true. The map was all I had of the old High-master's files. And though I haven't destroyed it before this moment, I certainly shall now, if for no other reason than to thwart Cordo's plans of murdering people of a nation that is allied with us, and a nation directly responsible for us being alive now."

"He views them as being nothing, Eddas. Half-castes, despoilers. Descendants of those who killed our people. To him, their deaths are meaningless," he said, then nodded to Arella. "Forgive me, Arella-tor, I merely repeat what High Master Cordo has been saying. I do not see your people this way myself. I find..." he said, then shrugged. "Well, to be honest, I see your people as being distantly related to us. Cousins, perhaps. Or great, great grandchildren. I don't see you as being strangers or despoilers, but as friends, and perhaps even distant relatives."

"Thank you," Arella replied quietly.

"So, this is the way the wind blows," I muttered.

"Yes, my friend. There is more, as well," Gorol replied.

"More? What more?" I asked, struggling to keep my voice even.

"I've been to the tower of the White Witch. She and her followers live in and around it in a small village they have built. It's more like a nunnery, really. Many work hard to feed the others, but some simply sit and weep, or pray. They have no interest in us, my friend. I honestly believe that..." he said, his voice trailing off. He sighed. "May I sit, please?"

I nodded, and he sat down on the nearest bench to Arella and I. "You know the Mountain Healers were a group of women who lived apart from the rest of our society, coming down from their mountain as lone wanderers, healing people they ran across, birthing children, but always returning there, never staying away and making families," he said, and I nodded again. "Well, I believe now that the reason why they lived apart was... They were, and are today, a colony of sapphites."

"No!" I shouted, hating the sound of my woman's voice in my ears. "It can't be!"

"I truly believe it is, my friend. Why else would they live apart from the rest of our people? Why else are they all unmarried? Many of us were married in our previous lives. Being a member of a thamaturgical circle does not preclude our having lives outside that circle - but for them, it did," he said, then waved his hand at the empty benches. "And since I do not see them sitting here, ready and willing to choose men from among our number to help restore our race, I can only presume I was right."

I sighed. "I have been the victim of a grand cosmic joke, then."

"I am sorry, my friend, but I think you have been. I cannot see how Morgar could be evil."

"Ask the dragon, Karg the Terrible. He can tell you. It was the death of our people that drove him insane," I snapped.

"Someday I shall, my friend. For now, there is only one last thing I may ask of you," Gorol replied quietly.

"What is it?"

"Cordo wishes the spell you created. The one you said you would use to raise Dyarzi from the dead, once you had restored your original body to yourself. He plans on simply going to our graveyards and raising as many as we can. The wives and daughters of the members of the Circle, female friends we recall from our living days."

I started to reach for my glove in preparation to pull it off, open the compartment in the ring on my right thumb, and pull out my grimoire from the extra-dimensional space it was hidden within. After all, a member of the Dyclonic Circle may ask any other member for a spell they have researched, and receive it without charge. Then, I stopped. My anger rose to the surface. "Tell Cordo that he can go to hell!" I shouted, standing. "He cannot eject me from the Circle, then come to me and expect to receive a spell I worked decades on for free, as though I still was a member of the Circle! If he wants my spell, he will have to pay for it, like he would any other mage who was not a member of the Circle!"

Gorol endured my rage quietly. "I agree, my friend. How much gold would you want for it?"

"Gold?! What need have I for gold?! All the merchants are dead! All their shops are rubble poking out from sixteen centuries of overgrowth! There is nothing for me to spend gold on!" I roared.

"Then what would you have in exchange?"

I glared at Gorol. "I want two things. Listen carefully, because I am only going to say this once."

"I am listening, my friend."

"I want an apology for the way the Circle has treated me today, and I want the Circle to acknowledge to my face that they were wrong, and Morgar is evil."

Gorol looked at me quietly for a moment before he replied. "That isn't going to happen, my friend."

"Then tell them that they can research the spell themselves! I am only one man - and if Cordo is right, I am a madman, anyway. You are over eighty men - some of the brightest and best the Circle ever produced. Find it yourselves!"

Gorol stood. "We shall try, my friend. We shall try. But you and I both know that eighty-five brains are

not necessarily brighter than one."

"Considering that Eddas brought you all back from the void to save your race and you reward her by casting her out like unwanted trash, I'd say that was true," Arella snapped coldly. Swift-wing said nothing, merely glaring at Gorol with one beady, black eye.

"I agree, Arella. I think that was wrong, and I voted against it. So did many others - but not enough of us, I'm sorry. By two-thirds vote, he was cast out. But there still remains one-third who think the decision was wrong, and wish to still call Eddas 'friend'," Gorol replied quietly.

"I appreciate that, Gorol," I replied, struggling to contain my rage. "Leave me now, before I say something that may hurt our friendship."

"I understand. Farewell, old friend," Gorol replied, bowing, then cast his Spell of Returning and vanished.

All my plans had failed. All my hopes and dreams were ashes. The men I had raised from the void had rejected me as a heretical madman. The women I had raised from the void were sapphites. My race was dead, and would forever be that way.

With a howl of frustration, rage and anguish, I raised my wizard's staff and smashed the first bench - the blow split it in half across the middle. No mere club did I wield, but an extension of my will - and my will was to destroy. Again and again I struck the inoffensive wood, until I'd reduced it to flinders. I stepped to the next, and did the same, striking it again and again until it was little more than broken bits of wood scattered hither and yon by my fury. Then I stepped to the next, and started again.

An age passed - I knew not how long. Perhaps an hour, perhaps less. Finally, I was spent. My arms trembled with exhaustion, sweat poured from me in rivers. I let my staff fall from nerveless fingers, fell to my knees, and covered my face in my hands.

A soft caress like the brush of a butterfly's wings touched my shoulder. I looked up, and Arella stood before me. She held her arms out to me, and I stood and hugged her. "It's all gone, Arella. Everything. All my hopes and dreams - ashes."

"I know, Raven. But you did the right thing."

"I did? When? I've ruined everything! My people are gone forever," I replied, by voice cracking with sorrow.

"No, you haven't. You did the right thing. Come sit with me. Come," she said, leading us back to our two chairs. I allowed her to lead me by the hand, and when I'd seated myself, she pulled her chair over to sit before me, taking my hands in hers. "Listen, love. Here is how I see what happened. You decided that the best way to build the numbers of your people was for the women of Iolo Mountain to have as many babies as they could. Their spells and midwife skills would mean that none of them would die, and in fact they wouldn't even show stretch-marks on their bellies afterwards because of their healing spells. I've had time to think about it, and I have realized you were right - that plan would have worked. Yes, it would have meant that those women would have had to choose men who were essentially strangers to them and couple repeatedly, bearing their children over and over, and that was something they couldn't accept - but it would have worked. You were right. Your plan may have been unpalatable to them, but that doesn't mean it was wrong. No, they were wrong, Raven. They should have sat down with you and discussed an alternate plan, and together worked something out that would have satisfied their honor as women and yet allowed your race to be reborn. But instead, they rejected you utterly. You were right, and they were wrong. But that's not all, love. You told the men of the Dyclonic Circle that Morgar was

evil, and they should owe their allegiance to Yorindar. And you were right again - Yorindar, through we of the Southlands, made it possible for your people to come back from the void and have a chance to restore your race. Morgar, on the other hand, is opposing this as best he can. You were right, in every case."

"Morgar is opposing me? How?" I asked, confused.

"Raven, think of what Gorol said Cordo was saying. 'Your failure to re-shape this body into your own is a mere fabrication to cover your own feeble will.' Cordo has to know that's not true. He was your friend for years before, wasn't he?"

"Well, yes. We often chatted over a cup of byallar in the Master's Lounge in the Black Tower, and we often played chatto together. He and I weren't as close as Gorol or Faral and I were, perhaps, but still, we knew each other fairly well."

"Precisely. How can someone who knows you even moderately well claim you are weak-willed, and unworthy to be High Master, my love?" she said, and stroked my cheek softly with a finger. "Surely that is Morgar influencing his thoughts. He would have to know you well enough to know that's simply not true."

I clasped her hand to my face, closing my eyes, and sighed. It was many moments before I could speak, I was simply too depressed. Finally, I found my voice again. "Thank you, Arella. I... I'm sorry," I said, and kissed her hand gently.

"Sorry? For what?" she asked.

I looked down to the ground, the tears coming unbidden to my eyes. "I... I'm sorry that I can't call you 'love' in return. To me, you still are and always will be my special, dearest friend... But my one, true love lies sleeping in her tomb. She still holds my heart in her tender grip, and always will. I'm sorry."

Arella reached out, lifting my chin with a finger, and smiled at me. "Oh, Raven. Don't you think I know that by now?" she said, and kissed me gently. I smiled weakly. "Raven, I've had many years to think about this, and I have accepted the fact that you love me as much as you can - as a friend. I love you far more than that, and to me, you will always be my only love. Even so, I understand, and I'm not unhappy with you. You have to understand - to my eyes, you are like some powerful, beautiful, immortal being who said she'd hold me close to her forever, if only I would let her. Instead, I rejected her, because she couldn't give me her heart - and that was wrong. Now, I see that your love for Dyarzi is greater and grander than even the old plays of chivalry and love that still are shown in Larinia. It's a part of your soul. It's what drives you, day after day. It's what kept you going all those lonely years when I abandoned you in my foolishness, and it's what keeps you going today," she said, then suddenly giggled.

"What? What's so amusing, now?" I asked, smiling.

"Oh, Raven! The story of our relationship would make for a grand, tragic play that would draw audiences in Larinia for ages to come! My love for you, your love for Dyarzi, and I'm sure from the afterlife she looks down on you and loves you still. Yes, it would be a marvelous play, and I'm sure the author would make a fortune in ticket sales - if only the audience could get over the fact that all three of us are women," she said, and laughed harder. Swift-wing joined her, cackling loudly.

"But..." I began, about to object that I wasn't really a woman, I merely had a woman's body, but I couldn't finish. I burst out laughing. I reached out to Arella, and we hugged each other tight. For many minutes, the sound of our giggling echoed over my quiet, lonely lands.

Four.

"The heart of a woman is like the sea - deep, mysterious, ever-changing, and trackless."

- Vilandian Proverb.

"I have to go soon. My duties call," Arella said, stroking the point of my ear softly with her fingertips. I looked at her and sighed. The last hour between us in my bed had been pleasant and sweet. I was about to say something, but she silenced me with a finger across my lips. "Shh. It's alright. I'll be back in a few days when I have some more free time, love. Until then, and from now on, I want you to be careful."

"Careful? Why?" I asked, surprised.

"I've been thinking. You spent decades trying to research a spell to bring Dyarzi back. In fact, all told, you spent almost a century on it. Despite what your former friends may think, I honestly believe you are the best battle-mage Hyperborea produced - perhaps the best mage ever. And yet, you failed. Why?"

I shrugged. "Because the way I was trained to think about magic, the way I was trained to structure spells, wasn't the way it needed to be done. It took you spending years developing your own way of thinking about magic before you and I could come up with the real answer."

"Precisely. But they don't have an Arella-tor helping them, do they?"

"No, they don't," I replied, nodding in understanding. "They may work on this the rest of their lives and never discover the answer, simply because of how they were taught to think about magic."

"And what do you think will happen in ten or twenty or forty years when they fail?"

"They'll be angry and frustrated, of course, and they'll want me to give them the answer - or want to take it," I replied.

"But they aren't going to be able to take the knowledge from you. You're the best - they'd have to kill you. And if they did that, they still wouldn't have the answer. It's not so much having the spells and reading it from your grimoire, but knowing what order to cast them in, and what kind of preparations you need to make to the body."

I nodded again. "Yes, everything has to be just so for it to work. And, the person has to want to come back. Someone who died in pain, or who just finds the afterlife to be more enjoyable than their life had been might not want to come back. And this can only be tried once - if they fumble casting the spells, or try to bring back someone who simply doesn't want to come back, they can't try again on that person."

"And they probably are going to be smart enough to know they need you alive, both to get the spell from you and to learn the miscellaneous details you didn't bother to write down in your grimoire. Which brings me to my next point - this is why I think you are still in the body of a woman."

"Oh?" I asked, surprised.

"Yes. Think for a moment, Raven - what would happen if Dyarzi were here, living with you, and these men failed? And you know they will fail, it's only a matter of time."

I nodded, understanding - it was obvious. "They'd grow frustrated and angry, and perhaps use her as leverage to force me to tell them what they want to know."

"Precisely. And that is why I think you are still in this body - aside from the fact that, as you mentioned,

Yorindar probably has much more for you to do, if you had restored yourself to your old body and revived Dyarzi, she would become a potential hostage to be used against you," she said, then sat up. "And that's why I want you to be careful while I'm gone," she finished, then leaned down to kiss me again before she stood to go fetch her clothes.

I rose from the bed and began to help Arella don the multiple layers of undergarments she wore beneath her dress. I still was amazed that the women of the Southlands actually bothered to wear all of these garments - bloomers, slips, and a dozen other arcane items which somehow the men of Larinia found fascinating, but I found almost silly. When she was dressed, Arella helped me slip on my gloves, boots, and the elf-chain garment that I still wore beneath my robe. I still wore Dyarzi's elf-chain garments, as it seemed an appropriate way to honor and remember her, and after forty-seven years of doing so, it had become habit. I also wore it for simple convenience - I had to wear something beneath my robe, after all, and these elf-chain garments, like the gloves and boots, were enchanted to never wear out, and they didn't hold stains. It consisted of two triangles of elfin-mail that covered the breasts and another that covered the sex, all held together by elfin chain. The upper part was held on by two fine chains (one around the back, one behind the neck), and the lower part was held in place by a chain that went around the waist and another that went between the buttocks. I remember she used to like to wear it as she pretended she was some fantastic warrior-princess and danced for me, and the memory still brought a smile to my face. The enchantments on the gloves and boots were simple ones - they allowed the wearer to move as silently as a cat, climb like a spider on any surface that would support their weight, and were invulnerable to harm. They were also very thin, being made of black-dyed kidskin, the gloves coming to just above the elbows and the boots coming to just above the knees. Dyarzi wore them with a black silk bodysuit back in her thieving days, but that garment had long since rotted away. I only wished my hooded robe was similarly enchanted. I was always having to cast a Spell of Repairing on it to clean and restore it. However, I wasn't willing to weaken this body to enchant the robe, and then spend weeks or months in rigorous physical and mental disciplines to restore my strength, all just to save me the convenience of washing my robe.

Arella looked me over once I had the robe back on, and shook her head. "You know, you really should take that robe in here and here," she said, pointing. "It would look much better on you, and show off your figure more."

I chuckled. "I don't think I'm really all that interested in showing off my figure, Arella."

"Why not? You're beautiful, love," she said, and smiled warmly. "Listen: When you had your old body before, didn't you dress and act in ways that would impress people and get them to listen to you?"

"Well, yes, but-

"Your robes tailored so they'd hang well, your beard always perfect, everything looking just right so that when you spoke, kings and princes would listen?"

"Well... Yes, I did, but-

"No 'buts'. It's obvious Yorindar has selected you to be his raven and fight his enemies, and that you're in this body for a reason. You should dress and act the part, and be proud of who and what you are. Just as you dressed to impress your peers, your employers and your enemies ages ago as a Hyperborean battle-mage, you should do the same today."

I nodded - she had a point. "You're right. I shouldn't just let my appearance go, or people might not take me seriously. Certainly, each time I've picked up one of the condemned men over the last five years, the guards at the gate of the Great Wall were impressed with me - some were petrified. But then again, they

were expecting an executioner of some kind, and seeing a woman dressed in black robes appear, then walk towards them out of the wastelands... Well, that already had them worried. This doesn't mean that others will always see me the same way, though. Perhaps that's another reason I've had so much trouble with the men of my circle. To them, I just look like some little half-elf in a robe that's several sizes too large and shortened at the hem so I won't step on it - they aren't impressed," I said, glancing at myself in the full-length mirror I had standing against one wall. "Dressed as I am, I might not be all that impressive. What do you suggest?"

"Well, I would suggest that you and I go shopping for a proper kirtle, but I know you'd never wear it," Arella replied, giggling.

I nodded. "I've worn your dresses when I had to, back when Darian was here years ago, but I just don't feel comfortable in something like that. By the same token, this body looks silly in trousers and a tunic, so dressing as a man or boy isn't an option, either. That's why I've just continued to wear robes, as I always have. It's a genderless garment," I replied, and gazed at myself in the mirror again. "Hmmm... I suppose I could get a better robe from Taliad, the elven trader..."

"Well, let's try this," she said, and tugged at the lacings for her waist-belt. Once she had it off, she wrapped it around my waist and laced it up again. After a few tugs on the sides of my robe to give my arms full freedom of movement again, she stepped back and looked me over. "There - how does that look to you?" she asked.

I looked at myself in the mirror. The belt was a little over a hand and a half wide in the front, and half a hand wide in the back, peaked at top and bottom in the front. Laced tight on me, it made my hooded robe resemble some kind of loose, long-sleeved dress, and definitely improved my appearance. As my hands and feet were concealed by the black gloves and boots, this enhanced the effect, drawing the eye to my face and my pale, aquiline features. "Interesting. But I hate the color - it's brown, and looks bad on this robe."

"I'll get you a black one, love. I'll have it when I come visit you next time. Meanwhile, you can keep that one so you'll get used to wearing it and how you'll have to adjust your robe," she replied, smiling at me.

"No, don't bother - I have a spell of alteration that can permanently change the coloration of pretty much anything. I used to save a fortune using it. Black robes are more expensive than gray or brown," I said, gesturing briefly. In a moment, the belt darkened to match the ebon hue of my gloves and boots.

Arella smiled and held out her hand, summoning Swift-wing with a mental call. Swift-wing awoke from his perch on the mantle, and fluttered over to her outstretched hand. She then turned back to me, and grinned wickedly as she looked me up and down. "Well, one thing's for sure - once you clean up the mess outside, you'll have plenty of firewood stored," she said, and kissed me with a giggle before she cast her Spell of Returning and vanished.

I chuckled, then turned back to the mirror to look at myself again. Arella was right, this did look better. It was a small change, but it was the right change. Dressed like this, the woman in the mirror now looked like a "dark" version of the Mountain Healers - powerful, beautiful, impressive, and deadly. Then suddenly, I stopped and stared.

It wasn't just "the woman in the mirror" - this was my body, now.

And I still didn't want it.

Certainly, over the last four and a half decades I had gotten used to seeing what I now looked like in the mirror, and only rarely did I catch my reflection in the mirror or in a pane of glass in the windows and

glance behind me, looking for the strange woman I saw reflected there. I knew who I really was, and I remembered (more or less) what I used to look like. I was Eddas Ayar, a muscular, bearded Hyperborean male, about four cubits tall, and about fourteen stone in weight.

And the woman in the mirror wasn't me.

Oh, she was beautiful to look at, to be sure. Her high cheekbones, ebon hair and eyes, and her aquiline, half-elven features gave her a sensual, deadly beauty. But it wasn't me in the mirror, it was someone else. Yorindar's Raven, perhaps, but not me.

I ran my fingers over myself, feeling my face and body again, trying to reassure myself that the body was indeed mine. Arella sometimes laughed at me when I felt like this - I was glad she wasn't here right now. I didn't want to have to hear her tell me for perhaps the thousandth time that this was my body and I'd have to get used to it. I simply couldn't. There were times I wasn't bothered by it, because I didn't think about it. Then there were other times, like now, when I hated it.

I tried not to look at the face of the woman in the mirror as I opened the closet and again slid the mirror back inside it. Arella didn't like it when I hid my mirror like this. She said I had to look at myself, and be reminded of the change to be able to get used to it. When she saw my mirror was put away, she always opened the closet and slid it back out again. Perhaps she was right - but after over four decades, I had learned that the best way for me to be able to deal with my feelings when I felt like this was to simply put my mirror away, so the strange, half-elven woman in the mirror would stop staring at me with those alien, ebon-irised eyes of hers. I was certain Arella would visit again in a few days, gently scold me, and drag the mirror back out again, as she always did. Even so, it was better than smashing it to pieces and screaming, which is what I felt like doing right now.

It took hours to finish picking up all the smashed flinders of the benches outside my tower and store them in the storage barn Darian and I had built ages ago, even using my spell of telekinesis to quickly lift and move many pieces at once. Arella had been right - forty benches smashed to flinders did make for a substantial amount of firewood, and I chuckled as I climbed the stairs back to the top of my tower. Many of the pieces were small, and ideal for starting fires or for use in making a quick, hot cookfire. Though it had taken quite awhile to clean up the mess my rage had made, it now seemed I'd have enough firewood to last easily over a year.

I sat down at my table, lost in thought. It was several minutes before I noticed a long, black feather laying there atop the table. One of Swift-wing's, surely, dropped while he flew across the room to Arella. Even so, I knew what it meant. I picked up the feather, stroking it with a finger for a moment, then looked upwards, beyond the ceiling. "Now, Yorindar, or merely soon?"

There was no answer, of course, but I didn't really expect there to be one. I reached behind my head, slipping the feather beneath the magic silver-ring I used as a hair-band, sliding it next to the one I had from forty-five years ago before shrinking the hair-band tight again. "Alright, Yorindar. I am still your raven, and I will still serve you," I said, and rose to my feet. I didn't know what it was Yorindar needed, but I knew where his general concerns lay. At a thought, my staff leapt to my hand from its place by the hearth. I cast my Spell of Returning, and the world blurred.

Five.

"...eventually, of course, the Mana-storms died down, and all was quiet in Hyperborea again. It took a century or so, and off and on a mana-storm would flare again in one or the other of the numerous dead-zones, but the worst of the disaster seemed over. Ever the opportunists, the goblins declared that the lands of Hyperborea now belonged to the Unseelie court, and swarms of

goblins and their kin, the kobolds and hob-goblins, rode to capture the lands. The goblins, mounted on their dreaded dire-wolves, and rank after rank of hobgoblin infantry armed with kobold-forged weaponry and bearing the colorful clan-banners of a hundred different clans made a dashing sight as they rode across the blasted wastelands. Unfortunately, they failed to reckon with the giants, who viewed the goblins as tiny little pests, and viewed the dead Hyperboreans, who now had been gone over a century, as their ancient and deeply-mourned friends. The battle was amusing to watch, though it was rather one-sided from the start. As the goblins quickly learned, giants have very thick hides, and very large feet. There was much wailing of widowed goblin-wives deep in the Iron Mountains thereafter, and it was nearly two centuries before the goblins were again able to mass a reasonably sized army to resume annoying the dwarves..."

- Luvitar Simallion, A History of the Courts of Faerie, 304 NCC

'How long will you be gone, Eddas?' Longtooth asked in the language of the giants. The other giants of Dohbari village looked on in concern. I smiled reassuringly as I looked them all over.

My relationship with the giants had been a long one, and a good one. They patrolled and guarded my lands not merely because they always had done so since before living memory (myself not included), but because they cared for me as an ally and friend. I sat on one of the stones from the ruins of the Hyperborean city of Dohbari, where I'd be out from underfoot while I talked to them - the giants never walked upon the ruins of Dohbari, but instead their village encircled it. Their enormous huts, each the size of a small keep to me, surrounded the village protectively in a gentle embrace of quiet eulogy. Beyond the circle of their dwellings, the lands that had once been the fields of Dohbari were now used by giants, as was their rule, today. In Hyperborea today, the giants owned all the lands, save that which was the ruins of our cities and towns, which they left in peace and guarded out of respect for the dead, and a desire to not be haunted by the ghosts of the slain.

I smiled reassuringly at the sad gaze of Longtooth, who sat before me. "I do not know how long I shall be gone, my friend," I replied, my ring of translation allowing me to speak their language. "I believe Yorindar wishes me to serve him again. Perhaps a few months, perhaps a year or so. I do not know."

Longtooth nodded. "Then perhaps now is a good time to give you the gift I intended to give you, rather than waiting until the midwinter festival," he replied, and gestured to his wife, Charity. She nodded, and stepped into their nearby hut for a few minutes, then returned with a small leather sack, barely large enough to stuff a dog into. Longtooth nodded his thanks, taking the bag from her, then opened it and emptied it into his palm. There was a clank of metal, and he lowered his hand so I could see what he had. "Here are two rings, made for us by the smiths of the Ilbarsi Mountain giants," he explained, showing me two small hoops of steel, looking like the banding of a barrel, but large enough to fit on my thigh. "They are enchanted so that the wearer of one may speak to the wearer of the other, no matter how far apart."

I nodded, reaching out with my will to assense the Mana-flow of the rings. "Quite a neat enchantment, my friend. They are also enchanted to be invulnerable to harm, so they will never rust. I'm impressed - I didn't know the Ilbarsi giants had het-men capable of enchanting an item," I replied. I noticed the rings also had a standard sizing enchantment, though that would be of little use to me - the sizing enchantment only changed the inner diameter of the ring, not it's width or thickness, and as it was a finger thick and over a hand wide, I couldn't possibly wear it as a ring.

"They do not - such sorcery is still a bit beyond our reach. Our magic is not as strong as that of the Little People," Longtooth replied, bowing his head briefly. "The Ilbarsi smiths paid to have the rings enchanted by a dwarven wizard, and we then paid them for both the work on the rings and the enchantments."

I reached out, taking one of the hoops, and Longtooth smiled. He then slipped the remaining one on his

finger while I slid the right sleeve of my robe up, slipped the ring over my arm, and shrunk it down over my upper arm as a bracelet. "I thank you, and I appreciate the gift - it certainly will come in quite useful if I need to contact you or you need to contact me. Even so, it must have cost you a fortune. What possessed you to have it made, when you could simply walk down the road to talk to me?"

Longtooth looked up to the sky. "One of our gods came to me in a dream, and said that we might have need of it," he replied, then looked down to me as the rest of the giants gathered around nodded. "I told my people, and they agreed. We all contributed a portion of what gold we had accumulated from trading byallar to the dwarves, and had this made for us. It is not merely a gift from me, it is a gift from all the giants of Dohbari village."

I smiled, then stood and bowed both to Longtooth and all the giants assembled nearby. "I appreciate the gift, my friends. I shall return as soon as possible. Farewell."

"Farewell, Eddas Ayar," Longtooth called as I cast my Spell of Returning. The world blurred for a moment, then I was standing outside Steelgate, the king's castle in Larinia.

Darian's castle had changed dramatically since I last saw it, forty-five years ago. Back then, we had just concluded the siege which also ended the war, and the grounds surrounding the castle were torn and trampled from months of men and undead marching about. Now, the grounds were immaculate - for nearly half a league surrounding the castle, there was nothing but short grass. I spotted a shepherd tending a flock of sheep, and realized how Darian kept it that way. "He learned his lessons well," I thought to myself. "With local shepherds using the grounds to feed their sheep, there is no place nearby for an enemy to hide, and at the same time the local shepherds owe a debt of gratitude to the crown. Yes, I'd have to say I taught him well."

As I walked up to the castle, I looked it over at length. Gone were the red-and-black pennants of Dorian's rule. In their place, Darian had put his own flag - a combination of his father's crest, a sable drake rampant, and his own personal colors, a field vert. I thought it was a stroke of genius, myself, and smiled at the flags as I approached the castle.

There were two guards at the gate, and as I approached, they stepped forward to bar my way. Each was armed with a loaded crossbow, and wore a green surcoat with a black dragon over their chainmail armor. At their left hip, each carried a broadsword. The taller of the two looked down at me, a suspicious look on his face, and pointed his crossbow at me, holding it at his hip. "What business have you here, witch?"

"I am here to see King Darian. It is entirely possible I may be expected. Will you pass the word to him that Raven is here to see him, please?" I said, smiling pleasantly.

"I will not. The king is quite busy at the moment, and cannot be disturbed."

"I am an old friend of his, and he will certainly make time for me," I said, still smiling - which was difficult to do, considering he still pointed his crossbow at me menacingly.

"That, I truly doubt, witch. Begone," The guard replied with a snort.

"Certainly he's told you to be on the lookout for me - his Court Wizardess visits me often. My name is Raven - the king himself gave me that name. I'm also known as Eddas Ayar. Haven't they ever mentioned me at all?"

"No, woman. Begone."

I gritted my teeth in annoyance, but pressed on gamely. "Please, won't you just pass the word that I am here - if for nothing else, at least to see if I really am expected?"

"No. For the last time, woman! Begone!" the guard snapped.

I considered my options. I couldn't use my Spell of Returning to just enter the castle - I'd never been inside it. I had a Spell of Teleportation in my grimoire, but that would take too long to cast, I didn't have the reagents handy, and without having ever been where I wanted to teleport to, it was highly likely to fail, anyway.

As I thought about it, I became quite angry. I found the whole situation highly annoying. Arella could visit me any time she wished, as could Darian (with her help) or anyone else in the castle who might want to see me, but I couldn't come see them. They'd never even bothered to tell the guards what I look like, and who I was. I was nobody to them. They visited me when they felt like it, or when Darian needed some advice, but when I wanted to visit them, I was shut out. I looked to the guard, trying to control my temper. "You can inform the king that I am extremely displeased at being turned away at his gate, and I think this is a particularly poor way to treat an old friend."

The guard simply smirked at me, which infuriated me to no end. "Certainly, madam. Oh, I'll tell him that right away," he said sarcastically, and his companion guffawed.

"I will not be mocked!" I shouted, hating the sound of the woman's screech in my ears.

"Think not to cast any spells on me, witch. I'll feather you before you finish your first cantrip! Now, begone!" the guard snarled, lifting his crossbow for emphasis.

He probably could, too. He had me covered - he only had to squeeze the trigger, an action of a mere eyeblink, while I would take at least a heartbeat to spit out even the fastest incantation I knew. 'I don't want to return to my animuary - it might be many more millennia before my tomb is found again, and more time lost in trying to bring Dyarzi back to me,' I thought to myself - then it hit me.

I didn't have an animuary anymore. If I died, I would simply be dead. I would most likely join Dyarzi in the afterlife. I had nothing to lose anymore.

That thought shook me to the soul - and what was more, I realized I had no reason to stay among the living anymore. I had been ejected from the Dyclonic Circle. They would probably rebuild Hyperborea without me. Perhaps they could discover the same spell I discovered, or perhaps they could woo the Mountain Healers despite their being sapphites - I didn't know. Either way, it no longer mattered - I'd been rejected by both groups. I was nothing to them. And I was obviously nothing to Darian, or he'd have thought to tell his guards about me so that I might be able to visit. I was nothing to Arella, or she'd have done the same. No, to Darian, I was just an occasional source of advice, and his Hyperborean executioner. To Arella, I was just a friend whom she toyed at the idea of being in love with, and an occasional sexual release. I was nothing to anyone anymore.

I was once a great man, long ago. Power, respect and prestige were mine. The love of my life was at my side, and I had more wealth than some kings hidden away in my tomb. Now, I had nothing, not even my manhood.

I looked the guard in the eye.

"Shoot me, then."

The guard blinked in surprise, and hesitated - this apparently wasn't the reaction he expected.

I glared at him. "What's the matter? Are you afraid? Go on, shoot! I say I'm a friend of the king. If I'm not, what difference will it make? If I am, he would have told you about me. Since he didn't, obviously I'm lying. So shoot me! Come on, shoot!"

The guard hesitated again. I could tell by his expression he was now shocked and surprised. I was supposed to be afraid of him - afraid of death. I wasn't. I was far too old to be afraid of death anymore, and I had nothing to live for that I knew of. "What's the matter with you, are you afraid?! SHOOT ME NOW, COWARD! DO IT! KILL ME NOW!"

I could see it in his eyes. He was afraid of me now. It had finally dawned on him that I was a spellcaster, and I just might have enchantments on my body that would kill him the instant he pulled the trigger (there were some spells like that, such as the Spell of Missile Reflection). Even if I didn't, I just might be a friend of the king, and shooting me just might make the king annoyed with him - or worse.

"What's going on here?!" a man's voice called. I looked past the annoying guard. A man with salt-and-pepper hair was trotting towards us from the courtyard, and judging by his livery, he was probably the captain of the King's Guard. I looked at his face, and realized who it was.

"Javan Tybalt. At last we meet," I called, struggling to regain control of myself.

Tybalt looked me over apprehensively - I could see the memories of the War of the Twins and the mad witch that served the king were still fresh in his mind. "Do we know each other, madam?"

"Rhane the Dryad still speaks warmly of you. Because of your kindness, she carried five hundred acorns into the forest, planting them far and wide. Today, there are a hundred young dryads who owe their existence to your generosity. Unfortunately, they share none of your features, they are instead their mother's daughters. The biology of dryads isn't quite the same as that of humans in regards to heredity. I'm glad to see you rejoined the king's service," I said, still trying to calm myself.

Tybalt looked taken aback. "Aye, thank you, it was a blessing that the king took me back after two decades. All my family was long since dead, and I had nowhere else to go. But who are you? How do you know of Rhane?"

"I am Raven, the king's Hyperborean executioner. The witch who took away all the condemned men at the Great Wall. I've spoken to Rhane many times. She and I are good friends," I replied, then looked the guard who had been the cause of the trouble. "Better friends than the king has been. When I visit Rhane, she welcomes me with open arms. When I visit the king, I find his men pointing their weapons at me and telling me to leave."

"That was you at the wall? Some of us had begun to think it was a ghost or spirit of some kind..."

I shook my head - the ridiculous notions that entered the heads of mundanes, sometimes. "Ghosts can't be seen in broad daylight. They're only ectoplasmic forms - in direct sunlight, they're invisible, and powerless. Now, if you don't mind, Tybalt, this man and I have some unfinished business," I said, then turned back to the guard. "Well? I'm waiting. Shoot me. I tire of life. Truly."

The guard stammered, and Tybalt cut him off before he got very far. "Thedrin, put aside your bow."

"No, Tybalt, don't tell him to do that. I see the way the wind blows. The king no longer needs me, and hasn't even bothered to tell his guards I exist. I guess that's to be expected - I'm merely his executioner. Where I come from, that's the lowest possible job that can still be called honest, and only a step above shoveling manure. Thedrin, here, has said he'll shoot me. Fine - shoot. If that's the way the king treats his friends, then so be it. Kill me. I've nothing to live for, anyway."

"No, no, err... Raven, you said your name was?" Tybalt said, and I nodded. "The king isn't like that - he's really a kind and wonderful man. I'm sure it's just a simple oversight. What was it you came here for, today?"

"I came here to see the king. After how I've been treated by his guards, however, I'm not sure I want to anymore," I replied, drawing back my hood and glaring at the guard. Thedrin, the guard, now held his crossbow at his side and looked at me with a face that was a mixture of embarrassment and fear.

"Well, Raven, I don't know where you're from - I can't even tell judging by your appearance. I've never seen anyone like you. You look like a half-elf, but... Your hair and eyes are dark as coal. I've never seen the like. No matter - wherever you're from, Raven, here in Larinia, a king's executioner isn't that low a profession. Come," he said, holding out his hand. "I've some real byallar in my office. The elvish trader I get it from says it's grown by giants in Hyperborea."

There was an old Hyperborean saying; 'Never refuse a cup of byallar offered in friendship.' I put my gloved hand in his, and he clasped my hand by the fingers briefly, and smiled.

A few minutes later, I found myself sitting in Tybalt's office. He had a rather nice desk as Commander of the Royal Guard, though his office apparently doubled as his quarters, since I could see his bed against the far wall and what apparently was a clothes cabinet in the corner. I sipped at my cup of byallar - it was good, but not great. Apparently it wasn't from the giants of Dohbari village or from my own fields, but probably a nearby tribe, instead. "So, you worked as the king's executioner in Hyperborea, eh?" he asked, once he'd poured his own cup.

"Yes," I replied simply. It wasn't something I was particularly proud of, and my hopes of being able to restore my race through it had been utterly dashed.

"If you don't mind me asking, what was the name of the first criminal you executed for the crown?"

I thought about it for a moment. It was obvious why he was asking - he was trying to verify my story. "Dorgosson. Torin Dorgosson. He gave the order for the murder of the children of Thilo village, as I recall."

Tybalt nodded, and appeared to visibly relax. It seemed I had proved my identity satisfactorily - few people would know whom the first one was, since for many of them their crimes were so heinous that the order they would be executed in was determined by a draw of lots, and all information concerning where and when they would be moved was suppressed to prevent the Arcadians from ambushing the Larinian guards escorting them north through Arcadia to the Great Wall. There was still much hatred for those feeble old men, even after all those years, and Darian feared mobs would tear them to pieces if they knew (and, in the end, he was probably right). "I've always wondered... I mean, it's obvious you're a spellcaster. What did you do to them? I mean, what was their final punishment?"

"You really don't want to know," I replied dryly, sipping at my cup.

"I'm curious," he insisted, smiling. "Trust me - you won't offend me. I've fought in war, I've seen death, and I've attended the executions that have occasionally had to be performed here with some of the more dastardly criminals by our executioner, Avrick. The crimes of those old war-criminals were heinous - but what was their punishment? I'm quite curious."

"They were slain by sorcery. Painlessly, but permanently. More than that, you really do not want to know, Tybalt," I said warningly. I was certain that Tybalt would be horrified if I told him the truth - the souls of those condemned men were crushed and destroyed, their bodies taken over and reshaped by the men of my circle and the women of the Mountain Healers into their own. The condemned men didn't

even have the comfort of at least surviving their death in Hell, though in eternal torment for their deeds. No, they were simply gone, with no trace of them remaining on earth or in the afterlife.

"Ah, sorry, I didn't mean to offend you, my lady, I was merely curious."

I waved off his apology. "I'm not offended, don't worry."

Tybalt smiled. "Well, thank you, Raven. Tell me, you said to my guard 'I've nothing to live for, anyway.' If it's not prying, may I ask what you meant by that?"

"I have no family, no loved ones left alive, Tybalt. In many ways, you and I are alike in that regard. My closest friend is Arella-tor, and she visits me often in my tower in Hyperborea - though apparently we weren't close enough for her to bother to tell the guards what I looked like, should I one day decide to visit her in return."

"Well, as I said, I'm sure that's merely an oversight. If I may ask, how long have you worked as an executioner for the king?"

"Well, technically since about three months before construction was begun on the Great Wall."

Tybalt blinked. "Really? But you look so young!" he said, gazing into my face.

I simply smiled, and decided not to tell him my real age. "Thank you."

"Tell me, though - I've been in the King's employ about that long, and yet I've never seen you come here. Did you come here today to pick up your final salary?"

I shook my head, smiling. "No, I've never been paid-" I began, but Tybalt cut me off.

"What?! Never?" he asked, obviously surprised.

"No, never. You see-"

"Incredible! In all this time you've never been paid for the service you've rendered the crown, and the first time you come to collect your pay you find that the king has never even acknowledged your existence to his guards?!" Tybalt exclaimed, then hopped to his feet, setting down his cup of byallar. "My lady Raven, please come with me," he said, stepping around the desk and holding out his hand.

"But-"

"No arguments, please. I think it's time we see the king."

I finished off the last of my cup, then rose. "As you wish, Commander," I replied, smiling. After all, that was what I came here to do, and any way that got me to Darian was fine with me.

A few minutes later, Tybalt gestured to a seat beside one of the doors deep inside the castle. "Please, my lady, have a seat." I nodded, and complied. Tybalt then opened the door and stepped inside without knocking. "Sire, I must speak with you," I heard him call. The ears of my half-elf body were still keen, and I probably would still have heard him easily, even had he closed the door behind him.

"What is it, Tybalt?" I heard Darian's aged voice reply.

"Your majesty, I have here just outside your throne room a person who has been in the crown's employ for over twenty-five years, and has never been paid for the services they rendered. Even at the usual rates for a person of their employment, the debt owed this person comes to at least fifty gold, sire - most

likely far more than that."

"What? Never been paid? Joy, do you know anything of this?"

"No, Darian, I don't," Joy replied, her voice sounding surprised and confused.

"What about you, Arella?"

"No, your Highness," Arella replied, her voice also sounding surprised and confused. "Should we summon the Royal Exchequer?"

"Immediately. And bring this person in that we may hear them out," Darian replied.

I grinned. I could see Darian and Arella would have a big surprise in store for them.

"Wait, sire - there's more."

"More? What more?"

"This person came to the castle today to collect their pay, and neither myself nor any of my guards were even told before hand that they existed, despite the importance of the duty to the crown they were performing. As a result, one of my guards nearly shot and killed them for refusing to leave the castle when ordered. Yet, I have questioned them sire, and I am certain they are who they say they are. Sire, I submit that the way this person has been treated is beneath the dignity and honor of the crown, and an immediate redress is in order."

"What? Bring them in, Tybalt. This must be resolved immediately."

I smoothed my face just as Tybalt stepped back out through the door. He then held out his right hand for me, and I took it. With an act of will honed through years of chatto-matches and in meeting and dealing with kings, I kept my face totally calm and expressionless and Tybalt led me in, walking with all the dignity and pride I could muster. I bowed as Tybalt released my hand and introduced me. "Your majesty, I present goodmaid Raven."

Both Arella and Darian looked stunned. "Good afternoon, your majesty," I said calmly, only barely able to suppress a grin. Queen Joy, who sat to Darian's right, chuckled slightly as she looked at me. Joy towered over Darian, even with them both sitting. Of course, that was to be expected - unbeknownst to the people of Darian's kingdom, Joy was a giant - though one that never attained full growth, as she was also a midget due to her mother being caught in a Mana-storm while very young.

It was Darian who found his voice first. "Raven, what are you doing here? Is this some kind of joke? Arella was only at your tower a few hours ago - if you had a problem, why didn't you talk to her about it then?"

My mirth instantly turned to annoyance. Normally, I preferred it when friends I hadn't seen in years began conversations with "Hello, how are you?" or something similar. Arella and Joy simply stared at Darian, and I could see out of the corner of my eye that Tybalt was surprised by Darian's poor manners, as well. "I am fine, your majesty, thank you for asking."

Darian rolled his eyes, looking highly annoyed. "Come, come, Raven. I'm very busy today. Could you come to the point quickly?"

"Yes, your majesty, my byallar trees are flowering nicely, thank you. If we don't have a cold snap this spring, I think I'll have a good harvest this fall," I replied coldly.

Darian sighed, running his fingers through his snow-white, thinning hair. "Alright, look - I know Arella said you had some sort of tiff with the other members of your order. Is that what this is about?"

"Tiff? Tiff?! I was cast out! Ejected! Humiliated! It wasn't a 'tiff', all my hopes and dreams are in ashes!" I shouted, then struggled to regain my composure. Finally, I looked at Darian, my face smooth again. "No, your majesty. What this was about was two things: One, coming to visit an old friend. When your guards gave me the greeting they did at the gate, I grew angry and assumed that the reason they were treating me this way was because you no longer considered me to be your friend - I was merely a tool you had used, and now no longer had a use for. Tybalt almost had me convinced otherwise, but now, I see in your rudeness to me that I was correct. Two, Yorindar gave me a sign that I should come and see you today," I said, and tugged the feather I'd found today loose from my hair-band. "This sign. I thought perhaps I was needed. I can see that not only am I not needed, I am not even wanted. I have never been treated so rudely by any king, not even by ones who wanted to kill me, Darian," I said, and plucked the second feather from my hair-band, holding it in my fingers along with the first. "If Yorindar wants your family protected, he can damn well get some other fool to do it. I'm through being treated like nothing by you," I said, and let the feathers go. As they fluttered gently to the floor, I spoke again. "Since it is obvious I am not welcome at your castle, then you and yours are no longer welcome at my tower," I said, and pulled the hood of my robe up. "I tried to teach you to choose your enemies well, Darian. I hope you have chosen well this day. Goodbye," I said, and incanted my Spell of Returning. As the world blurred, I heard Darian's voice call "Wait!" - but it was too late. I was already gone.

Six.

"And Honor! Aye, the Hyperboreans did know Honor. They did fight with honor, and they did die with honor. Ye may say what ye may about the dandelion-eating elves, but they do yet have honor. Even the wretched, evil Dark-elves do yet have honor of a sort, though it be yet warped and twisted, belike gnarled wood left to rot in a darkling sea of hate. And yet, the Hyperboreans did know honor even better than the elves, and oftentimes better than yet we did, ourselves."

- King Gunim IV, Commentaries on History, 1348 NCC

I sat in the small chair I'd placed in Dyarzi's crypt, gazing at her bones as she slept the eternal sleep. I'd had an earth elemental move her crypt in toto to the tomb I'd had dug beside my tower, hidden deep beneath the earth. The elemental did the job without disturbing even the dust that once was her flesh. When I'd first lain her body upon the marble bed that was her bier all those centuries ago, I'd wept hot tears of sorrow as I looked over her perfect, motionless body. She had still been beautiful, even in death. Now, only her bones remained. I had stroked her cold, dead hands then, and touched her face. Now, I dared not touch her, for fear of collapsing the delicate arch of her ribcage or scattering some of the dust. I gazed into the grinning skull of her face, and sighed.

I loved her still, and always would.

I gazed down into my lap, at my knife. Its blade was enchanted - sharper than the sharpest razor, it was also invulnerable, and would never lose its edge. Its damage was augmented by sorcery, as well, and could pierce armor and rend flesh as well as a shortsword, despite the modest length of its blade.

I wondered if it would hurt much.

I had nothing left, now. Nothing at all. And with my animus destroyed by the skull of Hyarlanoth, I was free to join Dyarzi in the afterlife.

I wondered if a thousand years from now, when this tomb was discovered again, or perhaps a thousand thousand years from now, if anyone would wonder about the skeleton of a half-elf woman in this room

with that of a human woman. I doubted it. Most likely, whoever found this tomb would simply be grave robbers. They'd take what they wished, then leave. Most likely, my people would be long forgotten, even to the elves. No, no one would know what happened, or who we were. No one would care.

I wrapped my hand about the hilt of my knife, lifting it from my lap. A hard, fast, clean cut across my throat should do it.

"Eddas," a deep, rumbling voice called in my ears, startling me. After a moment, I recognized it as Longtooth's, and remembered the magic giant's ring I wore as a bracelet on my right arm. For several heartbeats, I considered just slitting my throat anyway. Nothing he could say would make any difference, and I'd already said my goodbyes to them, anyway.

I sighed - he was a friend, and I owed him better treatment than that. I wasn't Darian, after all. I willed the ring to transmit my voice, and spoke quietly. "What is it, my friend?"

"The Little One, Arella-tor. She is here, in Dohbari village, with Joy the little giantess and her husband, King Darian."

"Yes?"

"They want to ask me of you, Eddas. They have been to your tower, and called for many hours. I have told them you are not there. I did not know if you were even alive, since I thought you were with them in the Southlands. Where are you? Are you alright?"

"I do not know, Longtooth. I think I am at the brink of my soul, as we Hyperboreans used to say," I replied, struggling to keep my voice calm.

There was a long pause, then Longtooth spoke again. "I have told them what you said. The Little People, Arella and Darian, do not understand it. I told them that I understand it. Joy, the little giantess, has told them she understands it. We giants do not remember much of the deeds of the Hyperboreans, as we were never much interested in what you had done, but were deeply fascinated with who you were. Something terrible has happened to you, my friend, to push you this far. Tell me, please."

"I..." the words stuck in my throat. It was too much. Arella didn't understand. She couldn't possibly understand - she was no Hyperborean, though she might be distantly related to one.

"Tell me, my friend. Who understands you better than the giants, and of all the giants, who understands you better than we of Dohbari village, who have lived beside you nearly half a century, and of all those of Dohbari village, who understands you better than I, your het-man? For as surely as we think of you as one of us, more than friends but kindred spirits of this land of Hyperborea, then I am your het-man, Eddas Ayar. Speak to me. Tell me what has happened, please."

"I... I have been ejected from my circle, Longtooth. They called me a madman, a heretic, for rejecting the god Morgar, who himself is insane. They cannot accept this half-elven woman's body as being me. The shame is great, Longtooth. The shame upon me is great. To be ejected from my circle... It is to be marked as being a shunned one. It is an act done to those who commit grave crimes, those who prove themselves to be unworthy of the brotherhood of the Dyclonic Circle. And yet... And yet this is not all. The Mountain Healers reject my plans, and reject me. I believe they may be sapphites. My race is doomed, and I have failed. My shame is even greater for this."

"This is not all. I can sense it in your voice. You are strong. Strong enough to bear this rejection for the poor and foolish choice it is, strong enough to bear this failure for the whim of fate it is. Your body may be tiny and frail, but your will is greater than mine could ever possibly be. No, there is something more,

something which has pushed you to the brink of your soul. Tell me - what else has happened?" Longtooth asked, his wisdom as his tribe's het-man showing. His mind, like that of all giants, might be slow, but he was far from stupid.

I struggled to control myself. It was unbecoming, and unmanly to weep. I may be in the body of a woman, but I would not weep like a woman - not now. "Darian. He is my friend - my first friend in this life. I endured five years of disgrace as his executioner, in the hope that my people might be revived - and this failed. Today, he calls my ejection from the circle... He calls the greatest shame of my life... A 'tiff.' I mean nothing to him. I am merely a tool that he has used, and now no longer needs. The wall is built, the condemned men are dead. My usefulness to him is at an end," I said, then paused as I struggled to compose myself. "There. I have said it, and by speaking of it I have shamed myself even further by revealing how truly small and insignificant was that thing which has shamed me beyond measure. Please, do not ask me to speak more of it. I simply cannot."

There was a long pause after that. I assumed Longtooth was talking to Darian, Arella and Joy. I hated it. I found that even knowing I was being discussed, that my weaknesses and my shame was a topic of conversation, perhaps even mirth, brought even more humiliation to me.

"Come to Dohbari, Eddas," Longtooth said at last.

"And bear the shame of them staring at me, now that you have told them what I've told you? No, I cannot," I replied.

"Then come invisible - but come now, please. As your friend I ask this. As your het-man, I command it. Come, Eddas. Come to the stone you sat upon earlier today."

Of course, Longtooth wasn't really my het-man, any more than I was a giant of Dohbari village. Even so, I understood what he meant. The giants had accepted me as one of them - a kindred spirit, if not a fellow giant. As far as they were concerned, I was a part of their tribe. It was a high honor, of course, and one enjoyed by only a handful in all of the history of Hyperborea. To reject him now would be to reject the honor they bestowed upon me, and spurn their friendship - and I couldn't possibly do that. With a sigh, I spoke again. "Alright, Longtooth. Just this once. Because you asked. For no other reason." I thought about casting a spell of invisibility, then decided against it. I had been totally stripped of my honor - having them stare upon me in my misery would make little difference, now. Sheathing my knife, I stood and looked to Dyarzi, laying quietly upon her bed of stone. "I'll be with you soon, my love. Only one last humiliation to bear, then I will be with you." Dyarzi said nothing, of course, but simply lay there quietly, as she had for over sixteen centuries.

I cast my spell of returning, and in a moment, I stood before Longtooth. He was seated, facing the ruins of the old Hyperborean village his own surrounded. Between he and I, and facing him, stood Darian, Arella and Joy, with Swift-wing riding Arella's shoulder. I looked behind me for a moment, then sat on the stone I had seated myself on earlier. "I am here, Longtooth," I said, and pulled the hood of my robe forward to shadow my face. "Let this humiliation be over soon, that I may go. I tire of living," I said, and sat on the stone.

Darian, Arella and Joy turned around. Through Joy, Darian and Arella both understood the language of the giants, so my words had not been lost on them. Darian spoke first, bowing his white-haired head. "Raven, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to treat you that way. It was -"

I cut him off. I could read his words in his wrinkled face long before he said them - it was obvious. "Yes, I know. You have a marvelous excuse, and you're terribly chagrined that I might take offense to what you said, or in any way be upset with having been nearly shot to death at your gates by your guards, or

having been treated like unwanted baggage by you. You'd like to express your sincere condolences for what happened to me, as the depth of my feelings of embarrassment and shame over my expulsion weren't clear to you until now. Does that about cover it?" I snapped angrily.

"Well... Yes, but-"

"Oh, Darian, I can read you like a damn book. I can see the biggest mistake I ever made with you is I never sat you down and taught you chatto. Your thoughts are as clear to me on your face as the sun in the sky. You're now probably thinking that there was more you wanted to say. I can guess - you don't want me to die, you don't want to lose a good friend, and you probably have need of me again. Something important, I'll wager, or you'd never have bothered to apologize. You have a need for your Hyperborean executioner again, or some other lowly deed that you think only I can do, and you certainly don't wish to lose so valuable a tool as me just at the moment you realized you need it. You're probably thinking of holding me to my promise to serve you for as long as you needed me. Well, I did - and today, you showed me that you no longer needed me, and showed me your real feelings towards me. I am no friend of yours, Darian. You chose to rub my deepest humiliation in my face. That is something you only do to an enemy. I tried to teach you to choose your enemies well, Darian. Perhaps you have - I find I can no longer live with this shame, and I certainly have no other reason for living, so very soon, I'll be dead by my own hand. Perhaps you have chosen your enemies well. A dead enemy is no threat to you," I snarled.

Darian stared at me in shock, and I can see that though I probably hadn't guessed right, I wasn't far off. He stood there in silence, and Joy glared down at him. Joy was still impressive to gaze upon - her snow-white hair and flashing blue eyes stared out from an aged face that still held a commanding, regal presence as a remnant of her youth and beauty. She also was still two heads taller than Darian, as she stood five cubits in height. "My husband, I tried to tell you. Eddas may have the body of a half-elf woman, but inside, he is still a Hyperborean male. They do not see the world the same way the Little People of the Southlands do, nor do they see the world the same way the giants do. They were an ancient, proud and honor-bound race, like the elves or the dwarves. To simply come here and apologize might have worked if Eddas was indeed a half-elf woman, with a human parent of Larinian or Arcadian extraction. But he is not. Treating him this way has only made him more shamed and angry than he was before. We giants know the Hyperboreans. They were our friends and neighbors. You do not."

"Alright, Joy. Handle it your way, then," Darian said, nodding.

Joy turned to me, and began to speak in the language of the giants. "Master Eddas Ayar, I ask that you let me take the wife's privilege as Fridmagga under the customs of your people. I apologize that I cannot ask you in your language, as your tongue has been lost to the giants for many centuries. I also ask that you forgive me if I do not follow the proper customs exactly as you may remember them, for I am only recalling what I have been taught of your people, I am not one of you," Joy said, and Longtooth and the rest of the giants gathered around nodded their approval.

I sighed. I could see this was going to take awhile longer. "I am listening."

"Master Eddas Ayar, my husband wronged you, and I do not agree with his reason for doing so. He was distracted by family matters. Our son is..." she began, then paused and shook her head. "No matter. When you left, I said to him 'Why did you do that? The one person who could possibly have helped us with Noril, and you treat them so badly that they renounce their friendship to you and their duty to their god and leave? Have you lost your mind?' He apologized to me, but could not apologize to you because you were gone, and the offense he has done to you goes beyond mere apology."

"So he is here because he needs me. I thought as much. I am just a tool to him, nothing more," I snorted

in reply.

"No, he is not. He is here because he still considers you his friend, and wishes to make amends for what he has done. We are willing to live with our problem and let his posterity fail. We are not willing to let you go. You are more important, and your friendship is more important."

"What do you mean, 'let his posterity fail'? What's the matter with Noril?" I asked, curious.

"That is of no consequence right now, Eddas Ayar. The only thing that is important is that you understand I am here as Fridmagga. It is important enough to us for me to agree to this, and my husband truly wishes to make peace with you and be your friend again."

I snorted again. "Does he have any idea what that means?" I asked, gesturing at Darian.

"No, he does not."

"Then you should tell him," I said, and crossed my arms beneath my breasts and waited.

Joy turned to Darian, who had been following along with the conversation since she had taught him the language of the giants years ago. "Darian, what an offer of Fridmagga means to a Hyperborean is that I give myself to your enemy by your consent, to do with as they wish. It is a show of how serious you are about making peace - you give your most valued possession, your wife, over to the enemy as a show of the seriousness of your desire to make peace."

Darian and Arella looked on in surprise, and Swift-wing muttered nervously on Arella's shoulder. "What does that mean, Joy? What can Eddas do to you?"

"Anything he wishes. To a Hyperborean, it is a final and sincere offer of peace and friendship, and how I am treated reflects your enemy's desire for peace. Traditionally, a Hyperborean who is your enemy will either call off their argument with you and become your friend out of respect for your sincerity, or they will publicly acknowledge that the matter between you two will only be settled by death - usually by Single Combat, following the ancient dueling codes of the Hyperboreans."

"But what happens to you?" Darian asked.

"Whatever he wishes. Traditionally, the wife is returned unharmed - Hyperborean males consider it dishonorable to war upon a woman unless that woman wars upon them first, and the exchange back and forth of the wife was handled with a great deal of ceremony and chivalry, usually with a special palanquin and many armed men as guards from both sides. However, by Hyperborean law and custom, the enemy has the right to do whatever they want. They can kill the Fridmagga, rape them, mutilate them, anything they wish, without legal consequences. That is what makes it a show of the sincerity of your desire for peace - both you and your wife agree that the cause is valuable enough for her to risk the possible consequences. If there were no possible consequences, then the whole thing would have no meaning - it would just be an empty gesture. The only thing they cannot do is keep the Fridmagga. The wife must be returned by the end of three days, whether alive or dead, unharmed or in small pieces. No matter what the condition of the wife, or her corpse, she must be returned by the end of three days."

"You mean Eddas could kill you for my insult?"

"Yes, of course. That's what establishes the sincerity of the custom. There's a bit more than what I've said to it, but that's all you need to know to understand it," Joy replied calmly. "Such were the ways of the Hyperboreans. They are not like the Larinians or the Arcadians. They were human, yes - but of a different culture."

Darian looked very nervous for several heartbeats. He turned to look at me for a long time. Finally, he shook his head, and smiled slightly. "Alright, Joy. Do whatever is necessary."

Joy nodded, then turned to me and knelt in the dirt. I looked at her - kneeling only brought her down to my height. She sat back on her heels, then bowed her head. "I present myself to you as Fridmagga, Eddas Ayar." I looked beyond her to Darian, Arella and Swift-wing. Arella and Swift-wing both looked nervous, but Darian seemed very calm, and was smiling slightly.

'Oh, so sure of yourself, are you?' I thought. 'We'll see about that.' I held out my tiny, black-gloved hand to Joy, and she took it in her enormous one. Then, to Darian's shock and surprise, I cast my Spell of Returning.

In a moment, Joy and I were in my room at the top of my tower. I walked over to my table and sat, pulling down the hood of my robe. I then just glowered at her for several minutes. Joy didn't look up, she merely sat there quietly on the floor.

"I should kill you, you know," I said at last, speaking in the tongue of the giants.

"I know," she replied, her head still bowed.

"It's what he deserves - and you, for manipulating this situation."

"I know."

"He was smiling before we left. Smiling! He thinks that this will solve everything, and that naturally I won't do anything to you. He doesn't understand the Hyperboreans. You do. You manipulated this whole situation! You manipulated Darian and me, forcing me into a position where I will have to make peace with him, or duel him to the death. And you know I don't want to kill him. He saved my life - I can't kill him, and you know it," I said angrily.

"Yes, I know," she replied, her voice quiet.

"And I'll wager there's nothing wrong with Noril, either."

Joy hung her head. "No, Eddas. He has some troubles with his studies, and I think that both my son and my daughter would benefit from becoming your students, even as Darian was your student, but no, there is nothing wrong at the moment other than that."

"I can't believe you'd do this to me, Joy. You astound me."

"I did it for my children, Eddas. My children are everything to me. Darian is old, Eddas, and growing senile. We had our children late in life - though not for lack of trying. For a long while, I wondered if I would have children at all. Arella gives him herbs that keep his mind alert, but he still has bouts of confusion and forgetfulness, sometimes. He both fears and is frustrated with his own forgetfulness, Eddas. He can feel his mind going, sometimes. This makes him very short tempered, and sometimes very crotchety and rude - as he was with you. My children need you, Eddas. They need you as their protector, and as their teacher. Darian cannot finish instructing his son in the skills needed to be king - it's all he can do to handle the day-to-day affairs of the kingdom, now," she replied, then sighed. "My children need you, Eddas. They need Yorindar's Raven to guide them, to mentor them, and to protect them."

"To protect them from what?"

Joy sighed. "I don't know. I don't know! Call it Mother's Intuition. Call it whatever you want. I only

know that they will need you to protect them."

I nodded. "Alright, I understand why you did it. Still, you didn't tell Darian everything. Fridmagga is the ultimate form of surrender, Joy! It is a request for me to either make peace with him, or to duel him one-on-one. And you know I can't do the latter, so you have forced me to make peace with someone who has insulted me more deeply than I can bear!" I snapped.

Joy sniffled. "I know, Eddas. He didn't mean to hurt you. He's just an old, slightly senile, crotchety man. He still thinks of you as his friend. He doesn't realize how deeply he hurt you by rubbing your humiliation in your face - he doesn't understand you, Eddas. He never really did. He thinks he does, but he doesn't. Only we giants truly understand you, and perhaps the elves and the dwarves. Even so, he really does care for you deeply, Eddas - as do I. He didn't come just because he needs you, he came because he still thinks of you as a friend, and he's sorry he hurt you. Forgive him, Eddas. He didn't mean it. He didn't mean to hurt you."

I sighed. "Alright, I'll forgive him," I said, then rose from my chair and stood before her. "You, on the other hand, I can't forgive. How dare you manipulate me like this?!"

Joy held her head up. "I dare for my children! They need you now, and they will need you in the future," she said, then reached into the sleeve of her dress and extracted the two raven feathers I'd dropped before Darian's feet back in his throne room. "I beg you, Eddas. Take back the feathers. Be Yorindar's Raven again. Protect my children, as only you can. Yes, I lied to my husband by not telling him the whole truth, and yes, I manipulated you. I called upon a tradition that was ancient even back when you were alive, and had ossified over the centuries into a simple, brief exchange of a hostage to call a truce and end a war between two kings, one way or another. I admit it normally would never be applied in this situation, and I admit I manipulated the situation to force you to make peace with my husband for the sake of my children. I admit all this, and I accept whatever punishment you deem appropriate for this. I only ask that you please take back the feathers, be Yorindar's Raven again, and guard my children."

"And yet you know also that there is nothing I can do to you. You're my friend, I don't want to hurt you. Even if I did, if I harmed you in any way, I would dishonor myself, and Darian will never understand or forgive it," I said, then shook my head. "Yes, Joy, you've manipulated things quite neatly."

"For my children, Eddas. It was all for my children. I care for you deeply. Without you, I would never have met Darian, and I would never have known four decades of love and happiness. I owe you a debt greater than I can ever repay, and I care for you deeper than I can ever say. But yes, I manipulated you. For my children," she replied, her head held high. Joy held the feathers out to me again.

I sighed, then reached out and took them, slipping the two feathers beneath my hair-band again. Joy slumped, looking down to the floor, then suddenly sobbed. "I'm sorry, Eddas. I really am. I had to do it. I couldn't let my husband's ignorance and pettiness destroy your friendship and remove your protection from my children. I'm sorry."

I leaned down and hugged her, patting her back gently. "It's alright, Joy. Do the giants still remember what the Hyperboreans meant by 'forglamma'?"

"Yes," she replied, still sniffing as she hugged me back.

"Forglamma, Joy. It's forgiven, and forgotten. We shall not speak of this again once we leave this room. It never happened."

"Thank you, Eddas. It is Forglamma, then. And I shall be eternally grateful," she sniffled, and hugged me painfully tight.

When she let me go, I looked down on her and chuckled. "Tell me, Joy - where did you learn to be so devious and manipulating, though? You were never like this when you lived here on my lands."

Joy wiped her eyes, then grinned wryly. "You cannot be wife and queen for over four decades and not learn something of the hearts of men," she replied, and tapped my chest over my left breast with an index finger as thick as my thumb. "And you, my dear, old friend, still have the heart of a man, despite all appearances," she said, and chuckled. I chuckled with her, and she rose to her feet and brushed off the front of her dress. She then took my hand, and smiled. "Take me back, Eddas, then come back to Steelgate in the morning, please. Tybalt was right - it was merely an oversight that the guards were never told to anticipate you might visit. We had planned on telling them after the wall was complete, but other things came up, and we forgot. Let us try again, please. Forglamma - the incident earlier today never happened. Come back in the morning, and we shall greet you as you should have been greeted."

I smiled in return, craning my neck to look up to her face. "As you wish, Joy," I replied, and cast my Spell of Returning again.

Seven.

"No one really understands what it's like, I'm afraid. My single night with Rhane was lovely... Glorious, in fact. It was, perhaps, the most powerful, intense and erotic experience of my life, and to this day I often dream of her and that single night we spent together, inside her ancient Oak. She was a wise, powerful and incredibly beautiful being... Yes, it was perhaps the happiest moment of my life. But the price! To return and find twenty years had passed, all my family dead (I had no brothers or sisters), all my friends old and many of them dead, as well... And everything had changed. Yes, no one really understands what that is like, I'm afraid. Well, except for perhaps Dame Raven. I could see it in those dark, mysterious, beautiful elven eyes of hers... Somehow, she seemed to understand."

- Commander Javan Tybalt of the King's Guard, Personal Diary, 1681 NCC

The morning sun shone down brightly, and a crisp, westerly spring breeze plucked lightly at my robe as I walked up to the gates of Darian's castle, Steelgate. The guards at the gate spotted me as I approached, and one of them darted inside the castle. I walked up to the gates, hoping that the guards there wouldn't be the same men that were there the day before. They weren't - apparently, either Joy or Tybalt had seen to that. The men who were there smiled in welcome, and bowed as I passed them.

As I looked around the courtyard, I spotted a grinning Tybalt trotting up to me. I smiled pleasantly in return, and when he had reached me, he bowed deeply. "Good morning, my lady. I'm happy to see you again."

"Good morning, Tybalt. It is a pleasure to see you, as well," I replied.

"I should warn you that the King and Queen have quite a bit planned for you today, to make up for how you were treated yesterday," he said, winking at me.

"Oh? That sounds quite nice."

"Oh, it will be more than nice, I assure you. A woman of such grace and refinement as yourself deserves to be treated properly."

I managed to keep the surprise off my face, and simply smiled again. Tybalt again led me to the throne room, past several guards in the castle who all snapped to attention smartly as we passed. I was quite impressed, though I was sure that the display was more for Tybalt's rank than for myself - he was their

commander, after all, and I was nobody.

As we entered the throne room, I smiled. Darian, Joy and Arella were there, and they were dressed in their finest raiments. Instead of a simple circlet of gold, both Darian and Joy were wearing their 'ceremonial' crowns. Noril and Dawn, their children, were also there, as were several dozen men who appeared to be royal functionaries, and all were dressed in what appeared to be their finest. Even Swift-wing seemed preened to perfection as he sat on Arella's shoulder. I wondered what it was they had in mind. "Good morning, your majesty," I said, bowing.

"Good morning, Raven. And how are you, today?"

"I am fine, thank you, your majesty," I replied, smiling.

"We are glad you came today. It has come to our attention that you have performed a service for the crown without compensation for well over two decades. Your service has been honorable, yet without compensation. This, we believe, was in error. It is time that we corrected this problem, and rewarded you for your patience all these many years," Darian said formally, using the royal 'third person'. "Come before us, and kneel," Darian commanded, pointing to the red-carpeted floor before his throne.

I kept my face smooth and did as he wished. I already knew what he had in mind - Darian truly was an easy man to read, particularly now, in the fading years of his life.

A young man, apparently a page, stepped up to Darian at a gesture, and held out a sword to him. Darian took the sword, then spoke, tapping each of my shoulders with the flat of the blade. "In compensation for her loyal service to the crown, let it be known henceforth that we have dubbed this woman Dame Raven, and elevate her to the esteemed rank of Defender of the Realm," he said, then handed the sword back to the page. "Rise, Dame Raven."

"Thank you, your majesty," I replied, putting a smile on my face to conceal my real feelings. Darian still didn't really understand me - he was knighting me as Dame Raven, as though I was happy and comfortable both being Raven and being a female. And I wasn't. The young Prince Darian I had known over forty years ago knew that. The aged King Darian before me now had forgotten it. He smiled broadly, his wrinkled face showing he thought he was bestowing a great honor upon an old friend. I smiled back, glancing over to Joy. Arella was standing next to her, and they both smiled nervously. Our eyes met briefly, and I could see Joy and Arella understood. I nodded to them, and both Joy and Arella seemed to visibly relax. I imagine Darian had proposed this last night, and neither of them could talk him out of it, simply because Darian no longer understood me.

As I rose, I glanced over to Darian's children. Princess Dawn beamed a glorious smile at me, and appeared very happy for me - and I suppose she truly was, as it would ordinarily be considered an enormous honor to be made a Dame, and a Defender of the Realm was a knight of the highest order in Larinia, with the usual knightly rights of meting out low justice combined with having the King's ear. Noril, however, merely smiled politely - it was highly unusual to make a woman a Defender of the Realm (I was, quite possibly, the first to receive such an honor), and I could see he was probably wondering just exactly what I had done to deserve the honor other than act as Royal Executioner and kill a few old men. I suppressed a sigh - neither of them really knew me, save through stories their parents might have told them. I managed to smile and bow my head as the rest of the people gathered to witness the event applauded politely.

Darian spoke up again, interrupting my thoughts. "Now, Dame Raven, we have something we would like to ask of you."

"What is it, your majesty?"

"We would like you to begin tutoring our heir, even as you tutored us forty-five years ago. The lessons you taught us have served us well in the years we have been king, and we think our heir's education would also benefit."

"Certainly, your majesty. When shall I begin?"

"Well, our heir's lessons begin in an hour. Perhaps you could meet with the Royal Schoolmaster then? Tybalt can take you," Darian replied with a smile.

"Certainly, your majesty," I replied, inclining my head.

"Very good! Well, for the moment, we should return to the affairs of state. Why don't you allow Tybalt to show you around the castle in the meantime?"

"As you wish, your majesty," I said, and Tybalt stepped up to me, extending his arm with a smile.

"There is no weapon more graceful, more elegant, or more deadly than the bow - save, of course, for a maiden's smile."

- Elven proverb.

Eight.

"And from here, our archers can strike any enemy who approaches closer than that league marker in the road," Tybalt explained, pointing off the battlement of the west side of the castle, the side where the drawbridge was.

"What distance is that? It looks to be about a hundred paces," I asked, fascinated in the castle's defenses.

"You've a good eye, my lady. It is indeed a hundred paces."

"Bah. You should be able to shoot a bit farther than that from here atop the wall. What kind of bows are you using?"

Tybalt again looked at me strangely. It had been like this for the last half an hour - whenever I showed knowledge or understanding of warfare, he seemed surprised by it. "I'll show you," he replied, and called to one of the guards nearby. A few moments later, two guards came up - one was carrying a crossbow, and the other a straight-limbed yew bow. "Here you are, my lady. This here is one of our best bows - fully four stone draw weight. This crossbow has a greater draw at ten stone, but its bolts fall short of that marker by a bit over half," he explained.

"Ah. You should use a recurve bow, like the elves. You'll get a greater draw weight, and be able to shoot farther. As for your crossbows, you really should use spring-steel for the bow like the dwarves do, not oak, and a windlass to cock it rather than a foot-stirrup."

Tybalt shook his head, dismissing the two guards with a gesture. "My lady, I'm afraid we've no idea how to do either. Besides, with all due respect, my lady, these weapons are more than sufficient to keep an enemy at bay. No one could hit anything beyond a hundred paces, anyway."

I simply smiled. "Tell that to an elf, Tybalt - but be prepared to have him chuckle at you. As for me, I've seen them do it. I've also seen dwarves do the same thing, with siege crossbows that have a pull of twenty stone and can send a bolt completely through platemail armor, through the torso of the warrior beneath, and out the other side. Dwarven firearms don't shoot as far, but then again they reload faster

than a crossbow, so it balances out."

Tybalt just stared at me. "I beg your pardon, my lady - please don't think I'm doubting you, but..."

"Yes?" I asked.

"Just how do you know all this?"

I smiled again. "Well, I can't tell you, Tybalt - but I can say that Darian's choice of me as his tutor forty-five years ago wasn't by accident. I can honestly say that there are few individuals in the world he could possibly have approached for a better education in the art of war."

Tybalt reached out to me, gripping my upper arm. "Please, tell me... I have to know something, and it's very important."

"What is it?"

"Did you... Did you know the witch who fought in the War of Liberation? The one who commanded the Army of Darkness?"

"Pardon?" I asked, surprised.

"Please, I must know. Are you her?" Tybalt asked, his face unreadable.

"No," I replied after a moment. After all, can any man truly claim to be the same man they were forty-five years before?

"Did you know her?" he asked, still gripping my arm.

"Yes," I replied calmly. After all, who alive could say they knew me better than I knew myself?

"Were you related in some way? You look to be her sister. Her face was a little different than yours... Softer, perhaps. I don't know. I noticed that the first day I met you, but dismissed it as it seemed so impossible. Now, I'm not so sure."

"Why do you want to know, Tybalt? Are you worried I might actually be her, and be a threat to the king? If so, please don't worry. I doubt the king would have knighted me if he thought I was a love-sick, insane witch," I replied dryly.

"No, that's not it at all. I..." he said, then let his arm drop from mine. "I'm sorry. I must know, though. Were you her sister?"

I thought about my answer carefully before I replied. "We shared a line of consanguinity, yes, but we were not sisters. More than that, I'd rather not say - it is a rather personal matter to me," I replied - an answer which was completely truthful.

Tybalt sighed, and turned to look off the battlements, leaning against the crenellated stone wall. "I'm sorry - I had to ask."

"Alright - but why did you want to know?"

"I..." he said, then sighed. "I don't know her relation to you. Cousins, I'd imagine, given your similarity. You may not have cared for her much. To be honest, few did - not even the king. He used her to obtain the throne, then destroyed her. She was like a rabid dog. But..." He said, his voice trailing off into silence.

"But what?" I asked, wondering what was on Tybalt's mind.

"I felt sorry for her. She was insane - she couldn't help herself. The king used her, played upon her insanity, and turned her against his enemies. Yes, perhaps she was evil. But often I wondered if she couldn't have been helped... Perhaps even cured, with sorcery? I don't know. I'm no mage, I'm just a soldier. I only know that on the few times I saw her, I didn't fear her. I pitied her. Writhing in the dirt and mud, nearly naked, insane with love for the king, and yet he was already married to Joy, and was using her as merely a weapon..." he said, then shook his head, as if dismissing the memory. "Bah. I've said too much, and taken up too much of your time, My Lady. Please - let me take you to the royal classroom. The schoolmaster should be getting there shortly, and you can meet him there," he said, turning back to me and smiling as he held out his hand.

I considered pressing him for more, but then discarded the thought. My real identity wasn't a subject I wanted to discuss around him, anyway. I merely smiled and let him lead me back into the castle.

The schoolroom turned out to be reasonably well equipped - there were two student-desks and a lecturer's podium, and a small chair set to one side by a table. A large slab of slate was set into the wall, apparently for use as a chalkboard. I examined what remained on the board - simple mathematics, for the most part. The wall opposite the door had a short shelf, upon which were two dozen books and four scrolls. Noril was already there, a small slate and piece of chalk atop his desk next to his textbook. He rose briefly to nod his head in greeting. "My lady," he said, then sat down again.

"Your Highness," I replied in turn, inclining my head to him. I walked over to examine the books while Tybalt leaned against the corner next to the door. The first book was a treatise on history and geography, but as it listed the beginnings of history at only about one thousand years ago, I knew it was worthless. The elves and dwarves both had accurate histories that went back much farther than that, and their textbooks weren't secret. "Is this the book you're being taught from now, Highness?" I asked, holding it out.

"Yes, my lady," he replied, nodding his blonde-haired head.

"Pfft. It's junk," I replied, and dropped it on the floor. I ignored the shocked widening of his blue eyes and picked up the next book, reading through it. It was the most basic, the most elemental of mathematics texts. "And this, Highness? Is this the book you are learning mathematics from?"

"Y-yes, my lady," he replied nervously.

"What's it doing here, then?"

"My lady? I don't understand?" he asked in confusion.

"Have you mastered it? Do you understand everything in it?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Good. Then take it with you when you leave here today, and put it in your own chambers. You have learned the book, you keep it. It's a good reference book, but it shouldn't be here. You should already have covered all this. Put it in your own book collection, and refer to it at need."

"But-but my lady!"

"What is it, your Highness?"

"None of those books are mine, they belong to master Korvin!"

"Pfft. Then he can take it with him when he leaves," I said, and dropped it atop the other book. I browsed through the other books, and discarded each of them in turn. None of them were irreplaceable - in fact, I could easily get better books from the elves or the dwarves. The scrolls turned out to be maps of Larinia and the surrounding territories. "Have you memorized these maps, Highness?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Good, then you don't need them anymore. I can get better maps from the elves," I said, and dropped then atop the books.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing?!" a voice shouted from behind me.

"Ah - Korvin, the royal schoolmaster," I replied, turning around and seeing a wrinkled old man standing next to princess Dawn in the doorway. "I'll deal with you in a moment. Good afternoon, your Highness. Won't you have a seat, please?" I said, inclining my head to the princess. She nervously darted into the room and sat at the empty desk, carrying a slate and a textbook, like her brother.

"Just exactly what is the meaning of this?! Why have you tossed my books and maps on the floor?!" the schoolmaster snapped, pointing.

"Because they're worthless," I said, and pointed to Noril. "The prince is twenty-three. He should have mastered everything in these books years ago. The princess is eighteen - she also should have mastered this years ago. Why haven't they been moved on in their studies?"

"Because they haven't quite mastered it all, woman. What would you know of teaching?" he snorted in reply.

"I was teaching apprentices ages before you were ever born, little man, and I taught Darian how to be a King," I replied dryly, then used my ring of telekinesis to lift his books and maps from the floor and float them across the room, to his shock and surprise. "Take this and go. Oh - and my name is 'Dame Raven', not 'woman', and the king has made me a Defender of the Realm. In future, you will kindly remember that. Now shoo, little man. I'll be teaching these two for the next six months to a year, not you."

Korvin stormed out of the room without a further word. Tybalt, still leaning against the corner near the door, chuckled. "He'll make trouble for you, my lady."

"He'd better not. I'm in no mood to brook foolishness from him, and if he attempts to interfere with me I'll turn him into a turtle and toss him in the moat to ponder his errors for a year or so," I replied dryly, pulling down the hood to my robe.

Tybalt started to laugh, but the grin faded from his face as he looked at me and realized I was quite serious. He cleared his throat briefly, then spoke. "I'll go tell him that, my lady, and try to get him to understand this is a royal decision."

"Thank you, my lord," I replied, and Tybalt turned and left the room, trotting after the schoolmaster.

I turned to the prince and princess, and looked them over. Both looked very apprehensive of me - a good beginning. "My name is Raven. For the next six months to a year, you'll be learning from me the same skills I taught your father - how to be a king. Or queen, as the case may be," I said, nodding to the princess. "Now: Do either of you have any questions before we begin?"

"Yes, I do, my lady," Noril said, raising his hand briefly. "Would you really have turned Master Korvin into a turtle?"

"Yes, your Highness. For a year. And tossed him into the moat to nibble on the plants there so he wouldn't starve," I replied calmly. "One of the most important lessons you can learn as king is politeness and diplomacy. A smooth tongue and a simple smile often is more useful to a king than a mighty army. Always remember that."

"Y-yes, my lady," Noril replied nervously.

"I have a question, Dame Raven," Dawn said, raising her hand briefly.

"Go ahead - and just call me Raven, you two, and I'll simply call you Noril and Dawn. Bandyng about titles will quickly become tiresome," I said, and smiled.

Dawn smiled back. "Well, do you really think it's necessary to teach me to rule? I mean, after all, it's Noril that will be king. Master Korvin thought I didn't really need to learn much more than I already have."

I snorted. "Noril, tell me - do you ride and hunt and compete in tournaments?"

"Yes, my la-err, yes, Raven," Noril replied, blushing.

"And do the knights you compete against in tournament hold back against you, to keep from injuring you, and perhaps allow you to win?"

"Certainly not, Raven! I'd be highly insulted."

"Then there's the possibility you could die accidentally, is there not? You could fall from your horse while hunting, or be mortally wounded accidentally in tournament, yes?"

"Well, yes, but I'm a skilled rider and among the best in the lists at tourney - it's very unlikely," he replied, holding up his head.

"But it's still possible, yes?"

"Well... Yes," Noril replied, nodding.

I looked back to Dawn. "There's your answer, Dawn. It's unlikely, and we all pray to Yorindar that nothing like that ever happens, but it's still possible. If Noril dies without an heir, or if his heir is too young to assume the throne, the power falls to you. Also, Noril might one day have to go to war. Who else would he leave in charge of his kingdom if not his loving sister? Who else could he possibly trust more?"

"Oh..." Dawn replied, looking down at her hands.

"It's alright, Dawn," I said, and smiled at her. "Now - let's begin by assessing just what little Master Korvin has managed to teach you two. We'll start by reviewing your knowledge of the art and science of warfare - that's the most important thing a king or queen can ever know. Everything else you can make mistakes in, and learn from. In war, you cannot make mistakes - if you do, you'll be dead," I said, and picking up the piece of chalk as I stepped to the slate on the wall, I began.

Nine.

"Thus it was that Dame Raven became the schoolmistress for my sister and I, even as she had been for my father before me. She was not a harsh teacher, as Master Korvin had been, not at all. No, her style of teaching was completely different. Rote memorization had been Korvin's rule, and a dreadfully dull method that was, indeed. Dame Raven, on the other hand, taught by example,

and by story, and by involving my sister and I with questions and answers, all with an ease and style that both showed she had taught these lessons countless times before, and yet made each lesson seem new and fresh. She would explain in careful detail those parts that were difficult to understand, and phrase important things as simple stories, easily remembered. And there was so much she taught us! Each day, it seemed like my head would burst from being filled with all the things she talked about - and yet, the next day, there were a thousand more things to learn. Still, it was more a process of discovery than it was one of learning, and to this day I remember each of her lessons well. One lesson in particular, I have always remembered, though it was not taught in our little schoolroom..."

- King Noril, Autobiography, 1729 NCC

It took a month for the messenger Darian sent to the elf-lands to return, bearing the books I'd asked Darian to buy. None of them were terribly expensive, but of course, they were all in elvish. As I didn't want to spend a year or two translating them, I snuck off quietly one night back to my tower and summoned a lesser demon to translate them all for me with sorcery. His will couldn't match mine, so I forced him to the task rather easily. He did an adequate job, so I thanked him for the work, and complimented him on his efforts. The squat, toad-like, fanged and clawed thing blinked at me in surprise at the compliment, then chuckled. "You're the Hyperborean battle-mage Eddas Ayar. You're gaining quite a reputation in Hell," he said, then vanished in a puff of flame.

Dawn and Noril's education was only fair - about what Darian had when I first met him. I concentrated on the same areas I had with Darian, forty-five years before. First, the art and science of war, followed by mathematics, economics, and the various other knowledges needed by a ruler. Dawn was an adept and eager student, and she worked hard to grasp everything I tried to teach her. Noril, however, often seemed distant, and only worked at his studies enough to meet the grade. Things finally came to a head in the fourth month, and I had to do something.

Outside the castle, the king had set up the lists for a small tourney he planned to hold. Single Combat for the knights, on foot, was the main event of the day, the intent being the knights might hone their skills and build their reputations - the prize was a mere ribbon, entitling the wearer to ask whomever they pleased to dance with them at the feast that evening. There were also contests of archery and axe-throwing, that the commoners might display their skills and win small prizes. A duck, goose or pig was the prize for most contests, though the Archery contest had a prize of ten gold coins - an astounding sum to a peasant, and one that kept all the peasant's skills at archery well honed. I smiled when Arella explained that to me the day of the tourney. Darian had learned his lessons well, indeed. Unfortunately, the prince had not, and would have to be dealt with.

Prince Noril had entered the single-combat event for the knights, of course, and was a heavy favorite to win. I walked out of the castle, heading over to the tournament. I was not terribly pleased with Noril, and the peasants who were gathering to witness the tourney caught a view of my face and gave way.

I walked over to the prince's pavilion, pushed past the guards and stepped in. Noril was about halfway into his suit of armor, and looked up at me in surprise from the stool where he sat, adjusting the straps on his chausses. "Raven? What is it?"

"Noril, I have just completed grading your last examination. Your sister passed. You did not. You will withdraw from this tournament immediately, and return to the castle with me - you're going to take the examination again, and we're going to go over those parts you are having trouble with."

"I most certainly will not! I've waited for this event for months! Besides - what does it matter if I didn't pass your examination? Who's to say that what you claim to know of war and fighting is truly correct?"

You're only a woman, you've never fought before," Noril snapped.

"Oh, you're so sure of that, eh?" I growled. "Before the day is out, I'll have you over my knee and spank you like a child before all the people gathered here today - including your father, your mother and your sister," I replied, and turned on my heel and left the pavilion.

Spotting Tybalt over by the stands, I walked over to him. "My lord Tybalt - who is in charge of the lists?"

"That would be me, Dame Raven. How can I help you?" he replied with a smile.

"Enter me in the lists for Single Combat."

Tybalt looked shocked. "But my lady! I cannot!"

"Oh? And why not?"

"Because... Because you're a woman!"

I glared at him. "I'm also a Defender of the Realm, am I not?"

"Well, yes, but-"

"And as such I have a right to fight in the lists, do I not?"

"Well, yes, but-"

"Then enter me in the lists, Tybalt."

Tybalt looked exasperated. "But, my lady, please! You cannot use your sorcery to win - that would be most unchivalrous!"

"I will not. I will win using only my staff - you can ask Arella-tor to verify that I am not using sorcery on any of the men I fight. I have a magic ring which gives me protection as though I was wearing armor, but I'll use nothing else. It will be skill against skill, not spell. Now enter me."

Tybalt nodded. "That seems fair. As you wish, my lady," he replied. I smiled politely, and bowed to Darian and Joy, who were just getting seated next to Arella in the royal box. I didn't bother to tell Tybalt that my ring actually gave me protection superior to anything the Larinian's articulated plate ever could - I would already be seen as operating at a disadvantage, without using spells, and saw little need to tell them that I was probably at a slight advantage.

An hour later, my first bout came up. The prince had already had his first match - he was a powerful and fast warrior, and defeated his opponent by literally pounding him into submission. When my match finally came up, my opponent lifted the visor of his helmet for a moment, then shook his head. "No, I will not fight her. I do not fight women," he said, and tucked his mace back into the loop at his belt.

"Fortunately, I do not have such compunctions about fighting you, Sir Brontian," I replied, and stepped forward and smashed him in the helmet, denting it. He went down with a dissonant crash of metal, and was dragged off the field, unconscious. The women in the crowd cheered me immensely, but the men seemed to mutter more than applaud.

My second opponent was a little smarter - he wasn't about to just stand there and let me beat him over the head. Maces and flails were the only weapons used in the Single Combat portion of the tourney, as they were less likely to kill an opponent in plate armor. Sir Orick stepped forward, wielding his mace

menacingly. As he approached, I swung my staff at his shield. There was a loud crack as I struck, and the oak of the shield split across the middle, only the steel rim of the shield keeping it from having been split in two. Sir Orick grunted in pain at the shock of the blow transmitted through the shield and his armor into his arm, and I whirled and smashed him in the head while his arm was momentarily paralyzed from the pain of the blow, preventing him from raising his shield to block the attack. He also was dragged off, unconscious.

My third opponent wasn't going to be defeated so easily. Sir Javas kept moving, swinging with his flail and blocking my blows with the stout edge of his shield rather than the flat. For a moment, I wondered if I could take him - I couldn't parry his flail, I had to dodge it. This meant he was using far less energy against me than I was using against him, despite his wearing five stone of armor and shield. Eventually, he'd wear me out. Suddenly, he slipped on a patch of grass. In the moment's distraction, I smashed his right wrist with my staff. He grunted in pain, his mace flying from his grip, and hopped back.

"Hold!" called the Knight's Marshall. I stopped, waiting, and two physickers came out to examine Javas.

"Broken," the older of the two physickers said after they had his gauntlet off.

"Aye, a clean break, too," the other agreed, stroking his graying beard.

"Damn," Javas swore, looking down at his wrist then up to me.

"Do you yield, Sir Javas, or will you fight on?" the Knight's Marshall called.

Javas shucked his shield, then reached up with his good hand and lifted the visor of his helmet. "Nay - I yield. Dame Raven has fought well, and proven why she is a Defender of the Realm. I would not have her break my other arm to prove her skill - I'll need at least one good arm to lift a toast to her tonight at the feast," he said, grinning broadly.

I grinned back, and we bowed to each other briefly. This time, all the crowd applauded. After we both had left the field, I walked over to him. The physicians were already going to place his wrist in a cast, but I held up a hand to stop them. "Wait, please," I said, taking his broken wrist in my hand. Tugging gently to make sure the bones were straight, I drew lightly from my staff and cast a spell of healing, knitting and healing the break.

Javas grinned even more broadly, flexing his arm. "Thank you, Dame Raven. That feels much better."

"You're quite welcome, Sir Javas," I replied, and we bowed to each other again.

Finally, the last round began. It was, as I expected, down to the prince and myself. I looked at him across the field as the echoes of the trumpets announcing the beginning of the match faded into silence. "Right here, Noril. Before everyone. I will do it," I said, and grinned ferociously.

"The hell you will," he growled in reply, and closed the distance between us. I hauled off and swung at his head with all my strength - a simple, straightforward blow I knew he would easily block. He did block it, almost reflexively, the result of his years of training, but couldn't possibly have anticipated the result. My staff was no mere shaft of wood, but a Wizard's Staff, an extension of my will - and my will was to humiliate Noril. There was a loud CRACK, and his shield split in half, top to bottom. Noril cried out in pain, and I leaped back and waited.

"Hold!" the Knight's Marshall called.

"Nay!" Noril called back, shucking the shattered pieces of his shield. "I'm alright. Just bring me a quarterstaff, and then let us lay on again," he growled, then glowered at me. "We'll fight on equal ground,

then."

"Not likely, your Highness," I replied dryly, and spun my staff before me at blurring speed, the shaft splitting the air with an ominous whoop-whoop-whoop sound, then stopping it in an en-garde' position. The gasp of awe from the crowd seemed to only irritate the prince even more. A quarterstaff would actually have a longer reach - but I was faster, more skilled, and armed with a weapon considerably better than a mere club.

Once they'd brought out a quarterstaff for the prince, he closed with me cautiously. I simply waited. He feinted low, then lashed out high in a surprisingly fast move. I blocked, then stepped in and swung downward at his head with all my might. He dodged backwards, as I expected, and my staff connected with the center of his quarterstaff, snapping it in two.

"Damn!" Noril roared, tossing the broken halves of the quarterstaff aside as he leaped back out of range.

I tossed my own staff aside. "Come, your Highness. Unarmed. Come," I said, and crooked a finger at him.

Noril roared and charged in like a maddened bull, tackling me and taking us both to the ground. We grappled for several long moments, Noril grinning beneath his visor. He was two heads taller than I, and his strength was legendary - he had the strength of three grown men, easily. The crowd gasped as he wrestled with me - the conclusion of a contest of strength between a tiny half-elf and the enormous Prince Noril seemed almost a foregone conclusion.

Slowly Noril's eyes went wide beneath his visor.

I was winning.

Like any mage, the power of Mana-energy flowing through my veins made me far stronger than I looked, and I had honed this body to the maximum possible strength it could attain. I was almost as strong as Noril, and far more experienced at grappling - which wasn't surprising, considering I was sixteen centuries old.

"Don't!" he hissed, his helmeted face close to mine as he grunted and strained.

"Don't what?" I hissed back through clenched teeth.

"Don't... spank me before my father and all these people! I was wrong, I'm sorry!" he hissed, gasping for breath.

I wasn't sure I could anymore, actually - Noril was strong, and a good wrestler. I could win, but I wasn't sure I could humiliate him like that. He was simply too powerful to take over my knee that casually. He was, after all, half giant. I didn't tell him this, though. "Then yield," I hissed at him.

"Hold!" he shouted.

"Hold! Release each other!" the Knight's Marshall called. I let Noril go, and stood. Noril lay there for a moment, gasping and exhausted, and finally rolled himself over and pushed himself to his feet. "Do you yield, your Highness?" the Knight's Marshall called.

"Yes - but wait," he said, bending over to catch his breath. After a moment, he straightened up, and raised the visor of his helmet. "Dame Raven has bested me this day! Let no one say that she is not worthy of the title 'Defender of the Realm!'" he shouted.

The crowd cheered, and I simply bowed, snatching up my staff as I did so. My robe was a mess - it had several tears in it, and several ground in dirt and grass stains. 'Ah, well - nothing a Spell of Repairing and a bit of washing can't fix,' I thought to myself. I walked over to Noril, and smiled, pulling him down for a hug. He grinned sheepishly - I normally didn't hug anyone - and bent down to hug me back, as he was fully two heads taller than I. The crowd cheered this display of gentility - but it wasn't. "Tomorrow morning, in the classroom, bright and early. Be there," I hissed into his ear.

"Yes, my lady," he whispered in reply, and smiled.

Though I wanted to simply leave, I knew that wasn't going to be possible. I walked up to the royal box, where Darian, Arella and Joy were already standing and waiting for me. Once the cheering and applause had died down, Darian spoke. "Dame Raven, we award you the victor's prize in our annual summer tourney, and we congratulate you on your skill at arms," Darian said, coming down from the box to tie a white ribbon about my upper left arm. I smiled and bowed in return as he resumed speaking. "Now, let us adjourn for the feast in the castle."

I smiled at Arella, pointing at the ribbon, and she smiled back, but shook her head. Swift-wing launched himself from her shoulder and fluttered over to land on mine. "You're thinking of using the victor's privilege to dance with her, aren't you?" he whispered in my ear as we walked back to the castle.

"Yes, actually," I whispered back, smiling.

"My mistress asks you not to, please. This isn't Hyperborea - many people wouldn't understand, and it would hurt her reputation badly."

I sighed. "Alright. I'll just go back to my room in the castle."

Swift-wing shook his head. "You can't do that either, Raven. That would be dishonoring the King. You're the victor of the tournament - you have to make an appearance at the feast, and you should probably stay until at least the king leaves. And you'll have to select at least one partner to dance with at least once, it's expected."

I sighed again. "Alright, who does she suggest? Noril?"

Swift-wing was silent for a moment, apparently communicating with Arella through their mental link. Finally, he whispered in my ear again. "No, that probably would be a bad idea. Some might take it as a sign you were interested in him. She suggests Tybalt."

"Alright, if I have to," I replied, and Swift-wing fluttered away as I passed through the castle gates.

An hour later, having cleaned myself up and cast a Spell of Repairing to restore my robe, I went to join the king and his guests at the feast. It was only the nobility that were invited - the commoners had their own feast outside the castle walls, which Darian was kind enough to provide much of the food for (again making the people love him even more). I smiled politely through the majority of the events - I was really too depressed to be overly interested. Sir Javan raised the first of many toasts to me, his toast being long yet polite, but I scarcely listened. It had been four months since I had been with Arella, and it was beginning to become quite frustrating and depressing. She couldn't meet with me while I was here in the castle - too great a chance that someone might notice our liaison and cause a scandal for her. While we Hyperboreans had only mild social prejudices against sapphites or sodomites and our ancient allies, the giants, had none at all (they merely found the notion odd, as the behavior was totally unknown to them), the Larinians and Arcadians were a different people. In truth, they shunned and despised sapphites and sodomites as being debased deviants. Arella couldn't afford that kind of scandal - she was the Court Wizardess for the King of Larinia. Her position and her power had been a great influence in helping the

women of Larinia to obtain the measure of 'equal rights' they had managed to gain so far. Having it revealed that she was some kind of sexual pervert would be an enormous handicap to her cause, and could not be allowed.

"Tell us, Dame Raven..." the brunette woman sitting next to me whispered, touching the back of my gloved hand lightly to catch my attention.

I looked to her, and remembered she was Princess Lyssa, of Arcadia - she was the daughter of King Strago, a distantly-related cousin that I had found for Darian after the 'War of the Twins', so he could put them on the throne of Arcadia and have one less headache to deal with. Strago had been promoted from a minor and relatively unknown Baronet to an adequate if unimaginative monarch, and his rule had been a relatively quiet one. It was quite an honor that Princess Lyssa chose to visit and see Prince Noril fight in the tournament - rumor had it that she had come because she might have some interest in the prince, but it was mere rumor. "Yes, your Highness?"

"Well, you're the Prince's teacher, are you not?"

"Yes, your Highness," I replied with a polite nod.

"Well... How well do you know him, Dame Raven?"

I shrugged. "Probably better than most here, I imagine."

"Well..." she said, then looked around furtively, and leaned forward to whisper into my pointed ear.

"What does a woman have to do to catch his attention? Defeat him in tournament?! If that's it, I'm afraid I'll never be able to compete with you, Dame Raven," she hissed quietly.

I struggled to suppress a laugh. The intrigues of the court held little interest to me, and the idea that Princess Lyssa of Arcadia would even have the slightest interest in Noril came as a total surprise to me. I turned and whispered back into her shell-like ear. "Your Highness, I have no interest in the prince at all, nor he in me. I am his teacher, nothing more - and today, I taught him perhaps his most important lesson: Never underestimate anyone."

The princess nodded, her expression showing relief. "Still, Dame Raven - is there at least anything that you might possibly tell me about how to attract the prince's attention?"

I smiled. "Why would you want to know, your highness? Are you attracted to him?" I whispered back.

The princess blushed. "Well... Yes," she whispered, her eyes glancing about to make sure we were not being overheard by those near us at the table. "But I trust you to keep that to yourself, on your honor as a Defender of the Realm." She paused, and looked at me strangely. "I honestly don't know why I'm telling you any of this. Still... I had a dream the other night... A dream of a woman in black, a woman whom I could talk to in confidence... I think the dream was of you."

I felt a chill run up my spine. Dreams were how Yorindar communicated to me - on those rare occasions when he had anything to say to me at all. I nodded quietly. "Ask me anything, Highness," I whispered back, and smiled.

"Well... What advice can you give me about the prince?"

I thought about it for a moment. If she truly was being guided by the gods to speak to me, she didn't need just a hint as to how to attract the prince's favor - she needed advice that went far beyond that. "Well, he's a strong, proud man, but at heart he's gentle. His sister is his closest friend and Arella-tor his closest advisor, and I think that any woman who runs afoul of either of them will do poorly in the prince's eyes.

My suggestion to someone who wanted to get closer to the prince would be to make friends with those two, and let them lead you to the Prince. This same person would also have to stay friends with these two, as I have a feeling that the relationship between them will only grow over the years, not fade, and any woman who tries to come between the prince and his sister or his court wizardess will most likely be looked on with disapproval," I whispered, then paused a moment as inspiration struck. "His favorite horse is a proud black destrier named Balthazar. Ask him about it. That might help you at least spark a conversation. Shared interests often lead to shared lives," I finished, quoting an old elvish saying.

Princess Lyssa smiled. "Thank you for your advice, Dame Raven. I shall remember it always," she whispered, and rose from her seat to walk over to the prince.

Finally, the dancing began. It was almost a relief, actually. The men seemed bound and determined to use their traditional dinner-toasts to shower me with honor as some brave warrior-woman, and I found it not only uncomfortable to be the object of all their chivalrous attention and affection, but somewhat irritating, as well. The knights spent a great deal of time citing examples of brave warrior-women of Larinian legend, a few of whom were actually elves and many of whom I doubted ever existed. Of course, I smiled and nodded, as was appropriate for the occasion. They were only trying to honor me - there was little reason for me to cause a scene by not appearing to appreciate it.

I rose from my seat as the music started - it appeared that I was expected to make my selection for the person to dance with at the beginning of the affair, not near the end. I cast my gaze across all the men gathered in the banquet hall, as though I was trying to make up my mind. I wasn't, of course. I was fairly certain that Arella's suggestion was most likely the sensible selection. Commander Javan Tybalt was a good man, and seemed least likely to pursue a relationship with me, which I did not want. I smiled at Tybalt, then walked over and held out my hand. "You'll have to forgive me, I've not danced in quite some time, and I don't know any of the steps to the dances of the Larinians," I said, smiling. 'Yes, about sixteen centuries or so, to be precise,' I thought to myself. 'And if I was really going to be completely truthful, I'd simply admit I've never danced before at all.'

"That's alright, my lady," he replied, and smiled. "I'll teach you."

I watched and listened to Tybalt's patient instruction, painfully conscious of the dozens of eyes upon me. I didn't want to make a fool of myself and fuel the gossip-mongers. "Place your left hand here," he explained putting my gloved left hand upon his belt, "and hold your right hand out, like so," he said, taking my right hand in his and placing his other hand on my waist. "This is called the 'box step', my lady. It's done as a mirror to the man's steps. For you, this means you step forward with your left foot, then right with your right foot, then back with your right foot, then left with your left foot," he explained, leading me through it. The musicians played slowly, and the crowd watched quietly, waiting. I felt myself flush - this was highly embarrassing. I could feel Tybalt gently pushing with his right hand against my waist, guiding my steps - that was embarrassing, as well. "One-two-three, one-two-three, one-two-three... See? You're doing quite well, my lady," he said, guiding me along.

After a few moments, the musicians began to play a little faster, then faster still. I suddenly realized I had it, and smiled. "Don't look at your feet, Dame Raven. Look up, into your partner's eyes," he said, smiling. I did so, and grinned back at him.

Before I knew it, Tybalt was moving me about the dance floor, in between and around the other couples who had finally joined the dance. The music was graceful, elegant, and stirring. It was also the first music I'd heard since I laid my drummers to rest, over forty-five years before, and I found I was smiling in spite of myself. It was very enjoyable. More than that, really - after awhile, I realized that I was truly having great sport. It was quite exhilarating and thrilling, and the music seemed to move something deep within my soul. I tried to tell myself that it was only that I hadn't heard music in so long, but still I couldn't deny

the fact that I was thrilled and thoroughly enjoying the experience.

Finally, the music stopped, and I gazed up into Tybalt's smiling face. A tingling thrill passed through me as I inhaled the scent of his body, standing so close to me. Suddenly, I recognized these feelings for what they were, and was horrified.

I was aroused by him.

I stepped back, taking my hands from him and placing a good pace of distance between us. Tybalt's face took on a sudden look of surprise and concern. "Dame Raven? Is something wrong?" he said, having noticed my expression.

"N-no. Yes," I replied, wishing I could curl up into a small ball and die. "I'm not feeling well - perhaps I over-exerted myself today. I think I'll go lie down," I said, then sketched a brief bow to where Darian sat at the head of the banquet table. "If you'll forgive me, your majesty, I really must go," I said, and before Darian could reply, I cast my Spell of Returning.

I sat quietly on the little bed I had been provided in my quarters. The cold granite walls of Steelgate did not completely muffle the sounds of the music from the feast, and after a few minutes, I could hear the music had resumed. I pulled my knees up to my chest in the darkness of the little room, and hugged myself tightly. 'What is happening to me?' I wondered in horror.

There was a knock at the door. "Raven? It's Arella. May I come in?"

"It's not locked," I replied, sighing.

The door opened and Arella stepped into the room, blinking at the darkness. I could see her clearly with the half-elven eyes of this body as she peered about in the gloom. Swift-wing was perched upon her shoulder, and he glanced about in the darkness as her eyes unfocused - she was apparently looking through his eyes and using his ability to see into the astral. She felt about near the door until her hands fell across the iron sconce on the wall. Casting a brief cantrip of ignition, the sconce burst to life, the little pool of resin it held burning fitfully. She then quietly closed the door, picked up the lone chair in the room, and came near me to sit before me. "Raven, what's the matter? Are you hurt or ill?"

"No. More frightened and disgusted," I replied quietly.

"Why? What happened?" Arella asked. Swift-wing said nothing, he merely gazed at me curiously with those beady black eyes of his.

I pulled myself into a tighter ball, and buried my face in my knees. "I don't know if I can even tell you."

"Try, Raven. Please."

We sat in silence for a long time, with the only sounds between us that of Swift-wing's beak clacking as he quietly preened himself. Finally, I managed to work up the courage to speak. "I was dancing with Tybalt, as you suggested..."

"Yes?" Arella asked.

"It was... It was the first time I had ever danced, really. It was exciting. It was wonderful sport. I had never danced before, and..." I said, then shuddered. "When it was over... I found I... I was..."

"Titillated?" Arella asked, smiling.

"Yes," I replied, feeling my face hot from a bone-deep blush. It was horribly embarrassing and humiliating. "I'm not interested in him - at all! I am not a sodomite! But..."

"But your body still responded," Arella finished for me. She sat down beside me, and hugged me briefly. "Raven, don't worry about it. If I had been in the same situation, I would have felt the same way - terribly titillated, yet still not interested in Tybalt at all. There's nothing wrong with you, alright? Your body responded to his scent and the closeness and the excitement. You can't help that - your body is that of a woman, and your response was completely natural for this body. Like your menses or like your leg twitching when I tap your knee just so, it's nothing you can control, it's simply the way the body is made. It has nothing to do with who you are inside, it's not a reflection on your manhood, it's just a natural part of the way this body was designed."

Still curled in a tight ball, I turned my head to the side and looked at her from behind my knees. "You really think so?"

"Yes," she replied, and smiled.

I hid my face again. "But I feel so... Filthy."

"It's alright, Raven. Really, it is. It's not your fault at all - your body responded the way it was made to respond. That has nothing to do with who you are inside. You are still Eddas Ayar, Master battle-mage of the Dyclonic Circle, a man I am proud to call my friend."

I threw my feet to the floor in a flare of irritation, and glared at her. "No longer of the Dyclonic Circle, they ejected me! The greatest humiliation of my life, even worse than what happened tonight!"

Arella paused for a moment, staring at me as if carefully considering what to say in return, then drew herself to her full height as she sat next to me on the bed. "No! I say that it was their humiliation! Someday they will realize what great fools they have been! I am the greatest mage in all the Southlands, both Larinia and Arcadia, and my knowledge is nothing compared to you! You were my teacher, I was your student! You spent a century researching a way to bring Dyarzi back to you, and in the process you have accumulated what is probably the largest collection of spells in history! No, I say that you are probably the mightiest mage of your day and mine, and someday when your circle realizes that they are nothing without you, they will beg you to return to them!"

I paused for a moment, taken aback by what she said. Then, as it sunk in, I grinned ferally. "That would be nice, wouldn't it?" I said, and stared off at the far wall, the image vivid in my mind. "I'd have Cordo crawl to me on his hands and knees in supplication, let him spend an hour begging me to come back to them, then smile as I told him to go to hell!"

"Someday, they shall have cause to regret their folly. Someday, they will wish they had treated you more fairly. And when that day comes, your revenge will be sweet, Eddas Ayar," Arella continued, holding her head high and speaking to me in an almost imperious tone.

"Aye, that it will. Quite sweet, indeed," I replied, feeling much better about myself.

"You, my friend, felt shamed by the natural response of your body, did you not? Even though you knew this was a natural response of this body, and no reflection on you as a man?" she continued, speaking in an almost imperious tone, her head held high.

I nodded. "Aye, that I did," I said, stroking my bare chin for a moment. "And you're right - I guess I did know deep inside that it was a natural response of this body to his scent and his closeness and the thrill of the moment, but I couldn't accept it. I feared it meant there was something wrong with me. But yes, I did

feel shamed."

"It is nothing, Master Eddas Ayar. Nothing!" she said, and snapped her fingers for emphasis, the same way a Hyperborean would when dismissing something of little importance. I nodded, listening as she continued. "You have been treating this body as a handicap - a curse. You should not do that. This body is a gift - a powerful and terrible gift, and a great weapon."

"What? How so?" I asked, surprised.

"Think, Eddas! Women get by in the world of men not by being stronger, but by being subtle and manipulative. Now, you have been given the basic tool we have - and yet, you still retain all your strengths, and an age of experience. Who better to serve Yorindar as his Raven than one who can bend the will of a king with a mere glance, a small smile?"

"Aye, there is that. As we Hyperboreans used to say, 'There is no spell more powerful than the smile of a woman,'" I replied, nodding.

"So stop being ashamed and embarrassed of this body! This is a gift from Yorindar - a great and powerful gift, as it is a weapon more deadly than your staff, and more powerful than the most potent sorcery you know. Be proud of your body, and keep it honed and sharp as your own knife," she said, and pointed at me, wagging her finger. "You said once that you found the lustful gaze of men repulsive. I say to you, Eddas Ayar, that you should see each lustful smile as an acknowledgment of the power of the gift you have been given. Stop seeing this as a handicap, and start seeing it for the advantage it is. After today's demonstration, no one in all of Larinia will think that you are a mere weak female. You defeated the Prince in hand-to-hand! He's renowned as perhaps the strongest man in all the Southlands! No, when word spreads of this, you'll have little to fear from most men, and still retain the ability to enforce your will over them without so much as uttering a syllable of the most insignificant cantrip - no, you'll do it all with a simple smile, or a glance," she said, and rested her hands in her lap.

I looked to Arella. "Thank you, Mage Arella-tor. I feel much better, now," I said, and grinned.

"You are quite welcome, Master Eddas Ayar," she replied, inclining her head briefly.

I raised an eyebrow to her. "Where did you learn to speak this way? You've never talked to me like this before, Arella. I do thank you, as it was what I needed to hear, but... Where did you learn this?"

Arella relaxed, then grinned at me while Swift-wing cackled. "From Joy. I've been talking to her every day since you had your argument with Darian four months ago, trying to learn about the Hyperboreans. She was right - you Hyperboreans are not like the Larinians, or the Arcadians. It suddenly dawned on me that the only thing that would make you feel better about what happened was to have someone speak to you the way a Hyperborean would. She was right, and I'm glad you feel better."

I grinned. "You truly did. I'd never thought of this body as a gift before - but now, I see it just might be that, after all."

"More than that, you know. It's more than just a weapon. If you're to truly be happy, I think you have to relax in that body, as well," Arella said, smiling.

"Relax? How so?"

"Well, I mean that certain things you normally keep from doing as part of being a man, you no longer have to refrain from doing. Joy explained that Hyperborean men never hugged other men unless there was deep, brotherly affection between them - it just wasn't done. Hugs were an expression of affection,

and Hyperborean men were supposed to be reserved towards each other. Yet in this body, you can hug other men where you feel it would be appropriate, and no one will think less of you for it. In fact, it's what a woman would do. Even in your own culture, women hugged in greeting to those they liked and felt close to," she said, then grinned. "I guess what I'm really trying to tell you is to just relax and have fun in this body. Enjoy yourself!"

I chuckled. "Well, I'll try, but..."

Arella rolled her eyes for a moment, then held her head up high again and resumed her imperious voice. "Would you limit yourself, make yourself miserable by constraining yourself to the actions of a man and thus demean this gift you have been given? Nay, I say! Relax, and do have sport! Make merry, and smile!" she said, and then broke down into giggles. Swift-wing cackled, and I smiled back.

"Alright, I'll try, Arella."

"Good. Now - come. We have to get back to the banquet. You still haven't eaten, and I'm sure that there are several more men who are hoping you'll dance with them."

"Hrm... Are you sure it will be alright?"

"Of course. I simply told them that you most likely were having... Female difficulties," she said, and grinned impishly.

"Well, I guess I was at that," I said, and chuckled.

"Well, I'm not merely the court wizardess, I'm also widely known as the king's physicker. Everyone will simply assume I gave you an herbal potion and fixed you right up," she explained, grinning even more broadly, and stood.

I rose, then took her hand. "Wait, though. I'd like to ask something..."

"Yes?"

"Could you... I mean, it's been four months. I know you're worried that someone might notice us together, and that would ruin your reputation here, but could you possibly...?"

Arella smiled. "Tonight, at midnight. We'll meet at your tower," she said, then kissed me softly. "It's been a long time for me, too," she said, and smiled again.

Ten.

"The more you learn, the less you know."

- Hyperborean proverb.

The months slowly passed, one by one, and slowly Noril began to catch up to his sister in his lessons. It was hard for him - like his father, Noril was more interested in physical things than mental, and his giantish heritage made winning at tournaments all the easier. In all my life, I had known only a handful of warriors as strong as him, and certainly he was probably the most powerful warrior in all the Southlands. His sister, on the other hand, favored their mother - she was beautiful, and very intelligent. Her sharp mind quickly grasped even the most difficult concepts, and she devoured information with great relish. In the end, it was only Noril's pride that saved his education - he certainly couldn't allow his sister to out-shine him while I was watching. Thus, as winter slowly dragged on, he buckled down and finally managed to catch up to Dawn.

There was more to their relationship than simple rivalry, however. As the months progressed and Noril truly began to work at his studies, his sister tutored him as best she could during the hours they had free to themselves. Over time, Dawn became just as much Noril's teacher as I was, and worked hard to help him master his studies. It reached the point where the two of them were together nearly constantly, exchanging thoughts and ideas. Each place where Noril's mind had a weakness, Dawn's had a strength. Noril was bull-headed like his father, often seeking the simplest, most direct route to a solution. Dawn was quiet and introspective, and had inherited her mother's brilliant mind - she was often willing to consider other paths that might, in the end, prove better. Before I knew it, they had forged themselves a true intellectual partnership, and Dawn had become Noril's closest advisor, along with Arella-tor. It occurred to me that this was probably why Yorindar had wanted me here - not merely to finish Noril and Dawn's education, but to provide them a focus, and a way to forge them together as true friends and intellectual partners. I realized that when Noril finally ascended the throne, he would have probably the best advisors he could ever have wished for - Arella and Dawn. It made me smile to see the three of them together, chatting and sipping byallar, and I could easily envision the three of them doing great things in the future, building on the foundations Darian had laid in his kingdom and his laws.

I found myself spending more and more of my time with Tybalt as the months progressed. At first, it was merely because I realized Arella had been right, and because he was a good man, I didn't want him to think he had done something to offend me at the dance. As time passed, though, I began to see more of him simply because I liked him. He had a good sense of humor, and a sharp mind. Sitting with him and sipping byallar as we chatted about wars and battles and court intrigues was an enjoyable way to spend my free time, and helped pass the long winter evenings. I found that he, like me, really had few others to speak to. Arella was often too busy to join us, as the care of the king was her greatest responsibility and only her herbal teas gave him the mental acuity necessary to continue his rule. Even so, when she could, we spent many an enjoyable evening just sitting together and chatting.

By the eighth month, though, I found Tybalt's attentions were growing a bit too close for my comfort. I knew he was only trying to be friendly, but I certainly didn't want him to be falling in love with me. I needed an excuse to spend time by myself on a regular basis. Fortunately, one came readily to mind, and I told Arella that I would study the phenomena of the Dead Zones. Perhaps I could find a way to accelerate the healing process of the lands, and return the Dead Zones to usable, arable lands for us. This would allow my people to build new cities in these zones (should the Circle ever learn how to woo the Mountain Healers from their sapphite ways), and also give the giants places to expand into as their population grew over the millennia. It made a good enough excuse, and soon the table in my room of the castle was covered with notes and various mathematical formulas I used in an attempt to model the chaos that was the astral plane in a Dead Zone. I visited the Great Southern Dead Zone regularly with my Spell of Returning, taking measurements, studying, and generally trying to understand what was happening.

By the last evening of the ninth month I had been at the castle, Arella came to visit me in my room, Swift-wing perched on her shoulder. "How goes your research?" Swift-wing asked, speaking before his mistress had a chance to.

I sighed. "Not well. It's very hard to quantify the astral chaos in a Dead Zone. I think perhaps to truly understand it will take many, many years. It literally will require a new understanding of the mathematics of magic."

"It's that complex?" Arella asked, her eyebrow raised.

"Well, yes," I said, and pointed to the fire crackling merrily in the fireplace. "It's like that fire, there. How can you predict at any given moment the exact position and strength of the flickering flames which make it up?"

"Perhaps you're approaching it wrong," she said, then stepped over to the fire, pulled out a small stick, and came back. A small flame, perhaps half a hand wide, flickered at the end of the stick as she held it up before me. "Perhaps you need to just understand a small part of it, like studying this little flame as a separate part of the larger fire. Or perhaps, all you need to do is just find out how to snuff the fire, a small piece at a time."

"I've tried that - what applies to a tiny part doesn't apply to the whole. I also can't snuff the fire - it's too hot, too bright. It would be like trying to snuff that fire in the fireplace with just your hands. Even snuffing a small section of it, like that little flame you hold there, would be extremely difficult. You'd burn your fingers trying to snuff it."

"No, I wouldn't," Arella replied, and pursed her lips. She blew on the flame hard, and in a moment, the stick was only smouldering.

I stared. An idea had come to me. "You know..."

"What, Raven?"

"You just gave me a brilliant idea. Now, I've got to do the math and see if it would work," I replied with a grin, and turned back to my worksheets.

Arella smiled, stepping back over to the door. "Call me if you need more inspiration," she said, and giggled while Swift-wing cackled. I chuckled and bid them goodnight, then returned to my work.

A fortnight later, Arella came to visit me again and see how I was doing, again bringing Swift-wing with her. "How goes your research now, Raven?" Arella asked.

I sighed. "Well, I'm done. Unfortunately, the answer isn't good. I'm afraid the idea you gave me won't work - but at least I understand what's happened in the Dead Zones better, now."

"Can you explain it to me?" Arella asked, smiling.

"Hrm. Well, the math is a bit complicated and would take me several days to go through with you, but I can try to explain it by analogy. You see, I was trying to solve the problems with the assumption that the mana-flow in the areas was totally disordered, like the random flames of a fire. It's not. It's more like each frequency of Mana is the strings of a harp. Normally, each spell sounds only a specific string on the harp. The spell that made each of the Dead zones doesn't sound just one string of the harp, or even a handful of strings. It sounded ALL of them, at once, and hard. It's as though you went up to the harp, and slapped a board across all the strings at once. The result is a discordant sound, a noise - but it's not pure chaos. As time passes, the harmonics inherent in each string will cancel out many of the others, and slowly the noise from the harp will fade into a few chords, then finally silence. My idea was that a large enough blast might snuff out the fire if it was weak enough - like snapping my staff in a Dead Zone, for instance. Unfortunately, it's not a fire, and the type of energy released by snapping my staff would only spark a Mana-storm in a Dead Zone - and the larger the dead-zone, the bigger the Mana-storm."

"Well, if we're plucking the strings in the first place, can't you reach out and grasp each vibrating string of the harp and still it, then move onto the next?" Swift-wing asked.

"No, I'm afraid not. The gods might have the power to reach out and still each string, but no mortal does. The way we are getting the 'harp' to sound when we cast spells is not by physically plucking the strings. It's more like singing a clear note next to the harp - the string closest to the note you sing vibrates sympathetically. It's tiring to sing loud enough to do it, and it takes a great deal of training and skill to hit the right note you want, but if you do it right, the string vibrates, and the spell happens."

"Ah - so with that analogy, the reason why you and Arella can cast spells and an ordinary person can't is because they were born mute," Swift-wing said, brightening.

"In essence, yes," I said, smiling at him.

"So how did the mages who made the Dead Zones sound all the strings at once?" Swift-wing asked.

"By devising a spell that literally ripped their bodies apart, blasting them to vapor - one voice, for a brief moment, split into an infinity of voices, the energy of their dying strike lending force to their sound. Literally, they sounded the 'harp' in this analogy with their death-scream," I said, and both Arella and Swift-wing shuddered while I tapped the formula on one of the sheets before me. "This is the formula for the spell they used. Having finally understood what it was they did, I reverse-engineered the formula from the effect. It's a greater, more refined version of the Spell of the Final Strike. Whoever discovered this in the first place must have truly been a genius."

"Why do you say that?" Swift wing asked, fluffing his feathers nervously. "It seems to me a rather silly thing to do to even consider a spell that causes your own destruction."

"Precisely the reason why this person was a genius, my friend. You can't experiment with a spell like this to see if you have the formula right. If you have it wrong, nothing happens. If you have it right, you die. That means whoever discovered how to do this in the first place did it entirely from theory - no experimentation at all. A true genius. I wish I had met him in my previous life. I'd have loved to have had the opportunity to sit down with a mind of that quality and discuss theory for a few hours," I said, and smiled.

Arella sighed. "It's just so sad, Raven. To even consider a spell like this... Who were they, I wonder, to have made such a sacrifice?"

"I don't know, Arella. The Invaders came to Hyperborea at least two decades after I died. It's possible this was someone I knew, but it's also possible they were a mere child when I was in my declining years. Whoever he or she was, they were very brave and noble to make such a sacrifice," I replied quietly. 'Or very desperate and suicidal,' I thought to myself.

"Oh! Raven! If you figured out the formula, couldn't another person figure it out, too?! We might be in danger!" Swift-wing squawked.

"Possibly, but I doubt it. First, they'd have to be as good at research as I am - and I can honestly say without boasting that there are probably only a handful of mages in the world with my level of skill at research, and most of them are probably going to be researching spells other than ones that will cause their instant death. Also, in another century or so, the Astral Plane will have finally calmed in even the largest of the Dead Zones - the smaller ones are nearly quiescent as it is. Once that happens, nobody will be able to reverse-engineer the formula from the effect - they'll have to develop the formula themselves. And I honestly can tell you that I don't think I could have developed this formula without seeing the effect. Whoever developed this was a true genius, far greater than myself. It may be another thousand years before we see another mind of his or her quality again."

Arella grinned, sitting next to me and hugging me gently while Swift-wing fluttered off her shoulder to land on the table and take a look at my notes. She hugged me in silence for many moments, then finally leaned back and grinned. "You and your modesty! I think that the world already has a mind of that quality - in you. I think you could have done it, if you had to," she said, and kissed me.

"Thank you, Arella," I replied, and kissed her back. When she had let go of me, I stood, taking the sheet with the formula on it and all my notes regarding it over to the fire, then dropping them in.

"What are you doing, Raven? I've never seen you burn your work before!" Arella exclaimed, surprised.

"I've already transcribed the formula into my grimoire, Arella, and all the notes regarding the Dead Zones I've transcribed into my works on magic theory. I don't want to leave these papers lying around. Perhaps, in a thousand years, if we have grown to a wiser people, I will reveal them. Otherwise, I will keep them to myself," I said, and stirred the ashes with a poker to make sure.

"Alright," Arella said, then was silent a moment before she spoke again. "So the end result of your research is you now know how to make a Dead Zone and you know how to spark a Mana-storm inside a Dead Zone, but you can't make the Dead Zones heal any faster, right?"

I nodded, staring at the fire. "Correct. Nobody can make a Dead Zone heal faster, save perhaps the gods. And right now, I think they're quite busy with some sort of project that involves Darian and his children - though what it might be, I have no idea."

"Well, alright. Now that you've at least finished this research, you really should spend more time with Tybalt."

I blinked in surprise. "Tybalt? Why?"

"Well, Raven, he likes you. He has few other people in the castle he can talk to, you know - most are far younger than him. He's twenty years out of his time. I'm sure you can understand what it feels like to be out of your own time and not have people of your own generation around. He enjoys your company, Raven, and I think you enjoy his company. You should spend some time with him."

"But, Arella, I am not interested in him. I don't want him to get the impression that I might be, and... Well, I just don't want to have to deal with that kind of situation."

"Raven, trust me - Tybalt is not going to press a relationship with you. He is far too chivalrous to do that. I think he's wise enough to see by now that you aren't interested in being anything but his friend - give him a chance."

I sighed. "Well, alright. You've known him longer than I have - I'll just have to trust your judgement."

Arella smiled. "Thank you, Raven. I'm sure you and he will be good friends."

For the remainder of the winter, I spent most of my free time with Tybalt. Arella came to chat with me almost every night about him, and after talking to her for several weeks, I finally became more relaxed around Tybalt again. He really wasn't the kind of man to press me for a relationship - Arella had been right. Once I realized that, I tried to pay attention to her advice more often, so I could perhaps get used to being female - with no real solution in sight, I might be stuck in this body for a long time.

Finally, one morning, I was standing on the parapet of the castle wall, looking out over Darian's lands. The winter's snows were half-melted away from the lands surrounding Steelgate, and I could even see a few shoots of green grass coming up from the earth. I leaned against the stones of the wall, taking in the beauty of the arriving spring, and sighed.

A soft footstep came up behind me, and Arella's gentle voice called to me. "Raven? Are you alright?"

"Yes, Arella. It's just that I must return, soon," I replied quietly, still gazing at the budding trees in the distance.

"Oh? So soon?" Swift-wing asked, fluttering from her shoulder to land next to me.

"Yes. I'm sorry, but my work is done, here. Just as their father before them, Noril and Dawn have learned all that I can really teach them - the rest they will have to learn themselves through study and practice. I've made sure they each have copies of the best texts I could get for them, translated into their own language," I said, then shook my head. "I don't know if they appreciate it, but those books are worth a fortune. Some of the finest elven texts on history, economics, warfare, and several other subjects, all translated into their own language. Though the original texts weren't terribly expensive, paying someone to translate all those works would cost an enormous sum, and would take years to complete."

"Really? How did you manage it, then?" Swift-wing asked, cocking his head at me in curiosity.

I grinned at him. "I cheated. I popped over to my tower and summoned a lesser demon to do it for me."

"A lesser demon. Brr..." Swift-wing shuddered, fluffing his feathers. "I sometimes forget how powerful you are," he said nervously.

"Raven, I don't understand why you have to leave, though. I mean... Why do you have to go back to your tower? Aren't you happy here? Is something the matter?" Arella asked, her face a mask of concern.

I sighed. "Arella, I know you won't understand this, but... It's against the rules of my Circle to be the vassal of a king. I was asked to do a job - finish the education of his children. I have done so. It is time for me to go."

"But, Raven, you're no longer..." she said, catching herself. Her fingers flew to her lips for a moment, and her eyes widened. "I'm sorry."

"It's alright," I replied quietly. "You're right. They cast me out. It is the greatest shame of my life. The same treatment they would give one who had committed rape or murder, just before they turned him over to the king's justice," I replied, my gaze lost in the distant clouds. "They called me a weak-willed, heretical madman, and cast me out," I said, then turned to face her. "But this does not change who I am. I cannot be something I am not, Arella. I am over sixteen centuries old. Even if you only count the years I have seen with my own eyes, Arella, I lived a full life before I died the first time, and I've lived a full life, now. I have seen a hundred and thirty six winters come and go, Arella. I am old," I said, and turned away from her again. "You see my face, you hear my voice, and to you, I am Raven, a half-elf woman who appears relatively young. But I am not she. Beneath this garment of flesh lies the spirit of Eddas Ayar, an ancient man from a forgotten civilization. I cannot change now. I know you don't understand, but this is who I am. They have cast me out, yes. But I shall not change. I shall still live my life as I always have."

"There is more. I can sense it in your voice," Arella said, stepping close to me and placing a gentle hand upon my shoulder. "You wish to return to your research. I can feel it. Your dream to bring your love back to you still leads your heart."

I was silent for a moment. Arella had known me for a long time, and this showed it. Finally, I sighed. "Yes, Arella. I'm sorry."

Arella gently hugged me, and I hugged her back. She then stepped back, holding my hands in hers. "I am not angry, my love. I know that you love Dyarzi, and you always will. This is something I think is wonderful and noble in you. As I told you before, love - I've had many years to think about this, and I have accepted the fact that you love me as much as you can, and that is as a friend. Even so, to me, you will always be my only love. To my eyes, you are still like some powerful, beautiful, immortal being who holds a love in her heart greater and grander than even the old plays of chivalry and love. It's a part of your soul. I am not angry, my love. I love you - I could never be angry with you," she said, her eyes

brimming with tears. "Someday, you will bring Dyarzi back to you. And when you do, I want to be there. I want to hug her, and tell her how lucky she is to have someone like you. I think she already knows, though. I think she looks down on you even now from the afterlife, and smiles."

Then, heedless of the fact that there were easily half a dozen guards who could see us standing on the castle wall, she leaned forward and kissed me gently, lovingly, and passionately.

When she leaned back, we both shared a grin for a moment before she spoke again. "Are you going to tell anyone else you're leaving?"

"I think not. If I announced it formally, I think Darian would come up with something to get me to stay," I replied, frowning slightly.

"You're probably right - Joy will have to keep him distracted until you're gone. Even so, you should at least tell Tybalt you're leaving. He likes you a lot."

"A lot? How much is a lot?" I replied, grimacing.

Swift-wing cackled as Arella grinned wryly. "Now, now. Let's go down and we'll have you say your goodbyes more formally," she said, holding out her hand to Swift-wing, who fluttered over and perched on it.

An hour later, Noril, Dawn and Tybalt had joined Arella and I at the castle gates. Dawn smiled and hugged me. "I'll miss you very much, Dame Raven," she said, wiping a tear from her eye.

"Well, if you ever need me, just tell your Court Wizardess, Arella-tor, your Highness. She can come fetch me."

"Your pardon, Dame Raven, but I don't understand why you have to leave," Noril said, taking my hand and clasping it lightly in his massive paws.

"I have my own lands to take care of, your Highness, and I have been absent for far too long. I also have... Some research I must attend to."

"May I ask... What kind of research?" Noril asked, his face showing he really didn't understand.

Arella smiled, speaking up before I did. "Dame Raven is doing some magical research that is none of our business, your Highness. I should also mention that she is probably the greatest spellcaster alive today - and I should know, as I was her student."

"You, Arella? But you're the greatest in all Larinia, maybe in all the Southlands!" Dawn replied, gaping.

"Just so, your Highness," Arella replied, still smiling.

I simply bowed my head. "You're too kind, Arella."

"It's simply the truth, Raven."

When I lifted my head, Tybalt finally stepped up to me. I could tell he had something on his mind, something he wanted to say, though I had no idea what. He reached out, gently taking my gloved hand and clasping it by the fingers, then lifting it to his lips for a moment as he inclined his head. He then lowered my hand, and smiled. "I shall miss you, my lady," he said quietly.

A year ago, I wouldn't have been terribly comfortable with him kissing my hand, but now, after Arella's patient counseling and the incident at the dance, I wasn't bothered by it. I realized it was totally

appropriate, considering my outward appearance - and Arella was right, the courtesies men gave to women were actually quite enjoyable, and my allowing them wasn't a slight to my manhood, it was simply an acceptance of the body I now found myself in. After all, if Arella, a confirmed sapphite, could allow these kind of gentle graces and compliments and still not be interested in men, then certainly I could, as well. I smiled. "Thank you, Tybalt. I'll miss you, as well. You've been very pleasant company these past months."

I stepped back from the group, gently drawing my hand from Tybalt's and summoning my staff to my grip. "If I am needed, have Arella summon me," I said, and bowed to them. "Farewell," I called, and as they all called their farewells in return, I cast my Spell of Returning.

Eleven.

"Cordo often explained that he knew he was on the right path, because Morgar would come to him at night in his dreams, and guide him. At first, we all took this as a good sign, for our hearts were full of fond images of Morgar, the calm and stoic god of War and Death. Each morning, Cordo would awaken with new thoughts, new ideas, all of which he claimed were received from Morgar in his dreams. And yet... Each morning, he seemed a bit more erratic... His temper shorter, his fury more wild... And his hatred for Eddas Ayar grew beyond measure. Eventually, he ruled the order not with logic and reason, but with cunning, guile, threats, and intimidation. Some followed him willingly, seeing him as being the true and proper leader for us, guided by the god our order traditionally paid homage to. Others simply followed out of fear. One morning, Faral reminded me of what Eddas had said; Morgar, to the people of the Southlands, was an evil deity - a god of Chaos and Death. And, watching Cordo's madness slowly grow, I found I had to agree. But what to do about it?"

- Gorol Qual, Personal Diary, Date Unknown, presumed 17th century NCC

A few weeks later, spring had fully arrived, and the byallar trees on my lands were laden with white flowers like a gentle dust of snowflakes upon them. I had been working on my research, trying to find a way to restore my old body, and had met with little progress. I took regular breaks each hour, gazing off into the distance of my lands so as not to damage the keen eyes I had appropriated from Ellysande Northstar so long ago by focusing on my own terse handwritings for hours or days on end. It was during one of these rest periods, while I stood on the parapet of my tower stretching my legs and gazing off into the distance, that I noticed a wagon coming down the road. 'Ah, I have a visitor,' I thought with a smile, fairly certain who it was, and immediately went back into my tower to try to make preparations for them.

My visitor rounded the bend in the road and came into view after a few minutes. The wagon was somewhat small, but laden with many boxes and barrels. It was drawn by two small horses, each the size of ponies but much more stocky and sturdily built. Sitting in the driver's seat was a broadly built dwarf wearing garments of bright red and blue, a blunderbuss by his side. 'Ah - I was right. It's Mungim. He's probably come to see what I might be willing to trade for some of my crop of byallar this fall,' I thought, already carrying two chairs out to the shade tree at the base of my tower. Mungim drew up to the shade tree just as I was setting the chairs near the little fire-pit I used to warm byallar. He hopped down from the wagon, grinning broadly at me. I tried not to chuckle as Mungim quickly checked himself over, spending a few moments smoothing his oak-brown beard, brushing a bit of trail-dust off his blue pantaloons, red doublet and hose. "Ah, Eddas Ayar. Seeing ye be in sooth the high point of me visits here to Hyperborea, now," he said in my language, pulling his feathered cap off his head and bowing low.

I smiled and extended my gloved hand, and Mungim took it lightly in his, inclining his head, but not kissing my hand (he was truly a well-mannered dwarf). As soon as he had released my hand, I turned to head

back to the tower. "I'll be right back out, Mungim. I'm going to get my pot and brew us a cup or two of byallar," I called, smiling at him.

A few minutes later, Mungim's team was hobbled and quietly nibbling grass in the shade of the trees growing by the road while I was pouring him his first cup of byallar beneath the large shade tree I used for meetings. "Ah - much thanks to ye, Eddas Ayar," he said in his own language, his voice gravelly but warm. "An ye do not mind I do say so, I do find ye do be the true treasure that yet draws me out to these god-forsaken, giant-infested lands time and again these last few years," he said, grinning.

I smiled, and was once again grateful for Arella's gentle tutelage and my time spent in the castle these last few months - I found that indeed, I didn't mind at all. Mungim, like all of the traveling merchants who dealt with the giants, had heard my story for weeks before he ever ran across me the first time, well over forty years ago, now. He knew I was a man in the body of a woman, and that I had no interest in men. He wasn't being insulting, he wasn't thinking I was a sodomite, nor was he trying to make a sexual advance - he was simply being friendly. Before, I found this kind of banter a little upsetting, but did my best to hide my feelings. Now, thanks to Arella and my months spent at Steelgate, I realized he was simply trying to be nice, and make a little joke. "Thank you, Mungim," I replied.

"Ye do seem much happier this fine spring day, I do notice," he observed, still smiling at me.

I knew what he meant - despite my attempts to be polite over the years, it was obvious to any who knew me that I was not terribly comfortable with being a woman. I simply smiled. "I think, perhaps, I've gotten used to my situation, and am able to be more comfortable with it," I replied. "That, and it is still possible I may be able to restore my old body someday - and once I can do that, I'll try to summon my beloved from the Void."

Mungim grinned broadly. "I do wish ye the best of luck in that, Eddas Ayar - though I must admit, an' ye do succeed, I yet shall sorely miss seeing the Gem of Hyperborea on me little visits," he replied in my language, and winked. I laughed at his joke, and Mungim joined me with a deep chuckle.

For anyone who has never met a dwarf, meeting Mungim would be an unusual experience - though I'd met my first dwarf back in my previous life, ages ago. They are long-lived, many living over three and a half centuries before old age felled them. In appearance, dwarven men were, for the most part, about three and a third cubits tall, their skin ranging from pale to ruddy, their hair and beards usually black or brown (though some were blonde or copper-haired), and their eyes usually brown (though some occasionally were blue). In build, though, they were very broad, barrel-chested and stocky - eleven to twelve stone was about average. They were also very powerful - a typical dwarf was half again as strong as a typical human.

In my day, many of my contemporaries believed that there were no female dwarves, as all that were ever seen above ground were male. Others sometimes joked (though not to a dwarf's face) that there were female dwarves - they just had beards, and we couldn't tell them apart. The truth, however, was far more prosaic. Female dwarves were more slender than the males, beardless, and a bit shorter - Mungim once described his sister as being a bit over seven stone and about a hand shorter than himself. In all the years I had dealt with dwarves in my previous life, I'd only seen one female, so I had to take his word for it - the same quirk of germ plasm that made it so only one in four of their births was female also gave these females extreme agoraphobia. The simple sight of the endless bowl of the heavens above them was a terror to their gentle little hearts. They had no desire to leave the safety and security of the dwarves' underground realms, and their rarity meant they were highly protected and greatly revered. Dwarven society was matriarchal in nature, though their rulers were unilaterally male. As an old dwarven saying went, 'A man may build the house, but it's his woman who'll tell him where'.

Mungim, like all bachelor males, was still working hard to accumulate his Bride-Price. Without a wife, he had no status among his people. Even should he get one, his status would be determined more by his wife than by his own efforts - her wit, wisdom, charm and social graces made up a large part of it, as did her own social status before marriage. Of course, even if he did manage to accumulate his bride-price, he still had to find a dwarf-maid willing to be his bride - they retained the right to refuse a suitor, no matter how much he may offer.

Sadly, it was the very necessity of accumulating a bride-price that made most other races view dwarves as greedy and gold-hungry people. A beautiful, graceful and skilled bride from a good family could easily command thousands of gold as a bride-price. Thus, the bachelor males were forced to accumulate vast wealth, or spend their lives alone - and as few individuals had spent time among the dwarves and learned their culture as I had in my previous life, few outside their people understood them.

Once I had poured the two of us a cup of byallar, I picked up our conversation. "It still amazes me, Mungim, that you speak our language so well."

"Aye, thankee Eddas, but the blessing or blame for that belongs to me great-great grand-pater, not me. Sixteen of our generations ago, when your people were defeated in the Great War of Devastation, as we dwarves do yet call it, he predicted that someday, your people might yet return. May Moradim bless him and forge his soul anew, as he was right," he said, making the fist-to-palm hand-clap that was the sign of reverence to Moradim, God of the Dwarves (I believed it symbolized a hammer striking an anvil, but as their religion was a private thing and quite personal to them, I had never asked).

"Me great grand-pater had a book from your people, a language-dictionary that placed your words aside ours that the finger might enlighten the mind. We did read from it and did keep the tongue alive among our family for generations, both in the hope that someday ye would return, and because it were a useful secret language for our little family of merchants once all the other dwarves did forget it," he replied, giving me a wink and a wry grin, which I returned with an equally wry grin. "Belike as were a total surprise, howe'er, when ye did return from the Void and I heard the tongue of the Hyperboreans spoke aright. It were yet many days before I did have the trick, though I needed not to worry, as your magic yet allows you to speak me tongue better than do I," Mungim finished, chuckling as he finished his cup of byallar.

Of course, I was very polite and didn't mention that the book Mungim's ancestor had obtained was apparently several centuries old when I was born - the words and grammar Mungim used, while easily understandable, were quite old to me. They fit the structure and grammar of Dwarf-Tongue quite readily, however, and that apparently had been a help in preserving it. All Mungim really needed to know when he first met me was how we Hyperboreans pronounced our words - his ancestor's language book had only contained an approximation of pronunciation, and over the years they had adapted our tongue as their 'secret language', the pronunciation they used had shifted to that of Dwarf-Tongue. I refilled my own cup of byallar as I continued our conversation. "So tell me, friend, what news have you brought me from your travels?"

"Bah. Some good, much bad, I be sorry to say," Mungim replied, fishing about in his belt-pouch and extracting his pipe.

"Oh?"

"Aye, Eddas. I did pass through Iolo mountain, and the Mountain Healers be yet cloistered there like nuns," he said, pulling out his pouch of pipe-weed. I nodded - Gorol had made the same observation. "They did buy but little from me - a few hand-tools, flour, sugar and other oddments, and a good axe, but naught else. I told them I would yet trade, not sell, but they did have naught they wished to trade and did

rather come up with two gold coins of ancient demeanor - I think careful-like they did hoard them, and they be a sum quite vast for their tiny purse. I did take but one, as the value of such ancient coin is greater to certain folk I know and I would not cheat them," he said, pulling a stick from the small fire beneath the byallar-pot to light his pipe with. Once he had it lit, he carefully put the stick back and puffed on his pipe for a moment before continuing.

"I went to Wilanda-city, and did see that your circle re-built the Black Tower. It be an amazing edifice, as well. Yet, I did notice that the ancient machine that once did lie before it was now nowhere to be seen. I did ask all polite what did befall the thing, but they did answer it were none of me business. Bah!" Mungim said, and spat to his side in the dirt.

"They were a rude lot, Eddas, and me patience were sore tried to deal with them. Naught did I have that drew their interest. Books of magic were all they did want. I did ask 'what kind?' as there be many books on matters thamaturgic, and I be no mage. They did say their need were for books on magical theorems and principles, as their library be long since gone to wind-blown dust from war and time. I did all polite ask why they did need such, and they again did answer it were none of me business. Then I did tell them that I did need to know, as I be no mage and would have to ask skilled wizards among our people and have them determine which books it were they did seek in sooth. So, they did answer that they did wish to give life to the dead. I did reply that they should just ask ye, as ye already did have this knowledge. Indeed, so far as be known to me, ye be the sole mage in the world today with this sorcery, perhaps the sole mage ever to live to master the trick - and I did tell them so, as well. They did reply they did eject ye from their number, and they did no longer consider ye their brother. When I did all polite ask why, they again did say it were none of me business. Bah!" Mungim said, and spat again.

Mungim puffed on his pipe for several moments before he continued. I remained silent, listening, as was polite. "I tell ye, Eddas, with Moradim as me judge, I think I'll not travel their way again. They did offer me much gold, many thousands of coins they did say their members did have cached in their tombs, all for the books they did want. Ancient coins, as well, that be worth more than their weight to the right folk. Me bride-price, it be certain. Me eyes did gleam, aye, and me heart did fill with gold-lust for many a breath. I tell ye forsooth, I did dream of that gold, and how it could get me a fair and pleasant bride, and I did open me pie-hole to say 'Aye!'. Then, their leader, High Master Cordo he did say his name was, did speak. 'Well, hurry up, little one, and make up your mind!' he did call to me. Bah!" Mungim replied, and spat again. "I be no child for him to speak to like that, Eddas, I be seven score and nine years old and I out-weigh him by at least a stone! 'Little one', indeed. Bah! I did climb back onto me wagon and did leave them there, me ears deaf to their entreaties for me to return and trade with them."

I nodded. "I think you did the right thing, Mungim. As the saying goes, 'Tainted Gold buys a Tainted Bride,'" I said, quoting an old dwarvish saying. To a dwarf, 'tainted gold' was gold obtained through greed, cheating or other methods dwarves consider unsavory. Dwarves like that very often get brides who have similar moral outlooks - the ones who are more honest and upright refuse them. So, they often end up with a bride who is just as greedy and grasping as they are, and end up unhappy.

"Aye, that it does - I've seen it happen many a time, meself," Mungim replied, puffing his pipe thoughtfully. "Perhaps it were indeed best I did refuse. E'en so, I might not did that Master Cordo not treat me like some child," he replied, then pointed his pipestem at me and wagged it as he spoke. "Eddas, ye be sixteen centuries old, and from all I have yet seen of ye, ye do act like it. Well and in sooth deserving be ye of me respect, and that of any other dwarf. Master Cordo, on the other edge of the axe, I find to be an annoying little human who be quite full of himself, and I shall not trade with him," Mungim said, and tucked his pipe back into his mouth and puffed with finality.

"I knew him once, long ago, and we called each other 'friend'. I suppose that seeing the devastation

around him has changed his heart."

"Bah," Mungim replied. "Ye saw the face he did present to others, when Hyperborea were aright. Now, in times of trial, we see the true cut of his axe."

I nodded. "You're probably right," I said, then changed the subject. "What other news is there, friend?"

"Ah! Me pardon. I did tell ye the bad and neglect the good," Mungim replied, and grinned around his pipestem. "Our king did come to an agreement with the Queen of the Elves, where their merchants may travel free-like through certain passes in the mountains to do trade with the humans of the south-lands without having to skulk about and sneak across our lands like thieves to avoid our patrols. To do trade with ye, of course, they just do travel around the northern foothills and avoid our lands all entire. It be not much, but it be a start towards a better relationship, I be thinking."

I grinned broadly. "That is good news. Perhaps even the start to a lasting peace between the elves and the dwarves."

Mungim nodded. "Aye. E'en though I have no particular love of the dandelion-eaters, as a merchant, I think peace be good. War be bad for business."

"Unless you sell weapons," I added with a grin.

Mungim chuckled. "Aye, Eddas. Just so."

We chatted for a bit more after that, then finally got down to the business of trading. My needs hadn't really changed in all the nearly five decades Mungim had been trading with me - powder and shot for my blunderbuss, mainly, along with the occasional tool and small items like soap and tooth-brushes and tooth-powder. In the last few years, however, he'd learned that I could be tempted greatly if he brought the right items. I, in turn, found I had to control my expression as though I was playing chatto for my life - Mungim was a shrewd bargainer, whose skills were matched by few.

The byallar grown on my lands which the giants harvested for me was the strongest and richest available. By the old agreement we had worked out years ago, in exchange for harvesting for me - in fact, for doing all the work for me - the giants took three parts in four of the harvest. This usually left me with anywhere from fifty to a hundred and fifty barrels of ground and roasted seeds, which was far more than I could possibly drink in several centuries. Nearly all of what they took themselves they brewed and drank themselves - giants brewed it by the barrel. Their own variety, while good, wasn't as strong and flavorful as that grown on my lands - the giants had spent ages breeding their trees for quantity, not quality. What they got from me they rarely traded, but instead saved for special occasions throughout the year. So, since the supply of my variety of byallar was limited, it was highly valuable. Though I hadn't been present for the fall harvest, and as such the giants had been allowed by our agreement to claim all of the harvest, they had been kind enough to give me five barrels so I'd have something to trade with. Aside from finding out what it was I would like to trade for when he came by again in the fall, Mungim was determined that he would leave none for the elven trader he knew was due to come by my lands any day now.

After trading two barrels for the basic supplies I needed (more powder, shot and flints for my blunderbuss, four toothbrushes and another jar of tooth powder, two dozen cakes of soap, a stone of sugar, two stone of flour, a wheel of salt, and a stone of ground pepper), I really didn't need much else. Mungim knew I didn't need anything, but he was determined to try. He showed me a dwarven invention - a percolating pot for making byallar in that could make up to thirty cups at once (I wasn't interested - I rarely have more than one visitor at a time). He showed me a collection of delicately painted ceramic plates and cups (I wasn't interested - I had plenty of cups and mugs, and all the food I ate I summoned by sorcery, and it came in wooden bowls that were easily disposed of by tossing them into the fire for

firewood - no dishes to wash).

"Ye be a hard bargainer, Eddas! Would ye have me a penniless pauper, now?" Mungim exclaimed, mock-grief in his voice. I chuckled, and Mungim grinned. "I do have one more item that may yet tickle your fancy," he said, and pulled out another box from his wagon. "Me sister did suggest this, may Moradim bless her heart," he said, clapping his hands briefly, then opening the box. He pulled out a bundle of cloths he'd used as padding, producing a smaller, flat box, and then opened it. Inside, I could see the lid had a small mirror, and there were several brushes like paint brushes, and small compartments inside the box. "I know but little of this, yet me sister did suggest it, so I will but try to explain what little I know. Inside each compartment be various pigments and belike that women-folk of our people do apply to their faces and lips. The brushes are used in some manner I do not understand, but the sorcery they weave in the right hands belike real magic at times."

"Hmm..." I said, thinking. While I had no interest in it, it occurred to me that once I succeeded in returning Dyarzi from the void, she would want something like this. I had spent years stocking my tower with things I wanted, needed and enjoyed, as sixteen centuries had destroyed everything I once owned in the tower - it was time I planned for the things she might want, need and enjoy.

"Well, I have no use for it, but someday I will be able to return Dyarzi from the void, and I do believe she would like that, my friend. Even so, it hardly seems to be worth a barrel," I said, and Mungim nodded - I couldn't trade in less than one-barrel units, as barrels of ground and roasted seeds were all I had to trade. "Do you have any other items that your sister suggested?"

"Aye, that I do, some small things," Mungim replied, pulling another cloth from the larger box and unwrapping it. Inside were three small glass vials, each marked with a different dwarven rune. "Here be three different perfumes she did suggest I bring - each be a different scent. She likes all three," he explained, unstoppering each and holding out the tiny vial for me to sniff. I sniffed carefully, trying to recall the scent Dyarzi wore, and hoping one of these might be close. Good perfume wasn't cheap, and the three bottles were probably enough to make up the difference.

Finally, I shook my head. "These are very nice, but their scent isn't really her. Your sister is certainly a very thoughtful and sweet girl for suggesting it, though. Tell me, is she married yet?" I asked, smiling wryly.

Mungim sighed, then smiled briefly. "Aye, thankee, Eddas, she be indeed very sweet. Her voice belike that of a small silver bell, her hair the color of white gold, and her eyes the blue of the sky - quite rare among me people. She be five score and five years of age, and an accountant of great skill, belike her mother - a great asset to our family. Her hair she does wear behind the head in a ponytail, even as ye do, Eddas. She be not yet married, howe'er, and I doubt she e'er will be."

"Oh? Why not?"

Mungim grimaced for a moment, then finally smiled weakly. "Well, ye be a good friend and I be sure ye can keep it under the anvil, so I'll tell ye. Me pater asks ten thousand pieces of gold, which be a fair bride-price considering her station, heritage and her skills at keeping the books of a business. Even so, it be not expected any will pay that much for her, as she do have the bajas."

I felt my face flush slightly with embarrassment at having even brought it up in the first place. "My condolences, friend," I replied quietly.

"Thank ye," Mungim said, his gravelly voice soft as he looked at the bottles of perfume.

I truly felt sorry for Mungim's sister. Bajas was a disease that showed up in perhaps one of every two or

three thousand female births, if that many - it was quite rare. It normally appeared at puberty, when the female begins growing facial hair. Not much, usually little more than a thin moustache, but sometimes a thin beard, as well. As it was a defect of the germ plasm, it couldn't be cured with magic, since nothing was really wrong with the victim - it simply was the way their body naturally was, similar to how Joy the Giantess was small. Shaving the hair only made it grow back thicker, and because of the way the skin and hair of a dwarf is made, plucking it left ugly little pock-marks. So, the victims normally left it as it was. It greatly reduced the value of a bride, but Mungim's father couldn't reduce the bride price without dishonoring his daughter.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to me. "Ah! I have an idea. Wait here, Mungim."

"What be ye up to, Eddas?" Mungim called after me curiously in his own language.

I grinned. "You'll have to wait and see, my friend," I called over my shoulder.

A few minutes later, I came back out and sat down again, holding out a small hemisphere of stone in the palm of my gloved hand. "This stone has a depilatory enchantment on it. Be very careful, because the effect is permanent. Wherever on your skin you stroke the flat surface, the hair will be destroyed and never grow back."

Mungim looked at the tiny stone, his eyes wide. "I could not trade this. It be too valuable. I would cheat ye if I did so."

"Pfft. It was a common item back before the Great War. It's not worth that much - a gold or two."

"Aye, Eddas, perhaps. But today, ye have the sole one I ever did hear of, and to us, it be worth a fortune. Even if me pater leaves the bride-price unchanged, it means ten thousand gold - five thousand gold to her and five thousand gold to our mother for the family treasury. More than that, in sooth, as it be possible me pater would increase the bride-price to reflect her genuine beauty and worth."

"Alright, then she can borrow it. Just bring it back in the fall when you come next. Remember to tell her to be careful, though - wherever you rub the flat part, the hair will go away and never grow back. If she accidentally touches it to her eyebrow or eyelash or scalp, it can't be fixed, not even by me - and I'm possibly the most powerful mage you could even ask to do the job."

"Aye, Eddas," Mungim replied, carefully securing the stone inside his belt-pouch. He then handed me the makeup-kit. "This be yet still enormous profit for me family yet little for ye, I be thinking. Ye will not e'en see use of the little kit, there, as it may yet be yet awhile afore ye do manage to bring Dyarzi back to you so she may yet use it."

"You are a good friend, Mungim. Think nothing of it," I replied, and smiled at him.

Mungim doffed his hat, went to one knee before me, took my hand in his and inclined his head again. "I cannot thank ye enough, Eddas. I will return this come the fall."

Half an hour later, I watched as Mungim's wagon disappeared behind the trees at the bend in the road. I was sure if Dyarzi were here, she'd tell me I'd done a good thing. Even so, it merely seemed the right thing to do at the time.

Twelve.

"Beware elves bearing gifts."

- Dwarven proverb.

"I am still amazed that the hairy one beats me here nearly every year," Taliad said in the language of the elves, and made a moue'.

I chuckled. "Well, my friend, he's been trading with the giants for many, many years - he knows all the safe routes as well as you do," I replied in the same language.

"Aye, there is that. I never thought to trade with the giants, and now I play 'catch-up' with Mungim and the other hairy ones who have for centuries."

I had nearly been taken completely by surprise by Taliad's arrival, four days after Mungim bid me farewell - the green-clad elf seemed to literally appear out of nowhere, wagon and all, while I was checking the blooms on my byallar trees and seeing if any of my trees needed pruning. Of course, that wasn't what had happened. His small wagon had an enchantment on it that suppressed noise, as did the shoes of his elf-pony. He'd simply ridden silently up on me. Now we sat beneath the shade tree, in the same spot I'd traded with Mungim, sipping byallar and chatting. It was fortunate my ring of translation allowed me to speak his language. For his part, Taliad could speak the language of the Arcadians and Larinians, as he often traded with them, but he could not speak Hyperborean - a fact he found quite annoying.

"Well, be that as it may, I do believe you have a problem, my friend," Taliad observed.

"Oh?" I replied, already fairly sure what he meant.

"Indeed. The women you raised from the void remain on Iolo mountain," he said, gesturing eastward, "while the men remain in their newly-restored tower in the ruins of Wilanda-city," he said, gesturing westward. "I beg your pardon, but it is simple to see that this will never work. You must get them together, somehow."

"Ah - you visited them?"

"Indeed I did. The women I found to be typical of your race - somewhat hairy, if you forgive me saying so. Of any human or half-elfen woman, only the body you inhabit now have I ever found to be attractive. It is clean-limbed, and has the beauty of a rose - sweetly formed and scented, but yet with sharp thorns. You have honed that body well in the four or five decades you've inhabited it - forgive me if it is still uncomfortable for you to hear me say so, however," Taliad said, bowing his head briefly.

"I've grown used to this body, and don't mind it as much, my friend. Thank you," I replied, and smiled.

Taliad smiled back, and after brushing a stray strand of golden hair out of his green eyes, he resumed speaking. "In any event, I also went to visit the Black Tower. What a confusing mess. It was an hour before they could bring out someone who knew a spell of translation, for they knew not my tongue and I knew not yours. Your tongue has been all but lost to living memory, I am sorry to say, though a handful of our scholars still know it. While I waited for them to finally sort themselves out, I pondered adding a translation spell to my grimoire. What transpired thereafter, however, made me no longer wish to bother."

"What happened?" I asked, pouring another cup for myself.

"Ah, Eddas. The Black Tower is full of fools, I think. They wished to trade for books on general magic theory, and research works regarding conjuration, summoning, alteration, ectoplasmic manipulation and soul-theory. It would be obvious even to a hedge-wizard that they are attempting to create a formula for revivification, which you, of course, have already done. The purpose was obvious, as well - they intended to raise your race from the Void, one person at a time - or at least raise their wives and loved

ones. I thought this strange, Eddas. Why spend all that time and effort researching a spell formula that you, a member of their order, already knew? So, in curiosity, I asked," Taliad said, and rolled his eyes. "Their leader flew into a rage at the merest hint that they might ask you, and said they'd cast you out of their order as a heretic and a madman. What utter nonsense. If it weren't for their age, I'd have told them to their faces they were fools."

I nodded. Elves had a great respect for age in their culture, and all the members of the Dyclonic Circle were over sixteen centuries old. "The quality of foolishness is not limited to the young," I replied, quoting an old elven proverb.

"True, Eddas - as you Hyperboreans used to say, 'There's No Fool Like An Old Fool'. In any event, I asked them what they might have to trade for these books. 'Gold - your weight in gold,' they replied. In deference to their age, I did not sneer. I am no grubby dwarf, whose every waking thought is occupied by gold. I trade for things that interest me, as you know, and things that I can trade for other things that interest me. Gold I have aplenty. It is not the accumulation of wealth that drives me, but the acquisition of interesting things, and the act of trading itself. I find bartering and haggling to be as enjoyable as pleasant conversation with friends - more, sometimes, as it's a bloodless and sometimes exciting exchange as each side makes offer and counter-offer in pursuit of the best deal they can get," Taliad said, then sipped at his cup quietly for a moment.

This was the aspect of elven culture that Arella had the hardest time understanding when she had met Taliad a few years ago, and took me the longest to explain it to her. She, like most humans unfamiliar with elves, used to see them as being flighty, aloof, and unconcerned with anything other than frivolous activities, yet at the same time she knew they were beings of incredible age, experience and wisdom who are often possessed of such intensity and focused purpose that they are impressive - sometimes even frightening. Their desires and goals often seemed so alien to humans that their true intents and purposes seem to defy understanding. This dichotomy in their nature is resolved when one understands the two main elements of an elf's existence: Long Life and Obsession.

The primary reason elves are seen as being flighty, aloof and unconcerned with day-to-day affairs is their very long lives. What reason is there to hurry when your average lifespan is six to seven centuries? Barring accident or illness, a typical elf can easily expect to outlive any human or dwarf. Many elves have seen several human kingdoms rise and fall in their lifetime, and met one or two members of their own race who are over a thousand years old. To an elf, nothing is really permanent. Even the mightiest castle in the world will crumble before they are middle-aged. Also, where a human female comes into season once each month, an elven female comes into season only once a year, in the springtime. Without the pressure of rapid population growth and short life, elves always look to the long-term, laying out plans and ideas that will take not months or years but decades or centuries to complete. In conflicts with humans or other short-lived races, elves are sometimes content to avoid conflict and simply out-live their foe, returning in a century or so to deal with their descendants (who may be more reasonable).

Since elves are so long lived, they do not have the same concept of time or time-related conflict that humans do. An activity that seems like a heart-pounding pace to an elf will seem like a maddening crawl to a human, and an hourglass that seems to empty at a snail's pace to a human is empty in a very brief time to an elf. On the one occasion Arella met Taliad, our conversation was constantly interrupted with regular pauses while I carefully translated what was being said to Arella, then translated her words back to Taliad - Arella, like most humans, was driven to distraction by the delay, and simply cast her spell of translation. Taliad didn't mind, however - he simply waited patiently. Elves have infinite patience at times. This is not to say that elves are slow, but rather that their sense of time is on a different scale than a human's. In fact, the physiology of elves gives them bodies capable of incredible feats of speed and dexterity, and a fluidity of movement that makes many human acrobats seem like plodding oafs by

comparison. Unfortunately, living for such a long time also causes the other major psychological attribute shared by all elves; Obsession.

The greatest fear of an elf is insanity. The length of their lives means that even elves with the keenest of minds tend to have the memories of their earliest experiences blur into a melange of images and sensations. While elves mature at the same rate humans do, upon reaching maturity at about age 18 to 24 or so, their aging processes slow to a virtual crawl until the very end of their life, when they rapidly grow old and die within a span of a few decades. This means that an elf experiences the world as a wildly chaotic, unstable place where nothing is permanent and nothing is certain except the fact that they will eventually die. To give some sense of order to their lives, elves tend to focus on things called Obsessions, which are pastimes or interests which form the central focus of an elf's life. An obsession can have any focus - sometimes it was to seek out a particular experience, activity or emotion in an attempt to "Experience It To The Fullest". Other Obsessions involving the setting and accomplishing of a specific goal, anything ranging from adventurous obsessions such as exploring the world, to the bizarre obsessions such as collecting one of each type of flower in the world. Sometimes their Obsession was with mastery of a particular ability or skill, again ranging from adventurous goals such as becoming the world's greatest swordsman, wizard, linguist or actor, to bizarre obsessions, such as becoming the world's greatest flower-arranger. Of course, the more bizarre Obsessions are only bizarre to someone who is not an elf - to an elf, such desires seem perfectly normal and understandable.

Many elves had a combination of these things, as Taliad did - he was obsessed with bartering, haggling and trading for items that interested him. In the pursuit of this, he traded with me for my byallar, which he traded to other elves for the things he was interested in, as the elves had grown as fond of byallar as the dwarves were.

All elves have an Obsession, but not all elves are as strongly affected by it. Young elves in their first or second century of life are rarely strongly Obsessed, but older elves in their fifth and sixth centuries of life are rarely mildly Obsessed. Taliad was over four hundred years old (I'd met his great-grandfather in my previous life, in fact, and fought alongside him at the battle of Rathas Pass), and his Obsession with trading for 'interesting things' was beginning to form a central part of his life. When in the pursuit of an Obsession, an elf loses their air of aloof casualness and becomes deadly serious; a being of great age and power who is often impressive or even frightening in their alien nature and psychology to lesser beings. And, should they day ever come when the elf truly feels they have satisfied their Obsession to the fullest, they simply choose another area that interests them and become obsessed with it instead.

I had no idea what the "interesting things" Taliad collected were, and as he had not ventured the information, I thought it impolite to ask. Even so, I knew that there was a chance that someday he would feel he had collected all the "interesting things" he could, and he would no longer live the life of a traveling merchant and trader - on that day, he would most likely bid me a final farewell, then silently fade away into the trees, never returning again. It was likely he'd return to his studies of sorcery, when that day finally came. Elves have a higher percentage of their population than humans do with the Talent, the inborn ability to manipulate mana required to be a spellcaster, and a fine, strong Talent like his was wasted in a life as a traveling merchant and trader, in my opinion - but that was an elf for you.

"Do go on, Taliad," I said, refilling his cup.

Taliad nodded his thanks, sipping at his cup for a moment before he continued. "Well, I told them I could obtain the books they wished with little trouble, yet I had little interest in gold, but rather I sought small items that interested me, or things I could trade for things that interested me. Out of politeness, I mentioned that if all they had to trade was gold, they should keep an eye out for Mungim, for as a dwarf, he would be interested in such an exchange. Well! That, my friend, appeared to be the exact wrong thing

to say! Their leader exploded into such a fit of rage he grew quite tiresome, so I left."

I managed to suppress a laugh, and told him the story of Mungim's experience, which apparently happened a few days to a week or two before his. "Ah, that would explain it," Taliad replied with a nod of understanding, and again sipped at his byallar for a moment. "You know, Eddas, I find it quite difficult to believe that you and High Master Cordo are from the same Circle of mages. You are over sixteen centuries old - older than the oldest elf by at least four centuries, and probably more. This shows in you, as you are polite, well-mannered, and pleasant company, as one would expect an Ancient One to be. Cordo is the same age, but has no manners and no self control. I wonder why?"

"Perhaps it's merely that he is distraught over the ruins he sees about him?" I ventured, just as I'd suggested to Mungim.

"Perhaps. Still, you saw the same ruins, and are not like him. I think perhaps the ruin of your civilization, the death of the Hyperboreans, has driven him insane," Taliad replied, and shuddered. Elves greatly fear insanity, and avoid the insane as though they had a contagious disease.

We chatted for a bit longer after that, then finally Taliad opened one of the boxes he had brought and begun trading. He had brought a book on magic theory representing the collected knowledge of the Arcadians and Larinians. The book had been written by a Larinian researcher, and contained a great deal of information gleaned from work with some of the finest minds in both lands - Arella-tor among them. I didn't refuse it - it was Arella's inspiration that led us to discovering the secrets that the Dyclonic Circle now struggled to find. The Arcadians and Larinians, particularly Arella, thought about magic differently than did we Hyperborean battle-mages - not necessarily better or worse, simply differently. I thought the book would make a fine and valuable addition to the theoretical works I already had, and agreed. It was easily worth a barrel by itself. I also asked Taliad if he might bring me a few black robes when next he visited, as my own robe wasn't as impressive as I'd like (being as it was the same robe I'd taken off the Vilandians ages ago, the hem shortened and the hood added by my own mediocre hand at needlework). As it turned out, Taliad had anticipated my need, and had half a dozen loose hooded robes of soft, finely-made ebon fustian for me to take a look at. Each had slight variations in the length of sleeve and hem, so I selected the one that was closest in length to what I was already wearing, and traded another barrel for it.

Finally, Taliad swung himself into the driver's seat of his small wagon, and smiled at me. "I may have something interesting for you when I come back in the fall - it depends on whether I can make the trades I am thinking of before then. I trade your byallar for something, then trade that for something else, then trade that for something else, and so on. Quite enjoyable - and if I succeed, I think I may have something that is well worth your time, and most of the fall harvest," he said, and grinned.

"Oh? And what will you do with several dozen barrels, my friend? Do you have something in particular you are trading for with them?"

"Oh, yes. A very interesting item indeed caught my eye last winter. I've been searching for something like it for many decades. It should be an interesting trade," he replied, then winked. "Farewell, Master Eddas Ayar. Until we meet again," he called, then flicked the reins to his pony. Silently, they moved away down the road, the enchantments he had on the wagon and the shoes of his pony muffling the sound of their movement to nothingness, until finally they disappeared behind the trees at the bend in the road.

I sighed. 'He may be right,' I thought to myself, considering our conversation and what I'd learned from it. 'Cordo may have been driven insane by the death of our people - like Morgar.' I tucked the book and robe I'd traded for under my arm, and turned back to my tower with a heavy heart. It seemed my people were well and truly gone, and with a madman in charge of half of the surviving population, it didn't seem

likely they would ever return.

Thirteen.

"Dig through the ruins!" That was Cordo's order. There were seven other circles of mages that once had their homes in Wilanda-city - it was possible we might find scraps of their libraries, and with spells of repairing might restore some kind of works we could use in our research. Natchok, Faral and I considered telling him the risk, but decided against it. No one could really tell him anything he didn't want to hear, now. Each day, he would come to us, and demand to know what progress Natchok, Faral and I had made. And each day, he flew into a rage when he found we had made little, if any. Yet, there was little we could do. Despite how much Cordo screamed, we needed proper research texts to have a decent chance at success. So many, many times, I thought of Eddas, and was saddened by the waste, and the futility of it all. Then, the first ghost came through the wall of my chamber one night, and we had other things to think about..."

- Gorol Qual, Personal Diary, Date Unknown, presumed 17th century NCC

"There. That formula is more what you want," I said in the tongue of the giants.

Longtooth looked at the large flat rock I was using as a 'chalkboard', his enormous brow furrowed in concentration as he studied my work. It was difficult for him to bend down to my level and remain so for hours on end, so he had simply lain down on his stomach to see what I was doing. His own grimoire he had open before him, and I recognized his father's blocky, simple writing in it - apparently, his father had passed his spellbook on as Longtooth's inheritance. The book was enormous to me - a massive tome that was two cubits long, a cubit wide and half a cubit thick with pages of soft cowhide pounded thinner than vellum. For him, however, it was a small book that sat easily on one hand held flat, and could be conveniently tucked into his belt. "Aye, Eddas. I see it now. By reducing this value here," he said, pointing with the tip of his writing brush, "you reduce the cost to the caster in endurance. I wonder why my father never thought of that?"

"Because he, like you and those few other giants who have the Talent, was also possessed of an enormous amount of strength. He could cast this disease-curing spell in your grimoire six or seven times before fainting with exhaustion - and usually he never needed to cast it more than once or twice. This spell, however, is much more efficient. I'll wager you can cast it twenty-five times without fainting - perhaps more. Combined with the meditation techniques I taught you last year, that should be enough to handle any outbreak of Black-Tongue or Dropsy you may have, even in the larger villages."

Longtooth nodded his massive head. "I thank you. I believe I shall copy it now, if that's alright. The remainder is the same, yes? I mean the reagents and other miscellany?"

"No, the change in the value here," I replied, pointing, "means that it cannot be imbued into an item or made into a potion, and has no reagents - and without reagents, you cannot cast it from a grimoire," I replied.

"I'll have to take some time to practice it, then, though it may be many weeks of practice before I can cast this new formula 'on the fly', as it were," Longtooth said, grinning, and I nodded as he dipped the tip of his writing-brush into the bucket of ink he brought. He then very carefully began to scribe the spell into his grimoire, writing in what for him was very small letters, using just the tip of the brush. His tongue was clenched between his teeth, his brow furrowed again, and he looked quite comical as he concentrated - I had to struggle to keep my expression smooth. It wouldn't do to break his concentration and cause him to make a mistake, much less to have him see me grinning at him and have him perhaps be insulted. For a giant, Longtooth was a genius with a quick mind and an innate grasp of the mathematics of magic - his

father would truly have been very proud of him if he could see him today. For a human, he was only slightly above average intelligence, and still somewhat slow of wit.

When he was finally done, he carefully cleaned his writing-brush in a bucket of water, then wiped it dry on his enormous tunic. With a gentle, careful hand, he lifted the small bucket of ink and capped it with the leather-wrapped wooden plug that was its stopper. Carefully, so as not to raise too much dust which might fall upon his open grimoire before the ink dried, he sat up. "There. That will take a bit to dry, though," he rumbled.

"Well, while we wait, you can tell me the news of Dohbari," I replied, sitting down in the chair I had brought out of the tower.

Longtooth pondered for several minutes, stroking his bearded chin in the warm summer sun before his rumbling voice replied. "Well, Dragonslayer and Felicity's oldest son, Stronghand, has been courting one of the girls of the village. Constance is her name. Quite nice, I think. My own wife Belinda thinks she's a bit flighty, though. Most likely if they decide to marry, they will have to be tested. The spring planting went well, and if the rains come as they should, we'll have a good harvest. Dragonslayer has taken to walking with Stronghand when they patrol for goblins, as he is getting on in years and no longer can chase them as fast as he used to. They encountered the mages of your circle in the ruins of Wilanda-city. The mages rebuilt the Black Tower, apparently, and now live in it. They are picking through the ruins in small groups - even though this is our territory, it is still their city, so Dragonslayer said nothing. This has stirred up several ghosts, though, so Dragonslayer and Stronghand no longer patrol at night there - only during the day. Stronghand asked if they wanted me to come by and try to appease the ghosts, but they declined. They are not like you at all. You talk to us often, and treat us as friends. They tend to ignore us, and speak to us very little," Longtooth said, then scratched his head with a massive digit. "I wonder why they are like that?"

"It's seeing all the destruction and ruin, most likely. They are still quite upset," I replied.

"Ah. I imagine that would be disheartening. The ghosts must be quite frightening at night, as well. Perhaps this also upsets them. No matter - they are no friends of ours. Mungim the dwarf said that they had ejected you from their Order. All of us of Dohbari think that is a terrible way to treat you, so they are not our friends."

'Gods, is there anyone in Hyperborea that Cordo hasn't annoyed yet?' I thought to myself. "Perhaps they'll change their minds as time goes by," I offered.

"Perhaps, Eddas. I do not know. I only know that you are our friend, tried and proven. They make no pretense at friendship, and betray you, who are our friend. They also stir up ghosts in our territory, which we do not like. If they mind their own business, we will mind ours, but if they do not, I think the giants of our village may go over there one morning and stomp them flat."

I blanched - they may have turned on me, but these were, for the most part, my friends we were talking about. "I don't know if that would be a good idea, my friend. There are over four score of them, and each is a powerful and skilled battle-mage."

"We have spread the story of them and what they did to you. Few giants are pleased with them - your fame as a healer and as a giant-friend is well known. I can gather the giants of three or four villages together easily. They will not be a problem," Longtooth replied.

I smiled - Longtooth was only trying to show me how much his people cared for me, and sounding disapproving would not be a good idea. "Thank you, my friend, I'm sure you're right," I replied. And he was right - three or four villages would be around ten or twelve score angry giants - and perhaps a few

giantesses, as well. My friends would die, and rather rapidly. This didn't make me happy, but there wasn't much I could do to try to help them. They had made me an outcast - I couldn't even speak to them, really. An outcast member of the Circle was, by our rules, a shunned person, and was to be avoided. There was, quite literally, nothing I could do.

When the ink on the page in Longtooth's grimoire was finally dry, he tucked it back into his belt and carefully put his writing gear away in a box he carried in his hand. "I thank you again, Eddas," He said, carefully rising to his feet. "Are you sure there is nothing we can do for you in return? This is a valuable spell to us, and will come in very handy in the future."

I smiled. "No, my friend. The Giants of Dohbari village already do so much for me, I feel I will never be able to repay them were I to live a hundred lifetimes," I replied.

Longtooth grinned back. "We feel the same way, my friend. Farewell for now," he called, then turned and began striding away down the road.

Arella peeked out from the door to the tower as the low booming of Longtooth's footsteps faded away, and Swift-wing fluttered down onto her shoulder from the shade tree at the base of my tower. "Is he gone?" she asked.

"Yes. I'll get the shovel and start digging. Can you drag them out here?"

"Yes - I can use my spell of telekinesis and get the one you called Horgoth down here fairly quickly," she replied, and went back into the tower.

What I hadn't told Longtooth, because it would have enraged him, is that I had two corpses inside my tower, and the count of members of the Dyclonic Circle was now down to eighty-three.

It had started innocently enough. I was sitting alone on the parapet of the tower, having just finished my simple breakfast of conjured fare. The air before me shimmered, and two of my old friends appeared - Master Horgoth and Master Nials. I greeted them in friendship, as it had been almost a year since the Circle ejected me, and I hoped that perhaps they had changed their minds. Horgoth and Nials smiled and clasped my forearm warmly in greeting. Horgoth wore his usual brown robes, and Nials wore his usual black - both of them also wore the steel skullcap of the order, though it looked like Horgoth's needed a bit of a polish.

"How goes it within the Circle, my friends?" I asked, resuming my seat.

Nials sighed at that. "Ah, poorly, Eddas. We sorely need the spell you researched. The Circle's library is long gone - a few scraps and the spines of a few tomes was all we could find. Even after we restored what little we could find with spells of repairing, they turned out to be worthless - just copies of spellbooks placed in the library for use by the apprentices and mages of the Circle in building their own grimoires. We've no theoretical works to refer to, and only three of us are good enough at spell research to try doing it off the top of their heads - Gorol, Natchok, and Faral. They're working on it, but it will take years - possibly decades. Only two traders have come by - an elf and a dwarf. The dwarf got some sort of bee up his rear at something High Master Cordo said, and took off. The elf - well, you know how they are. One moment things were fine, then he said something that insulted Cordo and rode off. A pair of giants wander by two or three times a week patrolling for goblins and ogres and such, but they said they weren't coming by at night anymore because we accidentally roused a few ghosts while seeing if any of the other libraries in Wilanda-city survived. Hell, Eddas, the place is so badly ruined, we had to dig in as many places as looked right - who knew we'd disturb a few bones belonging to some restless spirits? They're quite annoying, as well - they keep coming into the tower and wailing at us, keeping us awake all night. Cordo says we should just ignore them and eventually they'll go away, but so far it hasn't worked.

We really need your spell, Eddas. Do you think you could see your way clear to give it to us?"

I shook my head in reply to them. "No, Nials. Cordo ejected me from the Circle. He's not getting free access to my spellbooks and research works as though I was still a member, he's going to have to pay for it like he would any other mage not in the Circle. And I've already said my price, I'm not going to repeat it."

"Ah, that's too bad," Nials said, then looked around. "Tell me, is the mage Arella-tor here today? The one you trained?"

"No, not yet. She normally visits me this day of the week, but she hasn't arrived yet," I replied, shrugging.

Nials then threw his hands out in a magical gesture, rapidly incanting. Caught unprepared and sitting, I tried to begin a counter-spell - but it was too late. A rope as thick as my wrist appeared, flying from Nials' fingertips, while Horgoth leaped on me, knocking me out of my chair and to the parapet. In a moment I was bound hand and foot by the massive rope, and Horgoth was pulling the knot of a gag tight - I was helpless. "There. That spell can hold an ogre - it should hold him easily. I'll search the tower for his books, you keep an eye out for the Southlander woman. If I can't find what we want in the books, we'll use her as leverage."

Horgoth didn't reply, however. This was because someone had slit his throat from ear to ear.

Nials turned at his companion's death-rattle, and realized someone invisible was on the parapet - neither he nor I knew it at the time, but Arella was there. While Horgoth clutched at his throat, blood pouring between his fingers as he thrashed out his life at Nials' feet, Nials began casting the Spell of Truesight. As soon as he began casting, Arella darted around the corner of the tower.

Though I didn't know it at the time, Swift-wing had preceded his mistress, as she wanted to tell me she would be a little late. He had spotted Nials and Horgoth talking to me, and in curiosity had examined their astral auras - a natural talent of Ravens. As soon as he saw their auras, he warned his mistress - he didn't dare speak up to warn me, or he'd probably have been blasted into a puff of smoking feathers for his efforts. Swift-wing told me later he'd rarely read more dangerous auras - two very powerful mages, their base auras were both dark green and shot through with brown flashes, splotches of purple, bluish purple, green and red. They were desperate, they were contemplating treachery, they had nothing but contempt for me, and they were determined to get what they wanted at any cost. When Swift-wing told Arella this, she had pulled off her shoes to be as stealthy as possible, cast a Spell of Invisibility on herself, and used her Spell of Returning to come as quickly as she could. Nials and Horgoth had not cast any defensive spells before they came, on the off chance I might examine them, suspecting treachery, and find proof of it. That was to be Horgoth's undoing - if he'd had his Spell of Protection up, Arella never would have been able to kill him with her knife.

Nials searched the parapet carefully, but saw nothing - Arella simply wasn't within sight. I looked around - on the very top of my tower, sitting right at the peak of the dome, was Swift-wing. He held perfectly still, watching Nials carefully - and obviously telling Arella when to move so he wouldn't spot her. Swift-wing was simply so small and perched so far above Nial's head that he hadn't spotted him. I was again impressed with how well they worked together as a team, just as they had during the war for Darian's throne.

Their strategy was a wise one, though. Arella may have been the most powerful mage in the Southlands, but Nials was a Hyperborean battle-mage, and easily her superior - if he could see her, or even just know roughly where she was, he could kill her. Nials walked around the parapet stealthily, and

Swift-wing watched closely. As soon as Swift-wing told her Nials was on the other side, she quietly padded back around to me, her bare feet making almost no noise on the stone of the parapet. With a careful touch, she slipped her knife between the gag and my cheek, and cut the gag. Instantly, she darted for the far corner of the tower again, apparently at Swift-wing's silent, mental warning.

I looked up to Nials, who was just rounding the corner again in his search for Arella. "So, this is what it's come to, eh, Nials?" I yelled, spitting out the gag and hating the sound of the woman's shriek in my ears.

"Yes, damn you! Cordo says you worked almost fifty years before you died trying to find it, and another forty in this life! I'm not waiting a century or more for Gorol and his team to find it - I'll be dead by then! Give me the damn formula!"

"No," I replied coldly.

Nials pulled out a kerchief from his pocket. "We'll see about that. Let's just put this gag back, then we'll just see," he said, and grinned at me evilly. "That's a lovely body you stole, Eddas. It's been quite some time since I saw any woman, much less one with a body as lovely as that one. Once I kill your friend, perhaps I'll take my pleasure of it for a moment or two. Afterwards, we'll find out if you don't sing a different tune once you've bled a little under my blade."

Being bound limited my options drastically. I could cast, since I wasn't gagged, but being unable to gesture meant that I would have to limit myself to simple spells, most of which wouldn't hurt him if he had even the most basic of protection spells up - and judging by how openly he approached an un-gagged mage, it seemed likely he now had his best spells of protection up, most likely cast while he was on the other side of the tower. I did know one spell, however, that would completely ignore his protective spells, as it didn't do direct damage. I quickly spat out the incantation to the spell of the Elemental Blast of Air, struggling to gesture as best I could in my bonds. Just as he was bent over me, I finished the spell.

The massive gust of wind smashed into him, lifting him into the air, and throwing him off the parapet. His rapid and urgent incantation of the Spell of Flight was cut off by a sickening thud as he hit the ground, forty-two cubits below the parapet.

"You got him," Arella beamed, peeking from around the corner. She dashed over to me as Swift-wing fluttered down to her shoulder, and with a grin, cut me loose.

"Yes. It's a simple spell - you should know it well. I taught it to all my apprentices in the latter part of their training as an introduction to elemental theory, and as their first truly offensive spell. Just an enormous blast of air. Doesn't really hurt, but can throw you about and give you some scrapes and bruises from the fall or slam you into a wall hard enough to stun or render you unconscious - of course, when cast by a master, it hits considerably harder than when cast by an apprentice. Unfortunately for him, I never forgot that spell, and he was fighting on top of my tower," I replied grimly, rubbing my wrists. "Longtooth's coming at noon - go to my linen closet, pull out a spare blanket, wrap Horgoth up in it and drag him inside. I'll go downstairs and do the same to Nials, and try to rake the ground a bit so Longtooth won't notice the blood."

"Why bother hiding it from him, Eddas? He can help dig graves," Swift-wing asked.

"Because he would be so enraged he'd grab whoever was in the village and go charging over to the Black Tower - and the eighty-odd battle-mages there would easily kill a handful of giants. Come - let's hurry."

Now, hours later, I put the last bit of sod back over the two graves. I tamped the sod back down in place, then leaned on my shovel and sighed. The bodies I'd stripped of their rings and other magic items,

and my blankets could be washed in the river then hung to dry. Yes, in a few weeks, after a rain or two that let the sod grow smooth again, there would be no trace of them. No trace at all of two men whom I had once called 'friend.'

Arella came over an hour later, having finished washing the bundle of cloths she'd used to clean up the mess on the parapet and the blankets we'd used to wrap up the bodies to keep them from trailing blood everywhere while we moved them. All the blood-stained cloths and blankets now hung on a rope she'd tied between two trees, drying in the afternoon sun. She looked at me, and studied my face quietly for several minutes before she spoke. I was staring off into the distance, looking down the tree-lined road that led to my tower.

"What is it, Eddas?"

I sighed again. "I just wish..." I said, then shook my head. "They just wanted the formula, Arella. And now two old friends are dead."

"Raven, it had to be done. You heard what he said. Perhaps he wouldn't have killed you - but he'd have done worse," she said, then hugged me.

I let go the shovel and hugged her back for several minutes. Finally, we let each other go and just stood there, holding hands.

I looked down to the graves again, and she followed my gaze. "They were my friends, once," I said, and sighed. "But you're right - when Nials said he would... Use me like that..." I said, and in a burst of anger I let go Arella's hands, turned and stomped down on the dirt over his unmarked grave.

"I saw you going through their pockets and such," Swift-wing commented.

"Yes. I thought I would recover their rings and their other items and return them to their tombs. Now I am so angry at these two for doing this, for forcing me and you to kill them, I think I may keep them myself," I said, and stomped on Horgoth's grave, as well. My emotions were a confused whirl. Part of me felt deep grief at the death of two men I once called 'friend', yet another part of me was livid with anger and humiliation that Nials would consider raping me. "Between the two of them they had twenty rings and various other items, but only two were enchantments I don't already have. Nials wore a ring that was enchanted with the Spell of Summoning the Invisible Steed. He always said I was foolish to wear a ring of flight, as he felt an invisible steed summoned without effort was far more useful and faster than flying. As it turned out, he was wrong. If he'd had a ring of flight, he'd have been able to halt his fall before he hit the ground," I replied, and picked up the shovel. I gestured for Arella to follow, and walked back to the shed to put away the shovel as I continued.

"Anyway... Horgoth had a ring of extra-dimensional space like mine with his grimoire in it - I estimate it's worth around five thousand gold pieces, perhaps more. I didn't see any spell in it I didn't already have, but then again, I only skimmed through it. I'll have to review it carefully this evening, and that will give me a better idea of what's in it and how much it's actually worth. If you like, you can copy anything in it into your own grimoire - you helped beat him, you've certainly earned it. Nials' grimoire wasn't on him. It's probably back in the Black Tower, or inside his Hidden Sanctuary. Instead, he had a ring of invisibility," I said, and sighed. "I'd always told him that being invisible was of only limited use on the battlefield, since you were not only invisible to your enemies but to your allies, as well, but Nials disagreed, and said it had other uses. Considering as it was your invisibility that allowed you to kill Horgoth, I suppose he was right. I'll probably keep the ring to use myself."

"Eddas, I hate to remind you of this, but there's still more to do," she said, taking my hands in hers after I'd finished putting the shovel away.

"Oh? Like what?"

"They're not really dead - their bodies are, but their souls sleep in their animuaries somewhere in their tombs. Someday, they may rise again. You will probably have to go to their tombs and crush their animuaries," she replied quietly.

I blanched at the idea - as she didn't have an animuary herself, she couldn't know how chilling her suggestion was. Crushing and destroying someone's soul was not something I would do lightly. "No. It's not necessary - I sealed each of their tombs myself using the Spell of Warding when I first raised them from the void. No-one except me can get in there without first dispelling the ward - and aside from the Dyclonic Circle, I sincerely doubt any mage today is up to the challenge. Of course, they would have to find the tombs, first. They've lain hidden this long, it doesn't seem likely anyone's going to find them anytime soon. It's not necessary, Arella."

"Well, alright. Even so, we'll have to stay very alert from now on - Cordo will send more once he realizes these two failed."

"Cordo didn't send Nials and Horgoth, Arella. I used the spell of communication with the dead, and asked their corpses. They just grew impatient with waiting, conceived of the idea of trying to force me to give them what they wanted, and acted on it. They said there is a great deal of discontent among the members of the Circle, and Cordo is hard-pressed to keep everyone working and following his plan. I suspect there may be others who also are growing impatient, though, and they may make similar attempts. When these two are noticed to be missing, that's only going to make matters worse for Cordo - the others will think they have abandoned Cordo and his plan. At that point, Cordo may be forced to act, and may choose to do what these two tried," I said, walking back to the tower with Arella in tow.

"Alright, what do we do, then?" Arella asked.

"Well, 'we' do nothing. You have your duties at the castle, Arella, and it's at Steelgate where Yorindar's interests lie. As for myself, sooner or later, Yorindar will show me what he wants me to do. So, I simply wait."

"Assuming he hasn't forgotten about you," Arella replied, making a moue'.

"What do you mean?" I asked, opening the door to the tower for her.

"Eddas, you said before this conflict between Morgar and Yorindar is over Darian - or some descendant of his. And yet in five years all you've done is finish educating Darian's children. You seem to be left here by yourself. I understand what you're saying, and you're right - my duty is at Steelgate, helping Darian and his children. Still, that means you're having to deal with Morgar's ruining your plans and preventing the restoration of your people without anyone's help."

A thought suddenly occurred to me, like the flame of a candle finally flaring to life. "Of course!"

"What?" Arella asked, looking at me as we reached my room at the top of the tower.

I smiled, sitting down at my table and patting the chair beside me. As she sat, I began to explain. "Arella, I've had months to think about this, and it's finally dawned on me what's happening, and why I am still here in my tower, doing what is, for the most part, nothing."

"So what is happening?" Arella asked.

"Have I ever explained to you the concept of a battle fought as a delaying action?"

"Yes" she replied, then suddenly, her eyes widened. "You mean that you're here to keep Morgar distracted?"

I nodded. "So far as I can tell, especially after interrogating Nials and Horgoth's corpses with my spell, Cordo is receiving advice directly from Morgar, through his dreams, almost nightly. Yorindar explained once that doing that takes a lot of energy from him - he said 'It's very tiring, and can't be maintained indefinitely.' Cordo has become the main focus of Morgar's efforts, and probably all the energy he has is going into guiding Cordo. I'm here as part of a delaying action, while Yorindar continues the real work with Darian and his children."

Arella nodded in understanding, leaning back in her chair as she stroked her chin, thinking. "What do you suppose his plans are?"

"Hard to say. Darian is over seventy, now, so he won't live for too many more years. I think it's going to fall to you very soon to look after their children, most likely in your role as Court Wizardess - and I think you'll have to keep a close eye on them from now on. Either way, my task for the moment apparently is to keep Morgar distracted, which I am. Morgar has apparently decided that his plans require being the dominant deity of the Hyperboreans when our race finally arises from the ashes of our civilization. I think it was probably hard enough for him to help Cordo to get all the other mages of the Circle to turn against me, so now he's just struggling to maintain control," I said, and raised a finger. "But - and this is the most important thing - Morgar's whole plan is going to fail, and fail utterly if he continues the way he's been going."

"Really? Why?" Arella asked.

"Well, Arella, this is my thinking: He's presenting himself as being the correct and proper deity of the battle-mages of the Dyclonic Circle. And yet, everything he has ordered them to do through Cordo has been an utter and complete failure so far. Since the moment they decided to eject me from the Circle, everything they have tried has failed. If they continue like this, eventually even the most rabid of those who support Cordo and Morgar will realize that they are on the wrong side."

"Unless Cordo blames all this on you, and they all come here to blast you at once," Swift-wing said cynically.

"That's possible, too, my friend. Sometimes delaying actions cost you the troops you committed to them. Even so, I think Yorindar still needs me, probably for some event or person in the future, and I don't think he's quite willing to let me die just yet. He's building up to something that hasn't happened yet - something in the future. And he's doing it quietly, keeping Morgar's attention focused here, while he brings the future plans of his to fruition," I explained, and Arella nodded as I continued.

"Also, I think Morgar will be hesitant to have Cordo try to kill me so openly. Morgar is insane, not stupid. Certainly, they would succeed - but Morgar knows I am allied with the giants, friends with Karg, and that the elves and dwarves hold me in high respect. The Dyclonic Circle isn't strong enough at the moment to stand against all the giants and Karg, much less have the elves and dwarves annoyed at them, too."

"I still think it's very dangerous," Swift-wing commented, and Arella nodded.

"I agree. I think that this 'holding action' is very dangerous," she said.

"Of course it is," I replied, and leaned forward to kiss Arella briefly, then stroked Swift-wing's feathers for a moment before continuing. "All war is dangerous - and this is a war between two gods. Like I told you before - mortals fight wars with sword and spell across bloody battlegrounds. Gods fight wars with

souls and paradox across the Arc of Time," I said, and smiled. Eventually, Arella smiled back.

"So you were drawn from the past to save the future," she said at last.

"Exactly," I replied, and felt a chill as the word passed my lips.

Fourteen.

"A year had passed, and I found I missed Dame Raven greatly. What had started as simple friendship had, indeed, blossomed into love. Yet, she was gone - and might never return, unless the king needed her again. For many weeks, I considered leaving my post, abandoning what little I had in my life, and simply getting a good horse to ride north, past the Great Wall, and perhaps try to find her in the wilderness of Hyperborea. Finally, however, reason prevailed - even if I could dishonor myself by abandoning the king's duty, Hyperborea was a large and dangerous place, abounding with giants, dragons and fell beasts, if all that I had heard was true. It was far more likely I'd end up in the gullet of some hideous creature of those barren wastelands than it was I would be in the arms of the woman I loved. At last, in desperation, I asked the court wizardess, Mage Arella-tor, if she might help. Arella-tor simply smiled sadly at me, and shook her head. "Let her go, Commander. Your love can never be, for Dame Raven loves another, and has for sixteen centuries." Shocked at her immense age and saddened by my misfortune, I returned to my duties. Yet, at night, I often found I dreamed of her. To this day, I find I love her still."

- Commander Javan Tybalt of the King's Guard, Personal Diary, 1682 NCC

Arella's visits grew less and less frequent as spring slowly turned into summer. Darian's senility was slowly but steadily worsening, and she had to spend more and more of her time watching his health and mixing herbal tonics to give him to try to maintain the clarity of his mind. I staved off my loneliness by throwing myself into my research, hoping to find a way to restore my old body to me.

The problem was not simple. While I had the Spell of Body Alteration in my grimoire, a spell that allowed the caster to alter their body in nearly any way they desired, it wasn't what I needed. The spell would allow me to transform my body into a male human, if I wished, even into a Hyperborean male human, but not into any particular person, certainly not into my old self, and the spell wasn't permanent.

About the middle of summer, as I was poring through my grimoire, I suddenly stumbled upon the answer. I nearly whooped with joy. It was an effort to calm myself, and begin to do the calculations to see if it would work. After two hours, I found it would. "Yes!" I shouted, my heart leaping in my chest. After fetching a small reagent pouch from my research supplies, I cast my Spell of Returning to transport myself down into my tomb.

The theory was simple, and it surprised me that it had not occurred to me before. Many spells specify their effects through the use of samples from the intended target, or a direct example of the intended effect, using the Law of Sympathy or the Law of Contagion. For example, one of the spells of summoning in my grimoire had very little drain because its palliations were based around requiring a sample from the target to be summoned - a hair, a fingernail paring, a drop of blood, what have you. This used the Law of Contagion to reduce the drain by limiting the possible effect to a specific target. If I could get a sample of hair or something similar from my old body, I could then create a spell that used this sample to restore my form, using the Law of Sympathy to guide the spells effect.

Using my ring of telekinesis, I lifted the lid of my sarcophagus and bent down to the ancient skeleton that had once been my body. With a gentle touch, I took a large pinch of dust from beneath the skeleton - dust that had once been my flesh. I then carefully sealed the sarcophagus again, and cast my Spell of Returning to take me back to the top of my tower.

After copying the finished formula and the incantation onto several blank sheets of vellum and spreading them across my table, I stripped and set the garments on the bed. The formula didn't account for clothing and other items worn, and I didn't want to waste time trying to adjust it for that when I could simply remove them.

I sat back at the table again, nude, and looked down at myself. This body was very beautiful, yes - but I had tired of it. I wanted my old body back. "Hah! Goodbye, breasts! No longer will you pain me when I have to run!" I crowed, grinning. "Goodbye, womb! Your monthly interruption of my life will not be missed!" With great care, I extracted a few grains of the dust from the rest, holding them between my thumb and forefinger, then began reading the spell. I rattled it off rapidly - I didn't want to take even a moment more time than I needed. I had several pinches of dust - if I failed, I could always try again.

The grains of dust between my fingertips puffed into smoke, and I sat back and awaited the transformation. I was certain it would be uncomfortable, and I shut my eyes, steeling myself against whatever may come, and waited.

After a moment, I opened my eyes again.

Nothing happened.

I look down at myself, and swore. I was still a pale-skinned female half-elf.

"I must have mis-cast. Or perhaps I need more than just a few grains of the dust from my corpse," I muttered aloud, and carefully emptied the reagent bag into my open palm. Sighing, I began again, taking my time and casting carefully. I spent an hour, weaving the Mana into the desired pattern, repeating the words of power carefully and precisely. With a final gesture, I released the spell, and the dust in my palm puffed into smoke. I again shut my eyes and steeled myself against the pain of transformation from woman to man.

After a few heartbeats, I opened my eyes and swore again. Nothing had happened.

I pored over the formula for the spell, and the incantations and gestures I had written down. I knew I had followed what I'd written precisely - perhaps the error lay in what I had written. Or, perhaps, the spell violated the Law of Tantity. And the Law of Tantity did, indeed, apply here. The spell's drain was minor, and I could amplify the effect by applying my will. However, even if I applied every bit of my will and fainted with exhaustion, the spell would still fail if resisted by the Law of Tantity. I carefully re-checked my work.

After an hour of study, I swore again. There was nothing there. I'd checked by work carefully, and no slip of the pen was to blame. I'd been right in my initial calculations, and the Law of Tantity was not violated. Anyone with a pinch of dust from a corpse, a bit of hair from someone living or dead, or other similar material components could use this formula to transform their body, following the pattern that was laid down in the material component they had used. The spell should have worked. Some kind of transformation should have occurred in me - but nothing had happened.

'Or at least, nothing I can see looking down at myself,' I thought suddenly, realizing the possibilities.

For a brief moment, I was worried. It suddenly occurred to me that I still did not have an explanation for what had happened to me when the skull of Hyarlanoth had destroyed my animuary. The skull had bound my soul to this body as though it was my own, reducing my animuary to dust. Still, the binding itself had been in a strange manner, and something in its nature protected me, somehow, from the effects of the Hidden Life spell. I knew not what it was - I only knew that when I astrally projected from this body, my true form could be seen on the astral plane - my spirit was still that of a muscular, adult Hyperborean

male, as I always had been, despite my body being that of a half-elf female. 'Perhaps a change did occur, but the effect was warped by that of the Skull!' I thought, and leaped to my feet. I dashed to the mirror, worried that I might see something horrid had happened.

I looked into the mirror for a long moment. Then, I breathed an enormous sigh of relief, and grinned.

Standing before me, gazing out of the mirror with a broad grin on her face, was the same half-elven woman I had gotten used to seeing all these years. Her eyes flashed like twin pieces of jet, and she tossed her ebon ponytail with glee. Her smooth, hairless body was beautiful, sensual, and well-muscled. The woman in the mirror seemed to almost flaunt her body at me - and it was an astoundingly beautiful body, with an alien cast to the features that made her look even more beautiful. I ran my fingers over myself to assure myself again that the body was indeed mine, turning to look over my shoulder and see every part of me, and watched the woman in the mirror do the same, an expression of relish on her face.

It was some moments before I realized that this was perhaps the first time I had looked at the woman in the mirror, the strange person who had gazed back out at me for years, and was actually glad to see her.

I went back to my bed, and began pulling on my clothes. It seemed obvious, now - whatever effect the Skull had on me, it prevented me from altering this body. I sighed. It seemed that before I would be able to transform this body into my old one, I would have to find out just exactly what the Skull of Hyarlanoth had done to me in the first place.

And that research might take me decades. Perhaps centuries.

I had already spent time studying my own astral aura, and trying to find out what change the Skull had made in me. I'd spent years on it, in fact. To date, I still had no clue. I could tell something had changed by examining my own aura, but exactly what had been done was unclear. Yes, it could take me ages to unravel the mystery of what exactly had happened to me - and apparently, until I did, I couldn't resume my original form and become a man again. In this body, I had that kind of time for research - a half-elf could live three to four centuries. More, with the youth-restoring spell I'd copied from the grimoire of the White Witch of Iolo Mountain, I could simply restore this body's youth as it neared the end of its life, and take millennia to work on the problem, if needed. But even having a long lifespan to research the problem didn't necessarily mean I would find the answer.

When I was dressed, I rose to my feet and summoned my staff to my hand. With a sigh, I cast a minor cantrip of light and placed the glowing spark on the tip of my staff. Drawing lightly upon the reserves of strength it contained, I then cast my Spell of Returning. In an instant, I was deep below my tower, in the small chamber I had set aside in my tomb for Dyarzi's final resting place. I gazed upon her quiet, skeletal form, laying upon her cold bed of stone, and tears came to my eyes. "I'm sorry, Dyarzi. I guess we'll have to wait a little longer," I said, then knelt on the floor beside her, and wept.

Fifteen.

"The Law of Tativity: Whenever one is designing a new spell formula, one must always keep the limitations of the Law of Tativity in mind. In brief, the Law of Tativity states that the effect of any given application of mana is directly limited by the absolute relative effect in accomplishing the caster's intent, with the universe resisting the application of mana logarithmically, the amount of resistance related to the relative relationship between effect and desire. This means that an incidental effect which accomplishes the desire has a low resistance by the universe, while a direct effect which completely and uniquely accomplishes the desire has near infinite resistance. This is why a formula producing a blast of flame is far easier to derive than a formula to simply cause your neighbor's rooster who keeps waking you up at the crack of dawn to lose its voice. A blast of

flame could be used to start a forest fire, or light a forge - the fact that you can incinerate an enemy with it is incidental. A spell whose effect will only work on your neighbor's rooster, on the other hand, is a unique effect, not incidental, and the universe resists that to an almost infinite degree. Or, to put it simply, if the formula you are trying to design would only work for you in your current situation, it won't work. Now, a spell that works on any chicken, not just a rooster and not just your neighbor's rooster, is possible, though difficult. It is easier if it works on any bird, and easier still if it works on any animal, and child's play if it works on any living being."

- Eddas Ayar, *The Mathematics of Magic*, Chapter 42, Date Unknown, presumed 17th century NCC

The fall harvest was going very well. A dozen giantesses from Dohbari-village had been working for the last two weeks on it, and it seemed they'd have the work finished in about another week. Dragonslayer and his son Strongarm were visiting, taking a break in their patrols of the area to chat with me. Of course, they also were taking advantage of the fact that with a giantess grinding the harvest on my millstones, two others roasting the seeds in enormous pans over a bonfire and a third boiling an enormous cauldron to make byallar for the workers to drink, there actually was enough for them to share a mug of byallar with me - or a barrel, for them. Strongarm paid his respects, grinning broadly, when his eye caught upon one of the giantesses, and he politely excused himself to go chat with her while she worked, leaving Dragonslayer alone with me (if one can truly be said to be alone with a dozen giants within a few hundred paces of you).

"Health and Long Life, Eddas Ayar," Dragonslayer said, raising his enormous giant-cup, as large as a barrel, that one of the giantesses had filled for him. I raised my cup back to him, smiling. Dragonslayer had gone completely white-headed over the last few years, and his beard was salt-and-pepper gray. The armor he'd made from the dragon he'd killed all those years ago showed little sign of age, however, nor did his weapon - both he cared for well, as was expected of a warrior. His weapon was an enormous club made from the bole of a tree and tipped with an enormous iron sphere fully four cubits wide, the ball festooned with gigantic spikes a cubit long. Swift-wing had once commented years ago that it looked easily capable of smashing down a castle wall in one blow. I'd told him at the time that it'd probably take two or three blows, and he laughed at me once he realized I was teasing. It was too bad he and Arella weren't here today to share a cup of byallar with Dragonslayer and I, but Darian's senility had worsened over the summer, and now required Arella's almost constant attention and skills as a physicker to keep his mind sharp enough to rule - she was only able to visit once a month or so, now. Still, I had a chair next to me in the cool shade, on the off chance she might be able to visit today. There was, after all, always hope.

"And to you, my friend," I called back, and sipped my cup in the cool shade, chatting with Dragonslayer.

Suddenly, the air before me shimmered, and Pelia Cydalion, the White Witch of Iolo Mountain, appeared. Her face was livid, and she visibly trembled with barely controlled rage.

"Eddas Ayar!" she shouted in our language. "If you do not immediately return the twenty-eight members of our order you have stolen, I'll... I'll... I..." she said, her shout trailing off into a whisper as she noticed a dark, looming shadow rising behind her. She turned, looking over her shoulder, to see Dragonslayer had risen to his feet, gripping his club dangerously as he glared down at her. The giantesses had stopped working at the shout, and stared at Pelia with expressions ranging from surprise to a flat glower.

"Oh, my..." Pelia said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Lower your staff, Mistress Pelia, and do not begin any incantations or I am afraid Dragonslayer will most likely smash you where you stand," I said calmly.

"Who is this Little One, Eddas, who shouts and raises her hand to a Giant-Friend, but now trembles before me?" Dragonslayer sneered.

"That is the White Witch of Iolo Mountain, my friend. Something has happened, I know not what, and she thinks I may be responsible. Don't worry - we'll work it out."

"As you say, my friend, but I shall watch her. I know of sorcery and it's dangers. If she begins to cast on you, she will die before she can finish her first cantrip," Dragonslayer growled, and gripped his club until the knuckles of his massive hands whitened.

"Sit down, High Mistress Pelia. Take this seat, here. Tell me what the problem is."

Pelia sat, her eyes nervously flickering to Dragonslayer. Her face appeared careworn, and the livid rage that had brought her here being suddenly turned to fear had left her hands trembling. "Th-thank you, Master Eddas."

"Now - what is it you think I have done?"

"T-t-t," she stammered, then fell silent for a moment, struggling to control herself. "Twenty-eight m-members of our order have been kidnapped," she replied, finally managing to tear her gaze from Dragonslayer and look at me.

"I did not do it. They are not here," I replied quietly.

"I know, but you are the High Master of the Dyclonic Circle. It was the members of your circle who stole them."

"No, I am not," I said, and told her of the events that had transpired since I last saw her in the spring, two years ago.

"What? They can't have ejected you from the Circle! That's insane," she said.

"I agree - but it's been done. Cordo leads them - he is their new High Master. It seems that they have grown desperate. Since it will take them decades, perhaps a century or more to determine the spell I developed to bring Dyarzi back, and your order declined to even meet them here at my tower, much less choose from among them, their feelings may perhaps be understandable."

Pelia looked down for a moment. "I'm sorry for that, Master Eddas. It was very hard for us to adjust to what has happened. Perhaps your years spent here before you awakened us helped you adjust, or perhaps you simply are a stronger person. I think, given that you're a man who has had to adjust to suddenly becoming a woman and yet you seem to have adjusted quite well, the latter is probably the most likely. Still, for us, this has been a difficult time."

"It's alright, High Mistress Pelia. I had a hard time adjusting to the death of our people, as well. It took me years, really. I know how you feel," I said, picking up the extra cup I had hoped Arella might need, and handing it to Pelia.

I poured Pelia a cup of byallar, and she sipped at it quietly for a moment. Dragonslayer looked down, his grip relaxing on his club. "Is it alright now, Eddas?" he asked.

"Yes, my friend. Come - sit down again. Everything's alright. We haven't worked out exactly what the problem is, but she now understands it isn't my fault, and we're now chatting about it," I replied. I wasn't quite ready for Dragonslayer and his people to go charging after the Dyclonic Circle, so I thought I'd wait until I had some kind of answer before I told them what was really happening. The other giants, seeing

Dragonslayer sit, slowly began to work on the harvest again, their conversations gradually resuming.

"I see you calmed your bodyguard down, Master Eddas," Pelia commented dryly.

"He is no bodyguard, High Mistress, but a friend. All these giants are friends of mine. They're here for the fall harvest of byallar."

"I'm sorry - I didn't mean to be rude. I'm still a bit upset by all this."

"It's alright - tell me what happened. Perhaps I can help."

"Well, early this morning, a group of men from the Dyclonic Circle came to my tower and the little village we'd built around it. They asked us if we had reconsidered the plan you were to have us do two years ago, and if we were now ready to pick from among their number. In truth, we had been talking about it at our last meeting the week before, but we had not come to a final decision. We still dislike the idea of choosing men we know nothing about and having their children - we at least want to get to know them, and to feel like we are still human beings and not just a tool to be used to restore our race. We were discussing several other possible solutions, in fact... But I can tell you of that another time," she said, and I nodded as she continued.

"In any event, we told these men that we still were against the plan you had suggested. Then, without a word, they attacked. All began casting spells to pin and entangle us, and began to try to gag us. The faster of us managed to cast spells of returning or teleportation and escape - we are not fighters, Eddas Ayar, we are healers. We know few offensive spells. In a matter of moments, we were scattered over several leagues around the tower, hiding in the forests. When we finally gathered together by noon, one by one returning as each found the courage to see what had happened to the others, we discovered that twenty-eight members of our order had been taken," Pelia explained, then sighed. "I once had several defensive spells in my grimoire, spells I had bought from a battle-mage ages ago. I had a dream they might be needed, and so I went out into the world to obtain them. Perhaps they might have saved us, perhaps not. It matters little, now. My grimoire was lost when I was killed by that ogre, all these many centuries ago."

"Ah! I'm terribly sorry, I completely forgot," I said, and pulled off my glove to open the compartment in my ring. After dumping out the compartment, I opened the sack I had begun keeping my research works in, and extracted her grimoire. I then rose to my feet and bowed, holding out the book. "Please forgive me, High Mistress Pelia Cydalion, I completely forgot I had not returned this to you."

Pelia took the book, paging through it quickly, her face growing bright with excitement. "It-it is! It's my grimoire! I thought it gone forever! But how did you ever end up with it?" she asked, astounded.

"Well, your tower was and still is in the territory of the great dragon, Karg the Terrible. Since you never came to his cave or bothered him in any way, he considered you a good neighbor - dragons are like that. Leave them alone, and they'll usually be quite happy with you. When the ogre attacked you, Karg was flying by, high overhead, on a hunt. He was quite annoyed when the ogre killed you, as good neighbors are hard to come by, so he ate him to teach him a lesson. He recovered your grimoire and other items he found on you as the spoils of battle, and added them to his treasure-hoard. Well, many years later, I traded him a grimoire for teaching a few spells to Mage Arella-tor, who was at that time my apprentice. One of the spells in that grimoire, however, turned out to be enormously profitable - far beyond what he anticipated. He decided that my payment to him had been an overpayment, and since he knew I was seeking any possible answer to bring Dyarzi back to me, he gave me your book in the hopes it might help, and to balance out the scales. And now, I give it back to you," I said, and smiled.

"My spells, my notes, our guild rules and regulations, the map I made of our tombs - it's all here. I kept

everything in this book! I can't thank you enough," she said, and hugged the grimoire tight to her chest like a long-lost child finally come home.

"You're quite welcome - It's actually quite fortunate Karg kept it for you - it wouldn't have survived sixteen millennia lying on the ground next to your skeleton," I said, and Pelia grinned. "At the time I received it from Karg, I didn't know if I would be able to bring you back from the void, so I simply added it to my collection of reference works, and updated it as time permitted - I hope you don't mind. I marked on your map those tombs that were destroyed in dead zones, and the extent of the dead zones. Also, each tomb that I opened to recover each one of your members I then sealed up with the Spell of Warding and re-buried with an earth-elemental's assistance. Your tombs are quite safe."

Pelia sighed again. "No, no - of course I don't mind, I appreciate what you've added," she replied, and tucked the grimoire under her arm. "But how will we get our kidnapped members back? Our order can't possibly defeat the Dyclonic Circle, and we can't ask you to take them all on alone."

I smiled again. "Don't worry. In my search for spells that would bring Dyarzi back, I encountered several spells that would be useful here. Go back to your tower, High Mistress Pelia, and have all your members search the beds and hair-brushes of those who are missing. I need a hair from each of the missing women - preferably several. Once you have them, bring them here and I will see what I can do," I said, then stood, looking to Dragonslayer.

"My friend, it appears that a few members of my order have, in desperation and perhaps extreme concupiscence, abducted a few of their order against their will. I believe I can recover them, so don't worry," I said to Dragonslayer in his own language.

Dragonslayer snorted. "They have little honor, Eddas, and that is certain. Do you want help from us?"

"No, I think I can get them back without violence - though afterwards, I will need your help. I'll tell you later what I intend - for now I have to prepare to try to get these women back," I said, and set my cup in my chair, then walked off to the tower as Pelia cast her spell of returning and vanished.

An hour later, Pelia had returned carrying a small bag, inside of which was twenty-eight little clumps of hair tied in little leather thongs to separate them. Most had been gathered from hair brushes, and there were plenty. A few had been gathered from pillows, and there were pitifully few. I decided to start with the latter, first. Because appearing amongst a large group of giants might be frightening to these women, Pelia and I were in the top of the tower, my grimoire open on the table before me and each clump of hair set in a neat little row. I had pulled out all the sheets I owned from a cabinet in my room, setting them on the bed.

"Now, I'm having to cast this from my grimoire because I never needed it enough to bother learning it as a skill so I could cast it off the top of my head. Also, I'm going to have to cast this spell over and over as fast as I can, because once I start, they'll notice what's happening and try to take steps to stop me - and casting quickly from a grimoire instead of taking my time to get it right means I will likely fail several times. There's twenty-eight women missing, and that's far more than I can do in one sitting without casting myself into unconsciousness. High Mistress, I'll need you to ask you to use the Spell of Transference to restore my endurance after I cast, or we won't be able to get them all - and even if we do get them all, it's likely one or both of us may faint, even tapping our staves. I'll need you to also try to calm the women as they arrive, and keep them as quiet as you can - if my concentration gets disturbed, I'll likely mis-cast and waste endurance. Alright?"

Pelia nodded. "I am ready, Master Eddas."

"Here we go, then," I replied, and began.

Like many things in life, the process was easy to describe, but hard to do. Pick up a bundle of hair, pull one hair free, set the rest down, hold it in my right hand and begin casting, reading the spell from the grimoire as fast as I could, flipping the pages with my free hand rapidly. Unfortunately, it wasn't that easy. A missed word, a break in cadence, a stutter, and the hair vanished and was wasted.

The first woman appeared after my second casting, and Pelia snatched up a sheet and wrapped her nude body in it. I had the briefest, tantalizing flash of bare olive skin, then Pelia had her covered and held her hand over the woman's mouth, whispering rapidly into her ear as I reached for the second bundle of hair.

By the time the ninth woman had appeared and joined her companions sitting or standing around the room next to the walls, I was exhausted, and beginning to draw on the reserve of strength in my staff. By the time the eighteenth woman appeared, my staff was totally drained, my forehead ran with sweat, and Pelia was casting her transference spell to keep me from fainting. By the time the twenty-second woman appeared, Pelia set her staff aside, as it was totally drained. By the time the twenty-fourth woman appeared, Pelia cast her transference spell a final time and fainted - and I wasn't far from it myself. The other women in the room wanted to help, but apparently they had been geased to remain mute - they couldn't cast, because they couldn't speak. There was little they could do but take over for Pelia, wrapping the arriving women in sheets.

Finally, one of them stood and tried anyway. Her body shuddered as the wracking pain of resisting the geas took hold, and her incantation stuttered - the spell fizzled. Even so, her attempt gave courage to the others, and the few that knew the Spell of Transference stood and tried their hardest to cast through the pain of a geas. Two succeeded, and I felt renewed strength flow into me. I didn't stop - I couldn't. Already I could see red, hand-shaped marks on the wrists of the last two. The Circle members were attempting to move them to within the area of a permanent circle of protection, where I couldn't draw them from. I could only pray the women would realize what was happening, struggle, and give me the time to succeed.

Four left - then three, the last with scraped knees. 'They are struggling!' I thought, and continued casting.

Two left, then one. I gasped with the strain, but couldn't stop. Each incantation took three seconds - when I didn't fail. By now it had been well over a minute, perhaps two. I couldn't have much time left before they would be able to stop me.

A mis-cast - then another. I gasped like someone who had run twenty-seven leagues non-stop, only to be told they needed to run another league. I fought back the blackness of unconsciousness with an effort of will. 'I will not pass out!' I screamed within my skull. My fingers trembled, my breasts heaved, my heart was pounding - and I cast again.

I felt the energies flow from me, but knew not if I was in time to catch the last before they dragged her within a circle of protection. The strain of the last casting was simply too much. I slipped from my chair to land heavily on the floor, unconscious.

Sixteen.

"Though there may yet be a mere handful in number who do make the claim, the reason there yet be far more who do claim themselves a friend of the giants than those who call themselves their enemies be that the former do yet tend to live far longer than the latter."

- Dwarven proverb

I was standing on the parapet, looking to the west at the setting sun. A cool breeze blew into my face, and I gazed out across the neatly-arranged rows of byallar-trees across my lands, their green leaves

rippling in the wind like waves across a green ocean.

"Oh, well done, Eddas. Very well done, indeed," a voice said from behind me. I turned to look, and saw a grey-robed, balding, white-haired elderly man step around the eastern corner of the parapet and walk over to me. His beard was long and full, and he carried weight and power in his frame. He stood before me, and stared at me with eyes that glowed yellow-gold.

"Thank you, Yorindar, but why is it you always prefer to talk to me when I have fainted with exhaustion or am near death?"

"Your mind is quite strong, Eddas, and penetrating your dreams is quite difficult. It's easier when you're like this," he replied with a wry smile. "Now hush - I have something important to say to you, and I don't have a lot of time to say it. I'm quite busy elsewhere, as I'm sure you've realized by now."

"Yes, with Darian and his children. Go on, I'm listening."

"What you're doing right now?"

"Yes?"

"Keep it up. Oh - and try to remember: You and I are not in this alone. Vyleah and her rabbit are with us" he said, a wry smile lighting the corners of his mouth as he already began to slowly fade away.

"Keep it up? Keep what up? What I'm doing right now basically amounts to nothing!"

"Exactly," Yorindar's voice replied from nowhere.

I awoke to see an olive-skinned woman's face looming over mine - a beautiful, Hyperborean woman, and for a brief instant, my heart leapt at the thought of Dyarzi. It was several long moments before my wits gathered enough for me to realize I was staring into the face of Pelia Cydalion, the White Witch of Iolo Mountain. Behind her were even more smiling women's faces I didn't recognize at all for several long moments, until I remembered - the summoning! "Did I get the last one?" I asked, my voice an exhausted whisper.

"Yes, Master Eddas. You got them all," Pelia replied, and hugged me.

"Good. How long was I unconscious?"

"Not long, Master Eddas. Perhaps five minutes, at most," one of the others replied.

"Also good," I replied, sitting up. My head swam with exhaustion, but I forced my body to comply.

"How are you feeling, Pelia? Can you cast a spell of returning?" I asked.

"Barely," she replied.

"Good. Go back to your tower, grab everything of importance you can carry, tell all your followers to do the same while you rest, then come back here as fast as you can."

"Alright, but why?"

"The first thing they will try to do is figure out what happened. They've got restless spirits annoying them at night and making it hard for them to sleep - they're going to be tired, and not focused. It will take them perhaps half an hour to analyze the astral residue and figure out that all their prisoners were summoned away. They'll know only one of two people could have done it - me or you. They'll realize I don't have the strength to cast a major summoning like that twenty-eight times - much less the forty times we ended

up having to do it. That means they'll assume the Mountain Healers got together as a group to do it. The spell was rare in my day, and no-one in my circle had it - it's not likely any of them have it now, so they can't just summon them back. That means they'll gather together and go back to your tower and try to take them back by force. If you're not there, they can't get you."

"But then they'll just come to the next obvious place - right here."

"That, Pelia, is exactly what I am hoping for. They probably won't, because they know who my allies are, but at this point I am sincerely hoping they do," I said, summoning my staff to my grip. Using my staff, I started to drag myself to my feet. Pelia reached out and helped me up, as did all the women within reach. "Thank you. Pelia, get going. Take these women with you, so they can dress and gather what they may of their possessions. I can remove their geasa later. Hurry," I said, and staggered out to the parapet.

It took ten minutes to explain to Dragonslayer what had happened, and what I needed to be done. Dragonslayer nodded, picked up his enormous club, and told his son to run back to the village while he watched over the others. A giant's run isn't like a human's run - it just looks like a human taking long, rapid and deliberate strides to walk very fast, pumping their arms rapidly (if they ran like humans did, they'd shatter the bones in their legs). It's almost comical to watch - until you realize that with their enormously long stride, they're easily out-running a galloping horse. The giantesses were nervous, but seeing Dragonslayer watching over them made them feel better, and they gradually went back to work.

Half an hour later, six giants of Dohbari village came over the hill and down the road. Three had clubs made from the boles of large trees, two had spears, and the last, Strongarm, had an enormous two-handed sword nearly as long as he was tall, made by the smiths of the Ilbari mountain giants. I was impressed - the blade was essentially a sharpened slab of medium-grade steel a cubit wide, half a hand thick at the center and twelve cubits long, attached to a hilt four cubits long with a crossguard four cubits wide. The six giants took up positions guarding the dozen giantesses who were still working on the harvest, which made them feel very safe. All the giants kept a close eye on the ground, their eyes alert. Dragonslayer simply stood by the tower, waiting, his club at the ready.

A few minutes later, Pelia appeared, with all eighty-eight of the other women in her order, at the base of my tower. I went down and explained the plan to them. It was quite simple, and would preserve the most amount of lives, which the Mountain Healers approved of. For my part, I felt that there was still the chance the men of the Circle might come to their senses someday and realize Cordo was leading them on a path of destruction, so it was imperative that as few as possible die. Sixty of the women gathered near Dragonslayer's feet, laying their hands on the thick dragon-hide armor over his ankles and feet. Dragonslayer grinned for a moment, then looked up to the top of the tower and spoke to me. "Hah. If my wife saw this she would laugh herself to death. Five dozen women of the Little Ones, all reaching out to touch me while I protect them, yet it is they who will also be protecting me? Heh. The mice join the oilphant to beat the rats," he said, and his booming laughter rang out for several minutes, joined by several giants and giantesses who were close enough to hear. I didn't reply, I was still trying to meditate and recover my strength.

Suddenly, it began. A score of the Circle appeared at the base of the tower - enough to easily crush one lone battle-mage and re-capture twenty-eight mute and otherwise helpless women. They looked taken aback for a moment - they apparently hadn't been expecting to see all these giants around. Dragonslayer roared at the top of his lungs, a stupendous bellow that startled them greatly and I was sure was heard at least five leagues away.

Then, with that as his only warning, he began smashing each of them to a bloody pulp.

Dragonslayer's club rose and fell three times before the first response came - several of the Circle began

to rapidly incant blasts of lightning and fire. As they began to cast, the mountain healers began to cast, their hands still on Dragonslayer. Arcs of lightning flashed and boomed, roaring tongues of flame licked over his enormous form - but as soon as the wounds were made, they were healed by the combined spells of sixty healers. I had leaped to my feet at the sound of his bellow, and now leaned over the edge of the parapet, watching nervously. Dragonslayer reeled backwards from the impact of the sorcerous energies, but didn't stagger - he simply took one hand off his club and clapped it to my tower for balance so he wouldn't accidentally step on the women (the force of that impact was easily felt through my feet), then kept on swinging. Three more times his club rose and fell, leaving a crushed and mangled body in a small crater where it hit.

I felt I was as rested as I could afford to be, so I stood, looked over the top of the parapet, and began casting. Gesturing rapidly, I rattled off the incantation for the Spell of the Wall of Air, stretching its width as much as I thought I could maintain. I placed the wall just in front of the women at Dragonslayer's feet, between them and the men of the Circle.

It was a simple spell, really, one I taught to apprentices as their first effective magical defense spell - and one I knew I would have to teach to Pelia. It was a wall of turbulent air a cubit thick, four cubits high, and four cubits wide. Its length could be stretched, and I made this wall just long enough to completely shield the women. It was nothing, really - the wall could be walked through harmlessly. But it was impenetrable to virtually all ranged attacks, including spells, which faltered in the chaotic mana-flow that maintained the wall itself.

Dragonslayer executed the plan well. I'd kept it simple, so there would be no confusion in his giantish brain. Basically, there was only one place a large number of the Circle could go to with the spell of returning - the front of my tower, the one general location all of them had been and all of them would fit. Their first reaction would be to attack the rampaging giant smashing them - at which point, sixty healers would begin casting. They couldn't possibly compete with that. By the time they realized the combined strength of the Mountain Healers was enough to easily keep Dragonslayer from feeling so much as a scratch, the wall of air would appear to protect the healers - the men of the Circle would see the flying dust, leaves and grit from the ground, and know what it was. A Wall of Air, though it may have been a terribly simple spell, was proof against any arrow or bolt and even bullets from dwarven firearms, and certainly proof against any ranged spell. They were all masters, they would immediately realize the Mountain Healers were shielded from their spells. They couldn't back up - there were even more giants behind them. Some would try to move to the sides, to cast around the wall, while others might try to advance forward, intending to dispel the wall by simply walking through it. Dragonslayer would simply smash them, leaving the ones in the middle alone. The ones in the middle, given a respite from being attacked, would realize the situation was hopeless, and flee.

As Dragonslayer's spiked club rose and fell in a ghastly harvest of death, the men of the Circle finally began to falter. First one, then two, then suddenly all the remainder cast their spell of returning, and vanished.

Dragonslayer raised his bloody, gore-covered club, lifted his gray head to the sky, and roared his victory to the heavens above. For a moment, I saw him as he must have been after he snapped the neck of the evil dragon, Chaorlog, whose hide he now wore as both armor and as a badge of honor. He was indomitable, he was victorious, and for the briefest moment, he was young again.

The other giants raised their weapons likewise, and cheered Dragonslayer's victory with a series of hooting dou-dou-dou-dou-dou ululations, while the giantesses rose to their feet, raised their hands above their heads and loosed the ki-yi-yi-yi-yi cry that was their shout of joy and celebration.

The Mountain Healers cheered, as well, stepping away from Dragonslayer so he could move freely again,

and gathering near my shade-tree. The whole of the battle had only lasted perhaps a minute, but to those who had seen it, I was sure it would live forever in legend.

After Dragonslayer sat down to rest again (he was about seventy, after all, and he wasn't as spry as he once was), the mountain healers gently poked and prodded him to make sure he was alright. He was fine, though - the dragon-hide he wore as a tunic had a few scorched spots, but both it and the giant beneath were undamaged.

While Dragonslayer basked in the attentions of the "Little People" and the adulation of his own people, I went to sit down and rest on my chair on the parapet. I tried to meditate and recover my strength as best I could, but a sudden voice interrupted me.

"You!" the voice hissed.

I looked up, and saw Cordo had appeared before me. His eyes were wild, his black beard haggard, his steel skullcap scratched and dull from lack of polish, and his black robe was stained and wrinkled. He looked like the last few months hadn't been treating him well at all. "Yes, High Master Cordo? How can I help you?" I replied, keeping my voice calm. I was far too exhausted to fight after maintaining that large a wall of air for that long, but I didn't want him to know that.

"How dare you interfere with my plans for those women?!" he yelled, his face livid with anger.

"I have no idea what you mean, High Master," I replied, putting a note of sweetness in my woman's voice. I was sure curdled his stomach.

"Don't feign innocence with me! You freed the women we had captured, then killed the men we sent to get them back!"

"I find that difficult to believe, High Master. Kidnapping a woman is very much against the rules of the Circle. Forcing those women to copulate is, by definition, rape, and also against the rules of the Circle. I merely corrected an error I saw that obviously couldn't be of your doing, being as how you, the High Master of the Dyclonic Circle, would never order someone to break the rules of the Circle. Why, that would be... Just wrong," I replied with quiet sarcasm.

"You know why it was done! This is the future of our race we're talking about here!"

"Yes, it is. But the moment our race stoops to kidnapping and rape, the moment our race tosses aside the rule of law and lives by the rule of might, then we are no longer Hyperboreans, we are something lesser - goblins, perhaps," I said, then stroked my chin - I deeply missed my beard again. "No, not goblins. They at least have a code of honor, twisted though it may be. Those who kidnap and rape have no honor."

"This was your doing! You have opposed me at every turn, somehow! The traders, the ghosts, all of this was somehow your doing! You want to be High Master, and you'll stop at nothing, not even the destruction of our race! Why I'll..." he said, and I extended my hand, my staff flashing to my grip at a thought.

"You'll do what, Cordo? Fight me? You've seen a demonstration of my power. Do you really want to challenge me now? Alone? Do you really wish to see which of us is truly fit to be High Master?" I said, slowly rising from my chair. For once, I was supremely grateful for the half-elven body I had been cursed with - even wracked with weariness, I was still able to move smoothly and gracefully, concealing the true extent of my exhaustion from him. Cordo flinched, but did not reply. "High Master, I suggest you reconsider who your enemies are. You decided that I was the enemy two years ago. I submit that I was your friend two years ago, and I have done nothing to impede your plans other than prevent you from

breaking the rules of the Circle here today. You contend I am wrong, and Morgar is not changed. I contend he has. Consider that every death that has happened so far has been a direct result of your decisions. If we had followed my plans, no one would be dead, and several babies would be in the wombs of the women below us. Consider who your enemies are, High Master, and ask yourself if your real enemy, the one who has been leading you to make these decisions, isn't Morgar himself," I replied, then glowered at him.

"Now leave me, High Master. I am no longer in the Circle, by your edict. You no longer have the right to come onto my lands whenever you want, by that same edict. If you should come onto my lands again without a proper invitation, a mere trespasser, then I am afraid I will have to be quite harsh with you," I said, and then glared at Cordo. "And seeing as how everything I have done to oppose you boils down to my casting merely two of the most inconsequential spells I know, a simple summoning any journeyman could cast and a fifth-year apprentice's Wall of Air, I do believe you will not like it when I decide to become harsh with you," I hissed venomously.

Cordo flinched at my gaze, but didn't buckle. He muttered the spell of returning, gesturing briefly, then vanished.

To my surprise, Pelia stepped out from my room at the top of the tower onto the parapet. "I came up here to thank you, and saw you facing him. I'm sorry, Master Eddas, but I was afraid. I simply do not have the spells and skills needed to even attempt to fight him. I'm glad you were able to recover enough of your strength to face him," she said apologetically.

I simply smiled as I sat down to rest again. "Think nothing of it, High Mistress Pelia. I knew Cordo from my previous life, and we played chatto often. He never could tell when I was bluffing - and every time he thought he was calling my bluff, he always lost. He always was a terrible chatto player."

"You were bluffing?" she asked, stepping over to me.

"Of course. I'm far too exhausted to fight him, or anyone else, for that matter. I think a sick kitten would be a deadly opponent for me, at this point," I said, and grinned. Pelia burst out laughing, and we shared a chuckle for several minutes.

Finally, Pelia leaned against the parapet and smiled. "Well, Master Eddas, what do you think will happen now? Do you think Cordo will give up and leave us alone?"

I nodded. "For the moment, at least."

It seemed obvious to me that Cordo was insane, gone mad with the devastation wrought by the Great War and the deaths of our people, just as Morgar had - and from what I knew of Cordo in my previous life, he was never going to admit he was wrong, simply because he can't see it. He wasn't that kind of man when I knew him, and I doubted he had improved with the destruction of our civilization. As I considered it, it occurred to me that most likely he would be upset with Morgar, and as such Morgar may have his divine hands full with Cordo for the next few days. Most likely, Morgar would reinforce Cordo's thought that everything bad that's happened is all my fault, including today's defeat. After that, Cordo would probably focus on my death as his eventual, long-term goal, but he wouldn't come back or send anyone here for quite some time. Like Morgar, Cordo may be insane, but he wasn't stupid. If Yorindar had chosen me as being the best, it stood to reason Morgar had chosen Cordo as being the best. It was very likely Cordo was easily my match in battle, if not knowledge. I had bluffed him once with my life on the line - I didn't know if I would be able to bluff him again. When next we met, Cordo would be prepared.

"Yes, High Mistress, I'd have to say that he will most likely not be back anytime soon. He's learned I

simply am not to be trifled with. He lost fourteen tonight - that means he's down to less than seventy members in the Circle. He can't afford to lose many more. He may be insane, but he's still a highly-trained battle-mage of the Dyclonic Circle. He'll retreat, regroup, and try to figure out a way to solve the more pressing problems he has so he doesn't lose members to simple desertion."

"Desertion?" Pelia asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes. Not only has their digging around in the city caused them to be haunted by several vengeful ghosts, but did you see his appearance?" I asked in return, and she nodded. "Well, if his robes are in that bad a shape, that means they not only aren't getting much sleep because of the ghosts, but they haven't gotten any water from the old city wells yet. They're probably drawing water from the Juvari river in buckets. Without apprentices tending the fireplaces, it's probably quite cold in the tower at night. Without a Candlemaker's Guild to buy candles from, it's probably dark, too. The conditions in that place are probably quite miserable - and every member there is a Master, and knows that they can simply go home to their own towers which are made to their own design and be far more comfortable. Meanwhile, fourteen members died in an attack he probably told them would be a simple raid on a lone, mad heretic - morale is going to be very low. If he told them that they would also be able to get the formula they want from my corpse, his morale problem will be even worse. He's going to have to stop thinking about how to defeat me for awhile, and start thinking about how to make the Masters happy - otherwise, quite soon, he may end up alone."

After I had rested for a bit, we went downstairs to meet with the rest of the Mountain Healers. Dragonslayer had already covered up the fourteen small craters in the road, packing the dirt down with careful stomps, and it was difficult to tell anything had happened at all, were it not for all the women scattered around, hugging each other and weeping with joy. They had broken off into small groups scattered around my tower and down the road, with several of these groups scattered in the rubble that once was the houses of my workers - the giants and giantesses kept a close eye on them, so they wouldn't accidentally step on any of them. A few of the healers who knew spells of translation were chatting with the giantesses, learning my story from them - or as much of it as the giants knew, anyway. Pelia and I sat down beneath the shade tree at the base of my tower where the group of women who had been abducted had gathered.

"Master Eddas, I've tried, but removing the geasa on my members appears to be beyond my skill. Are you up to trying yet?" Pelia asked.

"Of course, High Mistress Pelia," I replied, smiling. "I'm still very tired from holding that large a wall for that long, but I believe I can manage it if we take time between each casting for me to rest."

The whole process took about an hour. First I had to examine the structure of the geas on each woman - it was a fairly straightforward geas, a simple command to not speak in any way. Since that included incantations, they couldn't cast. I asked the women who had spells of transference to raise their hands, and I began with them first so they could assist me by transferring some of their endurance to refresh me. After I was back to my full strength, handling the rest of them was a fairly simple matter - just snap off the Spell of Disenchantment, and the spell slams into the targeted knot of mana that makes up the geas, smashing it apart. The simplicity of the geas on each of them made it an easy task.

I was curious - Pelia should have been able to break these geasa easily, given her skill. "High Mistress Pelia, I'm quite curious - would you mind showing me the formula for the spell you tried to use to remove these geasa?" I asked. Pelia had her grimoire tucked firmly under one arm - after losing it once, it was obvious she didn't intend to lose it again.

"Certainly," Pelia replied, laying her grimoire on her lap, opening it and beginning to page through it. She

stopped about half-way through, then turned the book around so I could see. I examined the spell, then nodded.

"Ah - I see the problem. You're using an old Spell of Dispel Magic. We stopped using that formula when I was an apprentice - the Spell of Disenchantment is much more efficient. We can sit down sometime this evening and I'll let you copy it from my grimoire."

Pelia smiled. "I thank you, Master Eddas. I would appreciate that very much, but I do not have any gold to pay you for the spell."

"I have no need of gold, High Mistress Pelia. All the merchants are dead, their shops are in ruins. What would I buy with gold?" I replied, shrugging. "Nothing. You need it, I have it, and I am happy to let you copy the spell. Besides - in the years your grimoire was in my possession, I copied three spells from it that I did not already have. To my way of thinking, that means I owe you three spells."

"Thank you again, Master Eddas."

"It's nothing, High Mistress. I'll let you copy the Spell of Disenchantment from my grimoire tonight, and also two others I think may be of use to you - battle spells you may find helpful. If you find you don't like them, however, we can simply pick two others you will like. Not all are battle spells - in fact, most of the three hundred spells I've collected in my grimoire are spells you may find useful."

Pelia gaped. "Three hundred spells?! I barely have thirty!" The women around her murmured to each other, apparently impressed.

I managed to keep my expression composed. My tome was a cubit long, a cubit wide, and two hands thick - over twice the size of hers - and each of the nearly three thousand pages were made of fine, thin vellum of elven manufacture. What did she think I'd put in it, cooking recipes? I didn't waste my time filling my grimoire with irrelevant things, as she had - it was a spellbook, not a notebook. The mages of the Dyclonic Circle were trained to use their grimoires as a research tool and as a weapon of war, not as a scratchpad for things we didn't want to forget. Where her tome was apparently just a blank book she'd bought and began writing in, mine was the same as that of the other mages of the Dyclonic Circle - it was a sturdy pair of hinged steel plates covered in soft black leather and pierced by six holes, with the pages bound in between by seven stout cowhide thongs as wide as my finger. Five thongs went from hole-to-hole, and the last two were tied over the top and bottom of the book, rather than across the spine. This applied pressure in such a way as to not only hold the book together, but to prevent the pages from moving or spreading out as it was opened. When I needed to add pages, I simply loosened the bindings, laid the back cover over each new page one at a time as a guide to carefully cut the holes in the new sheets to be added with my knife, then bound it all together again. This also allowed me to organize my spells and create a useful index.

Two of the first spells I placed in my grimoire as an apprentice were a blotting spell, allowing me to clean up errors and spilled ink on the pages, and an erasing spell, allowing me to erase and re-enter the page numbers when I re-organized my spells or added new ones. As such, my grimoire wasn't simply a collection of spells entered from the first one I'd written to the most recent. No, it was an organized, indexed research tool and weapon of war, as a grimoire belonging to a proper master battle-mage of the Dyclonic Circle should be. Her grimoire was chaotic, disordered; part diary, part spell-book, part notebook of things she didn't want to forget. The spells she had in it were good ones, mostly healing magic, but finding them required you either know where they were or you spent several minutes paging through her book. Her grimoire may have been perfect for her, but for me, it was a total mess.

Of course, my attitude towards the creation and maintenance of a proper grimoire was influenced by the

fact I'd spent decades instructing apprentices and performing research, and my standards for judging the grimoire of another mage were somewhat more strict as a result. If I'd seen an apprentice of the Dyclonic Circle with a grimoire that looked like hers, they'd have been scrubbing the floors of the Black Tower for a month. I tried to remind myself that other mages didn't have the same high-standards I had set as a schoolmaster and researcher simply because they weren't really needed by them, and besides - I wasn't even a member of the Dyclonic Circle anymore. After a brief mental sigh, I put a smile on my face and replied.

"Well, to be honest, it's not quite three hundred, High Mistress. Two hundred and ninety seven. I'll have to bind in some more pages if I wish to add to that, however."

"I am truly impressed, Master Eddas. That's the single largest collection of spells I have ever heard of."

"Thank you, High Mistress," I replied, as was polite. I decided I didn't need to tell her it was the largest single collection of spells in the history of the Dyclonic Circle, probably more than any single mage in the entire history of Hyperborea had ever gathered. I could tell by her expression she was already thinking the obvious - that the Circle had been fools to eject me. I sighed. Water under the bridge, as it were.

"High Mistress Pelia, with all due respect, I believe you and the women of your order are still in danger. I would like to discuss a plan I have for insuring your safety and the safety of the Mountain Healers, if that is alright with you."

"Alright, Master Eddas - you've proven yourself to us, beyond a doubt. I trust you, as do the rest of the women of my order. What is your plan?"

"At the moment, the Dyclonic Circle is in the hands of someone I honestly believe to be insane. Perhaps the other members will realize this, perhaps not. Either way, until your order is able to defend itself better, it is time for you to come down from Iolo Mountain," I replied.

Pelia nodded. "Yes. They may try again. But where would we go? Where would we live?"

"Here with me, of course," I replied.

Seventeen.

"Ignore the relativist philosophers. The founding principle of sorcery is that reality is absolute. The blind man cannot see the cliff ahead - to him, it does not exist. This does not change the fact that the cliff is there, nor does it prevent him from dying when he walks off it. Our personal beliefs and the limitations of our minds and senses to comprehend the world around us do not affect the world itself, only our perceptions of it. Perception may be relative, but reality is absolute. If reality was relative, magic would only function against those who believed in it. Certainly a tree does not believe in magic - it does not even have a mind. Yet a bolt of lightning from my fingertips will destroy it just the same. Reality is absolute."

- Eddas Ayar, *The Mathematics of Magic*, Chapter 12, Date Unknown, presumed 17th century NCC

It was several minutes before Mungim noticed I had a chair ready for him and a pot of byallar warming beneath the shade tree next to my tower. He was too busy gaping.

In the four weeks since the battle before my tower, we had rebuilt many of the houses that used to belong to my workers, using logs provided by the giants. Now, inside and around those houses were eighty-nine women of the Mountain Healers - young, beautiful, each dressed in the white robes of their order, and without a man in sight. Mungim had three wagons besides his own with him, each driven by a

brother of his, and they themselves gaped from their seats on the wagons - in the over four decades they'd been coming here every fall, they'd never seen the like.

Mungim finally came over, and bowed deeply to me. "I do greet ye, Master Eddas Ayar, and I be glad to see ye in good health," he said. I stood and extended my gloved hand to him, and he took it, inclining his head. When he had finally seated himself and I had handed him a cup of byallar, he spoke again. "I be pleased to see that the Mountain Healers be safe and sound, Eddas. When I passed by their tower and village last week, belike it were something terrible did befall them, as all were empty and silent as the grave. Yet now I do see them here, and I be much comforted. Yet, I do wonder, what be the cause of this?"

"Well, my friend, it's a bit of a story. Here - let me tell you what has happened," I said, and began to explain the events which transpired between now and his last visit.

"Ah, would that I could have seen that battle, Eddas. It do sound belike it were a grand and glorious fight," Mungim replied when I reached the point in the story of Dragonslayer's finest moment.

"It was - Dragonslayer was the best choice to fight, as well, for his skill as a warrior is unsurpassed among his people. He never missed, and did not stumble, even though he was hit by enough focused mana-energies to blast a hole in the side of my tower. For their part, the Mountain Healers showed that they are, indeed, the best at what they do. The wounds made by arcs of lighting and searing blasts of flame closed the moment they opened - he hardly had time to feel the pain from each spell scorching his flesh before they had already healed it completely."

"So what did happen thereafter, Eddas?"

"Well, I reasoned that until the Mountain Healers had the ability to effectively defend themselves when attacked, they were still in danger. So, I thought it best they all stay here, under my protection and that of the giants of Dohbari village, until they had learned from me what they needed to defend themselves. I summoned an earth elemental to go through the ground where the crushed bodies were, moving their remains to a better location than the road and extracting what magic items may have survived Dragonslayer's blows. I examined the lot, but few were of any use to me, so I gave what I didn't need to High Mistress Pelia. She now wears most of the rings we recovered. I also gave other items to various members of her order who needed them. Unlike the members of the Dyclonic Circle, who most often died in battle and afterwards their bodies were recovered and placed in their tombs, many of the mountain healers died to accident or bandits and such far away from their home, and lost everything," I explained, and Mungim nodded as I continued.

"Since then, I have been teaching them a few spells and how to fight, both alone and as a group - basically, I've been trying to teach each of them how to defend themselves and each other," I said, and Mungim nodded in understanding. "They will be with me until the spring, when they will have learned enough to be reasonably safe on their own again."

"Aye, that be a wise plan, Eddas. Mayhap in a few years, the other men of the Dyclonic Circle will yet come to their senses," he said, then stood. "But for now, I do have matters of greater import," he said, and reached into his belt-pouch. Gingerly extracting Dyarzi's little depilatory stone, he went to one knee before me, and held it out to me. "Here be the magic stone ye did loan me sister last spring, Master Eddas Ayar, returned safe and sound. Me family can never thank ye enough - but we will yet try, rest assured."

"You're welcome, Mungim. I'm glad it helped your sister," I replied politely, slipping the stone into the pocket of my robe.

"It did more than help, Eddas. But here - let me yet give ye the letter she did write," he said, and went back to his wagon for a moment, opened a small box, extracted an envelope and handed it to me with a flourish.

I broke the wax seal, then pulled the letter out. The letter was in Dwarf-Tongue, the straight, stiff characters written with a soft, gentle hand.

"My Dearest Master Eddas Ayar: I hope you will forgive my writing this letter in our own language, for although I can speak your language, the translation-book we have does not contain your alphabet or the spelling of your words, but is instead a phonetic language dictionary. I thought of asking my dear brother Mungim to write it for me, as he is the best at speaking your tongue, but he said that he also did not know how your letters were formed. So, I have written this in the hope that you will forgive our ignorance of your language. I cannot thank you enough for what you have done for me. I will, of course, try. Before I do, however, I wanted you to understand how much this meant to me."

"When I was young and bajas first appeared in me, I was crushed. I do not know if your people get a similar disease, or if the little stone you loaned me was just a small cosmetic. Mungim says that having seen many other human females, the latter is more likely. Well, to us, it is worse than just a disfigurement - it means that we shall never marry. Never to know the love of a husband, never to know the joy of children. I endured years of childhood taunts, and as an adult, endured the averted eyes, the silence given the deformed. Had this been a scar, a wound, it might have been acceptable. But it was not. Over the years growing up, I became accustomed to the idea that I would forever sleep alone at night. Sometimes, though, I would lie on my bed, my face to my pillow, listening to the sound of my own heartbeat, and imagining that it was the heartbeat of a husband, my head tucked into his shoulder. Yet, always, I knew it was just my wishful thinking. There would never be anyone for me."

"Then, last spring, my brother brought to me the little stone you loaned me, and explained its use and warned me the same way he said you had warned him. I was skeptical, of course. I touched it to the hair of my arm, for the bajas makes the hair on my limbs grow thickly, as well, and it is not very pretty. I was amazed to see it worked! A small circle of hair had vanished. I ran to my room in our house, pulled out my mirror, and tried it on the hair of my face - it vanished, even as you said it would. Heeding your warning, I was careful with it. Even so, I noticed the small circle on my arm looked strange, so I rubbed it on my limbs as well, in fact everywhere I thought I had too much hair. Then I placed it in a small box for safekeeping, and waited. A week later, the hair had not returned - I was cured!"

"To say this changed my life would be an understatement. At first, those outside my family thought I had begun to shave. They warned me this would only make the hair come back thicker. I told them that I had not shaved, but had rather been cured by the magic of the Hyperboreans. Of course, no one believed this. After two months, however, even the most skeptical had to admit that there was no sign of regrowth. All were pleased and happy for me, and for the first time in my life, men began to look on me with favor. Soon, I found I was surrounded with suitors, and my father increased my bride price to thirty thousand pieces of gold, just to get rid of the ones who were not serious and the opportunists. And indeed there were many opportunists. Many I had found attractive and gazed at for many a year who ignored me utterly when I had bajas, now that I was cured suddenly decided they would court me. It was several months before I was able to reconcile in my head that those who were now enamored of me when before they would hardly speak to me were, in fact, poor choices for husbands. One, however, had always been friendly to me - he is a friend of the family, and we have known each other since childhood. When I was cured, he did not court me. When I asked him why, he said "Because I would not have you think that I did not care for you before, but suddenly care for you now." He and I now see each other. Perhaps in another three or four decades, he will be able to meet my bride price, and perhaps we will then marry."

"Even this is not the end of the story, however. By four months after I was cured, the word had spread. Over the course of a month, nine dwarf-maids with bajas came to me, one by one, asking if I would share with them the same cure. I told them the little stone was loaned to me, not given, but I could use it on them if they wished - most were dark of hair, and their limbs were hairy like those of young boys, so we used it on their limbs as well as their face. You not only have my family grateful to you, but nine other families, as well."

"Finally, last month, a royal messenger came, asking me to come to the palace of Durin, the King of the Dwarves, and bring the little stone you loaned me. I was very thrilled and frightened at the same time. When I arrived, I was shown to the room of one of his four daughters - Princess Dahshti. She had bajas, too. I never knew this - I had never seen her in public before. Apparently, few ever had - the king had hidden her in embarrassment. All that I thought my life was, all the misery and loneliness I thought I had suffered, were nothing compared to her life. I at least was able to leave my house, and my family wasn't ashamed of me. She had spent nearly all of her four-score years of life inside the palace, hidden away. I told her also that the little stone was loaned to me, not given, then I used the stone on her as I had myself and the others, and she was cured as well. So, now you have the gratitude of a king, as well."

"All good things must come to an end, of course. As I write this, my brother stands near, and has placed the little stone in his belt-pouch. Such a small thing, but it brought happiness to many. I have thought about the little stone often in the last six months I have had it. My brother said you told him that to the Hyperboreans, it was a small thing - worth no more than a gold piece or two. For those of us who received its touch, however, it changed our lives, and was worth more than a mountain of gold. I have often wondered what other small things your people had that are like this - nothing to you, but of enormous value to others. My brother says that last he saw, your men and women lived apart, and it did not seem likely they would come together. This is very sad, to me. I do not wish to think of your people disappearing again. I hope that your people will thrive and flourish, and perhaps share more small things like the wonderful little stone with us."

"I know we will almost certainly never meet. You live so far from me and have much more important things to do, what with trying to restore your people and civilization. I greatly fear the enormous open bowl of sky that hangs above the surface-lands, and the sight of it steals my breath and makes my heart flutter. I have tried, though. I went to the Great North Gate, and stood next to the guards there for as long as I could, trying to see if I could be brave enough to step out of the gate and below that enormous, terrifying sky. The guards thought I was very brave for even trying, as all we dwarf-maids greatly fear the openness of the surface-lands. I couldn't remain, though - it was just too frightening. But I will try again. And again. Someday, perhaps I will be brave enough. And I will continue to write you. And I will look for other ways to meet you. I want to hug you tight, and say 'thank you' to your face. I want you to see what your gift has done for me, see the beautiful face you have given me. But most of all, I want to be your friend. With Deepest and Eternal Thanks, Jhumni."

I studied her signature for a long while in silence - it was a gentle, elegant hand that wrote this letter, and I found I was very moved by it. Finally, I looked up to Mungim. I couldn't find words to express my feelings. I simply smiled and said "I'm glad I made her happy."

"Aye, Eddas, she be very happy. As I and she did say, we can never thank ye enough - but we shall try, rest assured," Mungim replied, and pulled a box from his wagon. "Me sister did speak with me many a time, as she did try to learn what ye might like. Yet little help could I give, as much of what I did think ye might like, we could not provide. Aye, we did think ye might like new clothes and suchlike, but we knew not your sizes or what exactly ye may want, and doubted a dressmaker of our people could do the job without they did measure ye. We did think of perfumes and suchlike, but we did think that as ye be in sooth a male deep at heart, ye may not wish such - and e'en if ye did, I might bring a hundred bottles

before we did strike upon a scent ye did like. Many a week did we ponder what might be of value to ye, and yet no answer did we see. At last, me sister did have a thought that just as a small thing of yours were yet of great value to her, a small thing of hers may yet be of great value to ye. As such, she did send this." Mungim explained, and opened the box.

He pulled out some cloths he'd used for padding, gently unwrapping them to reveal a very small box. It was about a hand tall, two hands wide and a hand long, the lid extending over the rest of the box to match its broad base. It was ornately carved with intricate spiral patterns - a rather nice piece of dwarven craftsmanship, but otherwise unremarkable. He turned it over gently, pointing at a small piece of metal attached to the bottom. "This be the key. It be attached, so never fear ye shall lose it. Ye turn the key three times to wind the spring what be inside - no more than three, howe'er, lest ye break the spring," he said, and demonstrated. He then turned the box back over, and opened the lid.

A soft, gentle melody came from within the box and I looked on in amazement. The music was gentle, sweet, and had a lonely, wistful quality to it. It sounded like it was being played on a series of small bells, but when I looked in the box I saw it was a little mechanism with a brass cylinder that rotated, little bumps on the cylinder plucking the fingers of a metal comb that apparently worked like a harp.

"Ah - a music box. I've heard of these," I said after a moment.

"Aye, Eddas. Me sister did write this melody about four score years ago, now. Me youngest brother be quite good at small things like this, and as he were apprenticed to the Mechanist's Guild back then, he did make it for her birthday that year. Me sister yet says I should tell ye she did write the tune when she was very sad, as she was often sad afore ye did cure her, yet listening to it did make her happy again bye and bye. She says that now she be no longer sad, and yet she did think that mayhap ye often would be sad in a quiet tower with none for company, your people and civilization in ruins. So, she did ask me to bring it to ye."

"It's beautiful," I said quietly, and as the last note finally faded away into silence, I spoke again. "Ah, Mungim. I haven't heard music in ages. I didn't realize how much I missed it until I heard it again, just now. After I helped Darian reclaim his kingdom, I laid my musicians to their proper rest again. For many years afterwards, I missed the sound of their playing. It was only martial drums, but to me, it brought back many warm memories. At Darian's castle there was music occasionally, and it was wonderful to hear - I nearly stayed there just for that." Mungim nodded, and handed the music-box to me. I carefully wound it, then listened again. "It's very beautiful, Mungim. Tell your sister I said 'thank you'."

Mungim beamed. "Me sister will be glad we did strike upon something small that in sooth be something of great value to ye. As music be lacking in your life, then ye will even more appreciate this:" he said, and pulled out another box, about the same size as the music box. Opening it, I saw it was full of thirty-two little brass cylinders, each fitting in a small slot inside the box. Mungim showed me how to change the cylinders in the music box (it turned out to be fairly simple), and soon we were listening to another melody, completely different - happy and joyful.

"The box do contain many melodies me sister likes, each the work of a musician of our people. Some were written long ago, others only a few years past. Some be happy, some sad, some joyful dance, some quiet - see ye here on the side of the cylinder be the name of the melody, who did write it, and who did impress it onto brass. We have no melodies from your people that we know of, but we have but yet begun to look. Perhaps in one of our libraries there may yet be sheet music containing some of your songs and melodies our ancestors did like and save. If this be so, me younger brother can yet impress them on a cylinder, and I can bring them to ye."

"Thank you, Mungim. This is a wonderful gift," I replied, then paused. "But wait - what will your sister

listen to, now? How can I accept her birthday present and the song she did write knowing she'll never hear it again?"

"Eddas, me sister says I should tell ye that like your stone, this be a trifle to us. A small thing. She has four other music boxes, several cylinders with the melody she wrote on them, and a large collection of other cylinders. To us, the box be worth perhaps a gold - less, in sooth, because while me youngest brother now be a master mechanist, he yet be no master woodcarver - his engraving shows more love than skill. Each cylinder be worth perhaps a silver, and some are very common and worth only a copper or two. It be a small thing to us, Eddas, a trifle. Yet me sister did think that perhaps this small thing may yet be of great worth to ye - and she were right, Moradim bless her soul," Mungim replied, clapping his hands together once. "I shall bring ye more cylinders when next I come, as my sister did hope ye might like it, and did say that if ye did, she would yet pick many melodies she liked of all sorts, buy them for ye, and send them to ye through me."

I wondered how I would ever repay Mungim for this gift, and then realized there was no need - Mungim was a Dwarf, not a human, and he and his sister were repaying me. They and their family would probably continue to repay me for quite some time, because my gift meant so much more than mere happiness to them - that little loan, in repayment for a makeup kit I had intended to give to Dyarzi when I might someday be able to bring her back to me, has meant wealth for their family thousands of times in excess of its worth. I decided to just smile, sit back and enjoy it.

Mungim reached into the larger box again, and extracted a scroll. "This be from our King, Durin. It be your copy of an official proclamation. It do name ye, Master Eddas Ayar, a Dwarf-Friend, and say that any who turn his hand against ye be an enemy of the dwarves. The king did intend to have a great lot of royal courtiers and such foppery to deliver this to ye, but they did ask me afore they did do such, as I did know ye best. I did tell them ye be a quiet sort and did live for the most part alone, and had done for as long as ever I did know ye, though I did tell them I did think this solitude be yet not of your own choice, but rather it be a sad quirk of fate. I did tell them not only did ye lack a large enough place to receive such an entourage, but ye could hardly feed and water them as were proper, ye being but one and without servants. I did also mention that such a large amount of dwarves marching through were most likely to annoy the giants of Dohbari village passing fiercely, who yet be your protectors and friends, and as ye be a Giant-Friend and they do care for ye with a watchful eye, they might mistake such a large collection of dwarves for a raiding party and squash the lot," Mungim said, and gave me a wink, grinning.

I chuckled. "Indeed, my friend, a royal entourage passing through would most likely be mistaken by the giants, as none of them have ever seen anything like that." I looked over the scroll briefly - it was in the language of the dwarves, of course, and bore the royal seal. It was a great honor, actually - this meant that someday, if I ever had the time and the desire to do so, I could go visit the land of the dwarves and be welcomed in friendship. It also meant that anyone who warred on me had best do it in a way that the dwarves don't find out about, or they'd face their army. As I rolled up the scroll again, Mungim resumed speaking.

"There be more, of course. I know ye by sight, but others do not. So, here be an iron band for ye. It be magicked so that it may only be worn by ye. I be no mage, and know not the workings of such, I be sorry to say. I do yet know that fewer than six score of those bands we dwarves did ever make. It be a great honor," Mungim said, and held out a small box, bowing. I rose and bowed in return, taking the box.

After we sat again, I opened the box and saw a black, wrought-iron wrist-band as wide as my finger in a velvet lining inside, the band engraved with the royal seal of the dwarves. It was fluted and spiraled, and I could easily see the smith who had forged it had been highly skilled. I took it in my hand and

concentrated on the mana-flow that was passing through it. It was a moderately complex enchantment, and quite neatly done. The band was enchanted so that it could only be opened or closed by the correct person, and would only close about the wrist of the correct person - in specific, it would only operate for someone who could truthfully claim an identical biography to myself. It was enchanted to recognize only the touch of someone calling themselves Eddas Ayar, a Hyperborean battle-mage who was born in Wilanda city on the fifth day of summer, in the first year of the reign of King Darrak II, when the moon was eclipsed, about seventeen centuries ago. Other than also being invulnerable to harm and adjustable in size, it had no other abilities. I closed the band around my left wrist, over my glove, and placed my hands in my lap again.

It occurred to me they probably enchanted them like this because they knew as a Hyperborean battle-mage, I probably had an animuary. As such, I may rise from the void in a different body at times - and had before, as Mungim was well aware. So, I would always be able to wear the little band, no matter what body I may find myself in. Of course, what they didn't know was that my animuary had been reduced to dust by the effect of the ultimate power of the Skull of Hyarlanoth, and were I to be killed now, I would simply move onto the afterlife and never return - worse, I couldn't possibly re-cast the spell until I had a permanent way of restoring my old body, as any casting of the spell now would attune the animuary to accept this body as my own, and the next time I arose I would most likely be a woman again. I saw no need to tell Mungim this, however. My problems were, in the end, my own.

"It's quite nice, thank you, Mungim."

"Ye be most welcome, Eddas," Mungim replied, smiling broadly.

"The harvest has been fairly good this year - I do believe I shall have quite a bit to trade for the goods both you and Taliad may bring."

"Ah!" Mungim said, brightening. "This do bring us quite neatly to the subject of trading for your byallar, my friend," he said, and winked.

Mungim had brought four large wagons, each driven by a brother of his. Of course, not all the wagons were meant to load up what he received from me - he also intended to trade with the giants of Dohbari-village, and several other villages along his usual route. After dispensing with the usual trades for salt, flour, and other basic supplies I needed, Mungim opened a small box and began showing me the things he had to trade this year in his attempt to beat out Taliad for the majority of my crop.

With great care, he brought out a rolled carpet, enchanted so as to be invulnerable. "It never will wear down, and it be easy to clean as no stain will cling to it. With winter soon to come, ye will find it a blessing to keep bare feet from chilled floors," Mungim said with a wink. The carpet was of good dwarven manufacture, made of fine wool and displaying a lovely pattern - it was generally red, with large interwoven green plant stems and leaves, each bearing blue and white flowers.

I stroked my chin as I considered it. Dyarzi had often complained of cold floors in my old tower, though I had never really noticed. Now that I was in the body of a woman who was much smaller than I had been in my previous life, one with tiny little feet, it was a different matter. Each winter was now heralded by my being reminded to adjust my ring of adaptation due to the chill of the floors on bare feet. If I ignored doing so or got busy, I also found my feet got uncomfortably cold in bed at night until I adjusted my ring of adaptation. In my old life with Dyarzi, I had often teased her, finding it amusing that she always complained of cold feet. Now, I didn't find it quite so funny. "Hmmm... The enchantments are of good quality, but the carpet itself is only fair. The pattern is rather uninspired, I think. Ten barrels."

"Bah, Eddas! Look again - see ye the pattern be yet easy on the eye, and will not be one to annoy ye

four or five decades from now, as one with a bright pattern might. See ye how well it be made - it be not shoddy workmanship held together with a cantrip, it be a fine carpet afore it were ever seen by he who did magic it. Come now - it be worth twenty barrels, easy-like."

"Perhaps you're right. Still, a pair of slippers would keep my feet just as warm in winter, I think. Twelve barrels."

Mungim pretended to wring his beard in misery. "Ah, Eddas! Think ye on what this does mean to me! It will yet be many a year before I can get me bride-price at this rate! Have pity on me, Eddas. Nineteen barrels." His act looked perfect, and I'm sure would have melted the heart of any dwarf he traded with, but it was spoiled by my bursting into giggles, which caused Mungim to grin at me.

We dickered back and forth a bit more, and finally settled on sixteen barrels on the condition he bring more carpets like it next fall, and tapestries for the walls - I gave some suggestions on what I would like to see on the tapestries and carpets, and he wrote down what I wanted in a small book he kept in his belt-pouch. Of course, that many enchanted carpets and tapestries made to order would have been impossible to get for any reasonable price, so we agreed that normal ones would be just fine, and set a price of three barrels per carpet and two per tapestry. I agreed on an advance of twelve barrels, partial payment on the tapestries and carpets he would bring next fall. Mungim was kind enough to take the carpet to the top of my tower (he was a dwarf, after all, and dwarves are quite strong), where I moved the furniture around and placed it where I thought best. We then proceeded to my storage shed, where Mungim and I rolled the barrels out so his brothers could load them up.

As Mungim and his brothers slowly drove their wagons away down the road, Pelia came up to me beneath the tree. I was still listening to my music box, smiling as I re-read the letter from Jhumni. "Good day, Master Eddas. I see you are finished with the traders. May I sit with you?"

"Please do," I replied, smiling.

After Pelia was seated and I had poured her a cup of byallar, she spoke again. "That is a lovely tune. I've never seen anything like that, though. Is it dwarf-made?"

"Yes, Mistress Pelia. It's a gift from a friend."

"Ah. I truly wish that we had something like your byallar to trade, Master Eddas. Our order has never been wealthy, so we have few coins to trade - and the way things are today, no way of getting more."

I thought about it, but I couldn't think of anything they could offer Mungim he might possibly want. "I'm sorry, High Mistress Pelia-" I began, but she cut me off.

"Oh, please. You, of all people, should be able to address me simply as 'Pelia'. You've taught us spells to summon food and water - and I should add the food is better than what we've managed to get from our gardens so far, as it's been many centuries since the earth of our little gardens were worked, and they were ridden with choke-weed. You're teaching us spells to help us defend ourselves, you've taught us how to fight as a group, and your lessons in hand-to-hand and in knife-fighting have made many of us feel more confident and safe even without spells to consider. Sometimes I feel like a mere apprentice next to you, and certainly I know your skills make you easily able to defeat anyone in my order."

"Perhaps, Pelia, but think about this for a moment: Yes, I know more of battle and war than you. But you know more of healing and herblore and the skills of the chiurgeon than I ever will. Yes, I know how to use my knife as a lethal weapon. Even so, I know nothing of being a midwife. Your skills are those of the healer, the skills of peace. My skills are those of a battle-mage, the skills of war. Do not think you are any less skilled simply because you have not mastered the skills I know - the skills of peace are just as

important, if not more important, than the skills of war," I replied, smiling at her.

Pelia smiled in return. "Thank you. Please continue what you were going to say, Eddas, before I interrupted."

"Well, what I was going to say was that I'm sorry, but I just can't think of anything offhand that you could offer to the traders that they might want. I do believe you're an important part of Yorindar's plan, however, so perhaps when the time is right, something will present itself."

"Ah - the God of Wisdom you mentioned. Our order gave homage to Vyleah, of course, as her sphere is healing, fertility and agriculture."

"Ah - I fear she sleeps, now. There are only eighty-nine of you, and so far as I know Vyleah isn't worshiped by the multitudes of people in the south-lands."

"She's not sleeping, she's merely resting, saving up her strength. She is very weak, and only awakened when you first saw the ruins of her temple in Wilanda-city fifty years ago and spoke her name aloud for the first time in over sixteen centuries. Yorindar is helping her by protecting us and our order, so that some day she will have the strength to join him. If all goes well, perhaps in a few centuries, Yorindar and Vyleah will make up the pantheon of the people of Hyperborea," Pelia said suddenly.

"Protecting you? How?" I asked.

"Through you," she replied, and smiled.

I nodded, as it was obvious she was right, and steepled my fingers. "Alright, but how do you know this, Pelia?"

Pelia blushed. "I... Ummm... I dreamed it," she replied, and looked at me.

I nodded again. "I understand, and know exactly what you mean. Yorindar sometimes speaks to me in dreams - but very rarely. He never speaks clearly, though, but rather always in riddles. I would prefer knowing what will happen before it happens, of course, but that is mortal fantasy - even the gods are limited by paradox. The best I can do is listen carefully for hints and clues, and guess at what may be coming - which apparently is what I am supposed to be doing," I said, then shrugged. "Perhaps Yorindar has some plan for what you may offer to the traders which he will reveal as time goes by. Certainly I can't think of anything."

Pelia suddenly brightened. "I can," she said, and grinned. "Healing herbs. We could grow them in our gardens. We could also make healing philters - oils, teas, and unguents. Our order is expert with these things, and our skills in this area are most likely far and away greater than any others alive today. We would have to stop trying to grow food in the gardens, of course, but what with the spell you taught us, we no longer need to, anyway."

I could see several problems with her plan, most of which involving the difficulties in cultivating some of the more delicate herbs. I opened my mouth to comment on them, but then shut it just as suddenly. 'You and I are not alone in this. Vyleah and her rabbit are with us,' Yorindar had said. Slowly, I nodded. "A good idea, Pelia. Some herbs are very difficult to cultivate, but I'm sure you and the women of your Order know more about these plants and mosses than I do, and can easily overcome any difficulties you may encounter in growing them - you simply need some good, clear land to begin with, land not ridden with weeds. In time, you may be able to trade equally as well as I do, for certainly some of the herbs and unguents will be worth as much as a barrel of ground and roasted byallar seeds to the elves and dwarves. I have several agricultural spells I've collected over the years - I could let you copy them from my

grimoire, and then you could easily rid your gardens of the weeds which are causing you problems, and cultivate enough herbs to have trade goods," I replied.

Pelia thought about it, then looked at me strangely. "It seems Yorindar has revealed his plans now, when we needed them. Yes, that can be done - and I do think you are right, it will work," she said, then sipped at her cup of byallar for several moments before continuing. "It is unfortunate there is no priest of Yorindar I can speak to. I would like to learn more of him."

"I can only tell you what I have learned of him myself, Pelia. He was a god of wisdom brought by the people I call the Invaders - they are the ancestors of the people of the south-lands. So are we, through our women. He has a raven, who acts as his eyes and ears in the world, and plucks out the eyes of his enemies. The Arcadians say he can take the form of an owl if he wishes, and in either form he has the golden eyes of an owl," I said, and stopped to think a moment. "I met a priest of Yorindar many years ago, now. It was shortly after I had first awakened. I'm sure he's dead, now. He looked to be perhaps fifty, and he was in Greenhaven when Vayanar's army captured the city - he probably would have been slaughtered along with all the other older men. Even if he managed to survive, he's surely passed on from old age. They live by begging. They don't accept money, only food and drink," I said, then looked up. "That's all I know, I'm sorry."

Pelia nodded. "The raven reminds me of the rabbit Vyleah has as her eyes and ears in the mortal world," she said, thinking, then she shook her head and smiled. "Perhaps you are Yorindar's raven, Eddas, and I am Vyleah's rabbit."

I smiled back. "Perhaps we are," I replied, knowing in my heart it was true.

[Eighteen](#)

"Even the lowest, grubbiest dwarf knows that when one encounters beauty, one should sing its praises - proof that they are, despite appearances, not entirely uncultured."

- Elven Proverb

"If you forgive me for saying so, Eddas... But in that body, it is indeed a pleasure to hear you speak our language - almost enough to soothe my annoyance over the knowledge that once again, the hairy one has beaten me here," Taliad said, smiling.

"Thank you, Taliad - and please don't worry, I'm not offended," I replied, because I wasn't. After many decades, it seemed I had finally gotten used to this body.

Taliad closed his eyes for a moment, listening to me speak. When I fell silent, he opened his eyes and smiled. "Eddas, my friend, with respect, if you could only hear yourself speaking the Language of the Elves. Your voice is like gentle music, or the sweet singing of an ancient bird, returned to these lands after many years of silence."

I smiled. "Come now, Taliad. You sound as though you're trying to court me."

Taliad winked. "No, my friend, I am not. It is merely good manners to comment on beauty where one finds it - and the effect is partly the voice of the delicate flower you find your soul in at the moment, and partly our language. With respect, Eddas, having heard the women of the Mountain Healers speak your language, I find it harsh to the ear, like the growling of a wolf. Our language is more like the call of the whippoorwill, or the hoot of the night owl," he said, and grinned.

I chuckled. Elves were very proud of their language - and it was quite complex. There were over a dozen

declensions, some of them only used in poetry and song. I was glad for my ring of translation - I doubted I ever would have had the time to learn to speak it properly otherwise.

We chatted for a bit after that, exchanging news of the events since our last meeting. "A dwarf-friend now? Well, I'm glad to see the dwarves have finally realized what we already knew," Taliad commented.

"What do you mean, Taliad?"

Taliad smiled. "My dear Eddas, we elves greatly respected the Hyperboreans, as both our races shared a common love and respect for nature and the wilderness. When you returned from the void, we were very glad - even though you are in the body of a half-elf woman, and one that bears a strong resemblance to a Dark Elf. Some of the older elves find this nearly as distasteful as you do, my friend," Taliad replied, and grinned as I chuckled. "More importantly, though, you are an Ancient One - and we greatly respect age. Many of our number wish to come and ask you what the ancient Hyperboreans were truly like, as they have faded from living memory, and our scholars are quite curious. Of course, we would never think to bother an Ancient One with such trivial questions as 'what were your people like?', particularly considering you are quite busy trying to restore your people and your civilization. So, we await hopefully the day when your numbers will rise again, and you will have more time to chat with us. Also, we know much of your deeds from days long gone, and we know a bit of your beloved, as well, Lady Dyarzi Na'Eddas," Taliad said, and winked. "We have always been your friends, Eddas Ayar. It is always wiser to be friends with an Ancient One than enemies, don't you think?"

I chuckled again. "It's good that your scholars have not come by to ask their questions, Taliad, for I am afraid I would probably have to disappoint them - I am quite busy with spell research at the moment."

Taliad nodded. "Our scholars and historians realized you may be busy for a century or so at first, trying to rebuild your civilization, and decided to wait. As you know yourself, Elven scholars are elves obsessed with knowledge - they would hardly come and chat for a few hours, take notes, and then bid you farewell. They would be here every day, talking to you for hours on end, asking endless questions about every little detail of your culture and language and history and dress and a hundred thousand other things you almost certainly took for granted every day of your life and never really gave an instant's thought about. They know that would annoy you immensely, and since we elves respect you, we leave you in peace for the nonce."

I chuckled again. "If you meet any of them, tell them to simply write down a short list of the most burning questions on their minds. You can then bring the list with you in the spring, and take the answers back the following fall. I'm sure that I can probably answer a dozen or so questions in that time with a few pages of detailed explanation for each, and that will at least satisfy some of them."

"Indeed, it would - and I shall do so, Eddas, though I'm afraid that you may cause quite a stir in our academic community as the specific list of questions is argued all this winter," Taliad said, sipping at his cup of byallar with a wry grin for several moments before he spoke again. "I think your plan for these women is also wise, Eddas. I shall visit them next year, and see what they may have grown for trade - but I shall be careful, as I fear after they have been under the tutelage of such a powerful battle-mage as yourself, if I come upon them unawares I may indeed be in trouble, despite my own spells," he said, and winked.

I feigned innocence. "Who, me? I'm just a delicate flower, as you've said yourself."

Taliad burst out laughing, and for several minutes we shared a chuckle. "Oh, yes. Merely a sweet and gentle rose, my friend," he chuckled.

I grinned, then changed the subject. "You said you even know a bit of Dyarzi? How is that?" I asked.

Taliad smiled. "She who sneaks into the royal bedchambers of the Queen of the Elves and steals her magic looking glass from beneath her pillow while Queen Lunitolla sleeps unawares can anticipate being remembered by the elves for many, many centuries afterward, my friend."

"You know about that?" I asked, surprised.

"Of course. The deed is still sung among our people as one of great bravery and skill in the craft of a rogue. Queen Lunitolla was both highly impressed and extremely annoyed with her. It was almost a century before she got her magic looking-glass back - she had one of our own people seek it, and his skills as a rogue were comparable to hers. Eventually he recovered it from the treasure-vault of the Hyperborean noble whose hands it had fallen into by that time. A year after it was recovered, the Invaders came to your shores. As I said, we know a bit of her tale, too. Lady Dyarzi Na'Eddas, she who stole the heart of Master Eddas Ayar, the greatest of Hyperborean battle-mages. The story of your lifelong search for a way to bring her back to you is one of surpassing tragic beauty," he said, and smiled warmly.

We chatted for a bit more beneath the shade, then finally the subject got around to trading. "I have a surprise for you - and I hope you didn't trade all your barrels to Mungim, as I do believe this will please you."

"You made the trade you were trying for?"

"Indeed I did, my ancient friend," Taliad replied, reaching into the little magic bag at his side and pulling out a long, black feather with a brass writing nib at the tip. He then held it out to me with a smile.

I looked at it with a start - for a moment, I thought it was another raven-feather, and perhaps a sign from Yorindar. "It's a quill. It looks like it comes from a black goose," I commented after taking it from him and studying it a moment.

Taliad grinned. "Nay, most powerful mage in all these lands. Examine it with your wizard's eye and see what it truly is."

I nodded, and spent a moment assensing its mana-flow. I was astounded. "By the gods, Taliad!" I exclaimed, unable to suppress my reaction.

"Perhaps by them, but more likely by your ancestors many, many years ago, before even the records of your histories begin. Or perhaps by mine - it is always hard to tell with interesting things," Taliad replied, grinning wider.

"Possibly. It doesn't have a proper name, since we never knew who made it, so we of the Dyclonic Circle who studied such things just called it a 'Magic Quill,'" I said, amazed. It was an artifact - a special class of magic item beyond the capacity of today's mages to make. Even back in my day, they were beyond the reach of the most powerful spellcasters. Like all artifacts, it was possessed of powers far beyond what could normally be imbued in a magic item by a mage today, and was totally invulnerable to harm or the ravages of time.

Taliad nodded. "Aye, Eddas. We know it by the same name. It's one of the more fascinating things I have obtained in my search for interesting things. It's attuned to me, so I can operate it for you and show you what it does."

I handed the quill back to Taliad, and he went over to his wagon and produced a large writing kit. The kit was a very nicely-made one, intended to hold a large inkwell and several dozen sheets of vellum inside securely while traveling, and when closed and placed on one's lap, it served as a portable writing desk.

Dipping the quill in the ink, he commanded the quill to write, then resumed talking to me. "As you can see, it can take dictation for you, in any language you like," he said, and I chuckled as I watched it copy down his words exactly, writing at a very rapid clip. "It can also copy pages for you, including any illustrations, graphs, diagrams or charts, and can even translate a work for you from any language into any other language - though you will have to supply the ink, and replace each sheet of vellum as it fills it up with text, of course," he explained, and I nodded. "It also is quite a passable hand at mathematics. Give me a formula - any spell formula will do," he said.

"Hmmm... How about the formula for the Spell of Telekinesis I use?"

Taliad rolled his eyes. "Oh, Eddas - there's at least four variations on that one that I know of. Which formula do you use?"

" $(T/C)^r + (R * VH / (C - x)) - Ng$ " I said aloud, and the quill quickly wrote it down.

"Ah - you use the 'Will as Strength' variant. The best of the four that I've seen. Now: Assuming the caster exerts nine stones of force as T, how much will they lift?" he asked aloud.

I pondered the question, trying to do the formula in my head, and the quill rapidly began writing. In a few moments it stopped, and rested in the inkwell. I looked - its answer was correct. "Very nice. Is it always correct?"

Taliad nodded. "Always - but with more complex formulas, it is quite slow. I sometimes find I am slightly faster than it is with 4th-level calculations, and by the time you get to hyperdimensional or temporal mathematics, it is abysmally slow. On the other hand, I sometimes err - it does not," he said, then plucked the quill from the inkwell and gripped the nib with his fingertips. He then held out his hand to me, and grinned - no ink was on his fingers. "The quill will not release ink save where it is supposed to. It also never makes an error, thus no blotting spell is ever required," he said, and I nodded again. "The only limitation to it I have found is that to attune it to yourself, you need to write with it for a few days, that it can learn your hand. Thereafter, it will write in your own style - or better, if you have a poor hand," he explained, and tucked it into a tube inside the writing kit. After carefully sealing the inkwell again he shut the writing kit and set it in his lap. "Of all the interesting things I have collected, I must admit this is perhaps the least rare - there are a thousand that I know of in existence, perhaps more. Even so, their owners are usually quite loathe to part with them, as you can well imagine."

I nodded. The magic quill was a boon to a scholar or researcher, and certainly would be an enormous aid to me in my research. I had to have it - it might save me years of poring over formulas and re-checking my calculations to see if I was correct. Aside from that, its ability to copy texts would be enormously useful in helping those of the Mountain Healers who had lost their grimoires over the centuries. It had been an exceptionally good year, and the giants had harvested almost four hundred barrels of ground and roasted seed - of which, I received one share in four, of course, and as such I had ninety-seven barrels when Mungim arrived a week ago. Now, I had sixty-nine barrels left. "It's quite nice, Taliad, though I have little use for it, of course, seeing as I am easily capable of doing my own writing and calculations. How much were you looking for?"

"Though it's not truly rare, considering it's age, Eddas, I think it's worth easily a hundred barrels - but I would settle for a ninety," Taliad replied, smiling.

The haggling session that followed was perhaps the most challenging one between Taliad and I in all the years we'd known each other. Taliad enjoyed every moment of it, pacing, posturing, smiling, frowning, pointing out every possible use for the quill he could think of, offering to give me the writing kit along with the quill for free (its value was negligible compared to that of the quill, however), and generally using all

the tricks of an experienced trader to go for the best bargain he could. I was limited by my purse, so I took the position of the reluctant sale, only seeming mildly interested once he began to get below seventy-five barrels. When he finally offered to go to sixty-nine, I knew it was as low as he would possibly go - so, feigning great reluctance, I finally agreed.

When we finally opened up my storage barn to load up the large wagon he'd brought, Taliad looked over the barrels and burst out laughing. "I count only sixty-nine barrels here, Eddas! You should have told me from the beginning that was all you had this year, I wouldn't have been so hard on you."

"What, and deny my good friend the enjoyment of haggling with me for an hour?" I replied with a grin, knowing his obsession with haggling and trading.

Taliad bowed. "I thank you, Eddas. Aye, that was an exciting session, was it not? For a long moment, I thought you would never agree," he said, and laughed again.

After we had the barrels loaded onto Taliad's small wagon (he had several boxes enchanted with an extra-dimensional space enchantment, so we simply slipped the barrels inside them one at a time, filling each one and moving onto the next, until all the barrels were loaded), Taliad bid me a warm farewell and silently drove off down the road. I held the writing kit beneath my arm and watched Taliad disappear past the bend in the road, the Mountain Healers waving at him as he passed. With luck, this trade today would bring Dyarzi to me years sooner than otherwise possible. Taliad had, perhaps, done me more good than he knew. I smiled. It seemed that things were finally looking up for me.

"The brightest candle burns the briefest - and the candle of man burns brightest of all."

- Elven Proverb

Nineteen.

It was in the middle of winter when the news finally came from the Southlands - news I had been expecting for years. I was chatting with Pelia in my room, just passing the quiet of a winter evening, when Swift-wing appeared on the mantle of my fireplace. With a brief flutter of his wings, he landed on the table before me. "Raven. You must come," he said, simply.

Pelia was startled for a moment, but recovered herself quickly. "Mage Arella-tor's familiar, I presume?"

"Yes," I replied, nodding to her, then looked down to Swift-wing. "What is it, my friend? What has happened?"

"Darian is dying."

I stared at him in shock for several heartbeats. Finally, I nodded. I extended my left hand, summoning my staff to my grip at a thought, then held out my right hand to him. "Take me there." Swift-wing said nothing, but simply fluttered up, perching on my wrist.

"Wait! Who is dying?" Pelia asked, rising to her feet.

"His Royal Majesty, Darian Vemcrior, King of Larinia. My oldest friend in this life. It was he who provided the condemned men to bring your Order back from the Void."

"I should come, then - I might be able to help."

I shook my head. "No, Pelia. This is something we've been expecting for years. Darian is old. It's his time."

"But we owe him so much! I could cast a spell to restore his youth, and-"

"And then what would you tell his son, the rightful heir? That he will have to wait perhaps another fifty or sixty years before he may rule? What will you tell his wife, the queen? That she will have to grow old and die while her husband easily out-lives her? Will you restore her youth, as well? Will you restore his son's youth as the years go by, that he may always be ready to reign? And then what will you tell his people, when they see their king never ages? Will you then begin casting the spell on those who beat down the castle gates demanding immortality?" I asked sharply, and Pelia took a step back in surprise.

I sighed. "I'm sorry, Pelia, but the people of the Southlands are not us. We Hyperboreans could accept a king who restores his youth through sorcery - so long as he was a good king, and ruled well. But not forever. Remember the story of King Nastar? A palace conspiracy finally had him assassinated - there were many who believed it was time for him to abdicate, and allow one of his descendants to rule. He was, after all, over two hundred and thirty, and his designated heir was his great-great-great-great-grandson. Nastar's death plunged the whole kingdom into chaos, if you remember, and it was eventually conquered by King Lothor," I said, and gestured with my staff to the south. "The people of the Southlands are not like us. They wouldn't even wait that long. They accept Arella-tor's renewed youth because they know she is a mage and a physicker - perhaps the most powerful mage and the most experienced physicker in the whole of the Southlands. They assume it's simply part of her abilities, and something she can't do for anyone other than herself. If they were to discover that she could restore anyone's youth, there would be chaos. Even the King himself has been led to believe she can only restore her own youth," I said, then sighed again. "No, Pelia. It is his time. And he is my friend, so I must go. I will return as soon as I can."

Pelia nodded. "We will wait for you, Master Eddas Ayar."

I looked to Swift-wing. "Take me there."

Swift-wing simply nodded, muttering his Spell of Returning with a quiet clacking of his beak. The world blurred for a moment, then steadied.

I had never been in this room before, but judging by what I could see, I guessed that it was most likely the royal bedchamber. Darian lay in a large bed, looking more withered than ever. His eyes were closed, but I could see his chest still lifting slowly, so he still lived. Joy sat in a chair by his side, holding his hand and weeping silently. Arella-tor was just rising and stepping away from him, a small cup in her hand - I assumed she had just given him another of her herbal concoctions. Noril and Dawn stood nearby. Noril seemed sad but composed, while Dawn sobbed quietly. Tybalt was there, and two of his guards were watching the door. The moment I appeared, the guards jumped in surprise and started to reach for their swords before they recognized who I was. As Swift-wing fluttered off my wrist and over to Arella, the others in the room turned to look. Tybalt came up to me first, striding quickly across the large room. He clasped my gloved hand briefly, lifting it to his lips for a soft kiss. "I am glad you could come, Dame Raven. The King asked for your presence."

"I am honored to be here," I replied, and Tybalt led me over to the bed.

I briefly hugged Arella, Joy and Dawn - Joy hugged me with a good portion of her giantess' strength, and I had to suppress a grunt. "Oh, Eddas! I'm so glad you came!" she said, and sobbed for a moment.

I said nothing - there was nothing that I could say. I simply hugged her silently, and patted her back for a moment until she released me. Noril looked at me, and seemed to be trying to decide whether to hug me or simply clasp my hand. I made up his mind for him, and hugged him silently. He hugged me back tightly. "Thank you," he whispered in my ear.

"He should awaken in a few moments," Arella said quietly, and Noril released me. As I turned to hug Arella, she spoke again. "Thank you for coming, Raven. You will make him very happy."

"You are all very welcome," I replied, and Arella and I hugged each other for a moment.

"That last dose of herbs should bring him around to be able to say goodbye to you, but I don't think he will be conscious for very long."

I nodded, and went to stand by his side. After a few moments, Darian's aged eyes fluttered open. His eyes flickered about for a moment, until he caught sight of me. Slowly, he smiled. "Ah... Eddas... I'm glad you came..." he said weakly.

"You are welcome," I replied quietly, smiling at him.

"There was something... I always wanted to tell you... I'd been meaning to say it to you for years... Ever since you helped me regain my throne... But I was so disturbed by the death of my brother... I forgot to say it, that day... Then as the years passed... I always got busy... I never got around to telling you..."

"What, Darian?"

"Thank you..." he replied simply, and smiled.

I smiled back. "You're welcome," I replied, gently taking his hand and squeezing it.

"Arella says... I'm dying..." he said, his voice almost a whisper.

I simply nodded, my own eyes beginning to fill with tears.

"Since it seems... I may see her soon... Is there anything I should tell Dyarzi... When I see her in the afterlife?" he asked, a wry grin lighting his face.

"Tell her I love her and miss her with all my heart and soul, and I always will," I said, the tears rolling silently down my cheeks.

Darian smiled. "I will..." he said, then closed his eyes. "It's the least I can do... For you, my friend..." he said, then fell silent. After a long moment, his breathing stilled.

Arella gently reached out, taking Darian's hand from mine, and feeling his wrist with an expert touch. She then reached up, gently probing his neck just below his jaw and to the left of his windpipe. Gently, she laid his hands across each other, then looked to Tybalt and nodded.

Tybalt turned to the guards by the double-door that was the entrance to the royal bedroom, and they opened it without a word. Tybalt then took a deep breath, and bellowed into the hallway. "The King is dead! Long live the King!"

I stood there, weeping along with the rest of Darian's family, and Arella came to me and hugged me silently as Tybalt's shout was echoed and re-echoed by the guards of the castle, passed along throughout all of Steelgate. It occurred to me that many of Darian's people were probably waiting in the courtyard to hear the news - and the message would then be spread by word-of-mouth throughout his kingdom long before the royal proclamation and the coronation of Noril took place. A smooth transition of power was important, and Darian had apparently provided for it. 'I taught him well,' I thought, looking down at his still form and weeping. Joy sat in her chair, laying her body across her husband's chest, sobbing uncontrollably.

'Yes, you did. You have done well, Eddas. Very well indeed,' a familiar voice replied. I looked up suddenly, but no one else seemed to have noticed.

A flash of movement caught my eye, and turned my head. At the window, an enormous owl gazed inside, its golden eyes staring unblinkingly.

I reached out with my will through my ring of telekinesis, opening the window and extending my arm. The owl swooped inside silently, to the stunned silence of everyone in the room except Swift-wing, who squawked in fear at the sight of what to a raven was a deadly predator. The owl perched on my arm, its claws gripping me painfully tight through the enchanted, elbow-length gloves I wore. I was certain if I hadn't been wearing Dyarzi's gloves, it would easily have torn my flesh without intending to.

I stared into the owl's eyes as silence reigned in the room. Darian had openly worshiped Yorindar all his life - particularly since he felt he owed his kingdom to Yorindar (which he did). Because of Darian, the worship of Yorindar had grown from that of a tiny sect of eccentric, beggar-priests to one that had spread far and wide in Larinia, and I could tell by the silence that the others in the room that this event had great significance for them.

My mind was awl with questions, but the owl's silent voice cut through my thoughts. 'Not now, Eddas. There will be another time for questions. I have little time to speak to you, and this particular manifestation is quite tiresome.'

'I am listening,' I thought back at it, trying to calm myself.

'This was an *Event*. It has been a long time in coming, Eddas. You know Temporal Theory. You should understand,' he thought to me. I simply nodded silently as he continued. 'Good. Now, you must take Joy back with you to Hyperborea.'

'Why?' I thought back, confused.

'I cannot say - and you know why,' Yorindar replied. I was surprised - this was the most direct he had ever been with me.

'Yes - you are limited by Paradox. The Arc of Time must not be broken, or else the universe shall come to an end.'

The owl tilted its head at me, and I imagined Yorindar was smiling. 'Not completely limited, Eddas. There are two things I may tell you, so pay attention: First, there are several *Events* I am working towards. The restoration of your race and your beloved are among them - but this has to happen according to my plan, not Morgar's, or he wins the game,' he thought at me, and my heart skipped a beat. 'The second is that there is another *Event* coming, one which Joy must be present for. You will know it is near when you are asked to repair a wedding-dress for the bride of Dragonslayer's grandson.'

'Morgar wins the game? What game? I thought this was war, a war between the gods! And what grandson? Dragonslayer doesn't even have a grandson yet! That may be decades away! Joy is old, near the end of her life!' I thought back in confusion.

'Exactly,' the owl thought back to me, and leapt off my arm, flying silently out the window to vanish into the night.

I looked after the owl in silence, my mind awl with emotions. Everyone in the room was silent for several heartbeats, apparently as profoundly affected as I had been. Arella regained her voice first. "It was Yorindar's prophecy, come true," she said, her voice hushed.

"Aye, my lady. 'And the Owl shall come at the Raven's call, and carry the soul of the First King of Tulan away to heaven.'" Tybalt replied, awed.

"Tulan? What's that?" I asked, even more confused than before.

"It's from the Holy Book of Yorindar. It's part of a prophecy," Noril replied. "The prophecy says that someday, a Golden Kingdom shall arise out of an age of chaos, and through that kingdom, all the people of the world shall live in peace and happiness for ten thousand years to follow."

I started to object, to tell them that it hadn't exactly happened the way that their prophecy said. I hadn't summoned the owl, the owl's arrival had been as much of a surprise to me as to any of them. The owl itself was a physical manifestation of Yorindar - and certainly I couldn't summon a god. Still, I held my tongue. Prophets don't know everything, and if the ancient scribe who had penned their holy book had been spoken to by Yorindar with the same numinous phrases he used with me, then it seemed likely that this was as close to the reality of events as Paradox would allow him to come.

I struggled to master my emotions. I had a job to do - even if I didn't understand what that job might be, or how I was to accomplish it. It appeared I would have to get a copy of the Holy Book of Yorindar. Perhaps Arella could bring a copy the next time she visited, or I could visit the Southlands sometime and buy one myself. Either way, it appeared that Yorindar had several plans for me that I might be able to learn of if I could read the book at some point. I held out my hand to Joy, who still stroked her husband's dead face gently with a hand, weeping quietly. "Joy, say goodbye to your children. It's time to go."

Joy looked up to me in surprise, her tear-streaked, aged face full of confusion. "Me? Come with you? Why?" she asked, then sobbed, clutching Darian's still form and sobbing into his chest. "My husband is dead. I have nothing to live for anymore. My life is over. Leave me here."

Princess Dawn burst into tears and hugged her mother, and Noril looked like he might weep, as well. It dawned on me why Yorindar needed Joy to leave - she was a giantess (albeit a midget one), and as such she would have the traditional period of mourning for a giant, which would last about a year. She may even take the traditional route of Baishanto that some Giant-Wives did upon the death of their mate, and quietly starve herself to death to join her beloved in the afterlife. This would probably affect Noril very badly during the crucial first year of his reign. I struggled over what to say, and I remembered when I had first met Joy and she had been suicidal over the knowledge that she would never be a full-size giantess. I stretched myself to my full height (such as it was, in this body), and again spoke to Joy the way I remembered being spoken to by elves and dragons. They always spoke from the viewpoint of great age, and couched their words in numinous phrases that implied I might understand were I only as old as they. Well, now I was as old as they. In fact, I was older than the oldest elf, and older than some dragons. It had worked the last time I tried it on her, nearly five decades ago - it was certainly worth a try now.

"You are right, Joy. Your life here is at an end. You have fulfilled your destiny here. You have raised a wise, strong and brave son who has at his side as his closest advisor the one person in the world he can trust above all others - his own loving sister. You have insured that each of them received the best education they possibly could have, and I can tell you as their teacher that for each area Noril has a weakness, his sister has a strength. Helping them and advising them is Arella-tor, the most powerful mage in all the Southlands - and I should know, I taught her, as well. As I told you years before - the gods had a reason for you being born, a destiny for you. This part of your destiny is finished. Now, you have another destiny to fulfill. Come, Joy," I said, and held my hand out to her again. "It's time to go."

Joy hugged Darian's body again, sobbing. I waited, and finally she released him and rose shakily to her feet. She stepped over to me, taking my little, gloved hand in her enormous, bare one. "I am ready."

"But-but mother! What will we tell the people when you aren't there for father's funeral?!" Noril asked, his face showing shock.

I spoke up, interrupting Joy's reply. "You will tell them that she has gone home to the lands of her birth, Prince Noril. She is a woman of Hyperborea. She loved a man of the Southlands, and helped him regain his throne and become king. Now, he is gone. It is time for her to go home."

"Dame Raven... I..." Tybalt said, his voice strained, the words catching in his throat. I could tell he wanted to say something, but couldn't bring himself to say it.

I looked around the room at the faces of everyone there. They all looked to me in awe. I was no longer merely Darian's Hyperborean Executioner, or even Darian's ancient and respected friend. No, the Owl had transformed me in their eyes into the living embodiment of Legend and Prophecy - the Raven of Yorindar. I knew that if I tried to quietly explain, they would never allow me to take her. No, there was only one way to speak to them. "It's alright, Tybalt. This is as Yorindar wills. I, the Raven of Yorindar, have spoken," I said, keeping my face perfectly straight as though I was playing chatto for my life. I was hoping that I had guessed right, and that my words didn't come out sounding as insipid to their ears as they did to mine.

'Raven of Yorindar, indeed,' I thought to myself. 'I'm no divine messenger or holy warrior - I'm me, Eddas Ayar. I'm a man who has lost everything - his power, his riches, his prestige, his honor, his beloved, and even his manhood. I am nothing. Less than nothing, really.' Yet, as I looked at their faces, I knew that to them, I was far, far more... Something beyond humanity, something beyond even mortality itself - and the knowledge of that saddened me.

Only Joy looked at me as she always had, and in that moment, I was glad of it. To her, I still was Eddas Ayar, a Hyperborean battle-mage risen from the void - and that was enough. She knew that deep inside me, I was still an ordinary man. She squeezed my hand gently, and spoke again, this time in the tongue of the Giants. "I am ready. Take me home."

I nodded, casting my Spell of Returning, and the world blurred.

Twenty.

"My love lies still,

Within the bosom of the earth,

And flowers grow above them.

My love lies still,

Within the bosom of the earth,

And my heart is buried with them.

Sleep well, my love, sleep well,

Within the bosom of the earth,

And I shall water the flowers,

With my eternal tears."

- Giantish mourning-song.

For the first three days, Joy did very little but sit in my room at the top of the tower and weep. After asking Pelia to assign half a dozen of her women to watch Joy in three shifts 'round the clock, I told Pelia everything that had happened - quietly, away from Joy so she wouldn't overhear.

"Do you really think she may try to kill herself?" Pelia had asked. "I mean, yes, she's tall, but she hardly looks like a giant-wife."

"Well, trust me - she is. And yes, I do think she may try to starve herself to death, or failing that, she may find some other way," I had replied, and went on to explain Joy's origin, so Pelia would understand.

Now, three days later, Joy sat by the fire in my room, staring into the flames. She had come up to talk to me, but so far hadn't said anything. I simply sat and waited, gazing at her expression over her right shoulder, as her back was mostly to me. It was a long time before she spoke, and for a while, I thought she might not speak at all.

"Eddas... Could you have... I mean..." she said quietly, haltingly, her gaze still lost in the flickering flames.

"Yes, Joy?" I replied, my voice soft. For the first time I could recall, I was actually glad to have a pleasant, gentle, woman's voice.

"The spell you made... For Dyarzi. Could you have cast it for Darian? Could you have brought him back to me? Can you, even now?"

I thought about my answer carefully. The simple truth of the matter was that I could, but it wasn't guaranteed to work, and it would cause an enormous amount of trouble if I did. Everything I'd said to Pelia that fateful evening three days ago was still true. No, I simply couldn't do it - the ramifications were simply too dire.

I sighed. "No, Joy. I'm sorry, but I can't," I replied, my heart aching for her.

Joy looked up, turning a wary eye to look into my face. "Can't, or won't?"

I was taken by surprise. In nearly five decades as queen, Joy had become extremely canny. I hesitated - and in that moment of hesitation, she swiftly turned in her chair to face me.

"Out with it, Old Man. You may fool others with that sweet little half-elf's body, but I've been Queen of Larinia for far too long to have not learned something of the hearts of men - and you most assuredly are a man, despite appearances," she said, wagging an index finger as thick as my thumb at me.

"The truth?"

"The truth," she replied, pulling her chair over to sit before me. She loomed over me like the little giantess she was, her expression firm.

"Alright. I could try, Joy, but most likely, I'd fail. Darian lived a full and happy life, and he had no regrets. He has nothing to come back here to except you, and most likely his afterlife is a happy and pleasant one. The departed has to want to come back, Joy. It's not a single spell, it's three separate spells - one to restore the body, one to summon the soul, and one to restore the Silver Cord and link the soul back to the body again. If for any reason he's hesitant about returning, the second spell won't work and the whole procedure fails. You'll simply have a soulless body that will just lie there and slowly starve to death - or worse, as such a vessel might attract a wandering spirit."

"But-"

"Wait - I wasn't done," I said, raising a gloved hand, and Joy fell silent again. "I know you're thinking that he would want to come back to be with you. Perhaps he might - he may be content to simply wait in the afterlife for you. He may not. But if he did come back, what would happen then, Joy? What would you tell Noril? That he will have to give up the throne and wait another sixty years? What will you tell his people? That their king is alive again, and can live as long as he wishes, while they must suffer and die?"

"We could live here, in our little cabin, just as we used to!" Joy objected firmly.

"No, Joy. His time had come. He has met and fulfilled his destiny. Let him go on to his reward. You have another destiny, Joy. Let Darian go," I said softly.

"And you? What of you? Will you let Dyarzi go? Isn't that the same thing?" she snapped.

I jerked back as surely as if she'd slapped me. I couldn't say anything in reply, I was simply too shocked and hurt - and after a moment, angry, as well.

Joy saw my expression, and wilted. "I'm sorry, Eddas. I didn't mean that. You've told me the story before. Dyarzi was murdered. She never had a chance to live a full life, as Darian and I did. It's not the same thing. You're right - it was Darian's time. I'm sorry I said that, Eddas. Please forgive me."

I waited until I'd managed to master my emotions again before I spoke. "It's alright, Joy. I understand. But there's something you must understand, as well. You have another destiny, Joy. The Gods have something in mind for you in the future. I don't know what it is, but I imagine it will be something... Wonderful," I said, and managed a smile.

"Do you really think so?" she asked quietly.

I reached out and took her enormous hand in my tiny one, and squeezed briefly before letting her go. "Yes, Joy. I know that you have another destiny. It's not a guess. Something perhaps two or three decades from now - something very special," I said, and held my head up, trying to imitate the enigmatic manner that I'd remembered elves and dragons speaking to me when I was only four decades old instead of sixteen centuries old. "Someday, Joy, you will understand what I mean, and you will thank me."

Joy suddenly chuckled. "You're going senile, Old Man. I'm seventy-eight years old. In two or three decades, I'll be long since dead."

I smiled. "You're so sure of that, are you?"

Joy's smile faded as she looked at me, her face changing to an expression of awe and surprise as she realized what I meant. "You mean... You'll restore my youth?"

"I told you, Joy - your old life is over. It's time for you to begin a new life, here and now."

Joy simply stared at me with an expression of awe. "You truly are the most powerful spellcaster in the world."

I chuckled. "No, Joy. Karg the Terrible is greater by far - nearly every dragon is more powerful than I am. I might be the most skilled in Hyperborea, but I'm hardly the most powerful, and it remains to be seen if I'm the best in the world."

Joy snorted. "Don't be so humble, Old Man. You're the greatest. Otherwise, I don't think the Little People's god, Yorindar, would have picked you to work through."

I smiled. "Thank you," I replied, holding the rest of my thoughts to myself. I didn't feel I was the greatest -

far from it. I still had no idea what Yorindar's true plans were for Joy, and my research into a way to transform myself and restore my old body was, so far, an utter failure. All I could do was simply do what I thought was right, and hope I was doing the right thing.

Twenty-One

"Finally, one morning, after yet another night of furtive, restless, ghost-ridden attempts at sleep, Faral and Natchok came to me. We spoke quietly, in the hushed whispers which now had become so common in the shadowed chambers of the Black Tower. It was obvious to us - the solution Cordo had us seek was simply impossible. Even if it were possible for us to find it, even if by some miracle we managed to somehow obtain the necessary research texts to accomplish our task, we would never arrive at an answer before Cordo's patience with us finally snapped, and he lashed out with sorcery to try to slay us. His madness seemed to grow day by day, now, and his rage at Eddas grew with it. Our path was clear - there was only one thing we could do. Now, the only question was... When?"

- Gorol Qual, *Personal Diary*, Date Unknown, presumed 17th century NCC

By spring, life had settled down to a quiet and familiar routine. Joy's grief at losing Darian finally had ebbed, eased in part by the strange and wonderful sensation of being young again. I restored her body to the condition it was in at about age twenty - she was a tall, blonde goddess again, and seemed very happy. For their part, the women of Pelia's order took the time to chat with her, find out about her life, and generally make friends with her. Suddenly faced with eighty-nine women, all of whom cared for her and wanted to be her friend, Joy began to smile and laugh again. Swift-wing visited frequently, relaying the latest news of the court and messages from her children, and Joy happily looked forward to their time together. This also helped ease Joy's sorrow, and lift the burden from her heart. Joy began to learn the Hyperborean language from them, and in exchange taught them the tongue of the giants. Pelia thought this was a marvelous exchange, as once they had mastered the language, they would be able to speak with the giants directly, rather than using spells of translation. My only regret over the last month or so was that Arella had been too busy to visit me as she had before. I found I missed our quiet, tender moments together as I lay awake in the darkness of my bedroom at night, alone.

As the weeks passed, Joy's relationship with me had slowly changed, however. Previous to this point, her real relationship had been with Darian. In fact, she'd spent nearly every waking moment of the last five decades in his company. Now, she was with me most of the time, and she and I slowly developed a friendship we hadn't really had before. She almost completely stopped calling me "Eddas", save when she was speaking about me to one of the other women. Instead, she often simply called me "Old Man," as she had sarcastically called me when in the midst of her grief. Now, though, it was a term of endearment - and one I found, after a few weeks of hearing it, that I enjoyed.

One spring morning, as I was walking among the trees of my land, checking them to see how they were blooming and to see if any needed pruning, Joy walked up to me, smiling. She fell in step beside me, and slowly walked along, enjoying the view and the sweet scent of the countless tiny white blossoms among the green leaves. Finally, she spoke, her rich, alto voice carrying a chuckle. "Old Man, be glad you're in the body of a woman. I think if you were not, the Mountain Healers would have long since torn that robe from your body and ravished you to within an inch of your life."

I started, surprised. "What do you mean, Joy? Those women are all sapphites. They have no interest in men."

Joy burst out laughing. "Old Man, for someone as wise as you are, you certainly can be very foolish. Those women are no more sapphites than I am," she said, and chuckled.

"But-but they all lived together for years, never leaving their order, never taking a husband-"

Joy laughed again. "Oh, Eddas! Where did you ever get that impression of them? They talk often of the husbands they have had over the years. They wandered the lands far and wide back before the Great War of Devastation, bringing their skills as healers to the sick, the lame and the blind in the name of their goddess, Vyleah."

"I know that, Joy - I was alive when their Order was active," I replied sourly.

"Ah, but what you do not know is that when they met a man and fell in love on these wanderings, they took a leave of absence from their Order and settled down to have his children. Then, when he grew old and died, they returned to their Order, restored their youth, and began their wandering work again," she said, and grinned at me. "I'd say that each of them has probably had at least one husband - most have had two or three." I stopped and simply stared up into her face in surprise. Joy looked down at me, and seeing my expression, chuckled at me again. "Yes, Old Man. It's true. And now, all they can talk about is you."

"Me?!" I replied, taken aback.

"Of course! They don't want the men of the Southlands. They think of them as pasty-skinned half-castes, descendants of the Invaders more than descendants of their own people. No, they want the olive-skinned, black-haired, dark-eyed men of Hyperborea. Unfortunately, the only surviving ones are of your order - and they hate them. Immensely."

"Because of the attempted rape of twenty-eight of their Order," I replied, nodding.

Joy smiled at me wryly. "They know that you are working on a way to restore your old body, and then you will try to bring back Dyarzi. To be honest, they have mixed feelings about it. They want you to succeed at restoring your old body, but they do not want you to succeed at bringing your beloved back to you. They want you for themselves."

"But why me?!"

"Who else, Old Man?" Joy asked in return, grinning at me. "They've seen your heart. You helped them with no thought of what they might do in return. You treat them with honor and respect in every word and deed. Can you say you would treat them differently if you were in a man's body again?"

I thought about it a moment, then shook my head. "No, I'd have to say I'd treat them pretty much the same way I have been. I'm not attracted to any of them, really - my heart still belongs to Dyarzi."

Joy smiled. "And that, Old Man," she said, poking my chest with a thick forefinger, "is exactly why they are attracted to you."

"I don't understand," I replied, scratching my head.

"Of course you don't, Eddas - that's because you have the heart of a man, not a woman. That's why they've stayed with you so late into spring - they were hoping that perhaps you'd find a solution. They know they have to get home soon if they are to get started on their gardens, using the spells you have given them to clear the land of stones and choke-weed. Still, they stayed on as long as they could, hoping against hope you might find a solution," she said, then looked at me strangely. "How goes your search for a cure, Eddas? Is there any hope?"

I sighed. "Yes and no. I've been studying my own astral aura for months. The Skull of Hyarlanoth made a deep and profound change in me, that is certain - but even now, when I have a better idea of what the

change was, I don't know what can be done to correct the problem. From everything I can see, the spell I developed to change myself back should have worked - yet, it does not. But, at the same time, the Curse of Infertility I cast on this body to prevent it from becoming pregnant when I first took it is still functional, and I have discovered I can cast my alteration spell to change the body's hair-color and other general appearances. I can even cast the same spell I cast on you, and restore this body's youth a few centuries from now when it nears the end of its life and the effects of age finally begin to show. Even so, I cannot change the body's gender," I said, then paused. "Well, I won't bore you with the mathematics of it - the end result is that it's as though this body was an inanimate object. The changes I want to make in gender simply have no effect on it, and any spell I cast that has as part of its effect a change in gender simply fails, as though I was trying to change the gender of a stone."

"Do you have any idea why this is, Eddas?"

"Well, my best guess at this point is that the change the Skull wrought in me was to make this body my animuary - the soul-receptacle created by the Spell of Hidden Life. Since a mage only has one soul and can only have one animuary, the crystal vial I had concealed in my tomb became a mere handful of dust. For the purposes of some spells, it's as though I was trying to cast upon an animuary, an inanimate object. For example, I can't change this body's gender, because it's as though it was an inanimate object, and didn't have a gender. For the purpose of a handful of other spells, it's as though I still had an animuary. For example, I am still immune to the possession attempt of other mages launched from their animuaries, as though I had an animuary myself. Yet, for the purposes of the vast majority of spells, it's as though this was my normal, natural body. For example, healing spells and other effects still function, and if this body dies or is killed, I'll move on to the afterlife."

Joy opened her mouth to say more, when the gentle breeze brought the chilling sound of a woman's scream to our ears, coming from the direction of my tower. I reached out and took her hand. "Come on, Joy!" I shouted, then incanted my Spell of Returning. The world blurred for a moment, and then we stood before my tower.

At first, it was difficult to see the problem. There were at least two dozen women gathered around in a circle, screaming epithets and brandishing their knives. Pelia was running up from the little cabin she had at the base of my tower, and when she saw the scene she began to cast a spell. Suddenly, Pelia's voice rang through the wooded lane, amplified by the spell I'd taught her. "MAKE ROOM! LET EDDAS THROUGH!" Joy helped by literally picking up the women in my way and setting them aside as easily as though they were little children - this startled them badly, and distracted them from whatever it was they had gathered around. In a few moments, the women began to step away and let me into the center of the mob.

When the women finally backed away, I was surprised. In the center of where they had been, there remained a clear line in the dust of the road where their feet had not trod - a clear sign of the invisible protection of a Spell of Abjuration. In the center of the area were three men, one standing, and another kneeling over the third, who lay there on the ground. I recognized them immediately - Gorol, Natchok, and Faral. Faral lay on the ground, bleeding profusely from a deep stab wound to his abdomen, which Natchok was carefully tending. Natchok himself had a long gash across his shoulder which bled freely, but he ignored it as he quietly intoned the incantation for a spell of healing on Faral. Gorol simply stood, holding his staff before him, maintaining the abjuration and watching the women around him quietly.

"Gorol! What are you three doing here?" I called, amazed.

"Getting killed, apparently," Gorol replied dryly.

"You deserve to die, you pig!" One of the women screamed. Several of the others joined her hurling

epithets at my three friends.

Pelia shouted for silence, then spoke again. "Silence, I say! We may not be able to get at them with that abjuration up, but they cannot get at us, either. Relax. Eddas is here. He is far better at battle-magic than we will ever be - let him handle this."

"Faral is weak, Gorol. I'm not very skilled at healing spells. He may die," Natchok said quietly.

"Good! Let the rapist die!" another of the women yelled, and there were shouts of agreement that Pelia had to shout down into silence again.

"He is no rapist. None of us are. We came to speak with Eddas, and tell him that we have left the Circle. And why," Gorol said, and spat. "Though I understand your feelings, we are not guilty of what happened to you."

The women apparently didn't believe, this, and pressed forward again to the limits of the Spell of Abjuration. I looked at Faral on the ground, and my heart was moved. "All of you stand back and stay back!" I shouted. "She who defies me in this will suffer my wrath!" A quiet gasp rippled through the crowd of women, and they backed away from the edge of the circle. Gorol raised an eyebrow, gazing at me in curiosity, but said nothing. "Pelia, I need you to heal Faral and Natchok. Gorol, drop your spell so that she may go to him."

Gorol stared at me for a long moment, then finally nodded. "Alright, Eddas. I shall do as you ask. We were friends, once. I hope that we still are," he replied, and his grip on his staff relaxed. There was no visible sign the spell was gone, but Pelia stepped forward, reaching out her fingers. Finding no resistance, she stepped over to Faral and examined his wound. The women shifted angrily, but did nothing.

While Pelia quietly incanted over Faral's still form, I turned again to Gorol. "Tell me, Gorol. What has happened? Why are you here?"

"Eddas, my friend, that is a long story," Gorol replied.

"Very long," Natchok added, still gazing down at Faral. "Our research is a failure - we cannot duplicate your spell, Eddas, it's just not possible. We realized that yes, we could spend a century working on it, as you did, but this wouldn't change the fact that as far as we can tell, it's impossible," he said, then looked at me apprehensively. "Please, don't misunderstand me. We're not doubting your word that you did it. We just cannot duplicate it ourselves. We have no research tools, no theoretical works, nothing - just our own grimoires. And what little we had written in our grimoires about magic theory related to battle-spells, not anything like this. Without the basic tools, it would take the three of us at least as long as you did, probably longer, to determine the formula - and we won't live that long, my friend," he said, and I nodded, holding my peace as he continued his explanation. "We also believe Cordo is totally insane. The others of the Circle are totally under his sway, and follow him like worshipful dogs. Those who have spoken out against Cordo have vanished - we know not what has become of them," he explained, and shuddered as he continued. "Most of those who voted against your ejection are now dead, and no member of the Circle is permitted to speak your name aloud, on pain of death - you are simply called 'The Heretic' by those of the Black Tower, now. When we left today, there were perhaps forty-five members of the Circle remaining, all of whom follow Cordo out of blind loyalty... or fear," he said, then sighed deeply. "Oh, Eddas! Would that they had listened to you. Would that I had listened. Gods..." he wept, then knelt by Pelia. "He is my friend. Will he live?"

"Yes. Now shut up, I'm quite busy," Pelia replied, not even bothering to look at him. She gazed across the crowd of women, then pointed. "Kylae. Go to my cabin and fetch my kit. Be quick about it."

"Yes, High Mistress," the woman replied, bowing her head, then trotted off, the crowd parting to let her through.

"Eddas, is there somewhere I can sit? I'm quite tired," Gorol asked, his voice strained.

Joy pointed at several of the women in the crowd. "Hala, Yoria, Fyllass and Pylota. Come - let's get some chairs."

Twenty minutes later, Gorol, Natchok and Faral were sitting in three chairs before me. Joy sat at my right side, and Pelia by my left. The rest of the women simply sat on the ground, gathered around us in a circle. Faral looked pale, but Pelia's skills and spells had healed and sealed his wound - he was merely weak from loss of blood. The women gazed at the men with expressions of hatred, and I could see that had Gorol been a bit slower in casting his defensive spells, most likely all three would be dead. I had trained these women well - they were now quite dangerous, particularly as a group. "Alright, Gorol - tell us what has happened."

"Well, my friend, we have been working on trying to reproduce your research efforts, Natchok, Faral and I. It's been quite difficult, lacking any research works, but we gave it our best try. We had been secluded away from the activities of the rest of the Circle - we never knew what was done to these women, Eddas, until after it was done. I swear to you, on my honor, Eddas. None of us knew."

"I believe you, Gorol. Go on."

"Well, I won't bore you with the tedious details, but suffice it to say that after working on it well over a year, we finally concluded it was impossible. It simply can't be done, Eddas. No living mage could possibly bring someone back from the dead."

Joy snorted. "I beg to differ. If anyone could, Eddas could. He has powers you haven't even dreamed of. I was old, nearly eighty, and Eddas restored my youth. Can your sorcery do that?" she asked, and Gorol shook his head.

"Well, perhaps if we had better research materials - it took us months to recover anything of any real use out of the library..." Natchok said, his voice trailing off.

"No," Faral interjected, his voice weak. "Between the three of us, we knew all that we needed to know. Only one was ever better at research than us, and he is there, before us - Eddas himself. Even so, the three of us together have within our minds as much information as he could possibly have used in his research. No, Natchok. The formula is impossible. Based on what we know, it simply can't be done with a corpse that far advanced in decay, and a spirit that long separated from the living."

"Aye," Gorol admitted grudgingly.

"Oh, we had smaller successes," Faral continued, looking to me. "We found that a mouse, a bird, or similar small animal could be brought back to life, assuming they had been dead only a few minutes. But this is more an effect of sorcerous healing of their injuries than it is a manipulation of ectoplasmic form. To bring back a human being who has been dead centuries, to restore their flesh, to give it animation, to recreate and rejoin the silver cord... No, it's simply impossible. Based on everything we know of magic theory, it simply can't be done."

"I was not lying, Faral," I said, and all the women muttered darkly as they gazed at my three friends. "I have the spell. I just cannot use it until I have restored my original body again - otherwise, bringing Dyarzi back would be pointless. She wasn't a sapphire," I didn't tell them, however, that as far as I could tell, there was little hope I would ever restore my original body. I still held out the faint hope that in a century

or two, I might come up with a solution.

"We know, Eddas," Natchok said, bowing his head. "When you first told us of your development, you had not been cast out of the Circle. All the dark things that transpired had not yet happened. We know you weren't lying when you said you had done it - and we also know that if Cordo hadn't taken the action he did, you already would have given the spell to us. We don't mean it to sound like we're saying you're lying. We know you weren't lying. You had no reason to, then or now. I'm sorry if it sounds that way, it's just that we three can't see how it can be done. I'm sorry, Eddas," he said, and sighed deeply. "Gods. I'm sorry for everything! Eddas, I voted in favor of your expulsion. I... I believed Cordo. I thought you had gone mad with your talk of a strange god and all the other things... Now, I see it is Morgar who is mad - and Cordo with him. Gods, I wish I could take that vote back. I wish I could honestly tell you that like Faral and Gorol, I voted in your favor. But I did not, and to conceal that from you now would be another betrayal of our friendship. I was a fool, Eddas. I hope you can forgive me for doubting you."

I looked at my old friend, and I could see that the thought of it weighed heavily on his mind. I nodded. "Forglamma, Natchok. It never happened," I replied, and he looked visibly relieved.

"That's all well and good, but this still doesn't tell us why you are here," Joy said, pointedly.

"We are here to tell Eddas we have left the Circle. He was right, and Cordo was wrong," Gorol replied.

Pelia bristled. "What, and now you come to seek wives from among us? Do you take us for fools?! We'd no sooner sleep with you than we would a pig!"

"But we didn't know! We didn't know what happened to your women! How can you blame us for something we did not know about?!" Gorol snapped back.

Pelia snorted. "You do take us for fools! You think that we would believe that you only found out now about this event, and have made this decision today?!"

"No, we did not just find out about it today, Mistress Pelia," Faral interjected, cutting off Gorol's reply. "We learned of what had happened several hours after it had all transpired. We were quite busy that day - we thought we were near a breakthrough. We weren't, and when we came out of our laboratory to eat that evening, we learned of what had happened."

"So why didn't you leave then?!" Pelia asked, and several of the other women shouted the same question.

"Where would we go?" Gorol asked in return. "Back to our towers, to live our days out alone? To go mad with isolation and solitude as the years crept by?" I could see he was struggling to remain calm - these last few months must have been particularly hard on him.

Natchok nodded at Gorol's words. "We found out what had happened that evening. We didn't know it was happening until after it was over. We three had been so busy with research we simply... Hadn't paid attention to much of what was going on with the rest of the Circle," Natchok replied, bowing his head.

Faral nodded. "Since the evening we found out how blatantly Cordo violated the rules of the Circle, we knew we would have to leave. As the days wore on, we realized that he was truly insane - but what else could we do? My two friends here decided our best move would be to wait, and to hope that if they gave you time to recover from what had happened to you, they would perhaps be able to at least come here and talk to you. They are here to seek wives, yes. But I am not," Faral said quietly.

"Oh? And why not?" Pelia asked.

"For two reasons. First, I already have someone I intend to ask to marry me - and she is none of you. Eddas knows who I mean," he replied, nodding to me.

"Rhane?" I asked, looking to him.

"Aye, Eddas. I've visited her secretly a few times since I've returned from the void. I think... Well, I hope perhaps she might say 'yes'. I've even..." he said, then sighed. "Well, it does no harm to tell you, I think. I've even moved my tomb to a location in the forest, so that I might be nearer to her," he said, then smiled distantly. "Of all the women I have ever met, she is the only one who even comes close to the beauty of your own precious Dyarzi, my friend. My heart has been hers since that day so long ago I carried her weak, wounded form into her tree," Faral explained.

I nodded silently. I remembered that day well. Rhane had been a young dryad then, her tree barely as thick as my wrist. She'd been wounded by a careless soldier carving his initials into the bark of her tree, and despite all the healing we could muster, the Ancient One of that time told us that only the Seed of Man could save her. Faral lifted the dying dryad without a word, merely nodding his goodbye to me, and stepped into her tree. I didn't see him again for twenty years. Shortly after his return, he was killed at the battle of Chorim Keep. "She's the current Ancient One of Wilanda Forest, my friend. Her life has been long, and is now stretched thin," I replied, looking into his eyes.

"I know. I have visited her several times since my return from the void, my friend. Her oak groans under the weight of its own branches, and perhaps, someday, will fall. But I will not allow that to happen, Eddas. I will build supports for her branches, shaped from stone with the power of sorcery. I will trim those branches that are dead or dying, and seal them with fine black tar. I shall use what spells I know that kill vermin and insects to rid her tree of termites and other pests. I shall help her to guard her forest from intrusion as only a master battle-mage of the Dyclonic Circle can," he said, then looked off into the distance to the south. "She has waited for me to return to her sixteen centuries, Eddas. Now, I shall care for her as long as she and I may live - if she will let me."

"That... That is very sweet, Master Faral," Pelia said, her voice soft, and several of the other women murmured their agreement. "Still, you said there were two reasons?"

"Yes, High Mistress Pelia," Faral replied. "My other reason was that I believed you would never accept any of us, particularly seeing what Cordo did to your women," he said, and grinned wryly as he rubbed his stomach over his blood-stained robe. "And considering the greeting that one over there gave me, I'd say I was not far wrong."

Sitting in the crowd, one of the women bowed her head. "I'm sorry for that, Master Faral. I-" Pylota said.

"Please - don't apologize, my lady. High Mistress Pelia has healed me, and I understand why you did what you did, and I'm certain that were I in your place, I'd have done the same - probably worse," he said, and grinned. "Forglamma, my lady," Faral replied, and Pylota bowed her head to him, smiling.

Pelia looked the men over for a moment. "So, now you two, Gorol and Natchok, come to us seeking brides from among our number?" Pelia asked, and they nodded. "Well, having heard your story, and seeing as how Eddas does trust you, I think that we may consider it. We will let you know of our answer."

"I'm curious about something," I said, a thought suddenly occurring to me. "The giants said that the war-machine of the Invaders had been removed from the front of the tower. Whatever became of it?"

"Oh, Eddas," Natchok said, waving his hand in dismissal. "That's nothing. He's turned it over to Kardak and Barad - they were the best at techno-magic golems. He plans on using it and several others like it we found around the city to attack the people of the Southlands. It's nothing - he'll burn a few cities, capture their women, and bring them back to the Black Tower. It's nothing, my friend. Pay it no heed."

"What?!" I roared, leaping to my feet. "When?! When does he plan to do this?!" The women gathered around in the circle muttered angrily, and a few drew their knives.

"Natchok, you utter fool," Gorol growled.

"What? What did I say?" Natchok asked, looking around in confusion. "They're nothing - half-castes. Less, actually, as they don't even look like us."

"Perhaps they are 'mere half-castes', but they're still human, and they are still of our blood!" Pelia snapped. "You casually dismiss the whole notion of their women being kidnapped and raped! You're no better than the rest of them!"

"I, for one, do not dismiss it casually!" Gorol shouted, his face flushing. "But there's damn little I can do about it, now isn't there? I'm one battle-mage - the combined strength of twenty of our order and all our apprentices was barely sufficient to stop one of those machines that attacked our tower! Cordo has six of those machines and forty-five members of our circle! Just what is it you expect any of us to do?!"

"Enough!" I shouted. Pelia and the women started to scream at Gorol and Natchok again, and I screamed at the top of my lungs for silence, hating the sound of the woman's shriek I was cursed with. "Silence!" When I finally had their attention, I looked to Gorol. "When did Cordo launch this attack?"

"This morning, Eddas. We three were left behind to continue our research. We decided it was the best time to slip away," Faral replied quietly.

"How fast do those machines move?"

"About as fast as a galloping horse, Eddas," Natchok replied, his face pale as he glanced at the expressions of the women around him.

"What are you going to do, Old Man?" Joy asked, eyeing me warily.

"I'm going to stop them," I replied, extending my hand and summoning my staff to my grip.

"What, alone?!"

"Yes," I replied simply.

"No!" Joy shouted, leaping to her feet. "You are not going to use that spell Arella told me you've discovered!"

"What spell?" Pelia asked.

Joy glanced at Pelia. "Mage Arella-tor told me that Eddas has discovered the secret to the spell that made the Dead Zones," she replied, and while Pelia and her women gasped, Joy stared down at me, her eyes blazing. "You will not destroy yourself in some sort of noble, stupid, male fashion to save the people of the Southlands, Old Man!"

"You know that sorcery, Eddas?" Gorol asked, his face showing he was awed. I looked to my three friends - they all stared at me in open amazement.

"We... We were truly fools to have not kept you as High Master," Natchok said, his voice a hushed whisper.

"What, it took you this long to figure that out?!" one of Pelia's women snapped, and a few of the others laughed at them in derision.

"Eddas, we'll go with you. We'll fight by your side, as we once did in the old days. You don't need to destroy yourself to stop them," Faral said, rising weakly to his feet.

"Aye, Eddas. It will be like old times, my friend - like the Battle of Faldor's Crossing. You remember, Eddas? It was just the three of us then, and we did well, despite the odds," Gorol said as he and Natchok also stood.

Natchok nodded in agreement. "Don't destroy yourself, Eddas. The three of us can find another way to stop them."

I looked over my three friends, and after a long moment's thought, I nodded. "Faral, you're too weak. You still need time to recover. Go to Rhane, Faral, and live in peace. That way, no matter what happens, at least one of us will survive," I said, and Faral nodded. "Gorol, Natchok, if you wish to come with me, then let's go. I've walked or ridden the entire way from Arcadia to my tower in this body - I can easily take us ahead of them with the Spell of Returning."

Natchok nodded. "Eddas, I-"

But what Natchok was going to say would forever remain unknown. At that moment, there was a puff of brimstone-scented smoke, and an enormous demon appeared. Fully sixteen cubits tall, it was the size of a giant. Its upper body was roughly humanoid, while its lower legs were those of a goat. Two enormous, ram-like horns curled from its brow, and its fanged, goat-like face twisted in an evil leer. "Cordo was right, you three did desert your order!" it roared, startling everyone.

"Back!" I shouted, and began to incant a spell.

The demon lifted a cloven hoof and smashed down, crushing Natchok and Gorol in a single stomp. Faral managed to throw himself to the side - he always was swift on his feet. The Mountain Healers screamed and scattered, and of all the women, only Pelia and Joy managed to retain some sense of mind - both reached down for Faral, Joy reaching him first and lifting him easily from the ground before turning to dash away.

I finished the spell just as the demon began to raise its bloodied hoof again, releasing the mana-energy not at him, but at the area around him. There was a brief shimmer, then its hoof skidded off an invisible barrier - a simple Spell of Abjuration.

"Hah! I'll break out of this easily, woman!" the demon snarled, and placed its clawed hands against the edges of the abjuration, and began to flex its titanic muscles.

"And what if I said I could release you from Cordo's spell and send you home?" I asked, gasping at the effort of maintaining the spell against his raw power. A lesser demon would have been contained easily - but against this beast, I had to exert all my will to maintain the barrier against his incredible physical strength.

Suddenly, the strain eased. The demon had stopped trying to shatter the abjuration, and simply stared down at me. "You would do that, after I've already murdered two here?"

"Yes," I replied, panting. "You can't help being forced to act by the Spell of Summoning. I don't blame

you, I blame your summoner, Cordo," I said, trying to keep my eyes turned upwards to its face, and not downwards to the ruin of my two friend's bodies. I needed information from this demon, and I had to maintain my self-control.

The demon peered at me for a moment, then grinned. "The Hyperborean battle-mage, Eddas Ayar. I should have suspected," he replied, then doubled over with pain. The demon roared in agony for a moment, then rose and placed his clawed hands upon the invisible barrier around him and began to push again. "I cannot stop - the spell forces me to comply. Say what you will, mage, but be quick about it. I am commanded to kill the traitors and anyone else I find near them, and that would include you."

I grunted with the effort of holding the beast within the abjuration - it was incredibly powerful, as all greater demons were. "Where is Cordo?"

"He and all of his circle loyal to him ride south on invisible steeds. When I left him, he was thirty leagues south of here, and about the same westwards," the demon replied, straining against the barrier.

"And what of the machines they had?" I asked, panting. The women had gathered again, watching the contest. I ignored them, drawing strength from my staff, hoping I could hold him long enough.

"They have half a dozen ancient war-toys, if that's what you mean. Their riders seem inexperienced in their use, to me."

"How fast are they traveling?" I gasped.

"I don't know, mage. I saw them only for a moment or two, and they weren't moving then. I would guess not very fast, as they appear to be still learning to use those little war-toys of theirs. All I know is that Cordo summoned me from hell, told me that he'd gone back to the communal tower of his order to retrieve a small item he'd forgotten, and discovered he'd been betrayed. He then ordered me to kill the traitors," he replied, then chuckled as he gazed down at me. "You're weakening, mage. You've wasted too much time talking, thinking that you could hold me. Your pride is your undoing. Soon I will break free of here, and kill you all. Such a pity," the demon commented, grinning evilly.

He was right - I couldn't hold him, and I was swiftly reaching the point where I couldn't be able to dismiss him, either. My heart pounded in my chest. I was going to die, and so would everyone else.

Pelia suddenly stepped forth, and began to cast a spell. In a moment, my weakness eased - her Spell of Transference had restored my strength. She gasped, staggering, and would have fallen had Joy not reached out and steadied her. She had drained herself deeply to give me all the strength she could. I gritted my teeth, and determined not to waste it. "No, you won't. Go in peace," I replied. Quickly, I rattled off the Spell of Dismissal, snapping my free hand out and releasing the mana-energy, snipping the bonds that held the demon in Cordo's thrall. This was why Demons weren't used much in battles where a true master battle-mage was present. No master would ever fail a simple Spell of Dismissal, and demons were particularly easy to dismiss, since they were summoned and enslaved against their will in the first place. Of course, if they could catch you by surprise, they could kill you before you uttered the first syllable of an incantation.

As the spell over him was shattered, the demon relaxed. He faded with a grin. "I expected you to try to slay me painfully, mage, not live up to your bargain... How interesting..." his voice called, echoing faintly in the breeze.

As I dropped the abjuration, I looked down to the crushed and bloody remains of two of my friends that were left in the demon's wake. I leaned heavily on my staff - not from exhaustion, but from sorrow. It was an effort not to weep.

The Mountain Healers, for the most part, couldn't bring themselves to even look at Gorol and Natchok's remains. Even my friend Faral, who had seen thousands of dead men in his previous life, was deeply sickened. Joy simply retched. With a deep sigh, I quietly drew a circle of protection and summoned an earth elemental to move their remains underground to the small area I had set aside for the remains of all my friends who had died at my tower. The elemental fulfilled my request gladly, not even bothering to struggle against me when I summoned it, as I was still an earth-friend from my previous life. The elemental, a huge, shambling mound of grassy earth and stones, deposited their rings and other magic items that had survived the demon's blow at my feet. I thanked it, and released it. Then, I knelt and slowly began picking up their items to return them to their tombs. Tears flowed silently down my face, and all during this, none spoke to me. They simply watched silently.

I felt a gentle hand at my shoulder as I finished, and looked up. It was Faral. "Eddas... The way you handled that demon..."

"It was nothing, Faral," I replied, wrapping the meager belongings of Gorol and Natchok in a bloodied rag that had once been a part of Natchok's dark gray robe, then tying it into a makeshift bag. I sat in my chair again, setting the bundle to the ground beside me with a clink of enchanted metal, and dried my eyes with a gloved hand.

The women slowly gathered 'round again, and Faral stood one of the fallen chairs back up, then sat before me. "Natchok was right. The Dyclonic Circle were fools to eject you from their order, my old friend. Your power is even greater than High Master Frarim - perhaps even greater than Grand Master Dyclon, himself," He said, then leaned forward and took my hand in his. "Please, my old friend. I know you now will go to try to stop Cordo. Please... Do not destroy yourself."

Joy stepped up beside me, leaning down to lay her hand upon my shoulder. "Listen to your friend, Old Man. Don't die," she said, then paused. "You don't even have to go alone. We could summon together the giant-clans. You could even call upon your friends, the dwarves or the elves. Perhaps both. Perhaps even that great dragon you speak of, Karg - perhaps he will help, as well."

I lifted my tear-stained face to Joy. "No, Joy. No others will fight and die. This is an internal matter of the Dyclonic Circle. It is not their concern."

"Damn you, Old Man! You will not go out there and destroy yourself to stop them! These women need you! I need you! What does it matter if it's an 'internal matter of the Circle'? You're not even-" she said, catching herself. She was a giant - she knew the ways of the Hyperboreans. She knew what her words meant to me.

"Yes, Joy. Say it," I growled.

"You're not even a member of their Circle anymore!" she replied, her eyes brimming with tears.

"I know. The greatest shame of my life. I was cast out. They called me a heretic and a madman, and cast me out like so much rubbish," I replied, and stood, pulling my hand from Faral's. "I was a great man, once. Power, prestige and honor were mine. I had more treasure stored in my tomb than most kings have in their treasury. The love of my life was at my side. Now, I have nothing - not even my manhood," I replied, my hateful woman's voice quavering as I finally spoke aloud the words that I had for years before only silently thought to myself. "Even so, I am still Eddas Ayar. I will still do what I must do," I finished, and reached up with my free hand to pull the hood of my robe over my head, hiding my face. "Faral, when you've rested, go to Rhane. At least there, you'll be safe - and at least one Hyperborean male will still exist, should..." I said, and found I couldn't finish.

"Alright, Eddas. I'll go. But please... Do not destroy yourself," Faral replied, and the women gathered

'round echoed his plea.

I stood there for a long moment, gazing at them in silence as they pleaded. I looked at their faces, and my heart was moved. "Alright," I said, sighing. "I'll find another way. I've had nearly five decades to think about those machines and how they might be defeated. Cordo's had far less time to think about it, and certainly the men he has operating those machines will be far less skilled at it than the original pilots were. Perhaps I'll out-smart him. I don't know. We'll just have to see."

"Promise me you'll come back to us, Eddas," Joy said, reaching out to take my hand in both of hers. "Swear it to me. On your honor."

"And me," Pelia said, placing her hand atop Joy's.

"And me!" Pylota called, stepping over to place her hand atop Pelia's. "And me!" another woman called. In a few moments, I was surrounded by half a dozen women, all pressing in to place their hands together, asking me to make the same vow. Even more pressed outside the circle, calling "And me!"

I couldn't help myself - I burst out laughing. It was ridiculous. "Alright! Alright! I promise. I'll come back to you. If I'm alive at the end of this, I'll come back."

Pelia shook her head. "No, Eddas. We want your Word of Honor that you will not destroy yourself, or allow yourself to get killed, and that you'll come back to us. We want your solemn vow on your Honor as one of the last living men of Hyperborea that you will return."

I smiled. "Thank you," I replied. Though it may have seemed a small thing, it meant a great deal to me to still be thought of as a man. "I cannot promise you I will survive, however. That is up to fate, and the gods. I can only swear on my Honor that I shall make every effort to stay alive, and that if I live, I shall return."

The women smiled at me, and as I smiled back, Joy spoke first. "That will have to do, Old Man. But remember - we shall be waiting for you."

I shook my head. "No - Pelia and her Order must return to Iolo Mountain," I said, then looked to Pelia. "You have your spring planting to do. Your lives must go on - you must have the herbs you need to trade with. Taliad and Mungim will likely be visiting Iolo Mountain sometime in the next week to see what supplies you might like for the fall. You should be there to meet them - and you should take Joy with you."

"Me? Why?" Joy asked.

"Because, Joy, you have a destiny that awaits you in the future. I want to know that you're safe."

"Alright, Old Man," Joy replied, and smiled again.

"We'll check back here every day to see if you've returned, Eddas," Pelia said, and I nodded.

"Then it's done. Now, all of you - get going. I have to recharge my staff, rest, plan what I may need... I've much to do, and so do you. Get going."

It took several minutes before the crowd began to disperse. Each one of the women wanted to hug me goodbye, including Joy. Finally, only Faral was left. "Come visit Rhane and I... When this is over, I mean," he said, and we clasped forearms in friendship.

"Go in peace, my friend, and live in happiness with your true love."

"I shall, Eddas," Faral replied, grinning. He then cast his Spell of Returning, and vanished.

I picked up the sad little bundle of Gorol and Natchok's possessions, and walked into my tower. In truth, there was very little preparation I needed to do other than restoring the full charge of strength my staff could store. Virtually everything I needed, I carried with me. My Hidden Sanctuary was stocked with food and other items I might need, as I'd had decades to take care of that, now. Nial's ring of invisibility graced the middle finger of my right hand next to the ring I already wore there, while his ring of the invisible steed graced my left. All told, I was now wearing twelve rings, counting the ten I originally owned. Between Dyarzi's magic items, those I already had, and those I had captured from my former friends, I was probably better equipped than I had been in ages. All I needed to do was take the twelve-cubit long knotted rope from the shelf in my room and loop it about my waist over my waist-belt, so that I could enter my Hidden Sanctuary when I wished. Yes, physically, I was fully prepared.

I only wondered if I was mentally prepared. It's not easy to contemplate killing old friends.

Twenty-Two.

"Then came the day Kardak and Barad were, finally, finished. Cordo insisted that the entire Circle come out and see their work, he was so proud of it. Six of the techno-magic golems, the war-machines of the invaders, were finally repaired, and operational. From the remains of twenty of them, all that they had found in searching the lands, and from months of work at the forge and at their golemic enchantments, they had finally finished these six. Natchok, Faral and I gazed upon the machines as Barad put one of them through its paces. Bigger than an ogre, as powerful as a giant, the thing could spit lightning and fire tirelessly, run as fast as a galloping horse tirelessly, batter down castle walls with its metal fists tirelessly... It was an unstoppable behemoth. It would take two dozen battle-mages just to defeat one of them. And Cordo had six. We went back into the Black Tower, and pretended to return to our research. Faral, Natchok and I simply sat in our laboratory, again talking quietly in the hushed whispers that had become so common now within the shadowed confines of the Black Tower. Each of us could only think of how our people, our civilization had been brought to ruin by these things. They were the doom of our people, sixteen centuries ago - and somehow, I could not help but feel that they would be the doom of our people, again."

- Gorol Qual, Personal Diary, Date Unknown, presumed 17th century NCC

I worried at first that finding Cordo's war-party might be difficult, and for several minutes, I searched the forested ruins of Wilanda-city, wishing I had Darian by my side to help me track them. In his youth, Darian had been a highly experienced hunter whose skills at tracking and woodcraft bordered on magic - so much so that there were times I wondered if there wasn't a Sylvani-elf in his family tree somewhere. 'Perhaps Prince Noril - well, King Noril, now... Perhaps he can help...' I thought, then dismissed the notion as I spotted enormous, flat, two-toed footprints that could only belong to the techno-magic golems of the Invaders. With a sigh of relief, I realized that tracking them would be easy, even for me. Each footprint was easily two cubits wide, three cubits long and a hand deep in the soft soil of the forest.

After sealing the Black Tower with a spell of warding, I summoned an invisible steed with Nial's ring. Once I'd had it form its saddle into a side-saddle for me, I rode along at a gallop. I could only hope that what the demon had said was true, and that the men Cordo had selected to pilot the war-machines of the invaders were, as yet, unskilled and traveled slowly. If all else failed, I could simply use my Spell of Returning to get ahead of them, perhaps encountering them at the Great Wall. Still, I hoped that wouldn't be necessary. I had a plan, and that plan required me catching up to them, not simply jumping far ahead of them and waiting for them to arrive.

What I'd said to the women was true - I'd had five decades to think about how those machines might be defeated. Certainly, I had a fairly good idea of what they could do - as large as an ogre and as strong as a giant, they were indomitable in battle. They could travel tirelessly for as long as their rider could remain awake to guide them, they could bash down castle gates or city walls with ease, and they could lay waste to rank after rank of ordinary opponents with blasts of flame and lightning. They were also enchanted to be highly resistant to spells, making damaging one with battle-magic nearly impossible without the concentrated efforts of two dozen mages, all casting at once. A lone battle-mage simply couldn't stand up to one, even in the hands of an unskilled pilot - they'd die. I, however, didn't intend to face down those machines. No, I had a different plan.

As evening approached, I could hear faint, mechanical sounds in the distance. Halting my invisible steed, I dismounted. Using Nial's ring of invisibility to fade from sight, I then used Dyarzi's boots to swiftly and silently run through the forest, heading towards the sounds in the distance.

As well-equipped as I was, I still approached them carefully. These were forty-five of the best battle-mages Hyperborea ever produced. They wouldn't be lax in their camp. If I were in Cordo's place, I'd have made camp about the time I dismounted, just as the sun was nearing the western horizon. I'd also have designated three shifts of fifteen on guard duty, each using the Spell of Truesight to watch the deepening gloom of the forest for enemies. This would give each of them keen vision to penetrate the darkness, and allow them to see through any illusion or invisibility spell. As for me, I was counting on them relying on these spells being used by their guards - it meant that the rest of them couldn't see me once I began to act. In addition, being dressed as I was all in black from head to toe, it was likely that even those on guard might not spot me if I was careful.

My plan was simple - separate Cordo and his men from the war-machines of the Invaders, and they might give up in their attempt to raid the Southlands. As I spotted the flickering campfires in the darkness before me, I crept closer. I relied heavily on the keen eyes I'd received from Ellysande Northstar to guide me - her elven heritage made the night seem like merely twilight to my eyes, and as the moon rose, it slowly grew brighter. I drew my hood close about my face, that the flash of pale skin might not give me away, and stealthily approached as closely as I dared.

Cordo's camp was a marvel of simplicity. He stood in the center of a ring of battle-mages, giving orders with his back to the central campfire. Near the fire, the six machines they had stood quietly, awaiting the dawn and their riders. The sharp, half-elven ears I'd appropriated missed few of his words - he gave his orders for watches exactly as I'd expected him to. The others simply produced the ropes they used to enter their own hidden sanctuaries, climbed up into their protection and disappeared. In there, each was safe from either a mundane shower of arrows or a sorcerous barrage of spells. The machines themselves were nearly invulnerable to sorcery, and the type of mundane force it would take to damage one, like a catapult or a dwarven steam-cannon, would be impossible to bring to bear against them so long as the Dyclonic Circle was on guard. Still, I was sure that my plan would work. Perhaps the Invaders had anticipated actions such as what I planned, and had their own pilots simply operate in shifts to keep the machines moving. Perhaps they simply protected them with sorceries I knew not of. Either way, I was certain that Cordo hadn't had much time to give thought to how the machines could be defeated - and a simple glance at his camp showed I was right. The machines were unattended in the center of the camp, where Cordo apparently thought they would be safe.

As the guards spread out from the campfire, casting their spells to peer into the night, I drew myself fully behind the tree I peered out from, and whispered the incantation for my own Hidden Sanctuary spell, loosing the rope from about my waist. After stealthily coiling the rope on the ground to the side of the tree, I quietly tossed one end into the air, where it hung, fastened to the iron ring on the floor inside my sanctuary. Wasting no time, I silently scurried up the rope in a heartbeat, aided by the magic of Dyarzi's

boots and gloves. Once inside, I pulled the rope up immediately. I waited, listening, but no one had seen my furtive movements. They had only just begun to patrol their perimeter.

Breathing a nearly-silent sigh of relief, I went over to the little window in my Sanctuary. It was a second point of coincidence with the reality outside this room, and was very difficult to enchant when I first made the room. My friends had once laughed at me for wasting the time and effort required to enchant it so, but at the time, I'd just wanted to be able to see what was going on outside without having to poke my head out and look. Now, another advantage came to the fore - I could invisibly observe Cordo's camp, and not even the Spell of Truesight would spot me. The nearby tree made it difficult to see, as its leaves partially obscured my view, but I could still see the majority of their camp.

And what I could see, I could cast on.

I was sure that if he were alive today, my old teacher, Master Frarim (later High Master Frarim) would be proud of his former student. The Hidden Sanctuary spell was intended to conjure a place of safety, where one could rest and recuperate without fear of ambush. Certainly, I hadn't been the first to create a Hidden Sanctuary with a window as a second point of planar coincidence - it had been done before. But so far as I knew, I was the first of my Circle to think of using it offensively, rather than defensively. Certainly, there were limits - most battle-spells required the mana-energy to pass in a straight line from the caster to the target and would affect any solid object that occupied the intervening space, thus, the invulnerable window before me would prevent their use. Still, there were other spells I knew, and they would still function. Wary of the nearness of Cordo's patrols, I peered out my window, between the leaves of the tree, and began to whisper an incantation, gesturing carefully. I finished, releasing the energy towards my target - not the dreaded war-machines, but at the ground beneath their feet.

In a heartbeat, the campfire winked out, drowned as the pile of logs collapsed and began floating on the surface of an enormous area of mud, plunging the camp into darkness. Another heartbeat later, the war-machines sank up to their hips into the ground, then toppled over with a series of loud, muddy splashes.

It was a simple enough idea - in fact, the tactic was often used against giants, as I'd once explained to Darian and Arella, many years ago. It also had use against siege engines, allowing one to stop them from being brought close to a castle wall. The Spell of Earth-To-Mud transformed the ground to a hemisphere of soggy, sloshing mud, shallow at the edges but deep in the center. Anything heavier than a sparrow would sink into it, and a master could make the pit both very wide and deep. As for me, I was skilled enough in the spell to make the pit a hundred and twenty cubits wide and sixty cubits deep at the center, if I concentrated. And with this, I did indeed concentrate.

At the sounds and the sudden extinguishing of the campfire, those mages assigned to guard duty turned and ran back to the camp. A few mis-judged the edge of the mud, as there was still plenty of grass atop it, and fell in, sloshing about for several seconds before they managed to pull themselves out. Cordo climbed down from his sanctuary, along with several others - and immediately found themselves sloshing in deep mud. For a moment, I hoped he'd drown, but it was not to be. With a roar of outrage, he pulled himself free of the muck and floated in the air above it, a ring of flight saving him. The others escaped similarly, or simply cast the Spell of Returning and transported themselves beyond the edge of the mud.

I had another spell that would transform the mud to stone, but I didn't dare use it yet. At this point, I had to keep the ground as liquid as possible - it prevented them from simply using an earth elemental to recover the buried war-machines. Any earth elemental that entered the mud to recover them would be weakened by the water in the mud, and unable to move the massive machines. By the same token, a water elemental simply couldn't disperse this amount of mud, even if there were a nearby river, stream or other source of water for them to summon one from aside from the pit of mud itself. And, if they tried to

summon a water elemental from the mud, what they'd get would be weakened by the soil and water combination and would only make things worse by increasing the amount of mud. No, Cordo's best plan was to transform the mud to stone, then have an earth elemental use its powers to fetch the machines from within the stone. And that was what I had to prevent.

"It's the heretic! Find him!" Cordo screamed. Wet mud flew from his clothes and beard as he gestured wildly, barking orders. He then flew over to the edge of the mud and landed lightly on his feet, then summoned his staff to his hand. As I watched, he scribed a circle in the ground, then began to incant a spell of abjuration. Once protected, he began to summon an elemental. It was a foolish decision, and a better move would have been to immediately transform the mud to stone, but it dawned on me that Cordo was probably too furious to be thinking clearly at this point. I waited - there was always the chance he might fail the contest of wills and the elemental may try to kill him.

It didn't happen, though. He dominated the elemental with a fierce glare, then began spitting out orders. Careful of the ears of Cordo's men who were only now beginning to search the woods for me, I whispered the Spell of Dismissal and gestured briefly. The mound of stone, dirt and earth vanished as quickly as Cordo had summoned it.

Cordo screamed with outrage. "He's near! He just dismissed my elemental! Find him!"

I watched and waited quietly, careful not to make a sound, hoarding my strength. Cordo was only a twenty paces away - I could easily hear him screaming epithets, urging his men to find me as quickly as possible. As carefully as they might look, however, I simply could not be seen. Light only passed into my sanctuary - not out. I could see them clearly, but from the outside, I was simply undetectable.

A few minutes later, the rest of Cordo's men had emerged from their sanctuaries and used spells of flight to avoid being dipped in the mud, and Cordo sent all of them out to scour the surrounding woods to find me. I held my breath as one passed beneath the opening to my sanctuary, then another. Even looking up, they wouldn't be able to see me - but they still might hear or smell me, if they had the right spells up.

After half an hour, it became apparent that they weren't going to find me. "Perhaps he's gone, High Master," one of the men shouted - I remembered his name was Jasto.

"Alright - everyone come back, form a ring around this area, and keep a sharp eye out!" Cordo shouted, then waited while his men complied.

I knew Cordo would try again. And I might be able to stop it - but at this point, I didn't dare. If we began a simple contest of spell and counter-spell, Cordo would win. Counting himself, he had forty-six master battle-mages present. Their combined endurance was far greater than mine, and eventually, they would wear me out. I could only hope that my delay had been long enough.

I waited until the sharp, half-elven ears I'd appropriated told me there was no-one near my sanctuary, then quietly whispered the reverse transformation spell, turning the mud to stone. Not, however, the same way Cordo would have done it, matching the edges of the mud precisely.

No, I shorted the width and depth of the effect by ten cubits, instead.

In a heartbeat, the center of the mud pit solidified into solid stone, a hundred and ten cubits wide and fifty cubits deep. With a wet, sucking sound, the enormous stone sank into the mud, the edges of the pit gushing out to spray Cordo and a few of his men who were standing too near, coating them head to toe in cold, dripping mud. I couldn't help but grin at their screams of surprise and outrage, despite how nervous I was.

And I was very nervous, indeed. This was the most critical part of my plan. If I hadn't waited long enough, there would be little effect - the war machines wouldn't have had time to settle on the bottom of the mud. They would simply be locked in stone. If, however, I'd waited long enough, they'd be lying on the bottom of the pit.

A pit in which an enormous hemisphere of rock that I estimated weighed at least thirty thousand stone was trying to settle onto the bottom.

"You fools! He's still here! How could you have missed him?! He can't be far, even he can't cast that spell farther than seventy-five paces! Find him!"

I held perfectly still, breathing silently through my mouth. Cordo dispatched forty of his men to search in a circle around the camp, checking every inch of forest. After another half hour, it became apparent even to Cordo that I couldn't be found. Cordo simply ordered that his men stand where they were, guarding the perimeter, until they had recovered the war-machines.

I remained perfectly quiet. One of Cordo's men was right below the entrance to my sanctuary - the slightest sound might reveal me. I couldn't cast to try to hamper Cordo any further, or I'd be spotted. With forty-six of them, once they knew my position, they could search about until they found the entrance to my sanctuary hanging invisibly in the air, then rush in, mob me and kill me - or simply cast explosions of fire and lightning through the entrance until I was dead.

Cordo again summoned an earth elemental, dominating it easily. Even if he was insane, he was still a master battle-mage of the Dyclonic Circle, and still had a powerful will that was easily a match for my own. Cordo spat out his orders to it, and the elemental nodded the shaggy earthen mound that served as its 'head', sinking into the earth at Cordo's feet.

I waited nervously, watching quietly. The plan had seemed a simple one when I conceived it, but I didn't know if it would work. A thousand things could go wrong. The war-machines might not have settled fully to the bottom of the pit. The earth itself at the bottom of the pit might have been softened too much by the mud above it. Or, at worst, the machines simply might be too tough for my idea to have worked. I chewed my lower lip anxiously, watching.

Finally, the ground seemed to shimmer, and the first machine was brought up by the elemental, using its powers to phase solid objects through the earth at will as it carried them. Its strength was titanic - easily twice that of a giant. As the machine slowly rose to the surface, I began to grin.

The weight of the massive stone that had sunk to the bottom of the pit had crushed and twisted the techno-magic golem into a useless pile of enchanted metal.

As Cordo screamed his outrage and the elemental submerged below the earth to recover the next one, I grinned broadly. As the second machine was brought up, more badly crushed than the first, I had to struggle to remain silent instead of laughing.

Soon, all six machines lay in a heap before Cordo, and he dismissed the elemental with an disgusted gesture. Cordo screamed at Kardak and Barad, the best of our circle at techno-magic golems, but they simply shook their heads. The war-machines of the invaders had been enchanted to resist spells, and that meant that they couldn't simply cast the Spell of Repairing to restore them. No, it would take years for them to slowly repair the damage, as it had taken them to get the machines operational again in the first place. As they explained this to him, Cordo burst into a nearly apoplectic fit of rage, swearing and screaming as the drying mud flaked off his clothes and beard.

Finally, after several minutes, Cordo was spent. He stood, glaring at the destroyed machines and

muttering. In the silence that ensued, Jasto spoke up. "What do we do now, High Master Cordo?"

The rest of the men of the Circle were silent, listening for his response. I listened, as well. It was my hope that the destruction of the machines would be enough - I hoped they would then abandon their disgraceful, dishonorable plan to attack the people of the Southlands and steal their women. It was a slim hope, but it was all I had. My only other option was to try to kill them all to stop them, and not only did I not really want to because each was once a man I called 'friend', there was also the small problem of that I simply didn't know how. Each of them was a master of my Circle - they were each near my skill, and some, like Cordo, were perhaps my equal. I might possibly defeat one of them in single combat. I might, with a great deal of luck, defeat even two or three. But I couldn't possibly defeat all forty-six of them, Cordo included, alone. Yet, at the same time, I felt I had to handle this problem alone. I simply didn't feel that others should die to handle this greatest and final disgrace of the Dyclonic Circle. No, if this was to be the final chapter in the story of the great and glorious order of battle-mages that Grand Master Dyclon established, then that chapter should not be written in the blood of strangers or innocents.

Yes, perhaps another man in my position would have looked at it differently. Perhaps they might even simply shrug their shoulders and say 'Ah, well - it's no longer my concern.' Or perhaps they would have called upon the giants, the elves and the dwarves, and even King Noril. Yes, another man might be more than happy to have others fight and die to preserve his honor and the honor of his old Circle.

But I was not such a man.

It was as I told Joy - once, I was a great man. Now, I had nothing. The enormous treasure that sat in my tomb was worthless - there wasn't a single merchant alive in Hyperborea I could spend my gold upon. My lands, once positioned to guard the borders of King Darrak's lands with the strength and power of a Master battle-mage, now meant nothing. The giants of Dohbari village guarded Darrak's old lands with far greater strength, and they didn't really need my assistance. My honor was destroyed when I was cast out of the Dyclonic Circle, a shame deeper than any I had ever experienced in all my days. Certainly, I could be weak and blame Cordo for this, even as he blamed me for his own problems, but the truth was that two thirds of my old friends had deemed me a heretic and a madman, and cast me out. This was a shame I could not, in all honesty, abate by casting my troubles about someone else's shoulders. Even my vaunted skill and power at sorcery was meaningless - I couldn't use it to transform myself and at least have regained my manhood. And because of that, the love of my life lay moldering in her tomb, her bright laughter stilled forever. Even so, I would not change. I would still do what honor commanded, even though by the ways of Hyperborea and in my own heart I had no honor left. Despite everything, I would handle this disgraceful act of the Dyclonic Circle in the memory of all those proud and honorable men who came before me, all the way back to Grand Master Dyclon himself.

Finally, Cordo slowly lifted his head, gazing out into the darkness of the forest that surrounded the clearing he had chosen to camp in. His mud-spattered face held an expression of determination, and as I watched, his jaw firmed. "We go on."

My heart sank as the men of the Dyclonic Circle cheered the decision. Their shouts roused Cordo, and he raised his fist to the darkness. "Do you hear me, heretic?! We go on! You may have destroyed the machines of the Invaders, but you cannot face all of us! We will go on! The armies of the Southlands cannot hope to stand against our combined might! We will go on, and we shall prevail over them! And, someday, we shall prevail against you! Someday I will drink byallar grown on the trees of your own lands in a cup made from your empty skull, heretic!" he shouted, to the renewed cheers of the men of the Dyclonic Circle. At the sound of their voices, Cordo warmed to the subject, gesturing to all his men. "Someday, our sons and daughters will fill this land, and we shall build a mighty empire with our Circle as everlasting kings, and myself as everlasting Emperor! In the coming years, we shall raise armies to defend

our lands from the battlefields where our warriors fell all these many centuries ago, giving each of them a chance to revenge themselves on the descendants of the Invaders, and secure the future of Hyperborea for us and our descendants! Our cities will grow anew, and we shall drive out the foolish giants and the other lesser races who have filled it in our absence - the goblins, ogres and other sub-humans will all be driven before us like chaff in the wind!" he shouted, and gestures into the darkness beyond the circle of his men. "But as for you, heretic, you will be gone and forgotten, your name never spoken aloud again in our empire on pain of death! Your legacy will be the dust in your tomb, and you will soon not even be held in living memory! You are the past, heretic, and your time is over! We are the future, and we shall prevail!"

In that moment, I understood Morgar's plan. It all suddenly became clear to me in a brilliant flash of insight - and I shuddered at the vision that had been revealed to my mind. With their animuaries preserving their souls, each of the men of the Dyclonic Circle would become a liche upon dying of old age. And once they had, they would, indeed, rule their kingdoms forever. Powerful, evil Liche-Kings each ruling a Kingdom of Darkness, with all of them ruled by Cordo, their Undead Emperor. Their people would live in fear and darkness forever - but at least they would live. The other people of the world would simply perish, crushed beneath the heels of their armies.

And they could raise an army, of that there was no doubt. The earth of Hyperborea was full of corpses. There were the graveyards of our cities, massive metropolises by the standards of the people of the Southlands, and there were many hundreds of ancient battlefields from uncounted wars in our long history, where thousands upon thousands had died and been buried, either by saddened hands on well-worn spades or simply by time and weather. Given enough time, the men of the Circle could raise the bones of the slain as walking dead and use them to outfit an Army of Darkness the likes of which the world had not seen since the liberation of Larinia, under my own hand. And, as liches, Cordo and the men of the Dyclonic Circle would have all the time in the world. The machines of the Invaders they could restore over the years and simply have skeletons pilot them. Humanoid Walking Dead can use any tool you put in their hands, as a part of the powers granted to them from the UnLife energy - along with the ability to move, fight, and even think a bit. They would pilot the war-machines of the Invaders with relative ease compared to the struggle the men of the Dyclonic Circle would have, though probably not nearly as well as the original pilots once did. In perhaps a generation or two, Cordo's army would be unstoppable. In a century, even those distant lands I had read about in the elven geography books but never seen would be conquered. Vilandia and far-distant Palome across the Bright Sea to the west, the desert-nation of Mysantia to the far east across the inland sea, and the strange nation of Shnee-Vurste in the snowy wastelands far to the northeast - all would be conquered, and perhaps many more that the scholars of the elves had never even heard of. This was Morgar's plan - to have the nation of Hyperborea rise from their forgotten grave of nearly seventeen centuries and conquer the world, ushering in an endless future of darkness, madness, and death. With his name on the lips of every sentient being in the entire world, Morgar's power would become absolute, and all the other gods of this universe would sleep until the end of time. He might even become powerful enough to speak the WORD, and spawn a new universe of his own liking from the void.

Yes, this was Morgar's plan. It was all so clear to me now. It was also clear why I was here - to stop this, at any cost.

It was no coincidence that the gods of the giants had whispered to Longtooth, telling him to obtain and give to me the magic ring I wore as a bracer on my left arm. That ring had allowed him to speak to me, to get me to stay my hand, and go on living long enough to have this chance - and if I succeeded, the giants would not be killed at the hands of the Army of Darkness that Cordo planned to raise. It was no coincidence that they had agreed to help Yorindar, giving him Joy to use for his own plans - for in the end, the success of Yorindar's plans would mean that the Giants would live, and the gods of the giants

would not be forced to sleep by the coming of the World of Darkness that was Morgar's plan. It was no coincidence that Dyarzi still remained in her tomb. Were she alive, the Circle almost certainly would have tried to capture her, and use her as a tool against me. And it was no coincidence that I was the one Yorindar chose to use to stop Morgar's plan - of all the Dyclonic Circle, I was probably the greatest at research. The answer to how to stop them already had been discovered by me, months ago. I would, of course, most likely die. Even so, it was better that only I die and the Dyclonic Circle vanish from history quietly, than for Morgar's plan to come to fruition and the proud and noble name of Grand Master Dyclon be dishonored forever by becoming part of the title of horrid, evil liche-kings who would rule over a world of darkness and despair.

While Cordo's men cheered, I quietly slipped out and down from my Hidden Sanctuary, dismissing it with a brief thought and quickly gathering up the fallen rope. I quietly incanted my Spell of Returning, bringing myself back to the invisible steed I had left half a league behind me. With care, I could stay just ahead of them as they traveled - and I would have to stay ahead of them, to be sure of intercepting them at the right spot. In a day, perhaps two, they would reach the place where I knew this last chapter in the history of the Dyclonic Circle would be written - the same place that all the history of Hyperborea had come to an end, nearly seventeen centuries ago. That vast stretch of wasteland that they couldn't possibly ride around without alerting someone to their presence, a desolate wasteland guarded by the massive wall that King Darian had erected - wisely, it seemed to me now, and probably yet another part of Yorindar's intricate and detailed plans.

Yes, the final confrontation would take place somewhere in the blasted, barren lands of the Great Southern Dead Zone. And perhaps, afterward, I would finally see my beloved Dyarzi again, in the afterlife.

Twenty-Three.

"But do not be fooled! Morgar is no more the ally of our people than wicked Yorindar is! The dark, mad god of dark and evil humans remains a god of humans, and the shadow he would cast over the world, though warm and comforting, has no room within its umbra for the likes of us."

- The Collected Prophecies of Ushrak IV, High Priest of the Goblins, 984 NCC

A sound like distant thunder and a billowing cloud of dust warned me of their approach long before they arrived. They were riding their invisible steeds at a hard gallop, trusting in their mount's supernatural strength and immunity to anything of this plane to carry them through this desolate land quickly.

'So careless, are we, Cordo?' I thought, waiting. Forty-six mages mounted on invisible steeds that never tired and never slowed raised quite a bit of dust in the Great Southern Dead Zone. An age ago, Cordo might have summoned a rainstorm to wet the ground before his men, so that they might travel without alerting anyone that they were coming. Now, it seemed he didn't care. Perhaps he didn't believe me when I told him of the Great Wall that Darian had built - or perhaps he simply felt that he and his men would easily blast their way through it. 'You truly believe that you are indomitable, and that your destiny is assured,' I thought, watching the dust rise up into the sky. It was apparent I would have to teach him otherwise.

Even should I fail, it was still possible that Cordo and his men might be held back at the wall. The wall was placed just at the edge of the Great Southern Dead Zone, and stretched all the way to the mountains in the east, and all the way to the sea in the west. Here in the dead zone, the chaotic Mana-flow made it extremely difficult to cast any spell more complex than a simple cantrip. It was still possible that even if I should fail, the men of the Dyclonic Circle would come to Darian's wall, try to attack it, and fail because their greater spells simply sputtered in this desolate place - whereupon the guards at the wall would easily

be able to slay them with arrows. I had been able to retrieve Darian's convicted war-criminals from the wall itself only because of the wall's proximity to the edge of the zone, and the relative simplicity of the Spell of Returning. More complex sorceries, such as battle magic, would have been far more difficult, if not outright impossible.

The same effect would protect me from their spells, as well. It took great concentration to be able to cast spells here, and one had to take a great deal of extra time in the casting to manage to form the knot of mana-energy one wanted. Enchanted items still worked, and spells that had been cast before one entered here could be maintained with an effort of will, but that was about the limit. And I was meeting them in the middle of the zone, where the effect was the greatest. It had taken me an hour to cast even the most basic of protective spells, emptying my staff to do so. I doubted Cordo and his men would be able to muster more than a simple Magic Dart against me, and would probably have to resort to simply beating me to death with their wizard's staves - not that this was much comfort.

The noonday sun beat down on the anvil of the barren wastelands, the heat creating shimmering illusions of water in the distance. From out of the mirage, the first of Cordo's riders came. I gripped my staff in my gloved hands, both hands spread far apart, and waited. I was glad of my Ring of Adaptation - I doubted I could have simply stood here in this heat and waited for them without it.

A thousand thoughts raced through my mind as I watched them ride closer, their bodies suspended in the air by their invisible steeds - regrets, dreams that had never been fulfilled, promises that would be broken. Yet, in the end, I knew this was how it had to be.

I had warned the guards at the lone gate to the Great Wall of what might happen. I hadn't told them what I intended to do, only the possible results. Even should I fail, they would be prepared for Cordo and his men. And should I succeed, they would be prepared for the consequences of that, as well. In a few days, King Noril would have word of what had happened. Perhaps by then the effects of what I planned would have faded, and they could at least recover my body - if anything remained to be recovered.

At two hundred paces from me, Cordo and his men reigned in their mounts. I saw a few of his men gesture, trying to cast protective spells, only to discover that it wasn't quite that easily done, here. Finally, Cordo raised his voice, cupping a hand to his mouth. "So, heretic, you think to stop us?!" he shouted. His voice echoed quietly from the blasted stones, and I felt a chill run up my spine.

With an effort, I steeled my will. I would not let fear un-man me at this, the last moment. I simply looked at him, and remained silent. All that I could possibly say to him or his men, I had already said. The time for words was now past. I simply lifted my staff before me, and waited.

Jasto spoke up, his voice almost whining. "What do we do, High Master? The story the heretic told us was true - we cannot cast here!" he called. I suppressed a snort of derision and disgust. It sickened me to see Jasto, a strong and bold friend, reduced to the status of sniveling lackey by Cordo.

"Dismount, and use your staves! There are forty-six of us - we'll easily kill the heretic!" Cordo shouted, swinging his leg over and sliding off his invisible steed. He gripped his staff menacingly, waiting for the others to follow. When all were dismounted, he led them in a slow walk towards me.

A chuckle began in Cordo's throat, and was picked up by his men. They had me easily outnumbered.

I had explained the uses and powers of a wizard's staff to Darian, over five decades ago. No force on earth can break my staff, but if I choose to I can snap it with my fingers like it was a twig. This would cause it to explode - the explosion wouldn't hurt me a bit, but would probably kill anyone nearby.

Suddenly, Jasto's voice rang out again. "High Master, wait! What if this is what the heretic wants?"

Perhaps the heretic means for us all to get close enough to where he can snap his staff, and kill us all with one stroke!"

Cordo halted, eyeing me with renewed respect. It was a strange expression on his face. "So, is that your plan, heretic?! Well, we won't fall for it!" he shouted, he and his men halting at fifty paces - well outside the possible area the blast of my staff would reach.

"You are close, Cordo, but not quite correct!" I shouted back, hating the sound of the woman's shriek in my ears. "I do intend to break my staff - but I don't care if the blast kills you or not! Something far greater than that will, instead!" I shouted, then paused. My eyes saw only my enemies, but my heart still saw my old friends. In a softer voice, I called over to them. "Please, my old friends. Don't force me to kill you. You are the last of us. Turn away from this path you've taken. Morgar is evil, and insane. Can't you see this?"

"I'll see you in hell, first, heretic!" Cordo shouted back, and the rest of his men shouted their agreement. They tossed jeers of abuse at me for many heartbeats, then, finally, they fell silent, waiting.

"So be it," I called back, and snapped my staff in my hands as though it were a dry stick.

There was a brilliant flash and the blast of detonation, and though I was unharmed, the rocks beneath my feet were cracked. Cordo and his men jumped at the sound, and silence reigned as the blast echoed off distant rocks. I lowered my empty hands to my side, and waited.

But nothing happened.

For a long moment, I thought I had failed. For a long moment, I thought my calculations, done so carefully in Steelgate all these many months ago, were wrong. Cordo looked at me, and laughed. "Is that the best you can do, heretic?! You've accomplished nothing, and now you're unarmed! Now you will die!"

Cordo's men began to chuckle, then joined him in roaring laughter at me. I was helpless before them, and they could easily kill me, now. And with me gone, their plans for conquering the world and turning it into a place of darkness and despair seemed assured.

Suddenly, a cool, dry wind plucked at the edges of my robe. Motes of light sparkled in the air before me, the raw and chaotic mana-energy of the Great Southern Dead Zone manifesting physically. A thrill of fear ran up my spine. "No, Cordo. We shall all die."

A sound broke through the laughter of Cordo and his men, shattering their humor and stilling their voices at once. It was a strange, ethereal whinny, loosed by the throats of the mounts the men had left behind them.

Nothing on this plane could harm an Invisible Steed - no spell, no weapon, no tool of mortal or immortal being. They were not ordinary horses, by any stretch of the imagination. They were intelligent, and they knew they couldn't be harmed by anything of this plane. As such, they never fled any threat, making them the ultimate steed. No, nothing could harm them.

Nothing... Save this.

The thunder of their hoofbeats and the cloud of dust showed that they had turned and fled as one.

The motes before my eyes whirled and danced, growing more and more numerous. The wind picked up, lifting the dust into the air. I stepped back, marveling at the sight. Soon, a small tornado of whirling dust and flashing motes of energy had formed, and tiny arcs of lightning danced within it as the motes of dust

flashed in random transformation, the essence of their physical form breaking down.

Cordo and his men stared for a long moment, then Cordo found his voice. "You fool! What have you done?!" he shouted above the growing noise of the wind.

I couldn't speak - I was simply too awed by what I was watching. No living mortal had ever seen a mana-storm form. Or, at least, none had ever seen it and lived to tell about it. I watched, fascinated, still stepping back from the edges of it as it rapidly grew. Motes of light began to appear in the air about me, drawn to the center of the rapidly whirling cloud. A strange, almost howling sound could be heard emanating from it. It grew louder and louder, slowly rising in pitch like the wailing of the damned as the matter at the center of the rapidly-forming storm broke down, reformed, and broke down again into a million limitless possibilities.

Then, with a sudden crash like thunder, the whole of the whirling cloud broke apart, and my world was plunged into chaos.

A blast of wind knocked me to my knees, and I stayed there, not knowing what else to do. The fury of the storm raged around me. My ears were full of the sounds of its howling, my eyes stung by flying dust. Lights of all colors rippled in the air about me, shading the tan stones beneath my gloved fingers green, then red, then blue, then a hundred other shades so rapidly my mind could not follow the changes.

Then, the screaming began.

The first wave of pain struck me at the same moment it did Cordo and his men, I was sure. The uncontrolled mana-energy of the storm, ripping through my body, changing it, transforming it... Destroying it. My garments flowed into my skin, and I could see the flesh of my hands upon the stones writhing, melting, forming, reforming...

I focused my will, trying to keep the storm from ripping me apart. A mundane would, perhaps, already be dead - but I was no mundane. As my will hardened against the pain, I could see my gloves again re-forming above my hands. It was possible...

I tried to concentrate on what I had once looked like. A tall, muscular, Hyperborean male. It had dawned on me that with a supreme effort of will, I might not only survive this, but might effect the transformation that I had been unable to, before. I might not only fulfill my promise to Joy, Pelia and the others to live, but might accomplish my most heartfelt dream.

A sudden spike of agony ran through me, and I recoiled with horror as I again watched the flesh flow on my body. In an instant, it dawned on me what the problem was.

I no longer had any real idea what I once looked like - only vague impressions and faded memories.

I had lived in this body for over five decades, and I had lived over eight decades in my previous life. My youthful body was merely a fond memory, even in my past life. Now, I found I had only the vaguest impression of what I looked like in a mirror all these many centuries ago.

And without a firm vision of my body in my mind, I couldn't focus my will to prevent the mana-storm from simply ripping me apart.

In desperation, I thought of the woman in the mirror - the stranger who had stared back at me all these years. Her form I knew quite well. I knew every line of her face. I knew every curve of her body. Hadn't I spent enough time before my own mirror, running my fingers over her body, trying to assure myself that it was, indeed, my own?

The pain eased slightly, and I was encouraged. I concentrated, focusing my every thought on that image. The strange woman in the mirror who had gazed out at me for decades. A beauty, to be sure. Her high cheekbones, ebon hair and eyes, and her aquiline, half-elven features... For years, I had stared at that pale-skinned stranger, hating the sight of her and feeling deep in my heart that she wasn't me. For years I had heard her voice in my ears, felt her skin beneath my fingers, and watched her alien, half-elven face staring out at me from the mirror. She wasn't me, and I knew it in my heart. Yorindar's Raven, perhaps, but not me. A tool of the gods, forged by fate and divine will to serve Yorindar, but not me.

Yet, now, she was my only salvation.

I gritted my teeth, closed my eyes, and concentrated, focusing my will. I could hear the voice of Master Frarim in my mind, giving me my first lesson in the study of sorcery. 'The will is the first tool of the mage, young apprentice. You must hone your will, above all. The formulas are nothing, the incantations are nothing - all is worthless without the will to drive it. Mana is subtle - it is an energy which permeates all matter in the universe, and beyond. A mundane can live their entire life and never see it, never feel it, and never manipulate it. It is too subtle for their minds to even sense - they can only see the results, like a deaf man who cannot hear the musician play the tripentele. He can see the people dancing, see the musician playing, and feel the notes of the song when they touch the sound-board, but he cannot hear the song. Even so, a mage can be born with a brilliant, sparkling Talent, such as you have, yet without the skill and training in wielding their will, they may as well be a mundane. You must concentrate, young apprentice. Concentrate...'

"Must... Concentrate..." I hissed through clenched teeth, my voice drowned out by the roaring of the mana-storm.

There was a sudden, painful ripple that passed through my body, my flesh warping and flowing in response. Then, another, and another. I blocked it all out, thinking only on the image of the stranger - the woman I had seen staring out at me from my mirror all these years.

Yet, it was my body, now. Arella had been more right than she knew. It wasn't merely my happiness that depended on accepting that, but my very survival.

I held onto that thought. The body was mine, and the strange woman I had seen staring out at me from my mirror for decades was me. It was an effort more taxing than summoning a greater demon - but I held onto the thought, blocking out the pain. The body was mine. I refused to be changed by the mana-storm, my flesh melting and flowing like wax before the flame. I refused to die. The woman in the mirror was me - like it or not.

Suddenly, the pain eased. I kept my mind focused, and felt a deep thrumming inside myself. Slowly, I realized that from the chaotic energies of the storm, my will had grasped onto the key frequency of mana that the Skull of Hyarlanoth had used to change me - the same as I once commanded an age ago, when I cast the Spell of Hidden Life, and created my animuary. I kept my thoughts focused. I would not let my mind drift now, and perhaps lose what little I had gained.

Slowly, the sounds of the storm began to fade from my ears. Still, I kept my mind focused through an effort of will, though it was now growing increasingly more difficult to do so. Like a man clinging to a rope to keep from falling into a bottomless chasm, my strength was ebbing.

It was several heartbeats before I noticed that the sounds of the storm had finally gone. With sweat running down my face from the strain of having to exert my will for so long, I opened my eyes.

The hands on the stones beneath me were gloved, as I remembered.

Sitting on my heels, I ran my fingers over my body beneath my robe. Everything felt as I remembered it - but I couldn't be sure from just a touch.

I reached to my side, drawing my enchanted knife with a trembling hand. I looked into the flat of the blade, trying to see my own reflection.

The same eyes that had stared at me for over five decades gazed back.

I grinned, and grinned again as I saw those coal-black eyes light up with mirth. I had done it. I had survived a mana-storm on the strength of my will. I glanced up to the sun - barely an hour had passed. It had felt longer - far longer.

I sheathed my knife again, then bowed my head, sending a silent prayer of thanks heavenward to Yorindar. As I did so, it occurred to me that I may have been aided by the very same effect I had been trying to overcome all these years - the effect of the Skull of Hyarlanoth. Its sorcery prevented me from making several types of changes in the body I always had wanted to. Now, it seemed that the same enchantment had helped protect me from the raw mana-energies I had loosed when I sparked the mana-storm, as my body was already resistant to change. Shorn up by my will, the power of the storm had been unable to overcome the enchantment.

A wet, sucking sound and a feeble croak suddenly caught my ear, and I lifted my head. In horror, I beheld what remained of Cordo and the Dyclonic Circle.

Most were simply gone - their bodies ripped apart, the smallest atoms of their existence transformed again and again and again until they finally were destroyed. Only six remained, and what was left of them was so mind-numbingly horrible, I gagged.

Skin, organs and bone that had melted and flowed, becoming one with garments and enchanted items into a single, bloody mass of obscenely twisted flesh that trembled and bubbled in an agony of dying. Patches of hair, teeth, and even a lone eye that blinked in a shapeless mound of grotesquely-hued, quivering flesh. Such was what remained of men I once called my friends. Only one even looked remotely human, and his flesh was horribly twisted and melted, having flowed and blended freely with the garments and magic items he once wore. He was, mercifully, still, and appeared to already be dead. As I sat, numb with shock and horror, the remaining five, ghastly mounds of flesh that still somehow retained some life, slowly ceased their movement as death overcame them.

I rose to my feet, trembling with revulsion and horror, and staggered away from their remains, heading north. It was several minutes before I had regained enough of my senses to finally stop. I couldn't walk all the way back - it simply was too far. Yet, I had to leave here, and quickly. In the distance to the east, I could see the flashes of lighting and the ominous, low cloud of the mana-storm. The rumbling storm-cloud was over two leagues wide, and at least half a league in height from the ground. It wasn't like a normal storm-cloud, hanging high in the sky and drifting with the prevailing winds. No, it clung tightly to the ground and moved entirely at random - and if I wasn't out of the dead zone soon, it might come back. I shuddered at that thought. I couldn't possibly resist it again. I simply didn't have the strength. If it caught up to me before I escaped here, I would be reduced to the same bubbling, dying, obscene blobs of flesh I had left half a league behind me - or simply destroyed.

If my calculations had been right, the mana-storm would rage for another two days, wandering hither and yon within the dead zone, obliterating everything in its path. As it neared the edges of the zone, the more ordered mana of the lands surrounding the dead zone would resist its chaotic, reality-warping effects, causing it to lose energy, and finally dissipate. There was a chance it's random movements might keep it near the center of the Great Southern Dead Zone, where it might grow and rage for centuries, but it was

highly unlikely. Yet, even if I was right, I couldn't out-run the storm on foot for two days - I had to leave the dead zone, and soon.

I couldn't cast a Spell of Returning - the Mana-storm had only made things worse in my immediate area. Sorcery was simply impossible, even if I still had the strength of will left to overcome the chaotic, disordered mana-energy of the dead zone. Suddenly, I remembered I had Nials' ring, and enchanted items would still function, even here.

Shortly thereafter, I had summoned an invisible steed, mounted side-saddle, and was riding away from what remained of the Dyclonic Circle. A part of me wanted to rejoice - Yorindar's enemies were dead, and his plans for the future seemed assured. Even so, another part of me wanted to weep for the deaths of my friends, and the tragic end of the circle of mages of which I had once been so proud to call myself a member. Still another part of me was ill at even the thought of what had been left of them, and the truly ghastly way in which they had died. No, this would not be a day of celebration, for me. Rather, I had a feeling that I would, someday, count myself very fortunate if I could simply cease to mourn for my lost friends.

Twenty-Four.

"It cannot be forgotten that the Ancient One was and is no mere mortal being, but more a force of nature, the will of a vengeful god incarnate. No mortal being could spark a mana-storm and live to tell the tale - and yet, by their own admission and confirmed by the old logs of the guards at the Great Wall, this is precisely what Eddas Ayar did. No mortal being could rise from the grave as the Ancient One did, and retain any semblance of humanity - and yet, by their own admission, this is again precisely what Eddas Ayar did. Passionless, compassionless, and infinitely powerful, the Ancient One is as much a kin of humanity as a mountain, or the sea, or the raging heart of a mana-storm itself."

- Lord Caladis, The Eddasine Chronicles, 1817 NCC

Noon three days later found me sitting on a chair on my parapet, watching the wind gently blow through the byallar trees on my land, rippling their leaves like waves on a green ocean. The gentle fragrance of their flowers wafted up to me, and I inhaled it quietly, trying to calm my soul with their soft scent. I had been here since the evening before, and had no plans for going anywhere else. I simply sat, gazing quietly over my lands, and trying not to weep.

The air shimmered nearby, and Pelia appeared, holding Joy's hand. "Eddas! You're back!" Pelia cried.

"So it seems," I replied quietly.

"We've been worried about you, Old Man," Joy said, grinning as she stepped over to me, then leaned down to hug me. "The giants of Silanto village passed word by runner that there was a mana-storm brewing in the Great Southern Dead Zone, only a few leagues from them. We were worried that you might be caught in it," she said, then stood up again, looking at me strangely. I hadn't hugged her back, I had simply pulled the hood of my robe closer about my face.

"I know about it, Joy. I sparked it," I replied quietly.

"Y-you did?!" Pelia yelped, startled. "How?! And why?! And how did you avoid being caught in it?!"

"How I did it matters little. I did it, and that's enough. As to why, I sparked it so that I might destroy the men of the Dyclonic Circle with it. And I did. They are dead, reduced to shapeless blobs of flesh that now lie rotting in the wastelands - or less. Most were simply disintegrated. As for how I avoided it..." I

said, then sighed. "I didn't."

"Old Man... You're hiding something," Joy said, eyeing me carefully. "Pull back the hood of your robe. Let us see you."

"No," I replied, and turned my chair a bit to my right so that they wouldn't be able to peer beneath the edge of my hood.

"Come, Old Man. We're going to find out sooner or later. Best to simply let us see the damage now. I know that a mana-storm can warp one's flesh - it happened to my mother, and is the reason I am so tiny, instead of the normal size for a giantess. Come, Eddas. Show us," Joy replied, laying a gentle hand upon my shoulder.

I was silent for a long moment, thinking. Finally, I decided Joy was right - sooner or later, they'd find out. It was best to simply show them. "Alright, but you asked for it," I replied, turning back to them and pulling my hood back.

Pelia gasped, and Joy simply blinked with surprise for several seconds. They were simply too stunned for words, as I had been when I first beheld myself in my mirror here in my tower. I turned my head, looking away from them. Their gaze was simply too much to bear at the moment.

It was Pelia who finally found her voice first. "Why, you're even more beautiful than you were before!"

I nodded. My own impression of the woman in the mirror hadn't been perfect. The mind of mortal man simply isn't perfect. No, the image I'd held in my mind was of an idealized version of her - which, now, I was. My eyebrows were even more sharply arched than they had been before, the nose more slender, the eyes more piercing, the ears more perfectly formed, the hair more lustrous and black as night... I'd spent hours just staring in shock at myself in the mirror that first night after my return. If I had thought that the woman in the mirror had been a beauty before, she was even more so now. She had a terrifying, alien beauty that both aroused me, and chilled me to the bone. The woman who looked back from the mirror now was more than simply beautiful, or even perfectly beautiful - she was surreal. "Yes, that's what Taliad said when he saw me this morning, once he was able to find his voice. I'm sure Mungim will say the same, when he comes back sometime tomorrow - if he's even able to speak at all after seeing me. Longtooth was kind enough to pass word that I was back, since apparently Mungim again beat Taliad here this year, and arrived sometime after we all left my tower."

"What of the rest of you?" Pelia asked, her gaze encompassing the rest of my body, hidden by my robe. "Was there anything... Anything bad that happened?"

"In appearance, my mirror shows the rest of me is the same. If anything, this body is even more beautiful than it was before. Small imperfections... Scars, birthmarks, and the like... All have vanished. There were also other changes... Subtle, but the total effect was... To change this body from one of ordinary beauty to that of the surreal," I replied, and sighed as I looked away from them again.

Joy peered at me silently for several heartbeats. "Old Man, there is still something you're not telling us. Out with it."

I glanced at her in irritation, and she blanched slightly. My face was now more impressive than it had once been, and my gaze more piercing. "You really want to know?"

"Yes," Joy replied firmly, steeling herself against my glare.

I reached to my left hand, pulling off my glove. Reaching to my side, I drew my enchanted knife, and slid

the edge across my palm. Pelia and Joy gasped as the blood flowed, the rings on my fingers gleaming in the noonday sun. Pelia began to step forward to cast a spell of healing, but in a few heartbeats, the flow of blood had stopped. I wiped my bloody palm on my robe, then held my hand out to them again. It was unmarked. Pelia took my hand, and while both she and Joy probed at it with their fingertips, I sheathed my knife and waited.

"There's no mark - no wound, not even a scar," Pelia commented, her voice hushed.

"Yes. I have examined this body's aura carefully. The mana-storm has altered it so that it will always look the way you see it now, which is the image of it I held in my mind to keep myself from being destroyed by the mana-storm. It will never age. It will never die. And it cannot be changed. This is my body, now and forever," I replied, slipping my glove back on once they had released my hand. I turned away, gazing out again over the byallar trees on my land. "I... I'll understand if you no longer visit, Pelia. My cause is now hopeless. I am trapped in this... This pasty-skinned female half-elf's body. The knot of mana that maintains it as you see it now is simple, but incredibly powerful. It is well beyond my ability to cut or unravel. It would take the power of an artifact... Or perhaps a god. And neither of which are readily available," I said, then sighed quietly. "At least, there is still Faral. You can... You can speak to Rhane, Pelia. I'm sure that she would agree to share him. She, of all people, understands what it means to be the last of a race. Should you and your women feel ready to... Well, should you feel ready to select a Hyperborean male to help you begin our race anew, at least there is still one that remains for you to select," I said, and closed my eyes. The pain in my stomach was slowly increasing. This was good. It meant there was, at least, some hope.

"But Eddas, we of the Mountain Healers already have selected a man," Pelia replied, her voice carrying a smile. "We have selected you."

My eyes flew open in surprise, and I stared openly at Pelia. She simply laughed at the sight of my expression. "But, Pelia, look at me! I'm not a man, and probably never will be again!"

Joy looked at me, and shook her head. "Old Man, do you really believe that what you have hanging between your legs has anything to do with being a man?"

I blinked in surprise. "But..."

"No, Old Man. They've made their choice - and I think it's a wise one. Perhaps it will take an artifact to transform you into a male again. Perhaps it will take an act of Yorindar, himself. If it's the latter, I suspect that when the time is right, he'll let you know. Either way, they have made their choice. They can wait for you, Old Man, for as long as it takes. A year, a decade, a century, or forever. They have the spells to endlessly restore their youth, and wait for you for as long as it takes," she said, then grinned at me. "Do you know what they have been talking about for the last three days?"

"I-I've no idea," I replied, my mind numb.

"They all, each and every one of them, wish to become your courtesan, just as your beloved Dyarzi once was."

"Wha-what?!" I replied, boggled.

Pelia laughed. "It's true, Eddas. We've selected you, and all of us wish to be your courtesans, in the proper Hyperborean tradition," she said, and smiled.

"But... Dyarzi!" I yelped, my mind awlirl.

Joy smiled at me. "Old Man, don't you see that she's one of the reasons they want you? You've been true to her, holding your love for her firmly in your heart all these years. That endears you to them, more than you could possibly know. Someday, you will bring her back to you - and if you wish, they will wait until then to ask her formally for her consent before they ask you for yours."

"But-but I can't! They can't! I mean..." My mind boggled. "That would be eighty-nine courtesans! It's... It's unheard of! It's ridiculous! Utterly ridiculous! Ludicrous! Why, I'd be the laughingstock of-"

"Of what, Old Man?" Joy interrupted, then lifted her hand in an all-encompassing gesture. "There are no more Hyperboreans to judge your actions, save these women and Faral. So you have said yourself - Faral is the last of the men, and you already know these are the last of the women. So, who else would laugh at you, given this situation? The giants? I can tell you as one of them that they would not. They and the elves and the dwarves look forward to the day when the Hyperboreans shall rise again, and none would raise even an eyebrow at the choice of the Mountain healers - they all know you far too well. The people of the Southlands? I've lived among them for nearly five decades, Old Man. Yes, some of them may snicker at you - but not to your face. Besides - it's highly unlikely any of them will ever find out, save for perhaps my children and Arella. To the people of the Southlands, Hyperborea is a mysterious land of shadowy woods, ancient ruins, blasted wastelands, hidden dangers and sudden death. They know nothing of what happens beyond the Great Wall, nor do they care to," Joy replied, then crossed her arms. "By your own customs, Old Man, there was no legal limit to the number of courtesans a man might have - only a limit to the number of wives, in that you were only permitted one. Given this situation, there is no other reasonable alternative - even if they had chosen Faral, he still would have been faced with the prospect of eighty-nine women vying for his attentions. Would you have seen anything wrong or shameful or dishonorable in that?"

"Well, no, it would simply be the necessity of the situation. But-"

"No 'buts', Old Man," Joy replied, and grinned. "If it wouldn't be wrong or dishonorable for your friend, then it certainly isn't for you," she said, then gestured at Pelia sweepingly. "They all respect you deeply, Old Man, and I think their choice honors you greatly."

"But why me?"

"And why not you, Eddas?" Pelia asked, smiling.

Joy chuckled. "Old Man, even having to ask that question shows that despite outward appearances, you are still a man inside. If you were truly a woman, you would already know the answer without asking."

I couldn't reply for many moments. I simply didn't know what to say. Joy and Pelia simply grinned at me, apparently enjoying putting me on the spot. Finally, I found my voice again. "I-I don't have to decide at this moment, do I?"

"No, Eddas. We will wait for your decision - no matter how long that may be," she said, then bowed her head. "We also wish this to be done with all the proper ceremony and formality. We wish to honor you, Eddas Ayar," she said, then raised her head and smiled again. "For now, come with us back to my tower. We would like to hold a feast in your honor - or at least, what little of a feast we can manage to conjure with a bit of hunting, some gathered wild berries and roots, and the little spell you taught us."

I nodded, pushing myself to my feet, then staggered. Joy caught me, her face full of alarm. "What is it? What's the matter? Are you ill?"

"No, just weak. When I first learned of what had happened to me I..." I replied, then sighed. "I haven't eaten or drunk for nearly two days," I replied, and said no more. The truth was that I no longer wanted

to live - and since this body cannot be harmed, I thought perhaps to simply starve it out. It did, apparently, still require food and drink to live.

"You foolish man! Why would you do that?!" Joy snapped, scooping me up easily and carrying me in her arms like a child. Her strength was about equal to an ogre, and in this body, I weighed only about ten stone - Joy could lift ten times that. Pelia stepped close, gently feeling the pulse in my neck as Joy held me, then looking into my eyes one at a time.

"Because Dyarzi is the love of my life, Joy, and she wasn't a sapphite! I can't summon her back to me like this! She would never be happy!" I snapped, clapping my mouth shut too late to stop my outburst.

"Dehydrated and hungry, is all," Pelia said at last, after probing me for many moments. "And probably exhausted, from lack of sleep. Let's take him back and get him some food and water."

Joy simply shook her head, looking down at me. "Old Man, I've said this before, and I'll say it again - for someone so wise, you can sometimes be so incredibly foolish. If she was even half the woman you say she was, she wouldn't reject you over this. If she loved you even half as much as you love her, she would embrace you with joy, even if you are, as you often put it, 'trapped in the body of a woman.' No, Old Man. She, like the Mountain Healers, would wait for you. And with your spells and theirs, she could wait - forever, if need be."

"Joy is right, you know. If she was worthy of you, she would wait for you to find a cure - she wouldn't reject you," Pelia said, shaking her head. Her dark brown eyes were sad, and she brushed a loose strand of ebon hair away from her olive-skinned cheek.

"But..." I replied, and found I simply couldn't finish. There really wasn't much I could say. They were right - if Dyarzi truly loved me, she would accept the change that had happened to me. I sighed again.

"Perhaps..."

"You're afraid she might reject you anyway," Joy said, her gaze penetrating. "I was a queen for nearly five decades, Old Man, and as such I learned much of the hearts of men. That's your real fear - that you will bring her back, and find she doesn't want you as you are, and will not touch you or lie with you."

I was silent for a long moment, then finally nodded. "Yes."

"She won't reject you like that, Eddas," Pelia said, stroking my cheek softly. "Perhaps she was not a sapphite, and perhaps she might be uncomfortable, or even unwilling to lie with you. Still, I imagine that if she ever was truly worthy of your love, she won't refuse to touch you. She may or may not couple with you in the manner of sapphite love, but if she was ever worthy of your love, she would not let you sleep alone," she said, then reached out and placed her hand on Joy's shoulder. "Now, come, the both of you. Let's get some food and drink into this starving little body you've abused, Eddas."

"And you will eat, Old Man, even if I have to spoon-feed you pap, as I once did my own children. You said I had a destiny - well, I can see that part of it is to make sure you don't starve yourself or suffocate yourself or do any number of other terrible things to yourself just because you are feeling miserable about the lot fate and the gods have handed you and want to join Dyarzi in the afterlife," Joy growled, and shook her head. "You really are a foolish old man at times, Eddas Ayar."

I smiled. She could never know just how much being thought of as a man, truly as a man, meant to me at that moment. "Thank you."

"A knight without a horse is like a wizard without a tower. Certainly one can be the former without always having the latter, but the peasants will tend to assume you are very poor - and usually, they'll be right."

- Hyperborean Proverb

Pelia's tower was a simple one, made of granite stones, and really more symbolic than anything else - hand-made and rough-hewn, it was hardly two stories high. Surrounding the tower were the small huts the women of her order lived in, and surrounding that, the fields they tended. In truth, the home of the Mountain Healers looked, just as Gorol had once said, much like a small nunnery. For nearly an hour after we arrived, I had to endure the joyous greetings of each of the women. They all marveled at my appearance, and all wanted to touch my gloved hands, or hug me. Joy, fortunately, spared me from the worst of it by insisting I first be given a bit of food and some water - unfortunately, she watched over me like a hawk to make certain I indeed ate every bit of the small bowl of gruel Pelia conjured.

The 'feast' Pelia and her women had prepared was, as she said, not much. A bit of rabbit-meat, wild berries, a root-soup, and some conjured gruel, served on a rough-hewn table set in the middle of their little village - and, judging by what I could see of the women around me, it was rather hastily prepared. They had apparently been planning something for when I came back, but had not known when that might be. My return had come as a bit of a surprise, then, and they had hurriedly prepared what little they had. I could see in their eyes and hear in their voices, however, that it was presented with great love and respect, so I smiled politely and ate with them quietly. Joy again watched me closely, making certain I did, indeed, eat and drink.

Slowly, the sun crept towards the horizon, and evening was upon us. I wanted to simply leave and sleep - I found I was exhausted after two days of trying to starve this body out - and Joy, seeing my exhaustion, asked Pelia to transport the two of us back to my tower, where she could care for me. I suppressed a sigh. The last thing I wanted was to be cared for, really. Still, I could tell by the look on Joy's face that arguing would be pointless. Shortly, the deed was done, and Joy and I had returned to my tower.

The days slowly turned into weeks, and soon, a month had passed. With Joy's help, I slowly began adjusting to my new situation. Joy hoped that I might once again become comfortable with myself, but the truth was that I simply became resigned to my situation. Of course, having Joy nearby almost every waking moment had helped - she refused to allow me to become maudlin, and she knew exactly how to speak to me to rouse my spirits. Still, she couldn't be with me every moment of my existence, and I often found myself lying awake in my bed at night, alone, staring at the stars out the nearby window, and sighing.

Mungim and his brothers came and went during this time - and, of course, he was as stunned as Taliad had been to see the change in me. It was many long moments before my dwarf-friend could even gather his wits to speak, and our conversation was strange, as he continually stared at me in amazement as he heard the story of what had happened to me. He brought the carpets and tapestries we'd agreed upon, and even more music selected by his sister. I accepted everything politely, of course, and didn't even bother to take advantage of Mungim's shock and astonishment to wrangle an ideal trade in my favor. I simply made the trades, watched as Mungim and his brothers placed the tapestries and carpets where I wished them, then bid them farewell.

Arella came to visit near the end of that first month - and that visit was extremely difficult for me. She was, like Taliad and Mungim and everyone else, shocked and stunned by my new appearance, and as she, Joy and I sat beneath the shade of the tree at the base of my tower, sipping our cups of byallar, her eyes rarely left my face. I again had to tell the tale, and I was growing very weary of repeating it, as I

simply did not wish to think about what had happened to my old friends. I had been happy to see her, at first... But as the minutes wore on, I realized that she, like the others, was simply too taken aback by my new appearance. Eventually, the day slowly turned to afternoon, I smiled, inviting her to come into my tower.

She politely declined, saying she wished to speak to Joy for a moment more... And would have to leave thereafter.

"I'm sorry, Raven," she replied, sighing. "I find that my time in Steelgate is nearly all taken up working with Dawn in advising Noril. It was fortunate I even had this little time to visit," she said, and shook her head. "He's not like Darian. Darian rarely asked questions - sometimes, that caused problems. Noril always asks questions, and listens to Dawn's opinion and mine before he makes a decision. I think this makes him a better king. He's more well-informed, at any rate. But I'm sorry, Raven... It's very time-consuming."

I smiled and nodded, hoping my real feelings didn't show. It had been months since Arella and I had been together intimately. There were times I could bear it easily - but other times when I felt like I'd fly apart. "It's alright, Arella. Perhaps as time passes and Noril becomes more confident in his rule, he'll need your advice less."

Arella was silent for a moment, then slowly shook her head. "To be honest, Raven, I'm not sure I look forward to that. I think it's good that Noril listens to his advisors before he makes a decision. He never lets Dawn or I make a decision for him, but he always listens to what we have to say. I find... Well, I find I enjoy it. I feel like I'm helping shape the future, through him. It's a very... Powerful feeling."

Joy looked to Arella. "Arella, you already have helped shape the future. You helped me raise Noril, and you're now like a beloved and respected aunt to him. Your thoughts and beliefs are a part of his upbringing, and will forever shape how he thinks and acts."

Arella smiled at Joy. "As will Raven's," she replied, then looked to me. "You were always so wrapped up in yourself and your own problems, you never looked around and really listened while you were at the castle."

"Well, I-" I started, but Arella interrupted me.

"No, no - don't explain it. I understand enough of your heart to know why you are the way you are. I just wanted to tell you that you have no idea how much your defeating Noril at that tournament affected him. You were all he could talk about for weeks. He respects you greatly... And fears you a bit, I think. You taught him a lesson that day that Darian only needed to be told, not have bashed into his head. You taught him that no matter how powerful you are, there is always someone more powerful than you. This was an important lesson, and one that Joy and Darian I could never teach him as a child. The only person in the entire castle even near his strength was his sister, and the only person greater was Joy - and as such, he always tended to look down on others because he was so much stronger than them. We never fought him physically, defeating him publicly to teach him a little humility - and that, I think, is a lesson he needed greatly. Now, he knows that his strength isn't the answer to all problems, and that while his strength may be the greatest in Larinia, it certainly isn't the greatest in the world."

I tried to smile, but found I simply couldn't. I longed for her. Yet, she was now wrapped up in the business of helping Noril run his kingdom. I was at the lowest point in my life in decades, and yet there was none to comfort me. "Well, I'll let you chat with Joy, Arella. Come visit again when you have more time," I said, trying to keep my voice even as I rose to my feet, placed my cup on my chair, then strode back to my tower.

Thus it was that two hours later, at the end of the first month following the destruction of the Dyclonic Circle and the end of my race, Joy walked up to the top of my tower, to find me staring quietly at the cold, dead ashes of the fireplace in my room. Beside me, the little dwarven music-box played a quiet tune of the dwarves, from long ago.

Joy sat down beside me, saying nothing. She simply listened to the music quietly, until the music-box finally stopped. Gently, she closed the lid, and gazed at me silently. I did not return her gaze, but instead simply stared at the ashes in the fireplace.

"That was a lovely melody, Old Man," she said at last.

I nodded, my gaze still lost in the ashes of the fireplace.

"Arella really did have to leave, you know. She wanted to stay, but could not."

"So she said," I replied quietly.

"She's quite busy recently, particularly since my son is about to marry."

I blinked, and looked to her, startled. "Marry? Who is he marrying?"

"Queen Lyssa of Arcadia," Joy replied, her face grim. "King Strago has died, and she has ascended to the throne. Now, she seeks a political marriage to my son, apparently. You're invited, of course, though Arella asks that you come invisibly, as many now see you as 'The Raven of Yorindar', and having you show up would cause many to fear that something ominous looms on the horizon, rather than something joyous."

"Ah," I replied, understanding. Yet another part of Yorindar's plans coming to fruition, thanks to me. Of course, I was merely a tool. My personal happiness mattered little, as did the fate of my people. Only the fate of Darian's progeny mattered. I turned my gaze back to the ashes in the fireplace.

"I do not approve of this... 'Political Marriage,' Old Man. It is a marriage of convenience, not love, and my son will be unhappy," Joy snorted.

I sighed. "Joy, this is part of the ways of the Little People, as you giants call us. King Strago was a remote cousin to the throne that I found when I helped Darian restore Arcadia. Queen Lyssa is his only offspring. By the laws of Arcadia, his daughter cannot rule the throne alone - she must be married. There is only one man whom she would even consider for such an arrangement - Noril. This marriage will unite his kingdom with that of Arcadia, making it into one large kingdom - a fitting legacy for the son of Darian Vemcior to leave his own sons."

Joy simply snorted again. "It is still an arranged marriage, with no love! He will be miserable in a mere year or two, mark my words! The ways of the giants may seem strange to you Little People, but they are good ways, and true ways!" she said, and looked down her nose at me. "She should be tested. And so should he, for that matter."

I sighed. "You're right, Joy. It is an arranged marriage. But it was arranged by Yorindar," I replied, then told her of the whispered conversation I'd had with then-Princess Lyssa over a year ago.

Joy had been shocked and surprised to hear that. "She-she dreamed of you?"

"Yes. It's as we Hyperboreans used to say - 'The gods sometimes speak to us in dreams, if we will but listen.' I honestly think that this marriage was ordained by Yorindar, and that they will be very happy," I said, and sighed for a moment before I continued. "He has some sort of plan... A plan for a Golden

Kingdom to arise in the future, a kingdom which will bring peace, prosperity and happiness to the world. Unfortunately, that's all I know about it. I once thought of asking Arella if she could bring a copy of the Holy Book of Yorindar and perhaps I might read the prophecies in it and perhaps know what he intends, but now, I don't think it would be of any use."

"Oh? Why not?"

"Because if there was anything in it that would let me conclusively know the future, then by definition, that would risk causing a paradox - which would break the Arc of Time, and the universe would come to an end. If there's anything I need to know, Yorindar will tell me - or give me a sign of some sort. If I need to read the book, then somehow, it will fall into my hands. Otherwise, all I can do is wait."

Joy was silent for a long moment before she spoke again. "So, you believe this marriage was ordained by the gods?"

I nodded. "I know it."

Joy reached out and took my hand, and I turned to look at her. Her face showed deep sorrow, and yet, she smiled briefly as she looked at me. "Old Man, my son is getting married. You tell me that the gods have ordained this, and that he will be happy. Well... I trust you, Old Man. I believe you are right," she said, and sighed as she continued. "I want to be there, now. But I know I can't. There would be too many problems," Joy said, and I nodded. The people of Larinia had been told that Queen Joy had been taken away, home to Hyperborea, and it was generally believed that she was dead - or at least, still very old and very gray. To have their Queen return, the proud beauty of her youth restored to her, would cause far more problems than she really wanted to saddle her son with. Joy looked deeply into my eyes. "I want you to go there in my stead, Old Man. Make sure that all the customs of the Little People are properly observed. Make sure that none may ever say the marriage was wrongly done."

"When is the marriage?"

"Next week, at the full of the moon."

I nodded. "I'll be there, Joy."

Joy gazed at me for a long moment, holding my hand. Finally, she looked to the music-box. "Play something happy for me, Old Man," she asked, and smiled.

I smiled back to her, and spent a few moments changing the cylinder in the music-box, then winding it. We then sat together in silence, listening to a quiet dwarvish song of joy.

Twenty-Six.

"I shall love thee until the sun flickers and dies, the wind fades forever, and the stars fall from the sky."

- Sylvani-Elf Marriage Vow

"And then what happened?" Joy asked eagerly, her eyes shining in the afternoon sun that filtered through the leaves of the shade tree by my tower. Pelia, who had arrived earlier and joined us to hear the story, smiled quietly at Joy's excitement as she sipped her cup of byallar.

I smiled. I had watched the entire ceremony while hidden by my ring of invisibility, of course, as I saw no need to announce my presence and take away from the focus of the occasion, which was Noril and Lyssa's happiness. Only Arella and Swift-wing had known I was there, as Swift-wing could see me easily

with his astral-vision. Arella had simply mouthed a silent 'thank you' towards me, and smiled. "Well, of course, after their vows, the priest blessed them, wishing them long life and many children. Then, Tybalt read the Royal proclamation which joined their two kingdoms into one. They then walked back down the aisle and out to their coach, which took them back to Steelgate. The road was lined with well-wishers, who all tossed garlands of flowers, which apparently is their tradition in Larinia," I replied, and gestured expansively with my cup of byallar. "I would say that the marriage was well done, Joy. Well done, indeed."

Pelia nodded. "It sounds that way. It must have been quite beautiful to see, as well."

Joy smiled beatifically. "Thank you, Old Man. You've made an old woman very happy."

I chuckled. "You're hardly an old woman, Joy. You've the same lovely face and form you had when I first saw you, five decades ago or so, now. Plus, you're not even a century old, yet. You're still a young pup, to me."

Joy rolled her eyes, not bothering to object or mention that she had her youth from my own sorcery. "Alright, Old Man. Now that you've helped me, Old Man, it's time for me to return to helping you."

"Helping me? How?"

"By kicking you in the rump and getting you to rejoin life again, Old Man. You've mourned long enough - I'm sure Yorindar has more planned for you than simply sitting on your buttocks for the rest of eternity and moping."

As Pelia tried unsuccessfully to stifle a giggle, I sighed for a moment, and smiled weakly. "Well, I guess you're right. What did you have in mind?"

"You told me a few weeks ago the story of that little music-box - and it is a wondrous and beautiful story, I might add."

"Thank you. I'm only glad that Dyarzi's little depilatory-stone was able to bring so much happiness."

Pelia looked to me suddenly. "A depilatory-stone? You have one?"

I nodded. "Well, yes, I do. It belonged to Dyarzi. She had used it to remove all the hair on her body, save for that of her eyebrows, eyelashes, and the hair of her head. It made her even more attractive to me, really, and I appreciated it very much. When I first found myself in this body, over fifty years ago, I..." I said, then blushed. "Well... I did the same with this body, to honor her," I finished, blushing deeply.

Pelia nodded, and Joy spoke up. "You should tell her the story of the music-box, as well, Old Man. It is a beautiful story."

"Well... Alright," I replied, and began.

When I had finished the story, Pelia smiled. "You were right, Queen Joy - that was a lovely story. Eddas, you truly are a wonderful man."

"Thank you," I replied, "But it merely seemed the right thing to do at the time."

Joy smiled at me. "It certainly was, Old Man. Now, you said that the loan was in payment for a makeup kit you had intended to give to Dyarzi someday, yes?"

"Well... Yes, what of it?"

"Why not loan that kit to Pelia and her women?"

"Ah!" Pelia exclaimed, brightening. "What a wonderful idea, Joy!"

"But-but I was saving it for Dyarzi!"

Joy shook her head. "Old Man, you said yourself you won't even attempt to bring her back until you have discovered how to transform this body, and that you said would now take an artifact, or the act of a god. That might not happen for a few centuries, yet - that kit won't last until then, it will dry out. It's not a book or a carving you can place on a shelf for a century or two, Old Man - you've never used one, or you'd know that already. Meanwhile, these women all want to be your courtesan, even as Dyarzi was, and they all want to show you they would be worthy of this. I'm sure that when the time comes, they'll repay you this loan with another kit of equal or better quality. For now, give them a chance, Old Man."

"But I-"

Joy looked at me firmly. "Old Man, you should at least give them a chance to prove their worth to you. By your own customs and traditions, they at least deserve that."

I sighed in resignation. "Well... Alright," I replied, and Pelia grinned broadly. I looked to her, and put on a firm face. "But not all at once! You have your own gardens to tend to, and if you don't raise any herbs, you won't have anything to trade come the fall," I said, and sat back in my chair, irritated. Somehow, I found the thought of having eighty-nine women fawn over me to be enormously irritating and depressing. I didn't love any of them. My one true love still lay moldering in her tomb, and no solution to that seemed to be possible.

"Never fear, Eddas!" Pelia replied, grinning, heedless of my expression. "We'll not disappoint you, there! Can you get the kit for me now, please? And the depilatory-stone, too. We'll bring the stone back in a few days, after we've all had a chance to use it."

Joy shook her head. "I don't know why you'd even want to, Pelia."

Pelia smiled at Joy. "Well, it was the fashion back when Eddas and I were alive."

"Really?" Joy asked, an eyebrow arched.

Pelia nodded, grinning, and in a few moments, the two women were chatting about what life and relations between the sexes were like in Hyperborea a millennium and a half ago. It was a subject Joy, of course, found incredibly fascinating, as she was still a giant (though a very small one) and they were always fascinated with the Hyperboreans. Meanwhile, I found the subject incredibly embarrassing - particularly when Pelia explained that herself and most of the women of her order used similar stones, though the enchantment was on the body they had previously inhabited centuries ago, and their new bodies had yet to be treated, as they simply did not have one of the little magic stones.

"And the men of your day enjoyed that?" Joy asked, fascinated.

"Immensely, Queen Joy. But to go all the way with it like that... To remove everything..." Pelia shivered, glancing at me, then looked back to Joy and grinned again. "It's so deliciously naughty," she said, and giggled.

Joy looked to me. "Really, Eddas? Men of your day liked that?"

"Yes," I replied, blushing furiously.

Joy grinned. "So I see."

I couldn't stand it anymore. I stood suddenly, placing my cup on my chair. "I'll get the kit and the stone for you now, Pelia, so you can be off," I said, and turned and strode back to my tower quickly.

After I had given the kit and the stone to Pelia, she thanked me with a wide smile, cast her spell of returning, and vanished. I sat again beside Joy, and sighed deeply.

"What is it, Old Man?" Joy asked, pouring me another cup of byallar.

I sighed again. "I... Joy, I don't know if I can explain it well. I know they only mean well, but... Well, I can't do anything with them, Joy! I literally don't have the equipment!"

Joy laughed. "Old Man, that doesn't matter to them - and no, I can tell by your face, Old Man, that's not what they're thinking, either. They're not interested in becoming sapphites. They simply want to show you that they would be worthy courtesans, Old Man. They hope that you will accept them. They also hope that if someday, a solution does present itself, you will consider lying with them, and giving them your children. They wish to give birth to their race again, Eddas - and they wish you, the greatest and most honorable man they have ever met, to be the father of their race."

I turned by face from her, and controlled myself with an effort. "Joy, I have no honor. My honor was ground to powder by acting as Darian's executioner all those years. My honor was destroyed when I was cast out of the Dyclonic Circle like a common felon."

"They were wrong, Old Man!" Joy snapped.

"Perhaps they were, Joy, but that changes nothing. Two thirds of my old friends deemed me a heretic and a madman, and cast me out. And now, they are dead by my own hand."

Joy was silent for a long moment, looking at me. Finally, she spoke again. "And if I were not here, you would try to kill yourself to mitigate this stain to your honor, according to the ancient customs of the Hyperboreans."

I looked to her, and saw she was staring at me, her expression firm. I firmed my own jaw. "Yes, most likely, I would."

"Probably by starving yourself, as you already tried a month ago, since this body can't be permanently injured. Or by suffocation, as you did to end your previous life. Or by any one of a hundred loathsome methods of ending your existence because you refuse to accept the reality before your own eyes, Old Man!" Joy shouted, rising to her feet. "Eddas Ayar, you are the wisest man I have ever met in all my days. You are also the most foolish man who ever lived in all the history of the world!" she roared, wagging a thick finger at me. "You will not kill yourself to mitigate the stain to your honor in some foolish, Hyperborean-male display of proper tradition! No, I am going to stay right by your side and make sure that you live long enough for those women to show you that you are not dishonored! You are honored by them, you are honored by the giants, you are honored by the elves, you are even honored by dragons, Old Man! And so help me, by the gods of my people, if I have to sit here and beat it into your thick skull for the rest of my life, I will! You will not kill yourself in some foolish, stupid display of male pride and honor, Old Man! You will live, even if I have to break every bone in your little body to convince you!"

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

Joy glowered at me for a moment longer, then slowly smiled. Such was her ability - as a Giant, she knew the Hyperborean culture, and as herself, she knew me. In the depths of my despair, Joy somehow always

could make me smile again.

"Alright, Joy. Alright. You win, for now," I said at last, still chuckling.

Joy sat in the chair before me, smiling, and sipped her cup of byallar for a moment before she replied. "Good. And I'll be watching you, Old Man. I can see that you were right - I do have a destiny. And, it's as I said before, I can see that part of it is to make sure you don't starve yourself or suffocate yourself or do any number of other terrible things to yourself just because you are feeling miserable about the lot fate and the gods have handed you. It is as we giants say - this winter of your soul shall pass, Old Man, and someday, the spring of your soul shall come again."

I sighed, then smiled at Joy. "Yes. And, of course, winter shall come again thereafter."

"And then spring again. Life is a circle, Old Man. Good follows bad, which is followed by good again. Life is a circle."

I smiled, and raised my cup to her. "Indeed it is, Joy. Indeed it is." Joy smiled, and raised her cup in return. Afterwards, we simply sat there silently, sipping at our cups, and gazing out over the spring beauty of my lands.

Twenty-Seven.

"...and thus, we decided it was our best move to take what opportunity fate had provided us, and flee as soon as Cordo and the others were well away. It might be weeks before Cordo returned from his campaign in the Southlands and learned of our betrayal - by then, Natchok and I could easily have sealed our towers with layer upon layer of protective sorceries, enough to keep out even the mightiest demon or elemental. Faral intended to live with Rhane, the dryad - and in her tender embrace, he would also be safe, as he would be invisible to Cordo's search. Natchok and I could only pray that the Mountain Healers would forgive us, and that time and necessity had possibly changed their minds about male companionship... For otherwise, it seemed we would spend eternity alone in our towers, and slowly go as mad as Cordo. I know not who may read these words... Perhaps no one. Indeed, I know not why I felt compelled to write this diary, save that it has always been my habit to do so. Yet, if anyone were to find this, I would hope it would be Eddas. Ah, Eddas. What fools we were. Those of us who voted in your favor should have turned and walked away from the Circle, rather than fall under Cordo's sway. Now, as I sit here in the darkness of the Black Tower at midnight, I find I dearly miss the days when you and I would sit on the parapet of your tower with your lovely Dyarzi, sipping byallar and chatting about life... It is my dearest wish that someday, we shall do so again."

- Gorol Qual, Personal Diary (Final Entry), Date Unknown, presumed 17th century NCC

Starting the next day, and each day thereafter, I was visited almost daily by all of the women of the Mountain Healers, one at a time. At first, I felt extremely uncomfortable with the situation. Yet, each was gentle - they didn't press anything, they simply spent time with me for an hour or so. Eventually, it fell into almost a routine, and the days slipped by, one by one.

Each day, another of the Mountain Healers would arrive to greet me in the morning. I smiled, held hands and hugged and chatted with each of them. Most of them wanted to just tell me their stories - how they lived, how they died, and how they felt when they came back and found everything destroyed. Many wept, and I hugged them until they felt better and smiled again, patting their backs and stroking their hair. Some wanted to tell me their hopes and dreams for the new society we would (hopefully) be building, someday. I listened politely, of course, and told them I thought their ideas were very nice. Basically, I was polite and warm to all of them, one at a time, for an hour or so each before returning to my work.

And I did have work to do, for I was, at heart, a scholar and a researcher. I'd spent decades in my previous life teaching apprentices and researching a way to bring Dyarzi back to me, poring through thousands of grimoires and ancient tomes in search of the answer. In this life, I'd spent another forty years researching the answer, gathering definitive texts on magic theory. No, I was, at heart, a researcher - and I realized that if I sat there with nothing to do, waiting for however long it may be before Yorindar needed me again, I'd go mad with boredom. Thus it was I decided to sit down, and write what I knew of magic theory into a single reference work. I had no real need of it, of course, as all the formulas and theorems I needed to know were contained within my own grimoire. Still, the scholar and teacher in me came forth - I had always wanted to have a reference work of my own sitting in the library of the Black Tower, but never had taken the time to create it. The Black Tower was no more, but the desire was still there, so, I began the work.

It took me the rest of spring simply to organize my notes and create the outline of the work. I wanted this to be the ultimate reference work, containing everything I knew about magic theory, and as much of that was in my head, it took quite a bit of time to write down the basics and organize it as a book of theoretical study. The only thing I withheld was my notes concerning the dead-zones - I felt the world was not quite ready for that knowledge.

By the beginning of summer, I finally realized that the real key to all the knowledge I had was mathematics. In magic, mathematics was everything. In truth, mathematics was the very soul of the universe - and anyone who thought otherwise was, in my opinion, a fool. 'What an excellent opening line for my book!' I thought, and with all my notes before me and the bright summer sun shining through my windows, I began to work.

Joy, true to her word, stayed by my side almost constantly, like an enormous, blonde shadow. She would only leave briefly when the Mountain Healers arrived, and she sensed that they needed to chat with me, alone. I worried that perhaps she might grow bored, but by the middle of summer, I found that the Mountain Healers also visited her after speaking with me, chatting with her, and being her friend. She knew every one by name (which, in time, I eventually did, as well), and she was good friends with all of them. She also made work for herself by cleaning and dusting my tower (which I was somewhat remiss in, since I only lived in the top floor), and doing various other small jobs around my lands that needed to be done. Joy's enormous strength made even difficult jobs simple. One week, she noticed a young byallar-tree that had escaped my neat little rows, and was growing near the road. The little tree was already taller than she was and had a bole as thick as a quarterstaff, having escaped my notice for several years. Joy simply grabbed it and pulled it from the ground, like an ordinary woman might pull a small weed from her garden. She presented it to me afterwards, having taken the time to carve it into a fighting-staff for me, and told me it was time I replaced the staff I had lost. I eventually agreed, and did so, making a new staff that was identical to my previous one. The drain of casting the spell to create a new staff was not a mere physical one, but a linkage to my soul, itself - it took me weeks of meditation and strict physical regimen before I was back at my former strength, and could resume work on my book. Joy took that time to plant a few vegetable seeds gathered by the Mountain Healers into the little garden-areas my servants used to use, centuries ago. Weeding and hoeing her little garden while I spent time with the women of Iolo Mountain also kept Joy busy, and she seemed happy.

About the middle of summer, I hit a small stumbling block, and paused in my work to think for a few days. Joy, noticing I had stopped, came up to ask me what the problem was.

I shrugged. "Well, it's probably nothing, but really, I'm curious as to what Gorol, Faral and Natchok discovered in their researches. They probably didn't find out anything I don't already know, but I'm curious."

"Why don't you just look it up in their grimoires?" Joy asked, setting a pot of hot byallar before us at my table.

"I don't have their grimoires. I'll probably have to go ask Faral."

Joy rolled her eyes. "Old Man, you've forgotten. The day they died, you gathered their things, but never got around to taking them back to their tombs. I placed them in your closet, here," Joy replied, rising and pulling out the small bundle I'd made of their belongings, that terrible day.

I sighed, seeing the bloodstained cloth that once was Natchok's robe. The once dark red stains had faded to a rusty brown, like simple mottling across the gray fabric. After a moment, I took the bundle from Joy's outstretched hand, spread its contents across the table, and began to go through it. Natchok's grimoire and other works I could not find. It was probable they were in his own Hidden Sanctuary, where many members of my order had kept their most precious possessions - which meant, of course, they were gone forever. Gorol, however, had a ring similar to my own thumb-ring, that contained his grimoire and a few other tomes. I paged through them carefully, searching, and finally found the answer I was looking for. "Ah, how interesting."

"What?" Joy asked, carefully pouring a cup of byallar for her and myself - carefully, so as not to spill anything on the copious notes I had spread across the table.

"Well, the closest they came was what Faral had mentioned - they learned that a standard healing spell could bring a small creature such as a bird or mouse back to life, if it hadn't been dead long. Quite neatly done - and their following theorems discussing the Silver Cord are valid. I learned the same thing myself in my own research, years ago. The silver cord doesn't truly snap upon death, severing soul from body - it's more like it dissolves. In theory, any creature of any size could be brought back to life if they haven't been dead long, and enough healing magic is applied in the right way," I said, and shrugged. "It's not useful once the silver cord finally has completely dissolved, of course, but prior to that point, it's useful information to know."

Joy smiled. "You realize, of course, I've no idea what you're talking about," she said, and winked.

I laughed. "Well, I suppose soul-theory is a bit much for a mundane. Suffice it to say that the basic theory still holds true - the body is a vessel for the soul. Damage it, and the connection between body and soul will be broken. But, that break isn't instantaneous. Repair the vessel before the break is complete, applying the healing spells in just the right way, and life will return," I said, picking up the next book in Gorol's collection and beginning to read. It was a small book - it looked like little more than an apprentice-mage's grimoire that Gorol or one of the others had managed to recover from the library, then carefully erased with sorcery so they could begin to write in it. As I read, I paled.

"What is it, Old Man? You look like you've seen a ghost."

I shook my head. "No... But I have found a message from beyond the grave."

"What?! What is that?!"

"It... It's a diary, Joy. Gorol's diary. It begins a few days after he returned to the Black Tower..." I said, and paged to the last entry. After a moment, I sighed. "And appears to end the day Gorol, Faral and Natchok came to my tower, and Gorol and Natchok were killed."

There was silence between us for a long moment. Joy simply sat, watching quietly, as I returned to the beginning of the diary, and began to read. Finally, she spoke. "You don't have to read it, Old Man. You can simply close it, and return it to his tomb."

I shook my head. "I don't think this is something Gorol would want if he ever returned from the void, Joy. The memories contained in this diary are not happy ones."

"Then why read it yourself, Old Man? Toss it in the fire, and be done with it."

"No, Joy. It's... It's my last contact with him. I may never see him again, and he was a good friend. I'll read it - and preserve it, as well. Perhaps... Perhaps someday, it will be read, and people will understand."

"As you wish, Old Man - but I'll not have you getting maudlin again, do you understand? What's done is done. Read it if you wish, but let it go afterwards. Agreed?"

I nodded, and smiled briefly. "Agreed, Joy."

"Good. Now drink your byallar while it's hot, Old Man."

It wasn't a long work. Though it covered a period of about eight years, Gorol's diary entries were sporadic, and irregular. He apparently made an entry when he had the time to do so, rather than daily. In some places, he'd made four entries a week. In others, particularly towards the end when Cordo screamed at them each day to work harder and harder, Gorol had only made two or three entries a month. I'd finished it in about an hour, and closed the book quietly. I sat there afterwards, gazing at the small tome and thinking as I quietly sipped at my cup.

"What are you thinking, Old Man?"

I smiled slightly. "Oh, just remembering old friends, and days long ago."

"I was, too," Joy said, quietly. "I was thinking of the lovely days Darian and I once spent here in our little cabin, enjoying each other's company." Joy lifted her cup, holding it out to me. "To old friends, and days long ago, Eddas," she said quietly.

I smiled, and touched my cup to hers. "To old friends, and days long ago, Joy."

Twenty-Eight.

"It is possible to live a full life, and never be kissed by a woman - but who would want to?"

- Mysantian Proverb

"Ah, there you are, Eddas!" Pelia called from the stairs.

I turned to look - Pelia looked truly radiant in the fall sunlight streaming in through the windows of my room on my tower. "Good morning, Pelia. You look beautiful, today."

"Thank you, Eddas. Joy told me you had something for me up here?"

"Yes. I finished a little work on magic theory. When Falyadi visited me yesterday, she told me you were working on a project, and were having trouble with a bit of theory. I thought you might like to have it," I said, holding out the book I'd finished. "You might find it useful."

"Oh? Well, we've been needing something like that, actually. Oh, and I wanted to ask you... Our harvest of herbs is done, and we've finished trading with Taliad and Mungim for what things we need. Would it be alright if we wintered here again, with you?"

I smiled. "Of course, Pelia."

Pelia smiled back and took the book from my hands, then sat at my table as I steepled my fingers to wait. I gazed at her quietly as she paged through the book - she truly was ravishing. Unfortunately, that only made me think of how long it had been since I'd lain with a woman.

Arella had visited a few times over the last few months, as her busy schedule permitted, but she simply hadn't had the time to spend a quiet moment with me. The joining of two kingdoms is no minor thing, and there were literally thousands of laws to be reconciled between the two kingdoms. In general, the laws of Larinia held sway - particularly where it came to the legal rights of women, as Dawn and Arella would have it no other way. But there were literally thousands more things to be dealt with, ranging from critical laws regarding taxation and legal rights to laws regarding sanitation and militias. And they all had to be dealt with, and a single code of laws hammered out that would stand the test of time. After all, they'd fought a war half a century ago - it was imperative that the people of Arcadia (particularly the nobility) feel that their rights and privileges would still be protected as a part of the Larinian state. "Soon, soon - I swear to you, Raven. This will be ended as soon as possible, and I will make this up to you then," Arella had said in apology the last time she visited, and kissed me passionately before she cast her spell of returning.

That, unfortunately, hadn't made me feel any better.

"Eddas!" Pelia yelped suddenly, breaking my little reverie.

"What, Pelia?"

"This... This is exactly what we've needed!"

I smiled. "Take it with you, then. It's yours - my gift to the Mountain Healers."

"But-but I can't! It's too much! The knowledge of the elves, the dwarves... You've even discussed draconic theorems, here! Why, this represents all the knowledge of magic theory you've ever accumulated! It's far too valuable, Eddas, I can't take this from you! You need it, yourself!"

I chuckled. "No, no. I've a copy of my own. I've a small item I traded for last year that allows me to copy works with ease, Pelia. I've several copies, in fact - I plan on trading them to Taliad and Mungim if I ever need anything more expensive than what I can barter for with my harvest of byallar. It's not a problem," I replied, referring to the magic quill I'd received from Taliad a year ago.

"Oh, Eddas! Thank you!" Pelia yelped, placing the book down and shuffling her chair next to mine. Pelia wrapped her arms around me, kissing me and hugging me tight.

I kissed back, my own passion and concupiscence blinding me. Our lips parted, and the tip of her tongue grazed mine...

Then suddenly she pulled herself from my arms, her eyes wide.

"I... I'm sorry," she said, a hand covering her bosom.

I ached for her, and my mind whirled with a thousand things I could say back. Part of me wanted to simply say "I'm only sorry you stopped, Pelia," but I knew that wouldn't be the right thing to say - I'd been a woman for over fifty years, now, and I'd learned that some things that came naturally to the lips of a man, honest words from his soul, were simply not the words one should say to a woman. Finally, I just smiled, and reached out to take her free hand in mine, then squeeze it gently. "It's alright, Pelia. Really. I understand. Far more than you know," I replied.

"I should go," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Only if you wish to, Pelia. You don't have to go, and you don't have to do anything if you stay."

Pelia looked to me. "It... It's alright if we... If we don't do anything, Eddas? I mean... I can't... I'm not..."

I smiled. "Yes, Pelia. It's alright if we do nothing at all."

"Oh, Eddas, I want to... Gods, you've no idea how much I want to... I just can't."

"It's alright, Pelia. Really."

"You're sure?"

I suppressed a sigh, and managed to smile again instead. "Yes, Pelia. I'm sure."

"Someday, Eddas..." Pelia said wistfully, then looked back to the book I'd given her, where it lay on the table. "And perhaps someday soon, thanks to what you've given me today!" Pelia said, finally smiling again.

"Oh?"

"Yes! It's a surprise! We've been working on it day and night - but now, thanks to you, perhaps we'll have a solution!"

I smiled, shaking my head. "Pelia, the knot of mana that maintains this body is too great to dispel by anything short of an artifact or a god. Please don't waste your time. It's not complex, but cutting it or unraveling it simply requires more energy than mortal beings could possibly possess."

"I know, Eddas - you've said that before. But that's not the solution we're following - we're healers, Eddas, and we've several different ideas of our own that just may work."

"Oh? What are you trying to do, then?" I asked, curious.

Pelia simply grinned. "You'll find out! It's a surprise."

I hid my annoyance behind a pleasant smile. "As you wish, Pelia," I replied, and rose to my feet, holding out an ebon-gloved hand. "Come. Joy should have a pot of byallar ready for us beneath my shade tree. Let us go relax, and chat."

Pelia smiled, taking my hand, and followed me down the stairs.

Twenty-Nine.

"It is not true that women are like snakes. Snakes hiss before they bite. Women are often not so obvious in their warnings."

- Vilandian Proverb

"It's time, Old Man," Joy called, waiting for me at the top of the stairs. The snow had stopped yesterday, and the sun shone brightly in a clear, cold sky. It was nearing mid-winter, so this was probably as good as the weather would get until spring returned.

I sighed, and closed the book of elvish magic theory I was reading. "Alright," I replied grimly.

"What's the matter? You should be happy."

I shook my head. Joy and I had probably had this conversation a dozen times. Though it was no shame

for me, in our current situation, to take on eighty-nine courtesans, it still felt embarrassing. More, as I had discovered with Pelia, there wasn't anything I could do with them. And now, I would have eighty-nine beautiful women as my courtesans, none of whom would touch me intimately. This body was still young, the blood singing hotly in its veins, and would remain so eternally. As such, I had needs - and as Arella was apparently going to be busy for quite some time and the Mountain Healers had no interest in sapphite love, it seemed those needs would go unfulfilled. Taking the Mountain Healers as my courtesans may make them happy, but it was unlikely to make me happy, in the end. "It's nothing, Joy," I replied, and rose to my feet, following her down the stairs.

I stood before the base of my tower, and Joy stepped off to the side to watch. We would have done this indoors, where it was more comfortable, but we had no place where all of them could gather at once. Besides - this apparently was another decision of the women that I, once again, was to have no say in. I sighed as I looked over the white-robed women, and tried to keep my feelings off my face.

Pelia knelt in the snow, and the women of her order followed suit. As one, they bowed their heads. Pelia spoke up, her voice carrying clearly in the quiet winter air. "Eddas Ayar, as I speak for myself, I speak for all the women gathered here. As you speak to me, you speak to all of them." Pelia announced, and I nodded - having each one meet with me and speak individually would take hours, and it was a reasonable modification to the ceremony.

"I hear your words, and accept them as being the words of all the women of your order, and my reply to you shall be the reply to all the women of your order." I replied formally.

"Eddas Ayar, I present myself to you formally, before witnesses, and ask that you accept me as your courtesan. I ask that you take me into your house, and hold me close to your heart. I swear to you that I have no other man in my life, I am not with child, nor do I seek to be your courtesan out of a sense of personal or financial gain. Rather I seek this because I find I care for you, and wish to share your life." Pelia intoned, repeating the formula for the first part of the ceremony, her breath forming a little cloud of fog before her mouth as she spoke.

There were three possible responses at this point - one was for me to reject her immediately by saying "I am deeply honored you would even consider me worthy of your gaze, but I fear I must decline." That's the line I wanted desperately to use, but I knew I couldn't. The other line was that which I'd used when Dyarzi presented herself to me: "I am deeply honored by your offer, and I have no wife at present." If one already had a wife, the proper response was "You know that I already have a wife, and that she takes first place in my heart and in my house. Do you swear to submit to her in all ways in my house, and not attempt to usurp her position by the hearth or in my heart?" That, too, was the response I wished I could make. I dearly wished I had Dyarzi by my side - and yet, it seemed that would never be.

"I am deeply honored by your offer, and I have no wife at present," I replied, then paused as was appropriate before speaking again. I noticed Pelia and several of the women behind her sighed with relief. "Do you swear to hold me in honor and respect, and always act to protect my honor and the honor of my house?"

"I do so swear." Pelia said, and shivered slightly from the cold.

"And what are your conditions in return, then?"

"I ask that you treat me with honor and respect, and hold me close to your heart."

"This I can do."

"I ask that in all ways you shall treat me as a proper member of your household, allowing me to share my

proper place by the hearth."

"This I can do."

"I ask that my body be held inviolate to you, and only shared upon mutual consent, not at your whim."

"This I can do." I replied, as per the formula, hoping I managed to keep my voice level and not show them how I really felt - it would be rude, and unbecoming of the ceremony.

"I ask that any offspring which might arise from our union be considered yours, and be entitled to a place at your hearth."

"This I can do," I replied, again hoping that my real feelings did not show in my voice or face. Children were impossible, now - Faral, having worked hard to assist Rhane's tree as he said he would, was now with her inside her tree, sharing the Long Night. It might be another twenty years before he came out again. There were no more males of my race left in the world.

"Then I offer myself to you without further reservation."

It was at this point in the ceremony I again had the option of rejecting her. It was almost unheard of - to reject a woman under these circumstances and before witnesses was to publicly say that you simply did not trust her word or her motives - it was tantamount to accusing her of being a social climber, a liar, or worse. I couldn't refuse, of course. It would be shameful to Pelia and all the women of her order, and they simply didn't deserve that kind of treatment. I paused the appropriate length of time required by formality and tradition (nine heartbeats), then spoke. "Rise woman, and take my hand. You shall have a place by my hearth, and let no man ask you to kneel again so long as you are a part of my house."

With a whoop and a cheer, they all rose to their feet at once, crowding around me. I reached out and touched the hands of each of them, many outstretched past the shoulders of the women standing before them. It was part of the ceremony - we had to touch hands - but doing so with eighty-nine eager, hopping, joyful women at once was somewhat difficult. Many wanted to hug me, but Pelia reminded them that the rest of them needed to clasp my hand, as well. When it was finally over, I smiled and walked back into my tower. Joy followed, leaving the happy crowd of babbling women behind.

"What is it now, Old Man?" Joy asked pouring the two of us a cup of byallar in my room at the top of my tower. "You look very unhappy."

I sighed, sipping at my cup for a moment. "Joy, I am like a starving man surrounded by a banquet of food, all made of stone."

"Because none of them will lie with you," Joy said, her sharp mind perceiving my meaning. I simply nodded, and Joy reached out, taking my hand. "Have faith, Eddas. I believe the Little People's god, Yorindar, watches over you. Have faith, Old Man. He will not forget you."

I nodded quietly, and we sat there afterwards, simply gazing out the windows of my room at the winter sky.

Thirty.

"In truth, it is the simple things in life that often create the most happiness in others. A quiet and attentive ear often can create more happiness than a mountain of gold. But don't tell a dwarf that - it annoys them immensely."

- Elven Proverb

For the next few weeks, the women again came one at a time, and each spent a few hours with me - though, as I had no work to do at present, I ended up seeing several a day. Again, I smiled, held hands and hugged and chatted with each of them, listening to their stories, their dreams for the future, their hopes, and their fears. I tried to be polite and warm to each of them, though at times the simple parade of lovely women, all of whom I could not touch, grew very frustrating.

Finally, when midwinter arrived, the women demanded I stop my work and come down to celebrate a midwinter festival with them - a tradition they had borrowed from the giants. I told each of them who asked me to come 'no, thank you', until finally Joy came and asked - I couldn't refuse her, so I put away my works on magical theory and all my notes, then went downstairs to the base of my tower.

The women had worked very hard for this festival of theirs, and I had to admit I was impressed. They had scoured the woods on the other side of the river for dead trees they could use to make an enormous bonfire, and they all gathered around it in the winter chill and sang songs. I was seated between Pelia and Joy, and each of the Mountain Healers came to stand before me and sing a song they had prepared. Some were beautiful. Some were sad. Some were joyful, songs of love and peace, and some were of hope. Even Joy rose, and sang a song to the tune of the melody Jhumni had written. It was a song of sadness, telling Jhumni's story in brief, but ended on a note of triumph and joy, as her story did. Finally, Pelia stood before me, bearing her staff in her right hand.

"Eddas, I have no song to sing. I do not have the voice or the talent for it, and I am not as brave as some of the others here tonight who have no skill at song but only a great deal of love and respect for you." she said, and several of the women burst into giggles at that. It was true - some of the women's singing had been very bad, but I wasn't judging the quality of their songs. I was simply impressed by the emotion they put behind their attempt at singing. "No, instead, I am here to tell you something - to speak for all of us. We know how you feel about this arrangement, and we know it makes you uncomfortable. And yet, you take the time to sit with each of us, to talk to us about our hopes and dreams for the future, to hold our hands, to hug us, to make us feel warm and cared for again. We have all thought about this, and talked to each other about it for many days. In all our combined experience, we have never met a man who can reach out and do that for each and every one of us - to make each one feel special, and cared for."

I was surprised - I had merely been polite, I thought, and treated each one as a proper courtesan, as they had asked. Aside from that, I was still trapped in the body of a nubile female half-elf, and from all appearances, would always be. I was glad that they accepted me as a man, but that was small comfort, really. I was about to say "It's nothing, Pelia", but she waved me off.

"No, Eddas. I know what you are thinking, I can see it in your face. You're about to say 'Think nothing of it', or something similar. We will not do that. To us, it isn't 'nothing'. This is everything. The giants have a tradition of exchanging gifts at the midwinter festival. To be honest, the one gift we all want to give you is the one we're still not comfortable with... And we hope you understand."

I sighed. "Yes, I do."

"We've heard you and Queen Joy talking from time to time. We know you once thought we were sapphites," she said, and then waved a hand in dismissal as I tried to stammer an apology. "No, Eddas. We are not offended. It was a common belief back when our civilization was alive. Now, I wish it were true. Then perhaps we wouldn't weep at night."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Pelia," I replied sincerely.

Joy looked to Pelia. "There is still hope, you know. It is possible..."

Pelia shook her head. "No, Queen Joy. I do not think it is. Consider - the lands of Hyperborea which

once belonged to our people now belong to yours, the Giants. If Eddas were male, and we all began producing children now, within a century, perhaps two, our people would come into conflict with yours - and might possibly go to war."

Joy blinked. "What? How?"

I was surprised, as well. "Yes, Pelia - what makes you think this?"

Pelia looked to me as she replied. "Eddas, all of us have the Talent, the ability to manipulate mana present in our germ plasm. If you were in the body of a male and we all began producing children now, it is likely that a large portion of our future generations will inherit this - given the small amount of our initial population and that nearly all the future generations will be at least indirectly related to you, Eddas, virtually all of our people will at least carry the potential for the talent in their germ plasm, even if it does not manifest in them. Of all the races, the elves have the greatest proportion of the Talent in their population - nearly one in twenty. Most other races have one in a hundred, or less. Our population may have a significantly higher percentage - no less than a quarter, and perhaps even all of them. That means that all our people would be able to cast spells of rejuvenation, and remain eternally young. With nearly a hundred of us producing a child every few years, and then those children producing children themselves, we would quickly fill the lands of Hyperborea with our progeny - and there simply isn't room for them all. Our former lands are now occupied by Joy's people, the giants. Though they may be willing to allow us to live in our old cities again, there simply isn't room for that kind of rapid growth. We would breed like rabbits, and very soon, come into conflict with the giants."

"I see," Joy said, her face showing she was contemplating Pelia's words, and was not pleased by the implications.

"And that presumes we could somehow toss aside common morality, and teach brother to couple with sister," Pelia added, placing her free hand on her hip.

I blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Eddas, if all the children of the first generation are yours, or even if they all are Faral's, they will all be half-siblings. We would have to raise them all with the loathsome notion that it was acceptable for brother to couple with sister - or, worse, simply conceal the truth from them, so they would not know. Even if we could somehow manage to bring ourselves to do that, to conceal the truth from them, interbreeding between them could produce any number of disasters, from albinism and hemophilia to congenital idiocy - or even insanity. And no sorcery in the world would be able to cure them, as this would simply be the way their bodies were made, twisted by the hideous crime of incest they would never know they were committing."

I nodded, and sighed. "You're right, of course... And, that means that even were I to become a man again, I would never be able to father our race."

As the words fell from my lips, my heart sank. I knew it to be true.

Pelia nodded. "We have known this for months, now, Eddas. Since the day you destroyed the Dyclonic Circle and slew the last of the Hyperborean men - and, in truth, we knew it would come to this the day they decided to abduct us and rape us. We could never have made men like that the father of our race, Eddas. Faral remains, the last man of Hyperborea, safe in the arms of Rhane the Dryad... But the problem is not mitigated by him, Eddas. He is still only one man," Pelia said, and smiled. "And yet, there is hope."

"Hope?! What hope?!" I snapped, in despair. Like Pelia and the women of her circle, I, too, had known

all this, if only in my heart. I simply had never allowed myself to consider the truth, and realize what it meant. I had thrown myself into my work, rather than face the reality of the situation. Now, I could not avoid the truth. My race was extinct, and always would be so. Morgar's plan was to have our race rise from the loins of the men of the Dyclonic Circle as they raped the women they captured. Thereafter, our race would rise like a dark phoenix, casting a shadow of terror and death over the world. I had stopped that - but the price was that my race would never rise again. Even should I manage to someday succeed, restore my former body, recover my beloved Dyarzi from the void and call Faral to join me with these women, our race would never rise again. One man could not father an entire race - and neither could two.

Pelia paused, as if collecting herself in preparation for an important speech. After a moment, she straightened her spine, standing proud and tall. I gazed at her - she truly was the High Mistress of a thamaturgical circle, and it showed in her bearing.

"Eddas, our people are dead. Our culture, our society, is gone. We are voyagers through time, having arrived at the distant future to discover our civilization in ruins. We cannot rebuild it the way it was - that simply will never happen. Our society was like a mighty oak, grown large and strong over the course of centuries, but then felled by a bolt of lightning from the heavens, a force stronger than it. We cannot rebuild the oak. It is dead, and its ruins lie around us. Yet in our hands, we carry an acorn. We can plant a new oak, and water it, and nurture it, fertilizing its roots with the shards of wood and dead leaves of the previous tree. It will never be the same as the old oak - it will grow differently, and mature differently. Yet it will still be an oak, and with care, it will regain some of the aspects that made our past civilization noble, proud, and strong," Pelia said, and with great ceremony, she reached into her pocket, and produced a small, hand-made box. Bowing her head, she held it out to me.

"Eddas Ayar, beloved by all of us, we have gathered together as a thamaturgical circle and as those who love and respect you, and with what you have taught us, we have made this for you. The circle you once belonged to was a circle of battle-mages, whose focus was power, war and death. Our circle was that of nature, life, and healing. We have called upon all that we know, and each of us has contributed a part of herself to its enchantment. We offer this to you out of our love and respect for you, and the hope for our people's future."

Pelia's speech was interrupted by the applause of the rest of the women - Joy included. I wondered how much Joy knew of this, but as I glanced at her, I saw by her expression she was merely being polite. Nodding to Pelia, I opened the small, hand-made box. Inside was a wide silver bracelet, engraved with an acorn. The engraving was quite well-done - it looked like the work of an elven artisan, and was the type of jewelry an elven warrior might wear to decorate a well-formed bicep. Probably, the Mountain Healers had traded some of their herbs to Taliad for it the last time he'd passed through, merely asking him for a simple silver band they could enchant, and specifying the engraving. Judging by the design, this was apparently something they'd had planned for awhile, and Pelia's speech was probably something she'd been working on for months, hoping they would succeed in the enchantment so that she would have the chance to give both the speech and this gift to me.

I let my gaze unfocus for a moment, examining its mana-flow. They had left little to chance - the whole was enchanted to be invulnerable from harm, and once closed about the arm, could not be removed by anyone save the wearer, themselves. Yet, as I examined the main enchantment, I sighed. "It... It's very neatly done, Pelia - a very skillfully woven enchantment. It must have weakened each and all eighty-nine of you noticeably to create it. You probably spent months recovering your strength. The effort is appreciated, but..."

Pelia nodded. "Yes, Eddas. We do not know if it will work, either. Our theory was sound - this much we

knew from reading your book. Yet, only its use will prove its effect, and we cannot use it, ourselves."

I nodded in reply. Its enchantment was such that it could only possibly work for a man. That did not, however, necessarily mean it would work for me.

Joy looked at me curiously. "What does it do, Old Man?"

"It... Well..." I found I was blushing.

Pelia smiled, and the women of her circle giggled at me in chorus. "Queen Joy, there are many creatures in the world who reproduce through parthenogenesis. Gorgons, lamias and a few others, as well as ordinary creatures such as some small lizards - even turkeys, on occasion. Humans do not - but that band would allow us to. Yet, we could not make the enchantment such that it could be used by a woman on herself, or on another woman. If we had done so, the Law of Taintivity would render it almost useless to us, as the drain required to overcome the resistance of the universe would be almost impossibly high. We are merely healers, Queen Joy. We do not have the vast reserves of will and endurance that a warrior or a battle-mage develops. Thus, instead, the enchantment is such that it can only be used by a man."

I sighed, and was about to speak, but Joy saw my expression and interrupted me. "Old Man, don't get maudlin. You are a man. As I've said to you before, what you have hanging between your legs has nothing to do with that. I don't know anything about sorcery or magic, and what Pelia has given you is as incomprehensible to me as the dark side of the moon. But I do know this: There are ninety of us gathered here tonight, and every one of us, to a woman and a giantess, believes you to be a man, despite what your body happens to look like. I don't know if that counts for anything - probably not. But try it anyway. It will either work, or it won't - but if there is any justice in the universe, if the Little People's god, Yorindar, is in any way looking after you and your people, then it will work."

Pelia and all her women applauded. I managed a small smile.

It seemed pointless to try to explain to Joy that what the Mountain Healers thought and what Joy thought was irrelevant - mana was an impersonal force, and what one believed to be true of the universe had nothing to do with anything. Reality itself was an absolute, and mana merely an underlying force of the universe. Of course, I was pleased that Joy, Pelia and everyone else gathered by this bonfire on this pleasant night did, indeed, think of me as a man. That, however, did not change whether or not the enchantment would work. The enchantment might respond to my male soul, or might not. I could not tell from simply examining it. The only way to know was to either look at the formula Pelia and her circle had used, or to simply try it. My choice seemed obvious. I suppressed a sigh, and looked to Pelia. "Alright... Who shall I try it on?"

There was sudden silence, and eighty-nine eyes gazed at me hopefully. Pelia bowed her head. "Whomever you wish, Eddas."

"Alright. Shall I try it on you, then?"

Pelia trembled, and there were a few hushed whispers. "Y-yes, please," she replied, after a moment.

I shrugged. "Come closer," I said, and the whispers suddenly stopped. Looking at the little bracelet, it didn't seem like much. I wasn't very optimistic. Still, it deserved to be tried. Lifting up my left sleeve, I slipped the band over my arm, and closed it. After shaking my sleeve back in place, I concentrated, extending my will into the band, then reached out to Pelia, placing the gloved fingertips of my right hand across her abdomen, over her womb. To my surprise, I felt the hum of mana flowing from the amulet, through me, and into her.

I grinned. The enchantment in the little amulet they had made did, indeed, respond to my male soul. The drain of the enchantment was slight - negligible, really. Pelia closed her eyes.

There was a long moment of silence.

Then, to my utter shock and surprise, Pelia began to moan softly.

I started to lift my fingers away from her, to break the contact and stop the enchantment, but she lashed out with her left hand, gripping my wrist tightly and pressing my hand to her.

I could see what was happening, and for a brief moment, I considered simply willing the enchantment to end. Then, I shook my head. Pelia deserved better than that. Pelia was a good woman, an honorable woman, and she loved me - as did they all. I did not love her, and never would. But, I respected her. Perhaps that would be enough. She could never give me what I needed, as she could never touch me intimately. I could never give her what she truly wanted, for I could never love her. Yet, I could give her this.

With a sigh of sadness, I reached down into my soul, extended my will into the bracelet, and opened my heart to her.

Pelia gasped, moaning loudly. She trembled for many heartbeats, gripping her staff and my wrist tightly, her knuckles whitening.

I could feel the weight of the gaze of dozens upon me, and hear their quiet whispers. They did not realize that these half-elven ears I'd appropriated were quite sharp - little of their whispered conversations tonight had been lost on me. They saw her reaction. They knew as well as I did what was happening. Some were happy. Some were jealous that I'd chosen Pelia instead of them. Others were hopeful that I would choose them, next. Many were all three.

After many silent heartbeats, Pelia let out a long, shuddering moan, then released me. She leaned heavily on her staff with both hands, her breasts heaving as she gasped for breath. "I think... I think the next time... That should be done lying down," she panted.

"Pelia? Are you alright?" I asked quietly.

"Oh, gods... That was so good..." she whispered, her gaze unfocused. After a long moment, the silence only broken by a dozen or so whispers from the women of her circle, she recovered herself, then gazed at me, her smile beaming. "Yes, Eddas. I'm fine. It's just... It's been so long since... Oh, Eddas! I could feel it all, just as though you were making love to me... But not with your body, with your soul. Your tenderness, your warmth... Your hesitation when you thought I was in pain, at first... Everything. It was... Incredible." Pelia let out a long sigh, then grinned. "If that was anything like how you once made Dyarzi feel, Eddas, I can tell you she was quite a lucky woman."

With an act of will honed through years of chatto-matches, I kept my face smooth. "A side-effect of the enchantment, I suppose. I'd have to see your original formulas to know for certain. Most likely, had I been in the body of a man, I'd have felt something, as well. But, I'm not."

"You-you felt that? As though it was..." Joy asked, her eyes wide with amazement.

Pelia nodded. "But more powerful, more spiritual. Not like from the body, but... From the heart, from the soul. It was incredible."

Joy looked to me. "And you felt nothing at all?"

"Nothing," I replied, then reached back and flicked my hood up, concealing my face in the shadows it cast. "Pelia, let me know if it worked. By what I can tell examining the enchantment, it isn't a transformation, but more an evocation. Like a normal coupling, it may have to be repeated. My guess is that if it does work, you should know in a few weeks when your menses fail to come - any child that results, however, will have nothing of me in her. She'll share your germ plasm entirely - like both daughter and twin. I'd like to see the formula, sometime, as well. If you like, I can trade you another spell-

Pelia blinked. "Eddas! I would give it to you, not trade!"

I nodded. "Very well. For now, I'm quite tired. I'm afraid I'll have to bid you goodnight," I said, and rose to my feet.

"G-goodnight, Eddas. Sleep well," Pelia stammered, bowing her head, and her words were echoed by the other women of her circle.

I started to walk away, but Joy grabbed my wrist. "Old Man..." she began warningly, but I waved her off.

"I'll be alright, Joy. Truly."

Joy looked at me for a long moment in silence, then nodded. "Alright, Old Man. I'll trust you, this time."

I walked away, into my tower. There was, in truth, nothing I could say or do. Yorindar's plan was obvious. My people would return, and I would, in effect, be the father of my race. Yet, ever afterward, all Hyperboreans would be female. With myself as, effectively, the only male who would ever exist, our people's numbers would grow slowly over the ages, at a rate the giants could accept - despite each and every one of us being effectively immortal, through sorcery. We would also have centuries to plan and arrange where we would live, as our population slowly grew. In time, perhaps a millennium or so, we would have a few thousand people. And, with the eldest of us having a thousand years of sorcerous knowledge and skill behind us, we would be quite powerful, despite our slight numbers. Pelia was right - it would be a new society entirely, rising from the ruins of the old. In a thousand years, Hyperboreans would probably be known and respected throughout the world as powerful and skilled sorceresses, more powerful than even the elves, and rivaling the skill and knowledge of even the elder dragons. They would probably no longer even be considered human, but would, instead, appear to be some eldritch race... Akin to the elves, perhaps, but without males, like dryads, naiads, gorgons or lamias. Vyleah would have her followers, a race of healers, and would slowly recover her strength as the centuries passed. In time, with the Hyperboreans as their allies, the Larinians would, eventually, establish the "Golden Kingdom" of Yorindar's prophecy. Yes, I could see Yorindar's plan clearly, now.

And for the life of me, I wanted no part of it.

Oh, I would do it, of course. Pelia was right - we could not simply introduce males into our population. Had my original plan worked, in a century or two, we would, most likely, be at war with the giants, struggling over land and space to grow. No, our population had to grow at an infinitesimally slow rate, to give us time to build our new society, plan its eventual growth, and build firm bonds with the giants, the elves and the dwarves. There was also, most likely, a need Yorindar had for the new Hyperborean society that would eventually come about. Perhaps to guide the Larinians, somehow, as an elder and allied race. Perhaps to mediate between them and the elves, or the dwarves. Or perhaps something I could not even imagine. The future was, indeed, limitless possibilities. Yorindar had said that the restoration of my race and my beloved were temporal events he was working towards. If I simply bowed my head and followed what he wanted, then what I wanted would, eventually, come to pass.

But that didn't mean I had to like how it would come about.

I started to undress for bed, removing my waist-belt to set it aside, carefully folding my robe to lay beside it... But then I grew annoyed, and simply tossed the robe and waist-belt aside. A flash of violent movement caught my eye, and I turned to look, summoning my staff to my hand as an act of simple reflex.

There, in the darkness, the strange woman in the mirror gazed back at me. I could see her clearly, thanks to her half-elven eyes and the pale moonlight that filtered in through the windows. She was dressed in Dyarzi's dancing outfit - and was, in truth, quite erotic to gaze upon. I had originally chosen to wear it over this body simply because there was nothing else to wear when I awoke. Later, I wore it both to honor my lost love, and simply because I had to wear something under my robe. Now, as the moonlight gleamed off the chain and the pale skin of the strange woman in the mirror, I paused.

She wore Dyarzi's enchanted black-dyed kidskin gloves, which came to just above her elbows. She wore Dyarzi's matching boots, which came to just above her knees. She wore Dyarzi's chainmail garment, and her hair was drawn into a ponytail beneath Dyarzi's enchanted silver hair-band. And yet, she was not Dyarzi. She held my staff in her fist. She wore the ring Longtooth had given me about her right bicep, and the band the Mountain healers had given me about her left, and I knew that she also bore my rings beneath her gloves and my knife in her boot. And yet, she was not I, Eddas Ayar, either. No, she was someone else. The pale-skinned, black-haired, ebon-eyed half-elven female who stared back at me with a fierce and terrible glare was someone else... And the two raven feathers tucked beneath the silver hair-band announced who she was.

She was the Raven of Yorindar.

Her body, forged by my will and over half a century of living the ascetic life of a Hyperborean battle-mage, had received its final forging in the very heart of a mana-storm. Her eyes were piercing and alien, her beauty wondrous and terrifying. She was as ancient and alien as a dragon. She was power incarnate. She was the tool of a god.

The tool of a god.

I looked at her, and understood why I had been alone. I understood why Arella could not bring herself to even visit me at night, and perhaps share a quiet moment or two before sleep, then return in the morning. Her duties may have absorbed her daylight hours, but surely her nights would be free...

But now I understood.

Arella looked at me, all those months ago, after the mana-storm had finished forging this body into what it was now, and no longer saw her old friend and lover, Raven. She looked and saw the woman in the mirror, the Raven of Yorindar, the tool of a god...

And trembled in fear and awe.

Now, I knew. Now, at last, I finally understood. Now, the strange woman in the mirror, the Raven of Yorindar, would reach out to each of the last women of Hyperborea, bringing life into their wombs, and restoring our race as some strange race of immortal sorceresses... Yet, forever remaining apart from them - loved, but untouched... Revered, yet never caressed.

She was the Raven of Yorindar. She was the tool of a god.

And she was me.

I wanted to scream, and smash the mirror to a million fragments with my staff, blast it to dust with strokes

of lightning, melt it to bubbling glass with blasts of flame, and smash the glass to fragments again. I wanted to howl my misery to the uncaring stars. I wanted to open my grimoire, read the apocalyptic spell that ancient Hyperborean mage had developed to end the Great War, and blast myself and all the lands and everything and everyone about me for a hundred leagues into vapor.

Yet, I did none of these things.

Slowly, I stepped forward, reached out a gloved hand, and touched the surface of the mirror with trembling fingers. "You are me," I whispered, watching the strange woman in the mirror silently mouth the same words, "and I am the Raven of Yorindar."

And as the words fell from my lips, a sense of calm filled me.

Softly, I heard the wind rise outside my tower.

The hairs at the nape of my neck rose.

In the distance, thunder rumbled.

The shimmering I saw in the mirror, beyond my shoulder, I half-expected.

"So, Eddas..." a voice muttered, dark and wet. "You have finally come to accept the truth. It took you long enough. I accepted the truth immediately." There was a long, wet cackle. "You always were the stubborn one."

I turned to face my opponent, standing on the opposite side of the room, near the door to the parapet. He was, in truth, a horror. His olive skin had melted like wax, and was now a raw and red fusion with the bone and muscle, beneath. His beard, what there was of it, was in patches here and there. Fresh red scars interwoven with patches of fabric crossed what little I could see of him beneath his ebon robe - he had, apparently, sliced much of his former robe from himself, which had blended and fused with his flesh, and replaced it with a new robe. His steel skullcap had, apparently, fused with the flesh and bone beneath, and his staff remained fused to his left hand. Gleams of silver and gold upon the fused fingers of his flipper-like right hand told me his rings had survived, buried amidst the melted flesh. He grinned - his teeth and eyes were, oddly, still perfect beneath his melted, warped visage, and that somehow made him all the more horrifying. "Yes, Eddas. Always the stubborn one. It's about time you realized your fate is inescapable. You are, indeed, the Raven of Yorindar - just as I am Morgar's Wolf."

"Cordo," I said, flatly.

Cordo cackled wetly, his eyes gleaming with madness. "Yes, Eddas. You were a fool not to check and see if I was alive, after. I lay there for two days, too weak to move, too twisted to move. In agony, Eddas. I would have blessed you had you slit my throat, then. Truly I would have. But, Morgar had other plans for me. My will was not as strong as yours. I was strong enough to live, but not strong enough to remain unchanged. For days, I howled in agony, Eddas. Days. But then I learned something, Eddas. Something important. Can you guess what it is? Can you guess?"

I did not answer, and Cordo cackled again. "I learned that with the will, one can overcome pain. And the pain made my will stronger. Strong enough to cut the flesh here and there so I could walk again, instead of crawl. Strong enough to feed on the discarded flesh, until I had mastered my new body and could summon food again. Strong enough to cut my robes from myself, Eddas. Oh, the pain of that was great, and the blood flowed richly. But I found an undamaged piece of cloth, and made my robes anew. Yes, the pain made my will stronger. Strong enough to be your equal - and, perhaps, your master."

"You are mad, Cordo. As mad as your god, Morgar. You are no wolf, Cordo. You are a rabid dog."

Cordo cackled wetly. "Mad? A rabid dog? Perhaps I am, to you, Eddas. But madness is merely a matter of perception, my old friend. You have pined after a woman dead over sixteen centuries, now - is that not madness? You wear her garments even now, in some perverted necrophilic transvestism. Is that not madness, as well?" I started, and Cordo grinned. "Yes, Eddas. Morgar whispers to me often, in my dreams. I know all about you. You've spent over fifty years in this body, and could not accept it until now. I have spent only a few months in this one, and I accepted it immediately. You looked to yourself for years, and did not see the truth. I look at you, and immediately see you for what you are. You look at me, and see twisted insanity. I look to myself, and see the heart of my god."

"A heart of chaos and madness, as I warned you all."

"Perhaps, Eddas - but what is chaos, but change? It is that, and nothing more. What is madness, but a view of reality you disagree with? It is that, and nothing more," Cordo replied, then sighed. "Ah, Eddas. It has been such a joy to speak with you again, as we once did in the old days. Do you remember? We would debate many points of philosophy over our cups of byallar - and you would lighten my pouch of an occasional gold coin or two at chatto," he said, then shook his head. "Ah, Eddas. You know, I once thought you to be a madman and heretic, Eddas. Now, I see you were not - you were merely a stubborn, misguided fool," he said, and smiled. "It is such a pity that I must kill you now, old friend."

At the speed of thought, I willed my ring of invisibility into activation and cast myself to the side and to the floor. I was gambling that Cordo's eyes were still, in the end, those of a human, and the horrible transformation that had overcome him had not given him any abilities he did not have before. Cordo lashed out with his twisted right hand, rattling off a spell - I recognized its incantation, and shut my eyes.

With a deafening crash of thunder, Cordo loosed a bolt of lightning at the spot I'd stood in, shattering the mirror to flinders and blasting a hole in the wall behind it. The flash of light from it was bright in the darkened room, even through my shut eyelids. I blinked for a moment to let my eyes re-adjust, willing my ring of protection into activation - its enchantment was superior to the finest articulated plate.

Cordo snarled, casting another bolt of lightning - I closed my eyes only in the nick of time to preserve my night-vision. He was only guessing where I might be, and missed. Willing Dyarzi's boots and gloves into action a heartbeat later, I silently scrambled to my feet and began whispering a spell to shield me against his sorcery. Cordo was mad, but he was no fool. He would have come prepared, his best defensive spells already cast upon himself. Almost certainly, there was no directly damaging spell I could cast that would injure him. I could not cast while he was speaking to me, as he simply would have attacked. I had to wait until he made his move - and now he had.

Cursing, blinking into the darkness, Cordo rattled off a brief spell, gesturing to himself. I knew the flashes of lightning had to have blinded him - Cordo always was blunt with his spells, and it didn't seem that madness had improved his style. He was now casting the Spell of Truesight - all too late. I finished my own spell with a flourish, and gripped my staff tightly. I was ready.

"Come, Cordo. Let's finish this."

Cordo snarled, rattling off another lightning bolt. I gripped my staff, waiting.

The bolt leaped from his melted, fused fingers with another deafening BOOM, lashing out at me...

...then rebounded from the Spell of Mana Reflection I'd placed upon myself, leaping back towards Cordo an instant later. The bolt smashed into him, throwing him back through the door, and onto the parapet in a shower of broken glass.

I strode out to him, my staff at the ready, and he snarled as he struggled to rise to his feet. He was uninjured, as his own protective spells had saved him, but it took him several seconds to stand. His staff was now more than simply a weapon - I could see that it also served him as a third leg, helping him to walk and stand on the crippled, twisted remains of his own legs. "I'll kill you for that!" he spat, his melted visage twisted with rage and fury.

"Will you, Cordo? Or have you already forgotten in your madness just who it is you face? I warned you before what would happen should you return to my lands uninvited, a trespasser."

"Hah! Do your worst! No battle-magic can harm me! I've protections proof against any spell of the Dyclonic Circle!"

I smiled. "But I've spells not of the Circle, Cordo. In my first life, I went among all the libraries of all the circles who would speak to me, paying to search for any spell or theorem that might help my endless quest. I searched among the elves and the dwarves, I searched the elemental planes, and I've even traded spells and theories with a dragon - that spell I used to thwart your lightning was the Spell of Mana Reflection, a sorcery I learned from Karg the Terrible, himself. Then, while you slept in your tomb, I learned even more of the sorceries of the dwarves and the elves, for the same reason. You mocked me for my search to bring Dyarzi back to me. You mocked me for my love of her. But it was that love which drew a lonely, grieving scholar and teacher from his circle, and sent him to search far and wide for a way to bring his love back to life. That search, my endless quest, has brought me knowledge of sorcery you can only dream of. I was the greatest scholar and researcher the Dyclonic Circle ever had, and I was driven to search endlessly for some way to bring Dyarzi back from the Void. That is why I am the Raven of Yorindar, Cordo, and you are nothing more than a mad dog," I replied, and gestured, casting a brief cantrip.

Cordo shuddered, then snarled, his eyes widening. Furiously, he began to scratch at himself. "What have you done to me?!"

"A little cantrip - a jest, actually. I ran across it studying the works of the elves. They find it quite amusing - and actually quite useful in combat. It conjures a few thousand fleas. Archers cannot shoot, and mages cannot cast for the scratching and the distraction. Even the strongest of warriors are sometimes brought to their knees by it. A mere apprentice's prank, in truth, but often quite useful," I replied, and smiled again. "How long can you maintain your concentration to hold your protective spells, Cordo? A minute? Perhaps two? Let's see how long your vaunted will holds out," I said, then snarled. "For when it fails, Cordo, and your protections drop, I will kill you."

"Graaaaagh!" Cordo snarled, unable to stop scratching. Yet, I could see it in his eyes - he knew his will would not last forever, and eventually, he would succumb. My own protective enchantments, though fewer in number than his own, were also far more effective. He glared at me, his eyes wild with fury, then his face twisted as he focused all his will to cast. In a moment, he rattled off a spell of returning, and vanished.

I waited, ready, for many heartbeats - but he did not return. With a sigh of relief, I relaxed my will, becoming visible as my protective enchantments faded. Taking a moment to brush away a shard of glass, I sat on the edge of the parapet to rest. Cordo had learned his lesson, for now. He was Morgar's best choice to enact his plans for the future - but that did not make him stronger than me. Cordo could not face me and hope to win. At least, not alone.

"Eddas? Is it alright, now?"

I looked up, to see Joy peering at me from inside the room, her eyes wide. "Yes, Joy, everything's

alright."

"May I join you out there?"

I nodded. "Mind the glass. It'll take me a bit to clean it all up, and repair the damage with sorcery - I'll do it later."

Joy nodded, stepping carefully, and eventually had dragged one of the chairs I kept on the parapet over to me, and sat beside me. As a giantess (even though a tiny one), Joy had an instinctual fear of falling - she could not possibly sit on the edge of the parapet with me. Joy looked around at the damage, and grinned. "Well, Old Man, when you decide to throw a tantrum, you really do a good job of it."

I rolled my eyes. "Joy, I didn't-"

"Now, now! I understand, you know. As I've said before, you cannot be queen for nearly five decades and not learn something of the hearts of men - and, as I've also said before, despite appearances, you are a man. I understand how you felt, Old Man. The gift they gave you was one of love, honor and respect, and it allows you to give them children - yet, you said those children will share nothing of your blood, your flesh, yes?"

I nodded. "Yes, that's true, but-"

"Well, I know that, for a man, would be heartbreaking. And more, the use of it gives pleasure to she whom you use it upon, as though you coupled with them - yet for you, it does nothing. That's immensely frustrating and depressing, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, but-"

"And last, Arella hasn't been with you in months, now... And I think... Well, I think you know that she probably never will be again," Joy said, her voice and face full of sympathy.

I paused, then sighed. "Well... Yes. Her duties, now, are much greater, and her time is more limited. And then, there's this," I said, and waved an ebon-gloved hand at myself. "Since my change, my appearance is... Well, somewhat frightening to her. Intimidating, perhaps. And then, there was that whole scene in the castle, at Darian's death-bed. To her eyes, I'm more than just an old friend and lover, now. I'm..." I said, and sighed. "I am the Raven of Yorindar, a living embodiment of some mysterious prophecy I know nothing about and dare not even inquire into, because of the risk of Paradox. I am the tool of a god, Joy. That's the way she sees me, now - and, in truth, it's what I am." I looked up to the stars for a long moment in silence, and Joy allowed me to collect my thoughts.

"Joy... It's been a difficult thing for me to accept. I know now how others see me. I know now that to everyone else, I am this strange creature of surreal beauty, great age, ancient wisdom, enormous power... The tool of a god. And, I suppose, in a way, I am all that," I said, then looked to her. "But inside, Joy, I'm still me," I said, tapping my chest with a gloved finger. "Inside, I'm still Eddas Ayar - a very old man who's very, very tired. I still weep at night, sometimes, for Dyarzi, and what we might have had. I still burn with the shame of my lost honor. I still yearn for the touch of a woman, and a tender moment exchanged in darkness." I rose to my feet, turning away from her and extending my hands to lean against the parapet, then sighed deeply as I gazed out into the darkness. "I don't have the answers to everything, Joy, like some divine messenger or holy warrior guided by their god. Even the dragons don't know everything. No mortal does. Yes, I am the Raven of Yorindar. But I am also still myself, Joy - Eddas Ayar. Merely a man."

Joy smiled, and patted my gloved hand reassuringly. "I know, Old Man. And tonight, all of that came to a

head for you, and you couldn't hold it all in. That's why I understand that you threw a bit of a tantrum. Pelia understands your frustration, as well, Eddas. I spoke to them, I told them that it was a bit frustrating for you to be in the body of a woman rather than at least being able to embrace them as a man, and they all understand. No-one will think badly of you for having lost your temper tonight," Joy said, then grinned wryly. "But I will say that in my opinion, when you do decide to throw a tantrum, you really do a proper job of it."

I glared at her suddenly. "Joy, I did not throw a tantrum!" I snapped, annoyed - and was annoyed again when it came out as a woman's shriek, complete with stamping of tiny feet.

Joy burst into giggles, and I made a moue'. "Well, then what do you call all this, then?" she asked, waving a large hand at all the damage.

"Cordo came by to have a brief little chat with me, and try to kill me. He failed. Between us, I'm the better mage," I replied, sitting on the parapet again and crossing my arms - and was annoyed again to hear it come out as a woman's sulking pout.

Joy gasped. "Cordo?! But-but you said he was dead!"

"I thought he was. When I last saw the men of the Dyclonic Circle, the force of the mana storm had torn the atoms of their bodies apart. All but a handful were simply destroyed, and those that remained were reduced to bubbling puddles of dying flesh. Apparently, however, the tool of a god is a bit harder to kill than that," I replied dryly. Joy paled, and I narrowed my eyes. "Oh, he's a bit worse for wear, alright, and now looks more like a wax statue left out in the sun a bit long - but he still lives."

"But-but Eddas! What will you do?! He could come back!"

"He won't. As I said, he's learned tonight that between us, I am the better mage. Of course, he has the advantage that Morgar speaks to him nightly, whereas Yorindar has spoken to me barely four times in over fifty years. Yorindar is more conservative of his strength, and apparently chooses to use me more as a single pawn on a very large game-board. An important pawn, perhaps, but still only a pawn. Morgar, however, is apparently acting directly through Cordo - he burns most of his energies doing so and limits his possible options, but in the end, he may still win. Knowledge is Power, Joy, and Cordo has far more knowledge of what may happen than I do, and may be more effective at making Morgar's plans come about, because of that. Cordo is still a highly-skilled battle-mage, Joy, and his insanity has not dimmed his power - only his judgement. If Morgar can guide Cordo properly, he can still win against Yorindar."

"But Eddas! What will you do?"

"Nothing, Joy. I simply wait."

"Wait?!"

"Yes, Joy. I sit here in my tower, and wait. Eventually, Yorindar will let me know that I am needed."

"But-but can't you go after Cordo?! You said you were stronger - can't you find him and kill him?!"

I shook my head. "No, Joy, I did not say I was stronger, I said I was the better mage between us. He is still my equal in power. As to following him... Well, I would follow him and try to kill him if I could, but I've no idea where he is. If I at least had a general notion, I might be able to try a spell of teleport - but I've no idea."

"The Black Tower! He could be there, now!"

I shook my head again. "No, Joy, I sealed the tower with a spell. He cannot enter - and if he managed to break the spell, the enchantment is such that I would know. He's probably raised a new tower in some remote part of the wilderness, and from there even now is plotting his revenge. All I can do is wait, and see what Yorindar wishes me to do about it," I replied, and sighed.

"Joy, you must understand what I have come to understand - many of the things that have happened to me and to those around me have been for a reason. Dyarzi died so that I would search far and wide for a way to bring her back to me - and, in the process, become the greatest mage in the history of my circle, and perhaps in the history of my people. Perhaps even Master Frarim became my teacher so that I would learn a love of scholarly pursuits, and the study of magic as a pure science - necessary for me to have become the mage I am, today. My suicide centuries ago was so that I would not be aware of the events of the Great War, and perhaps be destroyed in it. The birth, life and death of Ellysande Northstar was all for the purpose of giving me her body - and I am in this body that I might both have something I might form into a powerful vessel for the Raven of Yorindar, and at the same time never become the father of my race. Your birth was so that you would bring about Darian's progeny - who, apparently, are the main focus of Yorindar's efforts. Everything, from the beginning to this very moment, has been according to Yorindar's plan. I was called from the past to save the future, Joy - and it has all been according to Yorindar's plan," I said, and shrugged as I continued.

"There have been a few slip-ups along the way, of course. Yorindar is working through mortals, and mortals are not perfect. I went mad with loneliness when Arella abandoned me for seventeen years, and nearly killed myself then before this body received its final forging, and gained the regenerative abilities it has, now. And, Morgar is opposing him. I nearly died when Darian and I were shanghaied, and I was raped and left to die of starvation and thirst. Vayanar, whom I am certain was Morgar's pawn whether he knew it or not, was called from the past even as I was. Through him, Morgar's plan to snuff Darian's progeny before they were even born was nearly successful. Yes, there have been a few slip-ups along the way, but overall, nearly everything that has happened has been according to Yorindar's plan, and the prophecies he's laid down for his followers centuries ago. All I have to do is follow along. Yorindar will let me know what I need to do next - if anything."

"He-he will?" Joy asked nervously.

I smiled, and patted her hand reassuringly, just as she had done mine a few minutes before. "Yes, Joy. He will. I'm certain of it."

Joy smiled at me weakly, and I gave her a moment to compose herself. We sat there together in the moonlight, Joy gazing at the damage to my tower and thinking, and I simply gazing at the bare, skeletal trees of my lands that slumbered in the grip of winter. After a long moment, Joy spoke. "I'm sorry, Old Man."

"Sorry?" I looked at Joy, an eyebrow raised in curiosity. "For what?"

"For... For everything," Joy replied, and sighed deeply. "I'm sorry I can't be a better support to you than I am - here you were fighting for your life, and I thought you were just throwing a tantrum, frustrated at the fate the gods have handed you. I thought to let you work out a bit of your frustrations, then come chat with you and try to remind you that you are, at least, deeply loved by all the Mountain Healers. I thought to try to comfort you with the notion that perhaps, in a few more years, their reluctance to lie with you might change. A few decades without male companionship, and they might eventually..."

"Turn to each other?" I asked, gazing at her calmly.

Joy blushed. "Yes. I'm sorry, but that's what I was going to tell you. It's been nearly a decade for them,

now - they may, indeed, already have done so, for all I know." Joy looked at me, sitting on the edge of the parapet, dressed as I was in only Dyarzi's 'dancing outfit' instead of my robe, and blushed again. "Yes. I'm sorry, but that's what I was going to tell you. But I can see, now, looking at you... Thinking of all they have ever said to me over the months I have known them... Well, I can see this is unlikely."

"Unlikely? Why?"

"Well, when they look at you... They aren't seeing that," Joy replied, waving a hand at me. "I think you are, in their hearts, a kind of idealized man, a perfect man. Kind, gentle, respectful, attentive, patient, loving... Each of them, I think, has an idealized image of what you might really look like, inside their minds - even as I do, to some extent. It is that image, I think, they will always hold of you, and what they see when they look at you." Joy turned her eyes from me, gazing at the moonlit mountains in the distance.

"No other man in the world will be able to compete with the image of you they hold in their imaginations, Eddas. They will be your courtesans forever - and, probably, their children will join them, until someday, you have an extended family of thousands and thousands. Perhaps that, too, is part of Yorindar's plan. Perhaps he simply wishes to raise your people as a race with only one gender to slow your growth and preserve your alliance with the giants, as Pelia seemed to be suggesting tonight. Perhaps he wishes thousands of them to be present before men are introduced to them again, as he has a different solution in mind than either you or Pelia have imagined - something wondrous and special that, in the end, will make you happy," she said, and shook her head before she continued.

"I do not know, Old Man. Between the two of us, you are the one who is most likely to discern whatever plan Yorindar may have for your people - though you may not discover the truth until he makes it plain to you, as you've said before that the future must remain hidden, to avoid paradox. I do not know. I only know that these women and all their descendants will see you as father, teacher, scholar, and savior of their people," she said, and sighed deeply again. "But they will never see you as I do, Old Man. That is what I am truly sorry for. They will never see you as simply Eddas Ayar, a quiet and lonely old man whom I call 'friend.'"

I smiled, rising and stepping over to Joy, and holding out my arms. Joy rose from her chair, bent down to wrap her enormous arms around me, and we hugged each other for many long moments in the pale moonlight.

Thirty-One.

"And as the Age of Chaos draws to a close and the dawn of the Golden Age approaches, you will see three of my Ravens come among you, one at a time, to defend you from mine enemies. The first shall arise from the grave, a horrid, mad thing. The second shall stride out of the wastelands, a quiet, lonely thing. The third shall appear at the death of a queen, a smiling, happy thing."

- The Holy Tome of Yorindar, Chapter 42, Verses 64-67.

Spring eventually came, and with it, the Mountain Healers bid me a fond and tearful farewell, and returned to their mountain to begin planting their herbs and working their gardens in preparation for the following fall. They were, slowly, building their library again, trading rare and expensive herbs to the elves and dwarves. Their farewell was very emotional, and each of them wanted to be hugged by me. Each of them had visited me during the winter months, laying down quietly upon my bed (fully clothed) while I knelt beside them and used their gift to me upon them, and tried to make it as pleasant as possible for them - despite the fact that I felt nothing, and watching a young and lovely woman writhe in ecstasy as I touched her only made my own concupiscence nearly unbearable. Yet, they could feel my compassion for them, my respect for them, and how deeply I cared for them. They could feel that I was trying to

make it as pleasant as I could for them, as it was, to them, as though I was making love to them with my heart, my soul. Many wept afterwards, the experience was so powerful for them, and I hugged them in silence while they recovered. Thus, by the time spring arrived and they were ready to leave, Pelia assured me that nearly a quarter of them were pregnant - even herself. They had quite a bit of preparations to make before winter set in again, as twenty-odd newborns would need much, and they had little. I was certain Taliad and Mungim would receive a long list of things that the Mountain Healers wished to have by the fall, and both would be quite surprised by the contents of that list.

I warned them, of course, that Cordo had somehow survived. They promised to be very watchful of each other, and to stand regular guards. They would have to get into the habit of doing so, anyway, as there were still goblins and other dark creatures about in Hyperborea, and children would have to be watched. I wasn't terribly concerned for them, however. Though individually none of them were a match for Cordo and he could kill them as easily as swatting a fly, as a group, they were more than a match for him. They had learned well the lessons I taught them, and I knew their own goddess, Vyleah, was watching over them. It occurred to me that eventually, when the children were old enough, I would probably have to begin the process of instructing them to be battle-mages in their own right. They were, in the end, the future of our people, and each was of immeasurable value. I was certain Pelia and her Circle would instruct them in the skills they knew. Combined with the training I would give them, they would be safe from any possible threat.

And so it was that the third week of spring found me sitting in my chair upon my parapet, gazing out over the flowering byallar trees of my plantation. Joy sat beside me, and we shared a cup of byallar, reminiscing over times gone by.

There was a brief shimmer in the air before us, and to my surprise, Arella appeared. Swift-wing fluttered down from her shoulder to land on the parapet, then regarded me with a beady black eye, flicking his tail-feathers in what was, for a raven, a smile. Arella looked to Joy and I, and heaved a sigh. "Good morning, Raven, Queen Joy. May I please sit with you?"

"Certainly, Arella," Joy replied smoothly, cutting off my sputtering words. I glanced to her, but Joy only gave me a smile. Years of experience as a queen, dealing with many people in many different situations and years of dealing with Arella-tor had saved me the embarrassment of stammering through asking Arella what the hell she was doing here after so long.

Arella dragged over a nearby chair, then plopped herself down into it, smoothing her sky-blue dress. "I can't stay long, and I'm sorry for that. There's an ambassador from Vilandia coming in an hour, and Noril wants me present for that. A trade-mission, or so they said. He needs my advice. Pfft. I know why he really wants me there!" she snapped, then sighed again. "Raven, how do you handle it?!"

"Handle what, Arella?" I asked, having recovered my composure and returned to sipping at my cup.

"Well... Everything! The stares, the whispered comments... People gazing at you like... Well, I don't know what! I'm eighty years old and I don't look a day over thirty! At first it was nothing - but now, people all treat me like... Well, like I'm some immortal thing, maybe not even human! Nobody talks to me anymore, except for Noril and Dawn, and Noril often uses me to intimidate ambassadors and diplomats into silence just by having me stand there while he's having a discussion with them! Even Queen Lyssa often falls silent the moment I walk into the room! How do you deal with that, Raven?"

"You get used to it eventually, Arella," I replied dryly.

"Now, now, Old Man," Joy chided, then looked to Arella. "Arella, try being more open and friendly, rather than being so aloof. When you first became Darian's court wizardess, you developed this...

'Personae' of yours, where you played the part of the aloof and powerful wizardess - particularly when you noticed men giving you the eye. While that may have been good back when you were trying to establish your reputation, now it's cost you a bit, in that people fear you. Try being a little more open and friendly."

Arella nodded. "Well, what do I do about Queen Lyssa?"

"I don't know her, though Eddas has met her. What do you think, Old Man?"

I shrugged. "Do something... Womanish with her," I replied, waving a gloved hand dismissively. "Talk about hairstyles or perfumes or something. She's really a very ordinary woman at heart, Arella, and her biggest concern is probably following the instructions I told her - which was to make an effort never to come between Noril and his two advisors, you and Dawn. You probably make her nervous. Do something... Ordinary and womanish with her."

Arella rolled her eyes at me. "You really are a man at heart, you know that?"

"Thank you," I replied dryly.

"Now, Arella!" Joy chided, wagging a finger at her. "Just because Eddas is a man doesn't make his advice unsound. He's right - you should try to make friends with her, and chat about ordinary things. Don't be so aloof with her that you end up alienating her - in the end, that's not good. She's my son's wife, and Queen of the land. You need her to trust in you and confide in you as much as she does Dawn."

Arella nodded. "Alright, Queen Joy."

"And stop calling me that. I'm no longer queen of Larinia - my son's wife is. At best, I'm queen-mother, and I've no desire for you to call me that, either," Joy said, and grinned wryly. "Just call me 'Joy', Arella."

Arella smiled. "Alright, I will, Joy."

"Was there anything else you needed?" I asked politely, keeping the annoyance out of my voice with the skill of an expert chatto-player. I'd once explained to Joy what it was like when Arella abandoned me for seventeen years, leaving me alone in this tower - in the end, I went mad from the silence, and the endless loneliness. Only the visits of Taliad, Mungim and the giants broke the tedium, and living without physical contact for that long was simply too much for me. Now, Arella had done it again - and then had the nerve to come by and ask how I coped with being thought of as an alien, immortal being. The answer was simple, and exactly what I had told her in the first place - eventually, you get used to it.

"Well, no, not really. I just needed to get away from the castle for a bit, and... Well, I guess I just really needed to share this, and get it off my chest."

I nodded. "I understand. You need to stay close to Noril and his children, however. Cordo is still alive, and may have plans for them."

Arella gasped, and Swift-wing squawked with fear. "Alive?!" Swift-wing squawked, flapping his wings nervously. "How could he be alive? I thought you said he was dead!"

I glanced at Swift-wing. "It would appear, my friend, that just as I am Yorindar's Raven, Cordo is Morgar's wolf - though, in truth, he is more like a horrid, rabid dog than a wolf. And, as I discovered with myself, the tool of a god is a bit more difficult to kill than one might expect."

Arella paled. "The prophecy!"

"What of it? I'm afraid I know nothing about it, Arella. Paradox prevents me from really learning too much about the future."

"Part of the Holy Book of Yorindar is a series of prophecies, Old Man," Joy explained. "I never learned much of it - it was the beliefs of the Little People, and we giants have our own gods. Still, I do know some of it. The chapter of prophecies is a collection of short utterances by a het-man of the Little People who lived several centuries ago - one of their wandering beggar-priests of Yorindar. These numinous teachings are all obtuse phrases, in no particular order, which he uttered over the course of his life, and were later collected and written down by his followers. I understand little of them, and have not read them, unfortunately."

"Well, I have," Arella said, and looked to me. "Raven, one of the prophecies is this: 'Beware the Rabid Wolf, lest he steal away the Future's Hope, and take the Light down unto the Sunless Sea.' Oh, Raven! Cordo must be the 'Rabid Wolf' of the prophecy!"

I nodded. "Probably. As I said, you need to stay close to Noril and his children. You've been trained as a battle-mage by me, and are still the most powerful mage in the Southlands. Your skills were honed on the battlefield during the War of the Twins, and you're as prepared as you could possibly be for whatever may happen. Remember your lessons, and be on your guard."

"But Noril and Lyssa don't have any children, yet!"

"Exactly," I replied, and felt a chill as the word passed my lips.

Swift-wing gazed at me silently, then fluffed his feathers nervously. Arella simply stared, her mouth agape.

After a long moment, Joy looked to Arella, and smiled. "Close your mouth, dear, it's unbecoming of the Court Wizardess of Larinia to gape."

Joy nodded, then rose to her feet, Swift-wing flying to her shoulder at her mental call. "Thank you for your advice, Joy. I shall follow it. Thank you for your advice, Raven. I shall be watchful. Farewell, for now," she called, then cast a spell of returning, and vanished.

To my utter and absolute surprise, the very instant Arella was gone, Joy burst into gales of laughter. I blinked at Joy for several moments before I found my voice. "What is it? What's so funny?"

"Old Man, you've no idea! When you said that, and confirmed the prophecy, it was like a chill went down my spine. I could see in her face that she felt the same thing. 'Exactly', you said - but the way you said it was so much more. You truly are the Raven of Yorindar, and it was as though, for that moment, you were speaking with his voice. It was truly a moment of awe, Old Man."

"Well, what's so funny about that?" I replied, deciding not to tell her I felt the same thing.

Joy guffawed for several long moments before she was able to reply. "Old Man, this is after she's come to you, the person whom she has again abandoned, this time because she fears you and is in awe of you since your change, and asks you how you deal with being considered alien and inhuman because those in Steelgate are starting to treat her the same way?! Hah! The Little People's god, Yorindar, has a vast and lovely sense of humor and justice, Old Man!"

As Joy again guffawed, I managed a smile. I decided it would be best to simply enjoy this pleasant moment, and whatever pleasant moments there may be to come while they lasted. Joy did not need to hear me explain to her that Arella was just as much a pawn in Yorindar's vast, world-spanning,

time-spanning chatto game against Morgar as I was - and, indeed, as Joy was, herself. Joy did not need to hear me explain that Arella's relation of part of the prophecy to me was, almost certainly, no mere coincidence. Nor did she need me to tell her that I understood the prophecy - though had I been told this even as little as a year or two ago, I would not have been able to make sense of it. And I knew where the Sunless Sea was - or approximately where it was, at any rate. Nor did she need to hear me tell her that this knowledge was the final piece in the puzzle for me, and my understanding of why I remained trapped in this body was now complete.

For the Sunless Sea was in the heart of the lands of the Dark Elves, deep beneath the earth - the race this body most closely resembled.

No, there was no need to tell Joy any of that. It was far better to simply sit with her here, on the parapet of my tower, enjoying the warm spring sun and the fragrant scent of millions of byallar-blossoms that the gentle breezes brought to us as we sipped at our cups. Yes, far better to enjoy the pleasant moments we had, while they lasted. For though the day was calm and clear, I knew in my heart that storm-clouds loomed beyond the horizon.

The End.

[About the Author](#)

In J. Farris' words..."I am thirty-seven, 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."