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DiskUs Publishing

<http://www.diskuspublishing.com>
E-mail sales@diskuspublishing.com
DiskUs Publishing
PO Box 43
Albany, IN 47320

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Chapter One		

"To truly understand the Ancient One, it must be understood that they are not like any ordinary, mundane human who ever lived, before or since. Like all the truly mighty mages of legend and song, Eddas Ayar was and is passionless, and compassionless. Beyond humanity, Eddas Ayar was and is no mere mortal being, but more a force of nature, or the will of a vengeful god incarnate. To ascribe ordinary, human motivations to any mage is false - they wield powers far beyond normal beings, and that power shapes their view of the world, distancing them from it. The greatest of mages were even more distanced from the world by their power, and Eddas Ayar was and is perhaps the greatest mage in all of history. Thus, the Ancient One was so far removed from humanity that ascribing human goals and motivations to their actions is simply impossible."

- Lord Caladis, *The Eddasine Chronicles*, 1817 NCC

I reached out an ebon-gloved hand to adjust the full-length mirror, and looked myself over. The same strange woman who had gazed back at me for seven decades stood there, her expression calm. Even after all these years of gazing upon the woman in the mirror, it still felt odd at times to see *her* rather than myself - a tall, bearded, olive-skinned Hyperborean male.

The half-elf woman in the mirror was beautiful, of that there was no doubt. Night-black hair drawn back into a ponytail, highly arched eyebrows, eyes as black as jet... Her body, forged by seventy years of the ascetic life of a battle-mage, had received its final forging in the raging, destructive chaos that was the very heart of a *mana*-storm. Her beauty, because of that, was beyond ordinary mortal beauty... She was, in fact, possessed of a terrifying, alien and surreal beauty, fitting of who and what she really was. She was dressed in the ebon, long-sleeved hooded robes I favored, though with a black waist-belt over it to draw it closer about her figure. Wearing the black, elbow-length kidskin gloves and knee-length kidskin boots that had once belonged to my beloved Dyarzi, she looked every inch what the two ebon feathers she bore beneath her hairband announced she truly was - the Raven of Yorindar.

"Old Man, stop primping! You look fine," a voice called.

I turned, looking over my shoulder, and saw Joy coming up the stairs to my room at the top of my tower. Though now over ninety, the proud beauty of Joy's youth had been restored by my own sorcery, and she was once again the golden-haired goddess the late King Darian had taken as his wife. She was, in truth, a giant - though her mother's brush with the edge of a *mana*-storm had left her daughter of diminutive size, at a mere five cubits in height. And, though the giants might still consider her to be quite small as she was barely the size of a toddler to them, Joy towered head and shoulders above any human I had ever known. "Old Man, you've fussed in that mirror for an hour, now. Come on - it's nearly time. You don't want to be late."

"The first impression is very important, Joy. For some of those children, it will be the first time they have ever seen me. For some others, it will be their first day of lessons as an apprentice battle-mage," I replied, turning back to the mirror. "I will leave nothing but my best impression each time winter returns, and the children come."

"Yes, and for the rest of them, they've seen you a hundred times before and all your primping is completely wasted. Now come," Joy said, and grinned at me.

I chuckled. "Well, I suppose you're right. After all, they can see what I *really* look like beneath this garment of flesh, and most of them wouldn't even notice what I was wearing. Still, it's the *principle* of the thing. I want them to *always* know they're important to me - because they are."

As Joy and I walked down the stairs, she spoke again. "I still find that very odd - that they can see more than we can see. What have you been able to discover of it?"

I shrugged. "Well, as you know, each of them is the result of the little enchanted bracer that Pelia and her women gave me," I replied, patting my upper left arm where I wore the band beneath the sleeve of my robe. "The bracer allows me to begin a pregnancy within them, though I lack the equipment to otherwise do so - the enchantment responds to my male soul, which remains unchanged inside this body. The children themselves have nothing of me in them - their germ-plasm is entirely that of their mother, and they are more like twins than daughters. Still, because their lives were sparked with sorcery, their germ-plasm has been altered by sorcery. My best explanation, after studying their auras myself, is that they simply are more attuned to *mana* and astral emanations. They will be immensely powerful mages when they grow up, I think, as they each will have an innate understanding of *mana*-flow that even an apprentice with a strong *Talent* normally takes years to learn. They can see astral space and astral auras clearly and easily, Joy, just like I can with the Spell of Astral Vision or the spell of Astral Projection. Nothing is truly hidden from them - they can sense emotional states simply by glancing at one's aura, and tell what's really on someone's mind just from the colors they see floating about them, which are directly derived from various factors of emotion, intellect and personality. More, their vision is uncannily penetrating and accurate. Normally, with a spell of astral vision, one can only see the aura cast by the body itself, and whatever enchantments happen to be upon it. All these children can see far more than that - they can see the very *soul*. They know what I *really* look like, simply because they can *see* my male soul housed within this body." I shrugged again. "Still, it's best to make light of it, I think. After all, it wouldn't do to have them grow up thinking that they are in some way odd or strange - they may be that, for a human, but in truth, they are quite normal children, otherwise."

"I agree," Joy replied, nodding. "Having lived as a child being treated as an oddity because I am so small, I can tell you that it is a terrible thing to experience." Joy then grinned at me as we stood outside my tower, standing in the thin layer of snow which covered the ground. "And having raised two children myself, I can tell you that you make a wonderful father."

I rolled my eyes at her. "Please, Joy. That's the *one* thing I can't be for them. They spend the majority of the year with their mothers just so they'll *not* think of me as 'father'. Fate and the gods have meant that our people are, for now, a race with only one gender, and to my courtesans I am much like a bee to dozens of flowers - they need my touch to reproduce, but the result is never another bee, always another flower. Perhaps someday that will change - perhaps Yorindar has some plan I am not aware of that will, eventually, solve this problem. I have already developed a refined version of Pelia's spell that the Second Generation can use on themselves, once their numbers rise to the point where there simply are too many of them for me to act as the 'bee' to their 'flowers' - that, I accomplished ten years ago. Unfortunately, it takes a master mage to even attempt the spell, and none of them are even close to that level of power. So, for now..." I said, and shrugged. "Eventually, each of them will have to come to me and receive the same spell their mothers did, so that they may become mothers themselves. It would *not* do for them to all think of me as 'father', then have to turn to me later to become mothers, Joy," I said, and lifted my head as we stood outside my tower. "I am their teacher, Joy. I add to the lessons their mothers have taught. In a few decades, each of them will be both a master healer and a master battle-mage, as well as the best researcher and scholar of magic I can possibly make them. I must maintain an air of propriety at all times, that they will grow up to be proper Hyperborean ladies and well-educated, well-trained sorceresses. I am their teacher, Joy. Only that, and nothing more."

There was a shimmering in the air before us, and all eighty-nine of my courtesans appeared, along with their sixty daughters, all holding hands so Pelia could transport them with a single spell of returning. Pelia and her woman all smiled and called "Good morning, Eddas," as did the eldest of their children, bowing their heads respectfully. The toddlers and infants, held in their mother's arms, simply gaped - the experience of being translocated through sorcery was still a new one, for them. The rest, two dozen girls all ranging between two and ten, had a completely different reaction. They all immediately whooped with joy, dashed over to me and all tried to hug me at once, screaming "Daddy! Daddy!"

My heart melted, and I went to my knees and gave each of them a hug. "Hello, my little darlings! How are you?"

"Hello, daddy! We're just fine!" chirped Myota, grinning broadly.

"I learned how to whistle just like a sparrow! Wanna hear?" asked Molati.

"I learned how to write my name! Wanna see?" Iola squeaked excitedly.

"I can tie my shoes, now, all by myself!" Kyoli bragged.

On and on they went, each bouncing and happy and chattering like excited chipmunks, and soon I heard Joy's laughter above it all. "So, nothing more than a teacher, Old Man?" Joy laughed again. "Every year, it's the same thing - you spend days working yourself up to be aloof and proper, and when they get here, you weep with joy."

I looked up to Joy, grinning, my cheeks damp with tears. "Oh, hush."

Chapter Two

"To understand the Hyperboreans is to understand Honor. It is their greatest legacy, and the crowning jewel of their civilization."

- Elven proverb.

The days of winter flew past all too quickly, as they always did. I spent the daylight hours teaching the eldest, in the same manner I had once instructed countless apprentices in the Black Tower, seventeen centuries ago. Each was an apt pupil, learning their lessons quickly and easily. Of course, throughout the rest of the year, they learned the art of sorcery and healing from their mothers, so this was not terribly surprising. Still, their own innate abilities at sensing and understanding the flow of *mana* were quite useful to them, and it took very little explanation for them to grasp even the most complex of apprentice's lessons. Though they were only with me four months of the year, their education progressed at a rapid clip. Finally, I was faced with a predicament - and one that did not have a simple solution.

"I still don't understand what the problem is," Swift-wing grackled, sitting on Arella-tor's shoulder. Arella-tor, the Court Wizardess of Larinia, had come for one of her now-annual visits to appraise me of the year's activities at Steelgate, King Noril's castle. Swift-wing, Arella's raven familiar, reached up a foot to scratch an itch behind his feathered head as his mistress spoke.

"Neither do I, really. What exactly is the matter, Raven?" Arella asked.

"Well, Pelia's daughter, Lyota, is the eldest, at twenty. She has learned all the lessons of an apprentice battle-mage, and is prepared to begin the journeyman's lessons," I replied, nodding respectfully to Pelia, who sat with us at the table in my room at the top of my tower.

Pelia nodded gravely. "That would, indeed, pose a problem."

Arella blinked. "Umm... With respect, High Mistress Pelia... I don't understand *why* it's a problem."

Pelia smiled. "Because Eddas has no Circle, Mage Arella-tor. By our laws and traditions, he cannot instruct beyond the apprentice level."

Swift-wing rolled his little black eyes. "Well, why don't you just admit Raven to *your* circle, the Mountain Healers?"

Pelia shook her head. "Because, my little feathered friend, he cannot possibly join. He is a man, and the rules of our circle specifically prohibit men from joining. And before you ask, no, we cannot change our rules. We decided twenty years ago that we would preserve as much of our old way of life as possible - including our old laws and traditions, wherever we could."

I nodded. "We must retain what little we can, that the children will grow learning that there *are* laws and rules which govern their life, regardless of whether or not they understand them or agree with them. We cannot simply change anything we want at a whim, simply because it suits us to do so. If we did, we would raise children who would follow situational ethics, rather than absolute ethics - and absolute ethics are both the cornerstone of Hyperborean society, and a requirement for a Hyperborean battle-mage."

Arella looked at me in confusion. "Umm... You trained me to beyond the apprentice level, and weren't too concerned with lessons in ethics."

I chuckled. "You didn't need them, Arella. You were an adult woman from a mature and vibrant society of millions who had, in my opinion, a fully developed set of ethics. These, however, are children from a society which numbers less than two hundred people. A firm set of ethical guidelines is critical, particularly as they will all eventually be learning battle-magic."

"Why?" Swift-wing asked, cocking his head curiously.

Pelia raised a finger. "Suppose, for a moment, that we here are starving. Granted, it would never happen because all of us know the spells for conjuring food Eddas taught us, but pretend for a moment we are."

"Alright," Swift-wing replied, nodding to Pelia.

"Suppose also that we have the ability to transport ourselves down to the Southlands, and steal all the food we need to survive - which, incidentally, we do. Now - should we do it?"

"Well, yes, I suppose," Swift-wing replied with a feathered shrug. "You do what's necessary to survive."

Arella shook her head. "No, you shouldn't. Another solution should be devised."

I chuckled at the disagreement in thought between mage and familiar, then wagged a gloved finger at Swift-wing. "And that, my friend, is the difference between situational and absolute ethics. Arella-tor is your mistress, and knows that the power of sorcery, once abused, leads one on a downward slide towards a life of self-serving indulgence and eventual self-destruction. You, on the other hand, are still a wild raven at heart, and know that sometimes you must do what you must to survive."

"Well, who is right?" Swift-wing asked, tipping his head curiously.

"I am, silly," Arella replied with a grin, tapping Swift-wing's ebon beak reproachfully with a finger.

I chuckled. "No, actually, you *both* are."

"We are?" Swift-wing asked, obviously confused.

"Yes. In some situations, you *must* act with self-interest. However, in all situations, you must keep in mind the complete consequences of your actions. Thus, while it *might* seem the simplest solution is to just steal what one needs to live, *all* other solutions must be explored before you commit yourself to an action which has such vast ramifications. One theft such as that, no matter what the motives, would stain the reputation of all Hyperboreans as far as the people of the Southlands were concerned, possibly forever. Thus, it should be avoided if at all possible, according to Absolute Ethics."

Pelia nodded. "And Absolute Ethics are critical for a battle-mage, who learns to command spells that can destroy armies, and lay waste to large stretches of land. Decisions must be made not for the short-term interest, but for the long-term. That is why a Circle is important - a full circle provides the ethical background by social reinforcement necessary to safely learn the spells of true power and destruction."

"Ooooh, I see," Swift-wing replied, then paused. "Wait - no, I don't. I don't understand why you couldn't just form your own circle, Raven."

My anger flared, and Swift-wing blinked in surprise at my expression.

"Now, Eddas... I'm sure he didn't mean it the way it sounded," Pelia cautioned.

After a moment, I was able to calm myself, and I nodded. "No, you wouldn't know - you didn't mean it to be insulting," I said, and sighed. "I can't, my friend. I was ejected from my circle. By two-thirds vote, I was declared a heretic and a madman, and cast out. By our laws and traditions, I may not start a new circle. The honor of the circle would be tainted, should it ever come to light years or even centuries later."

Both Swift-wing and Arella stared at me in silence for a long moment. Finally, Arella shook her head. "You Hyperboreans really *are* different people, from a different culture. To someone from the Southlands, that wouldn't matter. The truth of what happened between you and the Dyclonic Circle is well-known among all your people. If you were like us, it would never be seen as a dishonor."

Pelia smiled. "Well, in truth, it's not seen as a dishonor by any of the Mountain Healers, either. To be rejected by those who later prove themselves fools and evil madmen is no dishonor. Still, as Eddas would say, it's the *principle* of the thing - and that's what Absolute Ethics is all about. Founding a Circle is no minor deed, and everything must be perfect, without the slightest hint of scandal. With great power goes great responsibility, and no whisper of scandal may stain the honor of any circle, lest it be considered a rogue organization of witches and warlocks, hunted down, and destroyed."

"And so, we have the situation we are in. Without a circle around me, there is only one way to have the ethical background by social reinforcement that Lyota would need - and that's to train her the same way I did you, Arella. She would have to come live with me, so that she might have me as an example and constant mentor, in the ancient manner of master and apprentice."

Arella blinked. "Well, what's wrong with that?"

Pelia smiled. "Eddas is a *man*, dear. It wouldn't be proper for an unmarried young woman to simply come live with him."

Arella gaped, then burst out laughing. "I-I'm sorry, but... Raven is like a father to them. I don't think that would be a problem."

I drummed my gloved fingers. "Arella, I know you're not intending to be insulting, so I'll try not to get angry with you. I *cannot* be like a father to them. I know that they look at me like one in many ways, particularly considering their origin and especially when they are younger, but I *cannot* be a father to them - particularly when they reach Lyota's age. Arella, if they intend to carry on the vision of their mothers and myself and restore our race, the only way they can reproduce is through *me*. They *cannot* see me as a father once they become an adult. That would be... Obscene."

Arella's eyes widened. "Oh! I'm sorry, I didn't think of it like that!"

Pelia reached out and patted Arella's hand. "I'm sure you didn't dear. Our little arrangement is, to say the

least, somewhat complicated. Fate and the gods have made things difficult for us - but we intend to survive, and grow, and again spread our race throughout the lands of our ancestors. It is important for Eddas to teach the skills he has mastered to our daughters, as each is critically important to the future of our race. Each of them must be able to defend themselves as well as Eddas can - or better. Hyperborea is still a dangerous place, with many ogres, goblins, and fell beasts. We cannot afford to lose even a single one of them. Thus, the skills he knows are of critical importance. Also, the more minds we have working on the problem of restoring his original body, the more likely it is that someday, we will succeed. Thus, he must also teach them the skills of the scholar and researcher. Yes, their education by him is of vital importance - but simply allowing them to view him as their father cannot be allowed."

"Well," Swift-wing said, fluffing his feathers, "I think that you should probably just go ahead with it anyway. You once said that Yorindar was watching over you, as you're the Raven of Yorindar. She said that Vyleah was watching out over her, as she was like Vyleah's rabbit. I think you should just trust that Yorindar and Vyleah will watch out for you, hope for the best, and deal with problems as they come along. Besides, the situation you're in isn't like any other, really. You're the last of your people. Some adjustments will have to be made - whether anyone else likes it or it conforms to what they consider 'ethics' isn't really important. You do what you have to do to survive - and if someone doesn't like it, that's too bad. And even if the fledglings *do* think of you as a father, it's not like you're actually *coupling* with them - it's sorcery, not copulation," Swift-wing said, then sniffed. "You can call that 'situational ethics' if you like and sneer at me, but that's what I think."

I shook my head, and smiled. "No, my friend, I would never sneer at you. As I told you many years ago, you are living proof that the noble ravens are truly wiser than the wisest owl." Swift-wing puffed out his little chest, and looked very proud and pleased with himself as I continued. "You are, in the end, probably right. We have little choice in the matter - if Lyota is to be properly trained, she will have to come live with me to receive that training. As I said before, in some situations, you *must* act with self-interest. However, in all situations, you must keep in mind the complete consequences of your actions. So, we shall simply do what we must, and hope for the best."

Arella smiled. "Well, I'm glad that's settled - though I really think you shouldn't worry about it. I know you Hyperboreans have a different culture than we of the Southlands, but really, *I'm* a woman of the Southlands, and to me, it's more like you were a bee and all Pelia's women were simply flowers. The fact that the bee allows the flowers to reproduce doesn't mean the bee is coupling with them - the relationship doesn't work like that. As Swift-wing said, it's sorcery, not copulation."

"In many ways, that is precisely how we look at it, Arella," Pelia replied, nodding. "Eddas himself has compared it to a bee and flowers many times over the years. Still..."

Arella nodded. "Well, to me, it all seems special and wonderful, not tawdry and illicit as you seem to be worried about. I've known Joy for many years, now, and it doesn't bother her, so I'm certain it wouldn't bother the giants. I don't know much about the elves and the dwarves, but from what little I do know having met Taliad and Mungim over the years, I'd say that their cultures are probably far less stuffy than your own - they probably would look at it the same way we do," Arella said, and grinned. "No offense, but... You Hyperboreans are really *very* stuffy, sometimes."

Pelia gazed at Arella, her expression calm. "That's probably because the oldest of us, Eddas himself, is one thousand, eight hundred and fifteen years old," Pelia said dryly. Arella blanched, but Pelia simply continued on, gazing at her with the gaze of a dragon. "We may seem 'stuffy' to you, Mage Arella-tor, but that is only because we are almost two millennia out of our time. You have the same sorcery we of the Mountain Healers do. You, too, can restore your youth endlessly - and, judging by your appearance, I'd say you have been doing so. One day, when *you* are a millennium or two old, you, too, will be seen as

'stuffy' by those around you," Pelia said, and Arella visibly shrank in her chair. Pelia then gently reached out a hand and placed it over Arella's, and smiled as she squeezed Arella's hand gently. "And when that day finally comes, Arella, always remember that you can come here, and will have friends who understand."

Arella smiled back, then suddenly grinned broadly. "I will, Pelia. I will."

There was little news of Steelgate to share - King Noril's son, Parial, was doing fine, a strapping young lad of ten (who had the strength of a full-grown man, as he was a quarter giant through his grandmother, Joy). Noril wanted to ask that I come in Parial's eighteenth or twentieth year to finish his education, even as I had done Darian and Noril before him. He'd phrased his request in an extremely polite and very lengthy letter, obviously not wanting to offend me. I simply told Arella that as I was still a Defender of the Realm by Darian's decree, she should tell the king I would be pleased and honored to fulfill his wishes in this regard.

For our part, there was little news to give Arella. The Mountain Healers had decided that a rate of two births a year was about what they could comfortably manage, until the tasks of raising the children could be assisted by the older children. Strider, Longtooth's son who was named after his grandfather (whom he strongly resembled), was a proud father himself, now, and his son was almost eighteen summers old. Dragonslayer himself no longer patrolled the lands for goblins, as he simply was too old. Instead, he spent most of his time teaching what he knew of fighting to the younger giants - though he may not have looked it to the eyes of a human, to the eyes of a giant, Dragonslayer was considered a master of the martial arts, with knowledge that was almost mystical in nature. In truth, as Dragonslayer related to me a few years ago, his greatest secret was simply a keen balance, learned when he was a young giant and had to first learn to help harvest the *byallar* grown on their lands by stepping between rows of tiny trees without stepping upon the trees themselves. This skill at balance also allowed him to learn how to make tremendous blows with a giant's weapon without shifting his feet much. While both were nothing for a human warrior, a giant was far more massive, and the mechanics of balance and movement were different for them. Dragonslayer himself weighed a bit over one thousand stone - he was literally as massive as an oilphant. Balancing that mass of muscle and bone was a completely different thing for a giant than a human, and a simple pratfall for a human was nearly always fatal to a giant. Thus, this simple skill at balance made Dragonslayer one of the most deadly warriors to ever live among his people, and many young giants traveled hundreds of leagues to study under him, even as all the young giants of Dohbari village already had.

Once we'd related the news to each other, Arella bid us a fond farewell, cast her spell of returning, and vanished. The smile I'd plastered on my face vanished as soon as she did. "Bah. Stuffy, indeed," I snorted, rising to my feet. "Let's see if she doesn't sing a different tune in a few centuries, when everyone she's ever known in the Southlands has gone to dust, and her only remaining friends are here, among the ruins of Hyperborea."

Pelia nodded. "She will, Eddas. After all, she's only a century old - in time, she'll seem quite stuffy herself, to those around her. Though, in the end, she may be right, you know. We may be worrying far too much about our situation," Pelia said, and smiled.

"Perhaps. But I will still make every effort to insure that when our race rises anew, it shall be a race that is honored and respected *despite* who founded it, and how."

Pelia stood, shaking her head. "Men!" she said, and smiled. "Eddas, despite what you may think, someday, you will realize that the Hyperborean people will be respected *because* of you, not in *spite* of you. Someday, you will understand that to my eyes and the eyes of all your other courtesans, even Dyarzi in the afterlife, the terrible, dishonoring things that have happened to you have not lessened your honor -

they have *ennobled* you." Pelia grinned. "Now come. It's time for you to begin the afternoon lessons, and we have an announcement to make about Lyota that will make her sisters very proud of her - and perhaps a bit jealous, as well."

I nodded as we walked to the stairs. "Probably," I replied, though I wasn't sure whether or not that was a good thing.

Chapter Three

"Her hair was the color of the leaves of her tree, her skin the color of it's bark. But her eyes! Her eyes shifted from moment to moment. Brown, mostly, but sometimes hazel, sometimes green, sometimes blue, sometimes gold... It was all in how the light struck them. Ah, Rhane! My single night with you has spoiled me for other women. Only Dame Raven ever challenged your place in my heart - but she loved another, and could not love me in return. That is the true curse of the Dryads, I think, and their true danger. Not that they will take a man away for a dozen or even a score of years, but that ever after, they will have stolen his heart."

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

Spring came, and the warmer weather brought the trees of my lands to life again, rippling in the breezes which passed over them like a green ocean of leaves. Normally, Joy would be sitting with me on the parapet, enjoying the view - but knowing what I had planned for today, Joy had chosen to remain in her room at the base of my tower. And, in retrospect, that was probably a wise decision, given what I would be doing today. Casually, I flicked another stone from the sack I'd collected into the air.

With a massive blast that echoed out over the stillness of my lands, the stone I had tossed from the parapet of my tower vanished in an explosion of lightning thirty cubits wide.

I sighed. "No, no, Lyota. Concentrate. Focus the area of the spell to just strike the stone."

Lyota sighed with exhaustion, and probably no little amount of frustration, brushing a stray strand of ebony hair from her eyes. "I am trying, Master Eddas, but it is quite difficult. It is *so* much easier to simply let the spell flow, and catch the stone somewhere in a larger area," she said, then looked at me. "If I may, why is it important to learn to focus the spell so it affects only the stone itself? Is not the purpose of an area-effect battle-spell to affect as large an area as possible? That is how healing-magic works - focusing on a single spot of the body isn't important, unless one is dealing with a wound or broken bone."

"It is important because *precision* is important. You must not merely have control of your will, but *precise* control of your will, and the ability to focus your will *instantly*. In this exercise, you learn to cast quickly, smoothly, and at an instant's notice. You learn to keep your eyes on the target, focusing your will on them to affect only what you wish to affect. In battle, ranks of friendly and enemy troops may be quite close - you want to be able to cast spells at an instant's notice that will only smite the enemy, and not injure friendly troops in the bargain. Precision is critical to a battle-mage - and, in truth, it's critical for all of the higher sorceries," I replied, then placed the sack of stones at my feet, and leaned against the edge of the parapet.

"Lyota, I have an enormous amount of respect for your mother, and all the Mountain Healers. If I did not, I would not have agreed to take them as my courtesans. Still, the sorcery they know is, in truth, not the most complex of sorcery, and the most complex spell they know could easily have been mastered by any journeyman battle-mage in a few days to a week or so. Healing spells function by assisting the body in doing what it is *already* trying to do, anyway. This, in truth, is why I could never repair Joy's condition - her body is tiny for a giant, but this is the way it was meant to be, and the way her germ plasm is set to be. There is, as far as her body is concerned, nothing wrong - thus, no healing spell can repair the

condition. Spells that *can* make her larger force the body to assume a shape it does not wish to, warping the very fabric of her existence into a new shape - and that, Lyota, is a far more complex sorcery than any that the Mountain Healers know."

As Lyota nodded, I gestured off the parapet. "That spell you've been casting for the past quarter hour, now - you have mastered it in a matter of days. Many young men I once trained, despite possessing a strong and vital *Talent*, took months to master its intricacies. Yet, though you are *very* skilled, you must learn *control* if you are to truly be considered a full mage and capable of learning the higher sorceries, and not merely a journeyman." I shrugged. "Despite appearances, this is actually the simplest and most effective way of learning the kind of control I have, myself - and also serves to make you more effective, should someday you need to use your spells to defend your life or the lives of the other women of Iolo Mountain."

"Perhaps, Master Eddas," Lyota said, her head still bowed, "if you showed me how it was done, I might see better what you meant?"

I paused, thinking, then nodded. "Possibly. You *can* see *mana*-flow effortlessly. Perhaps if you watched me, you may learn," I said, and reached down to lift up the sack of rocks again, placing it on the edge of the parapet. "Well, you've been working at this for a quarter of an hour - you're probably quite tired. We'll let you rest a bit. Cast a few of these stones and watch, and then we'll stop for lunch."

Lyota nodded, reaching into the bag for a stone, then casting it off the edge of the parapet. I lashed out with my will, briefly rattling off the same spell Lyota had been casting as I flicked my hand towards the flying stone. It was immediately enveloped in a small, brilliant globe of electricity, barely larger than it was. The report of the explosion was far less, and the stone itself vanished to vapor under the intense heat and pressure applied.

"Ah! It's like a funnel!" Lyota exclaimed, grinning.

"A what?" I replied, looking at her curiously.

Lyota bowed her head. "Your pardon, Master Eddas, but I meant that the way you applied your will compared to how I was applying mine was like that of a bucket compared to a funnel. I simply opened my will, and let the energies flow. Your will was more focused - and as a result, you applied far less effort to gain the effect you wanted than I did." Lyota then looked up. "May I try again?"

"Have you rested enough?"

"Well, not really, Master Eddas - but I am eager to try again, anyway," she said, and grinned.

I nodded, extending my hand and summoning my staff to my grip at a thought. I gestured, casting a simple spell of transference, drawing lightly from my staff as I cast upon Lyota, restoring a bit of her endurance. Lyota smiled, and stood a bit straighter. "There. That should tide you over, for the moment," I said, and set my staff aside. Reaching into the sack, I withdrew another stone. "Ready?"

"Ready!" Lyota replied, her eyes shining.

I flicked the stone into the air, and Lyota cast her spell again. A heartbeat later, the stone vanished in a small explosion, perfectly done.

I struggled not to gape. It took an ordinary journeyman weeks, sometimes *months* to master that technique. And yet she had understood it the moment she finally saw me *do* it, gazing at me with the enhanced vision she had. After a long moment, I grinned. "Oh, well done! Well done, indeed!" I called,

and clapped my gloved hands together in polite applause.

Lyota smiled and made a small curtsy, though I could tell by the beaming smile on her face that she was leaping for joy, inside. "Thank you, Master Eddas. It was very much the difference between a bucket and a funnel - I was trying to control my will as one might gently tip a bucket, trying to pour out less - which, in the end, is actually harder. Your method was more like a funnel, and was more efficient, as you said."

I grinned. "Well, remember what you've learned today, Lyota - for that exact method is critical to mastering the greater sorceries. Particularly when summoning demons and elementals - one must be very precise in one's summoning, so as not to summon something too powerful for one to control."

Lyota gaped. "Will you actually teach me to do that?!"

I nodded. "As the years pass, I will teach you everything I know," I replied, then grinned wryly at her. "Though, at the speed you learn, I imagine you'll have mastered it all by tomorrow."

Lyota giggled. "Thank you, Master Eddas, but I doubt it will be as easy as all that. I peeked at your book on magic theory, *The Mathematics of Magic*, just yesterday - and even though I *know* it was written in our language, I could hardly understand any of it past the tenth chapter."

I chuckled. "It's not a schoolbook to be read from beginning to end, but a book of theory, Lyota," I replied, and smiled. "We'll be reading and working from it as the years progress, and you'll have your own copy of it, as well."

"Are you *quite* finished with all the loud noises out here, Old Man?" a voice called.

Lyota giggled, and I turned to smile at Joy as she stood in the doorway leading back into my room. "Yes, Joy, we're quite finished for today. Lyota needs to rest and eat, and then you can resume teaching her the language of the Giants this afternoon."

"Well, good! I was verging on getting a headache from that, Old Man, and if you hadn't told the giants what to expect, I'm sure the whole of Dohbari village would have dashed over here, thinking there was some kind of trouble. You *really* need to find quieter ways to instruct your students, Old Man," Joy said teasingly as we walked inside and sat at my table. I gestured, rattling off a spell of conjuration to summon a simple bowl of oatmeal and a pitcher of water for each of us. Joy made a face. "And you *really* need to learn a better spell than that, Old Man."

"Why? What's wrong with it?" I asked, rising to fetch some spoons.

"Old Man, it may not bother *you*, but after twenty years as your companion, I am beginning to wonder if that body you find yourself in has any tastebuds at *all*! Don't you *tire* of the same thing, day after day?!"

"Well, yes. That's why I traded for that dwarven blunderbuss about fifty years ago. It allows a bit of variety in the fall, with a bit of wild game, and some mild sport in hunting," I replied, and shrugged. "Besides - it's not *real* oatmeal, anyway. As conjured food, it's as nutritious as anything else I could manage with hunting or what you get from your garden. It only happens to look and taste like oatmeal, because I didn't put any effort into it."

"Well, *put* some effort into it, Old Man. Please! My garden won't bear fruit until at least midsummer, and the whole notion of having to endure what *you* consider food until then leaves me quite nauseous," Joy replied, and Lyota struggled to stifle a giggle.

"Well, I suppose I'm predisposed to like it, simply because I spent so many years conjuring it for myself. I'm just used to it, I guess." I extended my hand, my staff flashing from where I left it on the parapet to

my fist, then smiled. "Here - I'll try again." I drew lightly from my staff, concentrating, and cast slowly and carefully. I took a full minute in weaving the spell, then released the last syllable of the incantation with a precise gesture.

Joy grinned as three bowls of steaming-hot stew appeared before us on the table, brimming with meat, carrots and potatoes. "Now, *that's* more like it, Old Man! Why don't you conjure meals like this all the time?"

Lyota giggled. "Because it takes more effort, Auntie Joy, and feeds exactly the same. I know it sounds silly because you can't see it at all, yourself, but... Well, despite what those bowls of stew look and smell and taste like, their auras show they're exactly the same as the bowls of gruel sitting next to them - conjured food. And, Master Eddas spent as much energy conjuring *one* of those bowls of stew as he spent conjuring *all three* bowls of gruel. If he did that all the time, he'd be spending more energy to conjure the food than he would be getting back from the food itself - eventually, he'd starve."

I nodded, smiling to Lyota. "Precisely, my dear," I replied, setting my staff aside and going to get the spoons.

Joy blushed. "I'm sorry - I didn't know. I thought... Well, I thought it was just old habits, and you simply were being lazy, Old Man. I'm sorry."

I gave Joy a glower, but Lyota burst out laughing. "Oh, Auntie Joy! Of *anyone* I've ever met, I'd say Master Eddas is perhaps the *least* lazy of all! I wish you could see him as I do - his aura just *glows* with strength and determination! Well, he's got a few red blotches floating around in his inner aura at the moment because he's a little annoyed you would think him lazy, and now some orange blotches are popping up because he knows I can see his emotional state in his aura and he's a tiny bit embarrassed that I'm talking about it, but really - there isn't a single bit of laziness in him, Auntie Joy."

Joy grinned at me, and chuckled. "Well, I'm still sorry - I didn't know."

Lyota laughed, and pointed to Joy. "Ah, I love it when people laugh! Silver sparkles! The more laughter, the wilder and happier the sparkles fly!" She then sighed a little, smiling. "Oh, Auntie Joy! I only wish both of you really *could* see things as I do. You'd be *so* much happier, I think. Master Eddas is really quite a handsome man inside that body, and you are really quite the lovely giantess inside yours. It's marvelous, really."

"I still find it amazing that you can see that at all," Joy replied as I handed her a spoon. "Tell me again - what would I really look like if my body matched my soul?"

"Well, you have to understand that the soul is something I see *inside* you, not overlaid atop you. Like a flame inside a lantern, the body contains it. The aura is like the light that comes from the lantern. Master Eddas can see the aura with his spells, but he can only see the soul when it is projected from the body, through sorcery. Understand?" Lyota asked as I handed her a spoon. Joy nodded, starting into her stew, and Lyota continued. "Well, if body matched soul, you'd be about sixteen cubits tall, your face much rounder and the nose much broader, more like a giantess than a human. By giantish standards, you'd be just as beautiful as you are to our eyes, now. All else would be about the same - hair, eyes, and so on. Well, except you'd be a bit broader, proportionally, as giants are a bit broader than humans. And as blonde hair and blue eyes is ever so rare among the giants, you'd be ever so much more beautiful for having it."

I nodded, taking a moment to cast a spell of astral vision, then pointing with my spoon. "That kink in her aura, there. That's what's made her our size - or nearly our size, at any rate. It's also what makes her blonde and blue-eyed - that's how I noticed it in the first place, seventy years ago," I added, then started

into the stew.

"What's caused that, Master Eddas? I mean, I know that it was caused because her mother, when she was little, was caught in the very edge of a *mana*-storm. But what caused the change exactly?"

"The *mana*-energies released in a *mana*-storm are chaotic, and reality-altering. At its full strength, the very atoms of existence break down in multiple, random transformations, eventually being converted into pure energy and absorbed by the storm itself. Her mother was brushed by the very edge of a *mana*-storm, and her overall form remained intact - but her germ-plasm was altered, and that caused her child, Joy to grow like a human, rather than a giant," I replied, looking up from my stew. "Look - here, here and here. Her body is that of a giantess - just a midget one."

Joy blushed slightly at Lyota's gaze, which slowly became unfocused as she continued to look at Joy, studying her astral aura more and more intently. Joy tried to absorb herself in her stew, and looked very much like she regretted even starting the conversation in the first place. After a long moment, Lyota blinked, then looked back to me, resuming eating. "How very strange... Master Eddas, wouldn't that mean that Giants and Humans are related? I mean... Auntie Joy was able to have children through her husband, King Darian."

I nodded. "Yes. Humans are related to giants, elves, dwarves, dryads, naiads, lamias, gorgons, ogres, goblins, hobgoblins, kobolds, centaurs, mer-folk, minotaurs, manticores, and a few other creatures. Some, like dryads, naiads and elves, they're related to closely enough to interbreed, but the rest they are not - particularly the fell beasts. And with dryads and naiads, the offspring is always another dryad or naiad, and really, human males are the only way dryads and naiads can reproduce at all. Technically, though, it isn't quite accurate to say these races are related to humans - it's more accurate to say that all these races are related to *each other*. The *how* of this relationship remains a subject of myth and speculation, however, as apparently the lines twine together back when the world was new, and the gods were not quite old," I said, and shrugged as I swallowed another mouthful of stew. "That Joy was able to bear Darian's children is more a function of her peculiar germ-plasm than it is any relation to giants that humans may have."

"Hmph. Myth and speculation, eh, Old Man?" Joy said with a snort. She was a giantess, after all, and she held the beliefs of the giants to be true.

I nodded politely, phrasing my words carefully so as not to offend. "Well... Yes, Joy. You see, each race has their *own* origin story, and each believes their particular version to be true. Most are similar at the start. The Creator spoke the WORD, and formed the universe from the endless Void. However, after that point, the beliefs of each race diverge. The giants, for instance, believe that the 'Little People', as they call humans, sprang from the tears of a widowed, childless giant-wife. We Hyperboreans, in turn, believed that the first giant and giant-wife were awakened from vast statues carved in a mountainside by a lonely god. Other races have similarly divergent origin stories for themselves and for the other races of the world."

Joy made a *moue'* at that last notion, but Lyota simply gazed thoughtfully at me. "So which is right, Master Eddas?" Lyota asked, heedless of Joy's reaction.

I shrugged. "It's impossible to say, really. Any one of them could be correct. It's even entirely possible that *all* of them are true - so far as the scholars and researchers of my day were able to determine, the world is thousands of millions of years old, and the universe itself perhaps even older. Back then, the Arc of Time was just forming, and reality wasn't the absolute thing it is, today. The elves know the origins of a few of the races which arose following the beginning of elven history - dryads, naiads, minotaurs and a handful of others. The written histories of the elves are by far the oldest, but their histories only stretch

back about forty or fifty millennia. Beyond that, even they don't know for certain - and fifty thousand years is only an eyeblink of time compared to the age of the world. And as I said, reality back at the beginning of time wasn't absolute, as it is today, it was relative. *All* the explanations each race has may, indeed, be true - or even *none* of them. It's impossible to say." I shrugged again, taking another mouthful of stew before I continued. "The dragons know, of course. They're immortal, barring accident or injury, they're universally recognized as being the first race to set foot on this world, and they've seen it all from the beginning of time to now. But, they won't talk about it."

"They won't?" Lyota asked, puzzled. "Why not?"

"I think they just enjoy being mysterious," I replied, and winked, which caused both Joy and Lyota to giggle. "Still, I've often thought that another reason might simply be that they don't feel we're ready to know. Or, perhaps, the truth of the gods and the origins of the different races of our world might be intertwined with Self-Determinism, and the formation of the Arc of Time - they may simply not be able to tell us, because of Paradox."

We ate in silence after that. Once I'd finished the stew, I slid the first bowl of gruel over and began eating it, as well. Joy looked at me curiously, and I simply shrugged at her. "I'll have to re-fill my staff, Joy, and that's tiring. The stew cost me more, sorry." Joy simply nodded, blushing.

About the time I was leaning back and patting a very full stomach, Lyota finally spoke again. "Master Eddas, you said that the elves know the origins of a few of the races?"

I nodded. "They know the origins of the dryads, naiads, minotaurs, and a few others. Those races arose after the beginnings of the written histories of the elves, which starts between forty and fifty millennia ago. The elves call them the 'Halfling Races', because they're half human - or appear to be partly human, at any rate. The origin of dryads is particularly well-detailed in their histories, as the race eventually became part of the Seelie Court. Most of the others are Unseelie - but not all."

"Well, what are their origins?" Lyota asked, her eyes shining. "I'm terribly curious!"

I chuckled. "Now, now. Each is a very long story, and you need to start this afternoon's lessons in giantish. The first and greatest ally of the Hyperboreans are the giants - thus, Joy's lessons are of critical importance."

"Ooo!" Lyota squeaked in frustration. "I already *can* speak their language! *All* of the Mountain Healers can!"

Joy chuckled. "Yes, but your accent is atrocious, Lyota, and you still need to learn more of the culture and ways of the giants." I suppressed a laugh - Joy had, in twenty years of living with me as my platonic companion, managed to teach me the language as well as helping me to overcome my depression about my situation. Yet, learning the language of the giants hadn't been easy, and it was many years before Joy ceased to complain about my own accent. "Come," Joy called, rising to her feet. "You can pester Eddas this evening for the stories," she said, and winked. "I'll probably join you - he can spin quite a tale once you get him going."

Lyota rose to go downstairs and begin her lessons, when I held up a gloved hand. "Wait. Listen..." They paused, listening, and soon noticed what the sharp half-elven ears of the body I'd appropriated had heard - a low booming sound, like that of a distant drum. "A giant approaches. Come - let's go greet them."

A minute later, we stood at the base of my tower, watching as Strongarm slowly approached. He was, in many ways, much like his father had been in his youth, and resembled him strongly - save that he wore the patchwork cowhide garments of an ordinary male of his people, rather than the dragon-hide armor of

his father. His hair was shoulder-length and black, his beard straight, with only a few gray hairs to show he was near his fortieth summer. On his back, he bore the enormous two-handed sword that the giants of the Ilbarsi mountains had forged, within a stiff sheath of thick, boiled cowhide he'd made himself. He walked carefully, his eyes on the narrow road, until he spotted us by the tower and was certain of where we were. The giants were particularly careful on my lands - they had a terrible fear of accidentally stepping on me, and killing the friend and ally of their village as I slept beneath a tree or worked on my plantation. Strongarm strode over to us, then went down to one knee to bring his head a bit closer to our level.

"What is it, my friend?" I called up to him in the language of the giants.

Strongarm let out an enormous sigh. *"My father has died, Eddas. He lay down for a nap before lunch today, and did not awaken."*

"Ah!" I exclaimed, and for a long moment, could say nothing more, tears of sorrow dampening my cheeks. Strongarm lowered his hand and extended a finger, and I hugged the digit (which was as thick as my leg). It was not unexpected - Dragonslayer was over ninety years old, and even for a giant, that was *quite* a long life. Felicity, his giant-wife, had died a decade before. No, it was not unexpected - only sad. Joy sobbed openly, though Lyota merely bowed her head politely, as she had only met Dragonslayer once, and did not know and love him as we did. Longtooth, the het-man of Dohbari village, had years ago told the other giants that my own sorcery to restore youth and even to bring back the dead would not work on their people - he told me he had done this to prevent me from being constantly pestered by giants from all across Hyperborea, seeking to restore their youth or their departed loved ones. I had agreed with his wisdom then, and still agreed with it now - though this did not make today's news any easier to bear.

Strongarm sighed again, his own cheeks damp with tears, then spoke again. *"We have prepared a place for him, Eddas. As the eldest surviving family, I would like to ask you to attend. You may even dig the grave, as my father once said you did for Strider."*

It was a great honor, of course, and I nodded my agreement. When I had finally managed to compose myself, I let go of Strongarm's finger, then looked to Joy and Lyota. "Lyota, use your spell of returning and let your mother and the others of the Mountain Healers know what has happened. I know that they will be very saddened, as they feel they owe much to Dragonslayer, but I'm afraid they can't come - the risk that a mourning giant might accidentally step on one of them or the children is too great. It will be enough that they avoid stepping on me. Take Joy with you, that she may at least be among friends during the funeral."

Of course, there was another reason they could not come, and it was not that they would be stepped on - it was that they simply were not invited. The funerals of giants were private affairs, usually limited to family and close friends. I was the only Little Person (as the giants called humans) that I knew of who had ever been invited to attend one - much less given the vast honor (and monumental task) of digging the grave. Of course, being a practical people, another reason their funerals had limited attendance was simply that any large collection of giants in any one spot tended to crush and destroy the very lands the giants themselves needed to grow food and raise animals.

"How long will you be gone, Master Eddas?" Lyota asked.

"At least three days."

Lyota nodded, then hugged me. "We will return then, Master Eddas." After Joy hugged me as well, the two joined hands. Lyota cast her spell, and they vanished.

"Take me there, my friend," I called to Strongarm. Strongarm nodded, lowering the back of his hand to the ground. I stepped onto it, then sat in his palm. Strongarm then rose to his feet, gently cradling me in his palm, turned, and strode off down the road, back to his village.

Chapter Four

"When a giant do yet breathe their last, the stones of the mountains do weep."

- Dwarven Proverb.

The last of the sod shifted into place over Dragonslayer, and I released the earth elemental I'd summoned to do the job with a quiet word of thanks. We had laid Dragonslayer to rest wearing his armor, the hide of the dragon he had slain so long ago, and with his mighty two-handed club by his side. The elemental had done a perfect job, and the grasses waved gently over the low mound where my old friend lay quietly. I stepped back, and Strongarm cleared his throat to speak.

"And now, the story of my father is complete. My father's legend was sung even during his lifetime among our people for his killing the evil dragon Chaorlog. It was attacking Bharo village, and slew any who opposed it in its quest to fill its belly. My father snuck up behind it while it gorged itself on the body of its latest victim, leapt upon its back where its claws would be useless, grabbed it by one of the horns on its head so it could not bite or breathe fire at him, then threw an arm around its neck and squeezed with all his strength so it could not breathe or speak to do sorcery. He wrestled it for nearly ten minutes before it finally collapsed from lack of air, and then he snapped its neck. And yet, there was more to his glory. He was the first to see the return of the Hyperboreans when he encountered Eddas Ayar in one of his regular patrols many years ago. He slew the madmen of the Black Tower as they sought to steal and rape the Healers of Iolo Mountain. He saw the first-born of Eddas' children, the new generations of Hyperboreans, who survive and prosper with one gender like the flowers of the fields, on the power of their mighty sorcery alone. It was Dragonslayer who slew thousands of goblins as they sought to rob the quiet ruins of our ancient friends, the Hyperboreans. It was Dragonslayer who crushed and dispersed the ogres that raided Wilanda-city, not five years before our friend, Eddas Ayar, returned from the Void. It was Dragonslayer who obtained for our people the black and good byallar beans from Eddas Ayar, which today give our village its wealth. All this and many more things he has done, some great, and some small - yet even the small things we shall remember. Yes, now, my father's story is done. Yet, his name will be sung for generations to come, until the stars grow dim and fall from the sky. We shall remember you, father, until the end of time."

Longtooth, the het-man of Dohbari village, nodded in approval to Strongarm. From his side, he lifted a barrel. Dipping his fingers within it, he sprinkled water across the grave - river water, mixed with the tears of all from the village. *"I bid thee rest well, old friend. We shall meet again in the afterlife."*

Longtooth then sat, and Dragonslayer's eldest daughter slid a drum before her. It was moderately sized, for a giant, being only four cubits wide, the skin of the drum being made of half a dozen scraped cowhides carefully sewn together. Gently placing it into her lap, she began to play it with her hands, and sing the legend of her father in a quiet, mournful voice.

I sat quietly, listening as the low, dull thuds of the drum and the quiet, alto rumble of Dragonslayer's daughter echoed over the spring hillside. The giants would stay like this for three days. Each, in turn, would sing what they knew of Dragonslayer's life, and together they would forge the final version of his song, which would be passed down for generations to follow. They would not eat, and they would only sip sparingly from the barrel of tears that Longtooth had brought. Such were their ways. I was not expected to sing, myself, and for that I was glad - I could not even see over the top of the drum, and

could hardly be expected to properly play it. Still, it would be placed before me, as I was a guest, and I would use my ring of flight to alight atop it, seat myself, and then make a speech about Dragonslayer's life - just as I had done for Strider, so many years before.

I gazed upon the final resting place of my old friend, then closed my eyes to meditate upon his life. It seemed that I would have some news to tell Arella when she arrived next year to visit. I wondered if my heart would be less heavy in the telling of it, a year from now.

Chapter Five

"Too many of our people do yet dismiss the giants as thick-skulled oafs. I, howe'er, do not. I did once think to make a study of their histories, and mayhap through them yet learn of the ancient past. But when I did ask them what books they might yet have of history, they did say they kept their histories not in books, but in their hearts. In song and poetry do they yet remember all the deeds of their people - and to recite the tale of the life of e'en one giant be yet often the work of a good hour. Aye, they mayhap be slow of thought, but I do challenge any dwarf to yet sit and listen to the deed-song of e'en the least of their people, and then do remember it in one sitting for the rest of one's life, e'en as they yet do. Slow of wit they may yet be, but they be hardly feeble of mind."

- King Gunim IV, *Commentaries on History*, 1348 NCC

The flickering light from the fireplace added to the moonlight that filtered in through the windows of my room in my tower. It was quite cozy and warm, and despite still being a bit tired and terribly hungry, I smiled. "Ah, Joy," I said between spoonfuls of conjured gruel, "you should have seen it. The funeral was well done - well done, indeed."

Joy nodded, smiling, but Lyota gazed at me with renewed respect. "You mean you really stayed awake all three days, Master Eddas? Without eating or drinking?"

I nodded. "It wasn't easy, but I managed it. I meditated to rest so I wouldn't fall asleep - if you practice the meditation lessons I've taught you, you'll be able to do the same. I did drink, however. The barrel of tears Longtooth brought was, after all, mostly river-water. It's a bit easier for the giants, as their metabolism is slower, and they have the ability to simply sit and endure it. Still, when it was finally over, everyone was completely exhausted. That, really, is part of the whole purpose of it. The work of forging the final song and singing your heart out and staying awake all that time... Well, it drains one completely, so that when you finally *do* sleep, the next morning, the pain of the loss is much eased. A giant-wife will go into ritual mourning for a year thereafter, of course, and if she is truly miserable, she may take the route of *baishanto* and starve herself to death. Yet, if the funeral is well done, she won't. She'll have cried herself out and be utterly exhausted by the end of three days, then she goes home and goes to sleep. When she finally awakens again and has some food and drink, she finds that much of the pain of her loss is eased. Of course, Felicity died a decade ago, so that wasn't even a consideration." I chuckled, shaking my head. "Still, it's very exhausting. I myself slept from the moment I cast my spell of returning and tossed myself in bed until the moment you two finally returned and awoke me - which is why my robe is so rumpled."

"Ooooh, I see - the grief is eased through enduring the ordeal," Lyota said, nodding. "The ways of the giants are good ways."

Joy grinned. "Yes, they are."

"Did you really *sing* though, Master Eddas?"

I shook my head, still eating. "No, not at all. I simply gave a speech, reciting all I could remember that he had ever done. Then, each time my turn came up thereafter, I added to the speech with another anecdote I'd recalled. And, of course, over three days of thinking about it, you remember quite a bit. The giants put my words to song for me, and made them rhyme. I've never sung in this body - I don't know if I even have the voice for it, and I decided that the funeral wasn't the time to try to find out. A giant's funeral is a *very* formal occasion, Lyota, and everything must be quite perfect."

"Do you remember the song you and the giants made?"

I rolled my eyes. "Lyota, after hearing it over and over for three days and being one of those who helped create it, I sincerely doubt I'll *ever* forget it."

"Ooo! Could you sing it to us now, Master Eddas?"

I shook my head, smiling. "Some other time," I replied, sliding the empty bowl away from myself and leaning back in my chair to stretch.

Joy grinned. "Come now, Old Man. Sing for us."

I took a long drink from the cup of hot *byallar* that Joy had brewed before I replied. "Joy, I've *never* sung in this body. I don't know if it even *can* sing - it may sound like the 'Raven of Yorindar' cawing, for all I know. Dragonslayer's song deserves better than that. Besides - you know what giantish Deed-Songs are like. It's an hour long, from beginning to end. This body would go hoarse trying to sing that long, since I've never practiced the skill."

Joy grinned again. "You're making excuses, Old Man. Come - just sing us the introduction and the synopsis from the beginning - you can skip the list of deeds and the conclusion. That's always the longest part, anyway."

"Yes, yes!" Lyota replied, clapping. "Please, Master Eddas!"

"But I don't even have a proper drum!" I replied, grasping at straws.

"Use your staff against the floor, then!" Joy shot back, grinning broadly. "Sing for us, Old Man. Sing us the Deed-Song of your old friend."

I sighed. "Well... Alright." Rising to my feet, I cast a brief cantrip to smooth my robe and shed three days of dirt from it - a useful little spell Pelia had taught me, one the Mountain Healers used to keep their robes so pristine white. I smoothed my hair, straightening the two raven-feathers beneath the silver hair-band, then held out my fist, my staff flashing to my grip at a thought. "Alright. A Deed-Song is a very formal thing, Lyota, and it must be sung with all propriety and formality. Not only is it the tradition of the giants and what my old friend Dragonslayer deserves, I'm quite sure Joy would be very annoyed with me if I didn't take it seriously," I said, and winked, causing Joy to grin and Lyota to giggle.

I paused, closing my eyes to collect my thoughts and recalling the song. In the language of the giants it was in anapestic tetrameter, and normally one played a drum to keep the rhythm. Lacking a drum, I simply rapped my staff sharply upon the floor, my eyes closed as I tried to remember it precisely.

"I sing now the song of a one who is gone,

I sing now the deeds of the dead in this song,

Hear now the deeds of one noble and strong,

That the deeds of Dragonslayer will ever live on."

I wasn't terribly pleased with how my voice sounded in my ears. It was difficult to judge, really. I remembered singing when I was in my former body, centuries ago, but it was merely battle-songs and tavern songs, sung while the ale was warm, the night cold and the glow of a victory in war was upon myself and my old friends. My voice then was a deep *basso profundo*, and hardly compared to the soprano of this body. Yet, now I was in this body, that of the Raven of Yorindar, and I would have to make the best of it. I knew Joy and Lyota were probably valiantly trying to suppress a giggle at the way I sounded, so I kept my eyes closed and simply concentrated on the song. I gave it my best effort, really - Dragonslayer deserved no less - but I was certain that the Raven of Yorindar possessed the voice of a raven long before I was even halfway through.

I worked my way through the introduction, which detailed Dragonslayer's birth and heritage, then launched into the synopsis. The synopsis was an important part, really, and was the part that would, as the years passed, be sung among the giants most often. It listed his greatest deeds, of course, but not in chronological order, but rather in an artistic order designed to be memorable and interesting. The list of deeds contained everything in chronological order, but I wouldn't be singing that at the moment. The conclusion, of course, contained mentions of his descendants, other notes about his life, and general moral lessons one might draw from his life. It was quite long, almost as long as the list of deeds itself, and I was glad I would be stopping at the synopsis.

Eventually, I reached the end of the synopsis, and stopped, opening my eyes. I then blinked in surprise.

Joy sat quietly weeping, daubing at her eyes with a kerchief. Lyota grinned broadly from ear to ear, and when she realized I was done, she applauded. "Oh, that was marvelous, Master Eddas!"

"It was?"

"Oh, yes, very much! And *oh!* The sparkles that flew from you while you sang! You were worried that body had a terrible voice, but it doesn't - it's quite beautiful."

"Like the singing of a bird," Joy agreed, nodding.

I chuckled. "To my ears, it sounded like the cawing of a raven - but I'll take your word for it."

A low, booming sound interrupted our conversation, and I paused. "A giant? At this time of night? Something must be terribly wrong for them to risk coming in the hours of darkness. It's after midnight, easily." I looked to Joy and Lyota. "Come along, you two. Let's go greet them."

We chatted as we walked down the stairs - Joy was very interested in the details of the funeral, of course. She had known Dragonslayer from meeting him several times when she lived on my lands with Darian, seventy years before, and had met him again since her return, twenty years ago. She liked him quite a bit - of course, to a giant, Dragonslayer was extremely difficult *not* to like. He was, in many ways, a giant's giant.

As we stepped outside my tower, Lyota suddenly gasped in alarm. Joy, however, screamed - startling me badly. It was not difficult to understand why Joy had screamed, however. She was, in the end, a giantess (although a very small one), and all giants were terribly afraid of ghosts.

And that was precisely what stood before us - the ghost of Dragonslayer, himself.

"Ah, Eddas... *It is good to see you again.*"

He had not died of violence, but simple old age, so there were no signs of violence on his body. His

ghost was simply an extremely large ectoplasmic form, all white, and somewhat translucent. He was dressed as he always was, in his dragon-hide armor, and bearing his massive two-handed club. His voice was firm and clear - Dragonslayer had a strong will when he was alive, and his ghost was focused, and clear of mind.

Joy yammered in terror (which didn't do Lyota's sense of courage any good), but I simply gazed calmly back at Dragonslayer. Ghosts were, in general, harmless. Though they could terrify you badly, only the most powerful of them could actually do anything to harm you. A wraith or revenant, of course, was a different matter - but Dragonslayer was hardly either of those. *"It is good to see you, as well, my friend. What brings you here, this evening?"*

Dragonslayer smiled, sitting lightly before us. *"Why, you do, my friend. You called, and I came."*

I blinked in surprise. *"I did?"*

"Yes, my friend. I heard your call as I wandered the endless, fertile fields of the Afterlife. I wanted to come... And somehow, I found your voice made it so I could. There were many there I knew, and many I did not. It is a lovely and peaceful place, Eddas. I can feel it drawing me even now... I shall not remain long, I think, even if I wished to. The pull of that place is too strong... What is it you wanted?"

I shook my head. *"Nothing, my old friend. My summoning of you was entirely by accident - though it was truly a pleasure to see you again, and have this chance to tell you how much you meant to me."* I reached out an ebon-gloved hand to him, and he held out a finger to me, as he often did to 'shake hands' with me when he was alive. My hand passed through his finger without resistance. *"You were and are my best friend among the giants, Dragonslayer, and I shall always remember you with love and respect."*

Dragonslayer smiled. *"And I, you, Eddas Ayar. Now that I can see you, truly see you beneath that garment of flesh... I can see you are a proud and noble man of the Little People. I am honored to have called you 'friend.'"* Dragonslayer rose to his feet with an ease he never could have managed in life, hefting his two-handed club on one shoulder. *"I can remain no longer, Eddas... I can feel the pull of those golden, lovely lands drawing me again. I shall simply say 'farewell', for now..."* He started to turn, then paused. *"Oh - I nearly forgot. Dyarzi sends her love, Eddas. And you were right - she is quite beautiful, even for a Little Person. Farewell..."* Dragonslayer then turned and walked away down the road, fading with each step, until he finally vanished before he reached the bend in the road.

I stood there, staring after him, struck speechless.

"It's alright, Auntie Joy, really. It was just a ghost. Nothing to worry about," Lyota said, trying to help Joy calm down. "I know they're a bit frightening, but that's part of their nature. Really, though, most are harmless. Master Eddas taught me."

Joy simply shuddered. "How you Hyperboreans can be so brave in the face of something like that, I will never understand!"

I simply gaped at the empty space where Dragonslayer's ghost had disappeared into. "He spoke with Dyarzi... My beloved..." I shook my head. "I don't understand... He said I called him - but I did no such thing! I simply sang his Deed-Song!"

"That's what I was trying to tell you before, Master Eddas," Lyota replied, hugging Joy for a moment. "You sang from your heart, your soul, of your old friend. That great knot of mana, there," she said, pointing to my chest, "that knot which maintains this body as it is... Well, it responded. I think it's far

more complex than you realize, Master Eddas. It's more than simply a knot of *mana*-energy forged in the heart of a *mana*-storm, as you once thought. I think that it's part of that artifact you told me of years ago, when I was younger - the Skull of Hyarlanoth. I think the enchantment which first bound you to this body is a part of it - and you retain some of the powers of that artifact, because of it. And more... I think it's growing, too, and absorbing more from the very enchantments you bear. Your song was a Song of Power, Master Eddas, and the power came from that knot of *mana* within you."

"Bah! That's impossible! Next you'll tell me I've become a Rune Singer!" I snorted.

Lyota visibly shrank at my gaze. "I don't know what that is, Master Eddas, I'm sorry," Lyota replied, bowing her head.

I sighed. "I'm sorry, too - this is a bit much for me, as well. I'm not quite the indomitable tower of strength Joy makes me out to be," I said, and smiled wanly. "Come - let's go inside so your Auntie Joy can have a bit of *byallar* to relax, and I'll explain."

Chapter Six

"...as dead as the Rune Singers."

- *Elven cliché.*

A few minutes later, we were seated around my table again in my room at the top of my tower. Joy had finished her second cup of *byallar*, and looked a bit less pale, though still not fully recovered from her fright. Lyota simply sat quietly, gazing at me. "So what *is* a Rune Singer, Master Eddas?"

I shrugged, pouring a cup of *byallar* for myself. "Well, countless ages ago, when the world was young, there was no separation between the mortals and the gods, and the word and the will warped the *mana* of our universe as desired. The universe, as it existed following the Creator speaking the WORD and forming it from the infinite Void, was chaos. Eventually, the gods established the Divine Compact, and forged the beginnings of the Arc of Time. Order was brought to the universe... But at a price, as *mana* could no longer be manipulated with the word and the will, but now only by those whose bodies and minds were attuned to it, through possession of the *Talent*," I explained, and Lyota nodded as I continued.

"Well, in our ancient legends, back when our race was young, there were two main schools of mages which emerged as we arose from the wilderness and began to build the foundations of our civilization - Rune Singers and Rune Weavers. This was, according to the elves, perhaps twelve thousand years ago, before the dawn of our own histories. Rune Singers cast spells by singing, their voices bending the forces of *mana* to their will through their songs. The notes of the melodies, you see, resonated with the proper frequencies of *mana* necessary to produce the desired effect. On the other hand, Rune Weavers cast spells through intricate gestures and dances, their bodies shaping the flow of *mana* to what they wished. The movements and gestures guided and controlled the *mana* that flowed through them naturally, you see, and thus produced the desired effect."

"Ah, I see," Lyota replied, nodding. "Whatever happened to them, Master Eddas?"

I sipped my *byallar* for a moment, remembering my own history lessons, ages ago. "Well, there was much debate between the two schools as to which sorcery was the 'true' method of sorcery - and this debate was only compounded by hundreds of minor variations in their knowledge and theory, as schools of "specialists" arose as the centuries passed. Some of these specialists focused on the elements, and became the first Warlocks, the Elemental Mages. Others focused on the power of nature, and became the first Druids... Sorceresses of nature, really. And there were dozens more "specialists" with their own

pet theories of magic, none of which truly agreed with any of the others."

Joy, who had regained a bit of her composure, finally snorted. "Knowing the stories you like to tell, Old Man, I'll bet they all had a big fight."

I grinned wryly. "Well, yes. Eventually, this debate over which theory was the one 'true' theory broke out into a war - a war of sorcerers. The details of the war weren't really known to the scholars of my day, though the elves know bits of it, here and there. The first *mana*-storms to rage across our world occurred during that war, and many were caught within the effects. Manticores, minotaurs, and several other 'Halfling' races arose at that time, as did the Dryads and Naiads. You once asked what their origins were, Lyota. Well, that's their origin - their ancient ancestors were circles of sorceresses who specialized in the powers of nature. Caught in the wake of those ancient *mana*-storms, they were transformed, and bonded to their knowledge and powers in a way that defies understanding."

Lyota nodded. "Ah, I see - so the dryads were bound to the trees they once drew power from, and the naiads to the streams and rivers they drew power from?"

I nodded. "Indeed," I replied, then shrugged. "Well, little is known beyond that point, really. What is known is that from all that conflict, one type of sorcery emerged among humans - the path of the Mage, which you have learned, and will continue to learn as the years pass. We speak incantations which contain the runes of power the Rune Singers once sang, and we use gestures which contain elements of the somatic methods of the Rune Weavers. Yet, we also rely on formulas, theories and knowledges far more advanced than that the Rune-Weavers, the Rune-Singers, or any of their contemporaries once knew. And, as you will discover, in the end, the path of the Mage is the 'one true path' that all these early divergent schools were seeking - and the same path nearly all the older races before us had already discovered, such as the elves and the dwarves. Yet, the true moral of the story, I think, is that there *is no* 'one true path' - magic is like song, and like dance. There is no one single way to sing, and no one single way to dance. The path of the Mage is the *best* way, and the path of the battle-mage best of all as it leads to enormous power, but it is not the *only* way," I explained, and pointed to my bookshelf.

"I've detailed what I've been able to learn or discern of these ancient theories over the years in my book, *The Mathematics of Magic*. We'll study them as we go along, and you'll see what I mean. All those early paths - the Rune Singer, the Rune Weaver, the Cabalist, the Ayurvedician, the Ecognostic, the Necromancer, the Shaman, the Illusionist, the Noetecist, the Summoner, the Sciologist, the Elementalist... They're all there, as best as I could record what little I've managed to document of them over the years, both in my previous life from perusing the works of scholars and researchers of my own day, and in this life, perusing the records of the elves. Their paths were weaker than the path of the Mage, really... But in their own very limited area of focus, they were quite strong. Some, indeed, are still used today. The giants and many other races still follow the path of the Shaman, as they have since the beginnings of their race, and goblin-mages still follow the path of the Sciologist, as they have since the dawn of time," I explained, and wagged a gloved finger at her. "And speaking of which, if you ever have to fight a goblin-mage, try to fight them either in full light or full dark. Each of them is a Sciologist, Lyota - they follow the path of the Shadowjack and the Shadowmaid, and as such they draw strength from shadows."

"Yes, Master Eddas - I'll remember."

Joy, apparently curious, was beginning to ask a question when suddenly there was a small shimmer in the air, and Swift-wing appeared on the mantle of my fireplace. "Ah! Greetings, my little friend," I called, grinning at the little raven. "What brings you here tonight?"

Swift-wing fluttered over to the table, squawking. "Raven! Raven! Come quickly! Trouble! Danger!"

Death! Catastrophe!"

"What has happened?"

"It's too long to explain! You must come with me right away! It's very urgent!" he squawked, flapping his wings wildly.

"Swift-wing, calm yourself. If it's as urgent as all that, you'll need to take me back to Arella in a moment, and you may mis-cast if you're not in control of yourself. Alright? Now calm yourself."

"Alright, Raven, I'll try," Swift-wing replied, shaking himself violently. Joy and Lyota sat quietly, though I could tell Joy was very nervous about what might be wrong at Steelgate, wondering if anything had happened to her son.

"Look - you're so nervous, you're shedding feathers," I said, pointing to a long black feather that fluttered across the table from beneath Swift-wing's tiny body. "You'll never cast a spell of returning in this state. Calm yourself."

"That's *not* my feather!" Swift-wing squawked. "Feathers are *not* like *mammal* hair, they don't just fall out without you noticing! That's a tail-feather, and tail-feathers have little sockets they go in and when they fall out you *notice* it because it's *very uncomfortable* so that's not *my* feather, it must be *yours!*"

I reached down to the table with an ebon-gloved hand, lifting the feather and examining it. In a flash of insight, I knew what it was, and what it meant.

My long wait had finally ended. Yorindar needed me again, and the storm I had sensed twenty years ago looming on the horizon had finally broken.

A chill went down my spine, and I smiled to Swift-wing to hide my true feelings. "Why, so it seems, my little friend. It does appear to be mine," I replied, and slipped the feather beneath my silver hair-band, beside the other two I already had. "Are you calm enough to take us back to Arella?"

"I'm as calm as I'll ever be, considering the situation," Swift-wing snapped.

"Then let us be off," I called, holding out my wrist. Swift-wing fluttered to perch upon my wrist, then muttered his spell of returning. In a moment, the world blurred, and we were gone.

[Chapter Seven](#)

"The pain of that day has never eased, even now, decades later. I still weep at the memory, at times."

- King Noril, Autobiography, 1729 NCC

Arella was weeping.

The room itself, once the royal bedchambers at Steelgate, was smashed and burned, the furniture blasted to flinders, and some of it still smoking from the sorcerous battle. The stones of the walls, clearly visible beneath the tattered and burned remains of the tapestries, bore the deep, long scars of tremendous blasts of lightning and fire. The oak support beams here and there still smoldered, and the floor was covered in ashy puddles from where Arella had, apparently, taken a moment after the battle to extinguish the fires with conjured streams of water.

And Arella was weeping.

The corpse over which Arella knelt was hardly recognizable as human. Charred beyond recognition in the fire and blasted by stray bolts of sorcery during the battle, it was little more than a pile of smoking flesh gathered by trembling hand. The stench of burnt flesh was strong in the air, smelling nauseatingly similar to that of roast pork. The corpse was, indeed, totally unrecognizable. It was difficult to believe it had once been the beautiful Queen Lyssa.

And Arella was weeping. As I looked at her, I realized she would, in all likelihood, weep over this moment for the rest of her life.

I brushed past King Noril and Commander Tybalt, who both tried to speak at once. Arella looked up at Swift-wing's gentle landing upon her shoulder, and saw me. "Oh, Raven!" she sobbed, and threw herself into my arms. I held her quietly, and stroked her back with my free hand.

"I tried, I tried so hard!"

"There, there, Arella. Tell me what happened."

"It was... It was *him*! Cordo! But he was... He was more horrible than I could ever possibly have imagined!"

I nodded - Cordo, once the self-proclaimed high-master of the Dyclonic Circle and my mortal enemy, had also been altered by the same mana-storm that had forged this body - but in his case, his will had been insufficient. His flesh now resembled that of a half-melted wax statue, and he was a true horror to behold. Though, in truth, his outer flesh only reflected the seething, rotting madness in his heart.

"My Lady Raven, we... *I* am truly glad to see you again," King Noril said, casting aside the royal 'third person' for the moment. "The crown has need of you, the Defender of the Realm, in this, our darkest hour."

"Tell me what happened, the three of you," I said, looking to Noril and Javan as I patted Arella's back.

Javan shook his graying head. "There is little we can tell you - I and the king were the first here, but... By then, the room was aflame, and blasts of sorcery split the air - we could not approach until it was all over. Afterwards, we found this..." he said, waving a hand at the room. "The queen dead, and the heir missing. And though that is the worst of it, it is hardly all."

"I would have helped if you'd let me! You told me to stay away!" Swift-wing squawked at Arella.

I shook my head. "You'd have died, my friend, and your death would have weakened Arella in the midst of a mage's battle - and then *she* would be dead, as well. Now come - enough of this. Tell me what happened."

Slowly, in bits and pieces, the story came out - or, at least, as much as the living knew. There had been a commotion of some kind. Shrieking, and running feet - the sounds of sharp explosions. Arella had come running, and seen guards slain by sorcery, their bodies blasted asunder by lightning. When she ran inside the royal bedchambers, the light from the fireplace cast eerie, flickering shadows - and into those shadows, Parial seemed to disappear. In the center of the room, laughing at the queen, was Cordo himself. Arella was horrified. Arella had never seen Cordo before his flesh had been melted and fused by the same *mana*-storm which had altered myself - he once was considered somewhat handsome by the women of my day. Now, however, she looked at him, and saw only the 'Rabid Wolf' of Yorindar's prophecy. She was horrified. She was nauseated. She had been shocked into a moment's hesitation.

And in that moment's hesitation, Cordo, with a ringing laugh, slew Parial's cowering mother with a searing

blast of flame.

I had trained Arella well, and she was, in the end, an accomplished battle-mage. She cast her defensive spells, then began casting upon Cordo. Their battle lasted for many minutes, and set the room ablaze - yet, for all Arella's skill, she could do little more than smash Cordo into the walls from time to time. For his part, he wore Arella down, and probably would have slain her eventually - but, he suddenly swayed, as though drunk or exhausted. Before Arella realized what he was doing, he'd cast a spell of returning, and vanished, leaving her in the blazing room. Arella extinguished the fire with an incantation I'd taught her which conjures a blast of water - useful for not only suppressing rioting crowds but also for extinguishing a blaze.

I stroked my chin thoughtfully with an ebon-gloved hand, idly missing my once-flowing beard. "Hmm... He probably left simply because it was growing too hot for him, Arella. I learned the Spell of Adaptation when I was first beginning my quest for a way to bring Dyarzi back to me - and later picked up a ring of adaptation so I might explore the hostile environments of the elemental planes for an answer. I taught you the spell simply because I found it useful, and thought you might need it. The other members of the Dyclonic Circle never really needed such sorcery - a simple coat in winter and a light robe in summer was all they ever needed. Now, with Cordo's flesh melted, much of his skin is gone, fused with the flesh beneath. He probably can't sweat enough to stay cool, and suddenly realized he was swooning from the heat of the room. It was probably like an oven. An interesting weakness... I'll have to keep it in mind." I smiled, then reached out and hugged Arella tightly. "You did well, Arella. Truly."

"But I couldn't stop him! The queen is dead, and Parial is missing!" Arella sobbed.

"True. But any lesser mage would simply be *dead*, Arella. You are the most powerful mage in the Southlands - and I should know, as I trained you, myself. Simply surviving against Cordo may not seem like much, to you, but it is enough to me to prove that you learned your lessons well." I turned to look to King Noril and Javan Tybalt. "I'll have to ask that the two of you leave, now. I'll call when you may re-enter."

"But-" Noril started, but I silenced him with a glare. The alien cast to this body's features gave it a gaze of steel - and I used that gaze, now.

"Your royal majesty, I am about to do some things that you, as a mundane, would find extremely disturbing, deeply horrifying, and possibly even maddening. There are some aspects of being a mage that it is best a mundane never know."

Noril glowered back - he had his father's backbone, of that, there was no doubt. "I am no *peasant* to be frightened of sorcery, nor am I totally unfamiliar with the workings of a mage. Arella-tor has been my court wizardess all my life, and I am not in any way afraid of anything you may do."

"This is *well* beyond anything you may have ever seen or experienced before, your highness. You should take my advice, and leave for the nonce."

"Just tell me what you shall do, Dame Raven," Noril replied, crossing his arms defiantly, much as he might have when I first knew him as a young prince.

"Alright, I will," I replied dryly. "First, your story, while interesting, does not tell me where the prince may be. I need more information - and there's only one place to get it. Thus, I am going to cast a spell of communication with the dead upon that charred husk over there, which once was your beloved wife. It will speak, as though alive - but it will not be. In truth, I won't even be speaking to her spirit, itself. The spell animates the corpse, filling it with UnLife energy, which then reads the patterns impressed upon the flesh by the spirit it once housed, and answers in its stead. As the corpse is so badly damaged, it will

probably disintegrate somewhat in the process of the spell - little bits of burned and roasted flesh dropping off here and there while I chat with it. Assuming your sanity can withstand seeing that, which I *sincerely* doubt because you loved your wife very much, you'll then see me repair the corpse with another spell, so that you'll have something that will at least be presentable for the funeral. I doubt Arella found all the pieces of it amongst the wreckage of this room, so the skittering of charred and burned bits of flesh as they dance across the floor to rejoin the corpse will probably put the finishing touches on what will be a budding madness in your brain." I gestured sweepingly towards the corpse with my staff. "Shall we begin, your highness? I'm quite busy, and if you're dead-set on being horrified to the pit of your soul, we may as well get on with it."

Noril blanched, and Javan looked like he was about to be ill. "You don't... You don't have to be so crude about it, Dame Raven," Noril said once he'd recovered himself.

"Oh, yes I do, your highness. I am a Defender of the Realm, by your father's edict - and more, I am the *Raven of Yorindar*. I will do *whatever is necessary* to protect *you*, Darian's heir, from destroying yourself through madness - and I will do *whatever is necessary* to recover *your* heir safely, even if I have to search the far corners of the universe or even *batter down the gates of hell* to find him! You would expect nothing less of me, and I would demand nothing less of myself."

Noril paused, gazing at me for a long moment in silence. I was, in truth, far from the woman he'd met twenty years ago. The transformation the *mana*-storm wrought in this body had given it a terrifying, surreal, intimidating beauty - an appearance perfectly suited to the Raven of Yorindar.

Finally, Noril nodded. "I'm sorry... I... I had forgotten just who it was you really were. Twenty years had softened my memory of you, Dame Raven, and somehow I thought of you as being just another mage, though a very ancient one... A family friend, a teacher... I had forgotten that while you *are* all that, you are also far *more* than that." Noril sighed deeply. "Alright... I'll go, for now. Call when you are done," Noril said, and bowed. "And thank you, Dame Raven... For everything."

"You're welcome, your highness," I replied politely, and Javan and Noril withdrew, closing the door behind them.

I walked over to the corpse, knelt, and began examining the head and skull, to see if it was intact enough for a communication spell to work. "So how is Dawn handling this?" I asked, mentioning the king's sister.

"I... She..." Arella replied, staring at me. Finally, she shook herself. "I don't know. Noril said she was alright, and Commander Tybalt said he has his best warriors guarding her room."

"Pfft. They wouldn't stop a decent mage, and you know it. None of them have trained to face *real* sorcery, like a warrior of Hyperborea," I replied, moving the jaw with a gloved hand. Charred flesh crackled and fell, but the bones seemed alright. That was all the spell required, anyway - a reasonably intact skull. "One of you two should be with her, to try to reassure her everything will be alright."

"*Will* everything be alright, Raven?" Swift-wing asked.

"I've no idea - but you should tell them it will, anyway. It'll help keep them calm for what lies ahead. And I've a feeling that this is only the beginning. Swift-wing, you can go. Just be kind and reassuring."

Arella looked at me poking about the corpse, picking up bits of charred flesh that lay nearby and tossing them atop it, and turned green. "I think... I think *I* should go, Raven. Swift-wing has a far stronger stomach than I, and I think I've had about all I can take, for the moment."

I nodded. "Drink some water, and spend some time with her. Swift-wing will let you know when to

return."

Arella nodded, quickly stepping over to the door, dashing through, and slamming it closed behind her.

"Do you really think some water will help her?" Swift-wing asked, his gaze unfocused for a moment as he sensed Arella's feelings through their mental link. "She seems very ill, to me."

"Probably not. The best it will really do is give her something to vomit, if it comes to that."

Swift-wing blinked, then focused a beady black eye on me, cocking his head. "And this doesn't bother you at all?"

"Honestly?"

"Yes."

"Not really, no. It was a bit shocking, at first, but I've seen worse," I replied, then chuckled. "Cordo, really, is far worse to look upon than the remains of Queen Lyssa. She's simply dead - Cordo looks worse than that."

Swift-wing cackled with amusement. "So once again, only we Ravens have the stomach for the true nastiness!" Swift-wing cackled again. "Ah, it's just like the old days!"

"And it's about to be more like those days in a moment. Do you have enough in your staff for a telekinesis spell?" I asked, nodding to the polished hematite ring around the shank of his foot.

"Yes, but not a long one," Swift-wing replied. "Why?"

"Because the jaw might fall off while I'm doing this, and the corpse is in such bad shape, it'll be hard enough just maintaining the spell. If it starts to come loose, support it a bit at the hinges. Don't grip it in your will, just steady it. Alright?"

"Alright. I'll be watching."

I nodded, and cast the spell of communication with the dead. There was a dry rattle as the UnLife energy took hold, the same energy that formed the basis for many undead creatures, and a few bits of flesh fell from the corpse.

"Tell me of the last few minutes of this body's life," I commanded.

"My son... I was to read a bedtime story... I went to his room... The candles flickered... From the shadows stepped two elves... Black hair, black eyes... Skin as white as snow... I took my son's hand... We ran... We came here... A hideous creature appeared... The elves snatched my son from my arms... Arella is at the door! Arella! FIRE! PAIN! ...then nothingness..."

"I've got it," Swift-wing called, seeing the jawbone start to slip, just as I feared.

"What were the elves wearing?"

"Black leather... Soft... Supple... Like armor, and yet... Not... A knife at each hip..."

I sighed. The dead could be so unhelpful at times. "Was there a crest or badge?"

"Yes... An embossed spider... Over the left breast..."

"Ah, now we're getting somewhere. Were they male or female?"

"Male, both..."

I nodded. "Enough," I commanded, and willed the spell to end. The corpse slowly relaxed, letting out a long, dreadful hiss as the UnLife energy dissipated. "You can let go, now," I called to Swift-wing, brushing my gloved hands clean against my robe.

Swift-wing nodded, and the jaw of the corpse fell, coming half-way free. "Brr... Is it always like that, with that spell?"

"Mmm? Like what?" I asked, rising to my feet.

"So... *Chilling*. It was like you were speaking to Queen Lyssa's ghost."

I shrugged. "Well, yes. But it's not their spirit at all. It's UnLife energy, the same as made the Army of the Dead, seven decades ago. The spell merely allows it to follow the patterns left in the flesh by the spirit which once inhabited it, and recall anything from that person's life. Similarly, a vampire is a spirit composed entirely of UnLife energy that inhabits a corpse - the original spirit is completely gone. The vampire uses the patterns left in the flesh by the original spirit that inhabited it, and pretends to be them, assuming their identity so as to more easily obtain their first few meals. Some vampires even awaken believing they *are* the deceased - though eventually they come to understand their true nature." I waved a hand at the room. "For now, search about a bit with your nose - your nose is considerably keener than mine, and we have to find all the parts of the corpse before I try to repair it. I don't want to leave anything here that might be nibbled upon by vermin or swept out with the trash or something equally horrid."

Swift-wing blinked. "But I thought you said you had a spell that would send all of the corpse skittering together? That's what you told King Noril!"

I grinned. "I lied. The effect's not that spectacular. I just wanted him to leave so he wouldn't be horrified by the corpse speaking. Noril is a Larinian, and they have a keen fear and loathing of the undead - he was also raised by Joy, who shares the giant's fear of ghosts and such. I've a feeling there's great danger coming soon, my friend. The king will need a clear head, and nights that aren't disturbed by nightmares."

Swift-wing cackled again. "Hee-hee-hee! Lied to the king for his own good!" Swift-wing shook his head. "Ah, it's *good* to be working with you again, Raven! Sometimes I think I should have been *your* familiar, not my mistress'," he said, then looked at me suddenly. "But *don't* tell her I said that!"

I winked at him. "Don't worry - I won't."

Swift-wing began walking about the room, peering beneath the smashed furniture and rubble to find any bits of the corpse we might have missed. His nose was, indeed, quite keen - he found several more bits of charred flesh that I didn't notice in my own search. Of course, he *was* a raven. The entire life of a wild raven revolved around finding and eating such things. Swift-wing, being Arella's familiar, had a bit of her soul in him, and could not possibly bring himself to eat the flesh of what was once a sentient being. Still, his innate talents remained.

"So, was she helpful? The queen, I mean. Do you know who has the prince?" Swift-wing asked as he and I searched.

I shrugged, tossing another bit of flesh I'd found onto the pile about the corpse. "The spider-mark Lyssa saw before she died is the emblem of the royal house of the Malani."

"Malani?" Swift-wing asked, hopping beneath a ruined chair.

"The Dark Elves - that's their own name for their race. There are four races of elves, my friend, though most humans have only met members of the Wood Elves, the Sylvani, as they form the majority of traveling merchants. In all, there are the Sylvani or the Wood Elves, who form the majority of their people; the Katani or the Sword-Elves, who are both warriors and smiths; the Nomani or the High Elves who form the largest portion of their leaders, scholars and philosophers..." I said, and sighed. "And deep within the earth are the shunned ones, the Malani... The Dark Elves."

"Ah - sorry, do go on," he replied, then picked a small goblet of burned flesh up in his beak.

"Well, as I said - the spider is the mark of their royal house. So, if the Queen of the Dark Elves doesn't have him, she certainly knows who does. And if she *does* have him and she thinks she can keep him from *me*, then it's apparent that over the last seventeen centuries, the Dark Elves have forgotten what a Hyperborean battle-mage is capable of. I'll have to give the current occupant of the Spider Throne a little reminder."

Swift-wing dropped another scrap of charred flesh that had found its way beneath a shattered chair back onto the pile beside the corpse, then cackled. "*That*, Raven, I think will be a lesson they will remember. When do you plan on leaving? In the morning?"

I shook my head. "No - I can't. Cordo's plan can't be this simple, my friend. If his plan was to simply snuff the heirs to Darian's line, why involve the Dark Elves? Why not just kill Parial at the same moment he's killing Lyssa? What *is* Cordo's goal? And what do the Dark Elves gain out of this?" I asked rhetorically, then shook my head. "No, there's too many unanswered questions at the moment, my friend. I'll have to find at least some of the answers, first."

We chatted a bit more as we worked, and the task went swiftly. Once I had all the pieces of the corpse, I cast the second spell, drawing moderately on my staff and taking my time in the incantations and gestures to get everything perfect. I was not aware of the embalming techniques of the Larinians, but most likely, they weren't terribly sophisticated, or were simply nonexistent - they weren't Hyperboreans, after all. Thus, this would probably be the last chance anyone had to give Queen Lyssa any dignity in death.

I had only met Lyssa once, but she seemed a very nice young lass at the time. 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. Lyssa had met me at the celebration feast and dance that had been held following King Darian's tournament - a tournament I had won by beating Noril in hand-to-hand, and teaching him a lesson in humility in the process. Lyssa was interested in Noril, who was prince at the time. But, plans within plans, wheels within wheels - it appeared that Yorindar had spoken to Lyssa through her dreams, and guided her to speak with me about the prince, and how she might capture his attention. Indeed, my finding of her father was probably yet another part of Yorindar's complicated and convoluted plans for a future I knew nothing about. I sighed. This was, indeed, a vast *chatto* match between Yorindar and Morgar... And, as in *chatto*, sometimes you have to sacrifice a pawn or two in order to win the game.

I finished the spell, releasing the energies upon the corpse. Slowly, then faster and faster, the pieces that had been gathered righted themselves, returning to their original positions. The crackled, burned flesh smoothed, lightened, swiftly flowing from black, through brown, then back to soft and supple white again. In a moment, it was done - she was as she had been before Cordo's spell took her life, and further blasts

scattered and destroyed her body. She was nude, the charred remains of her dress hanging in strips from her body, but a simple spell of repairing restored that.

"She looks almost alive!" Swift-wing squawked in amazement.

"Well, she's not, she's dead as stone. It's just a spell that repairs the flesh. The Dyclonic Circle used to use it on a damaged corpse prior to animating it for use in an army of undead. It's tiring, but the end result is worth it - it extends the overall life-span of your undead warriors, and makes them all the more terrifying when they take ghastly wounds and continue fighting. It doesn't repair decay, however, only damage, so it's really only useful on a fresh corpse. Now, which part of this mess used to be the royal bed?"

"That pile over there, I think," Swift-wing replied, pointing with his beak.

"Well, let's see if another spell of repairing or two might give us something presentable to lay her upon."

A few minutes later, I called Noril back in, and told Swift-wing to tell Arella to come back, and bring Dawn with her. Noril gaped when he entered the room. "She... She looks like she's sleeping!"

"She is dead, your highness. Now, however, you may at least remember her as she would have wished you to, not as what Cordo left her," I replied, and bowed my head.

Noril strode over to her side, then knelt beside her as she lay in the bed, taking her cold hand in his. After a long moment, he began to weep. Dawn stood behind him, weeping as well.

"That was... That was very nice of you, Raven," Arella said quietly, and hugged me gently as Swift-wing fluttered over to land on her shoulder.

"Thank you," I replied, hugging her back. "Now, is there somewhere I can rest? I've a feeling we've a long day ahead of us when the sun finally rises."

Javan stepped up, bowing. "We've a guest room just this way, Dame Raven. If you'll come with me?" he said, offering his arm.

I took Javan's arm quietly, and we walked away down hallways as dark and ominous as my own brooding thoughts.

[Chapter Eight](#)

"...and in the year 1704 NCC, or one thousand, seven hundred and four years after the end of the Great War of Devastation by the New Common Calendar we use today, the Ancient One once again entered the realm of man. In obedience to prophecy and in accordance with their true nature as a thing of the grave, the Ancient One appeared at the death of Queen Lyssa. Though many have said that the Ancient One's actions thereafter prove their worth as a hero and true ally of our people, in truth, had the Ancient One simply arrived an hour earlier, it's quite possible that none of what followed would have happened at all..."

- Lord Caladis, The Eddasine Chronicles, 1817 NCC

One of the things Darian had begun to establish during his lifetime was a system of good, sturdy roads. He'd been impressed when he'd seen what remained of the roads of Hyperborea, even after over a millennium and a half, and even more impressed when I'd told him how a good system of roads made commerce easier, and the movement of troops swifter. Most of the work was not completed during his life, but Noril carried on his work, and eventually managed the greater part of it. Along the main roads,

every seven leagues or so, there were mail stations. With a stable of swift horses and a small cadre of skilled riders at each station, Noril had not only established a fast and reliable (though somewhat pricey) Royal Mail system, it was also possible to send urgent royal messages as far as the Great Wall in only four days. And it was this system of messengers in mind that brought me to standing upon the parapets of Steelgate, scanning the horizon. I had a feeling that eventually, a messenger would appear, warning us of the next part of Cordo's plan. I even had an inkling of what that might be - though I was not quite certain, yet.

Cordo's plan could not be as simple as it appeared - if his goal was to stop Yorindar's plans by eliminating Darian's progeny, it would have been simpler to slay the child along with his mother. No, involving the Dark Elves showed Cordo had something much larger and more complicated on his mind - and, in turn, so did Morgar. Thus, I had to wait and see.

My delay was hardly noticed about the castle for the first three days. Instead, everyone was in mourning. The queen had been much beloved by all, and her death came as a terrible blow - one which, in retrospect, I was sincerely glad I had softened by repairing her corpse from a burned and shattered husk to something that was, indeed, presentable. I think, in the end, it was only the constant and reassuring presence of Dawn and Arella which helped Noril avoid falling into a black depression that would have paralyzed the kingdom completely.

I knew where Parial had been taken, of course. The relevant part of Yorindar's prophecy, revealed to me twenty years before, made that plain. The words of the queen's corpse confirmed that the dark warning of the prophecy had come true, and the prince had, just as the prophecy predicted, been taken down to the Sunless Sea, in the kingdom of the Malani. Yet, this was of little use, at the moment. Though I knew approximately where that was and had even been there before in my previous life, I had never been there in *this* body - I could not use my Spell of Returning to simply whisk me away to there now. I had tried using a spell of teleportation these last two nights, but failed utterly - knowing the approximate location was, unfortunately, not enough. I had also tried using a spell of summoning from a hair I found on Parial's pillow, of course, but it failed, as well. I was hoping teleportation might be the answer instead, but it was simply impossible. There was an enormous amount of distance between myself and the Sunless Sea, and uncounted leagues of rock. The spell simply would not work without my having a better knowledge of the precise location I needed to go - but, such was the nature of the Spell of Teleportation, and the main reason why it was of minimal use in most situations. Only the Spell of Returning was of any real use to a mage, as it allowed one to transport oneself instantly to any place one had been before. But, as I'd never been to the Sunless Sea in this body, it could not be used. No, I would have to travel there myself, most likely on foot. Yet, I could not even *begin* that journey without knowing what Cordo was truly up to. Thus, I had to wait.

Idly, I wished I could know more of Yorindar's prophecy and perhaps have a clue as to what was to come... Perhaps even read the Holy Book of Yorindar, and discern what my next steps should be...

But, I shook my head, dismissing the thought. I was the *Raven of Yorindar*, whether I wished it or not, and as such, the majority of the prophecy would have to remain unknown to me, to prevent paradox. I knew Yorindar's general goal - a Golden Kingdom called Tulan, which would bring peace to the world for millenia to come. I knew that Darian's progeny were necessary to that end. Beyond that, I could know little more, as it risked creating a paradox - and a powerful enough paradox could shatter the Arc of Time, and bring the universe to an end.

"Eddas," a deep, rumbling voice called in my ears, startling me. After a moment, I recognized it as Longtooth's, and again remembered the magic giant's ring I wore as a bracelet on my right arm.

"I am here, Longtooth. What is it you need?"

"Joy, the little giantess, is here in Dohbari village, with your eldest daughter, Lyota. Joy wishes to know what has happened. It has been four days, Eddas. She is concerned. They both are."

I nodded. This morning was the fourth dawn since I'd been summoned to Steelgate. Eventually, Joy would have to be told - I could only hope that Longtooth's wisdom and kindness would be enough to help her. *"Queen Lyssa, the wife of her son, has been murdered by sorcery. Parial, her grandson and heir to the throne, has been kidnapped. The storm I once told you of, my friend, is finally upon us."*

There was a long moment of silence before Longtooth spoke again. *"Joy asks what has happened to her son and daughter?"*

"They are fine, Longtooth. Mourning, but fine."

"She now asks who has done this."

"She already knows who - Cordo. The why of it, however, I have yet to determine."

"Ah, your dark counterpart in this conflict between the gods of the Little People. This is truly a sad day. Have you discovered where the child has been taken?"

"Yes. I've known where he would be taken for twenty years, my friend. I shall seek him soon - but for now, I must wait. I do not know what Cordo's plans may be, and I must learn more of them before I act."

Longtooth was silent for a long moment again. Finally, he spoke. *"Your eldest daughter says that she believes Cordo may wish you safely out of the way, hunting the child, while he deals with King Noril. I think she may be right. She is wise, Eddas - a credit to you."*

I nodded silently, thinking. Lyota may, indeed, be right - and it would make sense for Cordo to do just that. With me out of the way, the only mage who could possibly resist him is Arella - and he had already proven that he was more than a match for her. I smiled. *"More a credit to her mother than I, my friend. Her life was sparked by sorcery. There is nothing of me in her."*

Longtooth chuckled, his voice carried over the leagues by the power of the enchanted rings. *"Perhaps, my friend - I understand little of such sorcery, as it is far beyond my capability as a simple het-man of the giants. Yet, in her eyes, I see your strength and determination. She may be her mother's daughter and have nothing of you in her body, but your influence in her upbringing can be seen in her bearing, and in her eyes."* Longtooth paused for a moment, perhaps speaking to Joy and Lyota, or simply collecting his thoughts. The thought processes of giants were slow, at times, though giants were hardly stupid - I gave him a moment, of course, waiting patiently, and finally he spoke again. *"If the storm you once foresaw is upon us, we may be needed to help you combat what forces may come against you. Call upon us, if we are needed, Eddas. For now, I will keep Joy among us in our village, that she may share her grief among fellow giants."*

"Tell Lyota to remain at my tower. She knows a spell for conjuring food and drink, so she'll be alright. I'll return when I can, and let you all know what I plan on doing."

"Alright, Eddas. Farewell, for now," Longtooth replied, and fell silent.

"Dame Raven?"

I turned, and saw Noril approaching. *"Yes, your highness?"*

"I... I was looking for you, and heard you speaking the language of the giants," Noril replied, standing before me. He was still two heads taller than I, built much like his mother, and loomed over me like a small mountain.

"You still remember the lessons your mother taught you?" I asked in the giant's tongue.

Noril smiled. *"My sister and I still use the tongue of the giants to communicate when others are about without being overheard - it is particularly useful when dealing with various diplomats,"* Noril replied in the same tongue, then paused. "If I may... Who were you talking to just now, before I came up to you?"

"I was using sorcery to tell your mother in Hyperborea what has happened," I replied, deciding a longer explanation wasn't necessary.

Noril blinked. "My mother? But she's-"

"Dead? Hardly, your majesty. She is very much alive and well, and will be quite pleased to learn that you have not forgotten the lessons she taught you. The giants of Hyperborea prevent adventurers and grave-robbers from looting the ancient tombs, and bringing trouble upon your kingdom. It is important you remember their tongue, that you may always be able to speak to them in time of need."

"But she... Well, she must be very old, now. Nearly a hundred."

"Indeed she is, your majesty. But, she is also a woman of Hyperborea. It seems likely to me that she will easily outlive you," I replied, then looked up at him. "Now, what is it you wished, King Noril?"

"I..." Noril paused, taken aback by what I'd said. The knowledge that his mother was still alive was shocking enough, and my prediction that she would likely out-live him (which was no prophecy, but simply a statement of fact) was even more unnerving. Finally, he composed himself. "Well, I was wondering what you had planned on doing to recover my son."

"For the moment, I plan on standing here and waiting. Yorindar's plan requires you to have an heir. Morgar's plan requires that your father's line die out. Kidnapping the heir does nothing to accomplish Morgar's plan - you can always have another."

"Not without a wife, Dame Raven," Noril replied solemnly.

"Come, come. I know you're in mourning now, but in a few years, you could easily find another wife, and produce another son."

"I could never find another, Dame Raven," Noril said, lifting his eyes to gaze off into the distance. "Lyssa was my one, true love. There will never be another. I know you are centuries old, and to you, this seems perhaps to be the moaning of a despondent man, and means little. But, I know in my heart there will never be another, Dame Raven. Were I a sorcerer instead of a king, I would spend the rest of my life searching for a way to bring her back to me," Noril said, and paused, sighing. He did not notice my own startled expression, as his gaze was still lost in the horizon.

"But, I am no mage, and even if I were, I could not shirk the duties of the crown. My people need me - and I am far from the hot-headed prince you knew twenty years ago, Dame Raven. I now understand what it is you and my father both were trying to teach me. I now understand the true measure of responsibility that falls upon the shoulders of a king. Yet, there will never be another, for me. My sister, perhaps, may find someone. She has been courted by a few nobles from time to time, though they are somewhat intimidated by her height. She, like me, shares my mother's build, and towers over any she

meets. Perhaps through her, there would be an heir. Certainly, she's had her eye on Lord Vasadin for a few years..." Noril said, then shook his head. "But, for me, there will never be another, Dame Raven. Lyssa was my one, true love, and when she is buried this afternoon, my heart will be buried with her. I know you do not understand, but that is the way it is, with me."

I gazed to him. Through his words, he had echoed my own feelings for Dyarzi, and my own endless quest to recover her from the void. I could not help but sympathize. Finally, I smiled. "Oh, but I do understand, King Noril - far better than you realize. You are a man after my own heart, though you know it not, and I completely understand your feelings."

Noril looked at me again, smiling slightly. "Thank you. So, what will you do to find Parial?"

"At the moment, nothing."

Noril blinked. "Nothing?!"

I nodded. "I have already determined where he is, your majesty, but before I can seek him, I must know what Cordo intends. Even given that you will never have another child, Morgar's plan still remains unknown to me. If the intent was to simply snuff your line, Cordo could have done it at the same time he slew Queen Lyssa. Kidnapping Parial is unnecessary, when he could just as easily have killed him."

"So you wait for a sign from Yorindar? Some heavenly sending that will tell you what to do?"

A small movement caught my eye, and I turned to look. There, racing down the road on a lathered horse, was a royal messenger. "No, King Noril. I was waiting for that, I believe," I replied, and pointed.

A guard on a nearby turret let loose the cry "A messenger approaches the castle!" at almost the instant Noril spotted the rider.

"Come, Dame Raven - let's see what the message is," Noril called, then turned and strode for the stairs. I followed, hoping it wasn't something trivial, but was indeed the message I had been waiting for - yet, at the same time, I dreaded that it was precisely that.

[Chapter Nine](#)

"My mother taught us much about the Giants of Hyperborea - their language, their culture... Quite a bit, actually. 'They are to be your allies, my son - you must learn of them,' she explained. One day, after listening to the Priest in Chapel explain part of Yorindar's prophecy, I asked my mother if the Giants of Hyperborea had any prophecies, too. I was quite young at the time. My mother said they did - but they were not written down in some holy book, as were Yorindar's prophecies, but passed on by word of mouth for generations, in the form of songs. The giants had prodigious memories, she explained, and songs were how they remembered important things. Then she sang me one of these prophecy-songs. It was a beautiful song, and though it was very long, I remember it well to this day. A great queen would be born among the giants, but she would never be queen of the giants. She would marry thrice, outliving two husbands, but the third marriage would be without ceremony. She would bear two children to each of her first two husbands, but to the third, she would only bear her love. Her son would grow to be a great warrior and save his people from a great danger. Her daughter would marry a het-man and found a line of great magical power. Thereafter, the song concluded, she would live with her third husband, and while away eternity exchanging smiles in the darkness. I asked my mother what it meant, and she said she did not know - no giant did. Such was the nature of prophecy, she explained, and mortals rarely understood any prophecy until after the prediction had already come true. Years later, after the death of my beloved Lyssa, I learned my mother was right. Truly,

all mortal men and women are merely the pawns of prophecy..."

- King Noril, Autobiography, 1729 NCC

Though the sun shone brightly through the arched windows of the throne room, the atmosphere was, nonetheless, quite gloomy. "I can't believe it! How could this happen?!" Noril growled. "My father's wall was supposed to be impenetrable!"

I could understand Noril's anger. The Great Wall, the vast defensive fortification Darian had erected, had not prevented Cordo's army from passing it. Rank after rank of undead had simply marched into the sea, past the wall, then back out of the sea. Yes, the riptides and other deadly currents in that area of the ocean cost him about half of his warriors, as Darian had chosen that particular bit of rocky coastline very carefully, but in the end, fully twelve thousand undead marched out the other side, ready to do battle.

Worse than that, Cordo's army was assisted by a host of warriors from the major goblin-clans, who had simply ridden out of the hills and mountains that bordered northern Arcadia, and joined with the host of undead. Ten thousand goblin archers mounted upon their dreaded Dire Wolves, and another twenty-five thousand hobgoblin infantry, all armed with finely forged kobold weaponry. An individual goblin, though fierce, was only half the size of a man. The giant wolves they rode, however, each the size of a small pony, made them a force to be reckoned with. The hobgoblins, for their part, were each the size of a human warrior, and just as dangerous. With the whole of the enemy host backed up by Cordo's spellcasting skills and a small circle of goblin-wizards, the army that marched on Noril's kingdom was deadly, despite its small numbers. Now, Noril, Dawn and Arella sat in the throne-room, Commander Tybalt by their side, trying to determine what to do. The empty throne that once was Lyssa's only made the discussions more gloomy, though in retrospect, I realized she probably wouldn't have had anything productive to add to the discussion even had she lived. Her skills had been in the field of diplomacy, not war, and there would be little diplomacy ahead.

"The wall *was* impenetrable, your royal highness - but only to those whom it was intended to stop," I said, walking to the middle of the throne room. "Despite what many have come to believe over the years, and despite the fact that most on guard duty at the wall face north, the real threat the wall was designed to contain was to the *south*."

"The south?" Dawn asked. "How so, Dame Raven?"

"Princess Dawn, your father built that wall not to contain the beasts of Hyperborea, for he knew that the giants are more than capable of doing that job, themselves. The wall was built to prevent adventurers and grave-robbers from looting the tombs of the ancient Hyperboreans, your highness, for within the ruins of the Hyperborean civilization lie weapons that could be turned against your people - to their doom. It was intended to cut off fifty leagues of otherwise unguarded wilderness, forcing those who would turn a spade to the ruins of Hyperborea to go around it - either going by sea, or to try to pass through the Iron Hills among the foothills of the Granite Mountains. The latter, your majesty, is not an undertaking anyone would be likely to succeed at. The Iron Hills are the lands of the dwarves - though only barely, as they constantly skirmish with the goblins over their possession, both above and below the earth. Between dwarven patrols and goblin raiding parties, no group of adventurous tomb-robbers would be likely to survive passage there. And as far as those who tried to pass by sea..." I said, and shrugged. "The coast where the western end of the wall terminates is extremely rocky, and incredibly dangerous to make any kind of landing in. Landfall would have to be made farther up the coast, within the lands of the giants - and they are quite watchful of their coasts, your majesty. The giants who live along the Hyperborean coast cast their nets into the sea from the beach and while wading out into the surf, and much of the income of the coastal tribes is made through selling the fish they catch. Ships and boats they find in the area they consider to be trespassers, and they often sink them with thrown boulders, each strike more

powerful than any catapult you could possibly imagine. And finally, aside from keeping out adventurers and grave-robbers, the wall also served the purpose of allowing the Arcadians to rebuild their lives after the War of the Twins, placing money into both your economies and allowing the Arcadians to recover from the devastation of the war."

"But-" Noril began, but I shook my head.

"No, King Noril - the wall did not fail you. You merely forgot what it was for," I said, then paused, thinking. "I would imagine Cordo has spent the last twenty years going among the ancient battlefields of Hyperborea, slowly accumulating his army. He would not scour the graveyards of the cities, for the cities of the Hyperboreans are carefully patrolled by the giants, and they would kill him to prevent him from disturbing the ghosts of the Great War. The ancient battlefields of the Hyperboreans, however, are generally far older than the Great War, and for the most part, are free of ghosts. The psychic emanations of these ancient battlefields are far different than those left by the Great War, and less conducive to ghosts - after all, the Hyperborean people survived after those ancient wars, and even in their day the reason for those ancient battles were often forgotten a mere century after the battle was over. The Great War, however, they did not survive."

"So all Cordo's undead host is very old?" Arella asked, looking at me.

"Very, Arella. Old and very dry bones, the flesh long gone to dust and not fully repairable by any sorcery Cordo might know. Despite their fearsome appearance, Noril's warriors will find that a single strong blow, or perhaps two, reduces each one to a pile of twitching, shattered bones - and as Cordo can only renew their ranks one corpse at a time, slowly, it is highly likely they will not last beyond the first or second engagement. From what the commander of the guards at the wall said in his message, few are armored, and what little weaponry they have is simple clubs and ancient, rusted swords. Their bones will be too fragile even to use shields, in truth, thus it is my estimation that Cordo simply intends to use them as an instrument of terror, to try to frighten your warriors from the field before the ranks even clash. No, his *real* army is the host of goblins that rides by his side - and in truth, it is a rather meager host, compared to what the goblins *could* field."

"It is?" Noril asked, surprised.

"Yes, your majesty. Only ten thousand goblin mounted archers and twenty-five thousand hobgoblin infantry? The goblins could easily field twice that if they wanted, and if all their clans got together to declare war, they could field ten times that. Of course, either case would mean calling a halt to their endless attacks on the dwarves, but that's as may be." Noril goggled for a moment before he controlled himself - though I'd taught him the Hyperborean science of Logistics, it was still a major effort for his kingdom to field an army of a hundred thousand, much less the third of a million the goblins could field with the same effort.

"Could we possibly get help against them from their own enemies, the dwarves and the elves?" Dawn asked, thinking.

"Possibly, princess - but Noril might look a weak king of a weak people if you asked for help against a host this size. This is, from the description of the banners your guards passed along, the forces of only six goblin-clans. To the elves and the dwarves, that would be a respectable host, but hardly something to panic over. In my day, the goblins and dwarves had a rather bloody little scrap that involved an army of goblins and hobgoblins half a million strong - and the dwarves won, incidentally, though they were outnumbered five to one. The elves had a similar little war with the goblins a few millennia before that, with similar numbers and similar results. And don't even get me started on the battles the Hyperboreans had with them, the battles the giants have had since the Great War with them, or the War of the Rift,

where the whole of the Seelie court fought the Unseelie court, drove the Malani-elves underground and shattered the grip of darkness over the Southlands forever."

"Ah, so you think the fight will be easy?" Noril asked with a grin.

"Not hardly, your majesty. You are facing one of the most powerful battle-mages who ever lived, second perhaps only to me. At his side he has probably two dozen goblin-mages, who are masters of spells of darkness and shadow. The goblin and hobgoblin warriors themselves are fierce, and not easily routed. It will *hardly* be an easy fight, your majesty. Of course, if you win, you'll have earned the respect of the elves and dwarves, and will probably have a much easier time negotiating treaties and forging alliances with them. If you lose, you'll simply be dead."

"Hmm... What do you advise, Dame Raven?"

"Well, given what we now know, Cordo's plan seems obvious, to me. He intends to have me otherwise occupied in seeking your son, while he takes this army and marches south. Hopefully, he will crush your army and in the process eliminate most of those who could put up armed resistance to him, kill you and seize the throne, and from there try to establish a base of power - a 'Kingdom of Darkness', if you will. Most likely, the six goblin-clans that ride with him were all he could convince to join him in such a risky venture. If he succeeds, kills you and scatters your army, he will gain the confidence of the goblins and their kin. More will join him, and he would, indeed, have the strength to hold the lands - particularly if he gains the confidence of the Council of Death."

"The what?" Noril asked.

"The ruling council of all the goblins - in truth, they are the real power-brokers of the Unseelie court. Thirteen goblin necromancers, each very ancient, and very powerful. With their support, the whole of the Unseelie court would swing to Cordo's banner, and all the Southlands would fall under the hand of darkness. Cordo's power would become absolute, and with it, Morgar's. There are, however, four things Cordo has not reckoned with, four assets you have that may yet allow you to win."

"Oh? And what are these things, Dame Raven?"

"First, you were trained in the science of war by me - which means you have the best possible education you could have ever received. You may have learned of the *art* of war from your father and from tournament, but the *science* of war is what I taught you," I replied, and Noril nodded as I continued.

"Second, Arella-tor shall be at your side. Despite being unable to defeat Cordo in single combat, she is still the most powerful mage in the Southlands, and a skilled battle-mage. I should know, as I trained her, as well. Riding her shoulder is her familiar, Swift-wing. He will be more of an asset than you could ever possibly realize."

Swift-wing, who had been silent so far and simply listening, blinked his little black eyes in surprise. "Me?! How?"

"You are a raven, my friend - and the noble ravens can see into the astral. That, in fact, is why they are so often chosen as familiars. The sorcery of a goblin-mage is that of Sciology, the sorcery of the Shadowmaid and Shadowjack. One of the most powerful spells they know is one which allows them to step into one shadow, and step out of another - the two being separated by any distance. There are limitations, of course, as there are with nearly any spell, but in general, it would give them the ability to slay Noril with ease, while he slept, should all the conditions of the nearby shadows prove just right at the moment of their casting. There are other spells similarly powerful, and similarly limited by the transient nature of shadows. Yet, in *all* these cases, any shadow they are attempting to work their sorcery on will,

to you, stand out like the proverbial sore thumb - or, perhaps, a sore tail feather, in your case," I said, and grinned as Swift-wing cackled. "If you and Arella keep careful watch over the king and you constantly check all nearby shadows with your astral vision, you will be able to spot anything they may try long before the spell is completed. Spells of shadow are not swiftly done, my friend - it is hardly battle-magic. Just stay alert, and you will be alright."

Arella looked at me in concern. "But Raven, what would I *do* if Swift-wing should see something?"

I shrugged. "Simply dispel where he points. Even if you are utterly exhausted, you can cast a simple cantrip of light on any shadow Swift-wing indicates as being used by the enemy, and that will foil their spell instantly. More, if they were using the spell of Shadow-Walking, it will be instantly fatal, as well. Swift-wing could even do it himself, if you're busy."

"Ah, so Shadow-magic isn't that dangerous?"

"Not if you remain alert. If you're caught by surprise, asleep, or otherwise inattentive, however, there are several spells of shadow which can be instantly fatal," I replied, and wagged a gloved finger at Arella. "Always remember - never underestimate the goblins. They and their kin live as long as an elf, and if you're not careful, they can be quite dangerous. The sorcery of shadows may seem weak and ineffectual compared to battle-magic, but you'll change your tune when you see your first Shadow Beast, or watch a host of goblins charge from the flickering shadows cast by a candle."

Arella nodded, and I looked again to Noril. "Anyway, your majesty... The third thing you have in your favor is this man, here - Commander Javan Tybalt."

"Me?!" Tybalt exclaimed. "How?"

I rolled my eyes. "If everyone is going to keep asking me that question, we'll be here quite some time," I said, and pointed at him. "You, Javan, are the last surviving commander of the War of the Twins. There is literally no one Noril could obtain to command his legions that has more experience in battle. Noril is skilled, and a fine warrior - but he has never been tested in war. You have. With you by his side, he will have the best chance of winning," I said, and paused for a moment. "That is why, I think, Yorindar had you spend twenty years with Rhane the Dryad, Javan. That you would be available here, now, to help defend your king in his hour of need. Though you are over eighty, twenty years of your life were spent in her timeless embrace, and your body is twenty years younger, because of that. You are still vigorous enough to ride by the king's side, and give him the skilled and experienced advice he needs to win."

Javan looked taken aback for a long moment. "I... I had never thought of it like that, Dame Raven..." he replied, then looked up again. "But, my lady, I'm the commander of the King's Guard! Who will defend the castle while I am gone? Who can we entrust Princess Dawn's safety to?"

"You will entrust Princess Dawn's safety to the fourth and last asset King Noril has that Cordo does not know about - Princess Dawn herself."

"Me?!" Princess Dawn exclaimed, then blushed. "Sorry, Dame Raven."

I chuckled. "Princess Dawn, I gave both you and your brother the same lessons in war. Should you find the castle besieged, you yourself are more than capable of handling the situation - just remember your lessons, and don't panic. Also, I'm sure Javan's second-in-command is not a complete dunce, or Javan would hardly have promoted him to the position. Your presence here in the castle also means that the affairs of state will not come to a halt during this war. You are more than capable of managing the kingdom in your brother's absence, as you were trained by me specifically to be able to do so, should the need ever arise."

"But what if... What if Cordo returns? What will I do, then?" Dawn asked.

I sighed. "Most likely, you will die, Princess." Dawn gasped, and her sentiment was obviously shared by all present. Arella, Noril and Javan all started to speak at once, but I silenced them with a glare. "That, unfortunately, is the advantage Cordo has. I cannot be everywhere at once, and neither can Arella. Arella is needed in the battle, and to defend the king. I am needed to recover the prince. We cannot leave the *king* undefended, and we *certainly* cannot allow the prince to suffer whatever fate may be in store for him. Thus, Dawn must be left here, in the castle, to manage as best she can. My only advice can possibly be to make sure that she is guarded at all times, by guards armed with halberds, *not* crossbows, and to make sure she is always in a room where, no matter where an enemy wizard may appear, the guards can leap upon them in an instant. If you use crossbows, you risk that a spell of missile reflection may simply have your guards killing themselves. If you use anything less than halberds, you risk that they might not get through any defensive spells that Cordo may have up - or, for that matter, any goblin-mages he may send in his stead. Your guards will have to be alert at all times, ready to respond at an instant's notice, and they will have to attack with all their strength or they will simply be slain out of hand," I said, and shrugged.

"That, unfortunately, is the best advice I can give. I do not have the time available to instruct your guards in the skills necessary to fully defend themselves against a mage - that is a matter of years of training, not a few minutes of hurried instruction. As I said, this is where Cordo's plan has its strength. I cannot be everywhere, and neither can Arella. We must acknowledge that he is a worthy opponent, shore up our own weaknesses as best we can, and continue forward with the four strengths I have mentioned, and fight to win."

As I looked at them, a thought occurred to me. The more I thought about it, the more I realized it was true. I rapped my staff soundly against the floor, then slowly gestured at each of them. "Each of you, man and woman, have been brought to this moment in time to fulfill Yorindar's plan, and defeat Morgar's plan. Each of you has been, in some way, touched by me, the Raven of Yorindar, so as to forge you for the coming conflict. Noril, Dawn and Arella were all trained by me. Javan lay in Rhane's embrace for twenty years that he might be here today - yet he never would have heard of her had it not been for my leading Darian within her territory, all these many years ago," I said, then looked at Noril. "You may consider my words to be merely 'advice', if you choose, your majesty. However, they are not. I am the Raven of Yorindar. I say to you again - shore up our own weaknesses as best you can, continue forward with the four strengths I have mentioned, and fight to win."

"So... This is our destiny... The very reason we were born," Noril said, staring at me with an expression of awe that was shared by all the others.

"Exactly," I replied, and felt a chill as the word fell from my lips.

Swift-wing fluffed his feathers, and I saw the others tremble briefly. I knew that again, I had spoken with Yorindar's words without intending to, and they had felt the same chill I did when the word was spoken. Perhaps that was another reason he had chosen me - he knew that at the right moment, I would say what he would have wished to say, had he been present himself. Perhaps, at moments like those, I *was* merely a pawn, and *did* speak with his voice, a god speaking through their instrument. I did not know.

Yet, as they gazed at me with expressions that were a mixture of awe and no little amount of fear, I found I had to suppress a sigh. Deep inside, I was no holy warrior, no divine messenger. Yes, I had accepted my identity as the Raven of Yorindar, the tool of a god. Yet, inside, beneath this garment of flesh, I was still myself - Eddas Ayar, a man nearly two millennia out of his time. Eddas Ayar - a very old man who found he still was, at times, very, very tired. I found that even after all these years, despite Joy's constant companionship, I still wept at night, sometimes, for Dyarzi, and what we might have had. Despite being

held in high esteem by all my courtesans and everyone in this room, I still burned with the shame of my lost honor, the painful disgrace of being expelled from the Dyclonic Circle. And, despite having eighty-nine courtesans and hundreds of children who loved me dearly, I still slept alone.

That was, at times, the hardest part to bear. I still yearned for the touch of a woman, and a tender moment exchanged in darkness - something I knew I would never experience again.

I shook off my maudlin feelings with an effort. If there was anything that Joy had managed to teach me in the last two decades, it was that I needed to suppress my own dark thoughts whenever they cropped up - for my own darkness, my inner sadness, was both my greatest strength, and my most profound weakness.

Noril finally nodded, then looked to the others. "I believe Dame Raven is right. Now - what shall we do to shore up our weaknesses?"

"I shall pick a small handful of my best men, your majesty," Javan replied immediately. "Men strong of arm, quick on their feet, skilled with halberds, and of the highest degree of dedication. I'll instruct them as Dame Raven has indicated, and they will remain with Princess Dawn every moment of the campaign."

Arella nodded. "And I can place a spell of warding on the princess' privy, keyed to allow only her entrance," she replied. When Noril gave her a look of surprise, she blushed. "Well, it's a small chamber, and Princess Dawn quite completely fills it when she's inside. There would be no room for hidden assassins, it's very sturdily built as the walls are stone and the door oak, and no sorcery could allow entrance. The spell would prevent anyone save her from entering, so it would be a safe haven should something happen, and she need to flee. It's not much, but it's at least something."

Dawn nodded. "That will have to do, Arella."

"Good," I said, and looked to Noril. "Your majesty, I leave you now to seek your son. I can be contacted through Longtooth the Giant - Arella and Swift-wing know how to find him. You still have a funeral to attend this afternoon, your majesty. Make sure it is carried out with all proper respect and honor - your wife and your mother would have it no other way. Then, make your preparations, and march your army to war against your wife's murderer. With luck and a bit of help from Yorindar, we may yet succeed against Morgar. Farewell."

"Farewell, Dame Raven," Noril called, "and may Yorindar grant that you find my son."

I nodded, casting my spell of returning, and the world blurred.

[Chapter Ten](#)

"Though a man may feel he is in absolute control of a woman or a horse, the truth remains that one can only ride them where they were willing to go in the first place."

- Mysantian proverb

"No, Joy, and that's final," I replied, pulling down the knotted rope I kept on my shelf.

"Old Man, that's my *grandson*!"

"I'm well aware of that, Joy," I replied, wrapping the knotted rope about my waist and tying it firmly. "The answer is still 'no.'"

Lyota sat at my table, watching silently, her face inscrutable. I was beginning to regret teaching her

chatto - she could tell my emotions at a glance, just from my aura. I, however, could only wonder what was on her mind as she watched Joy and I argue.

Joy paced back and forth, thinking furiously. "It could be dangerous! I could help - I'm very strong, and good in a fight!"

"Joy, it will be underground. Small, tight spaces, at times. You're a giant - you'll panic just from the dark and the closeness of the caves. And as for your being strong and able to fight..." I said, and gestured negligently. Joy floated a hand's width off the floor. "Fight me now, Joy."

Joy thrashed for a moment, held in the grip of my will as focused through my ring of telekinesis, then glowered at me. "You know I can't fight like this!"

"And what makes you think you'll be able to fight against the Dark Elves, Joy? This is just telekinesis - it's nothing. It can get worse," I replied, and squeezed with my will - not hard enough to hurt her, just hard enough to get her attention. Joy gasped, and I glowered back at her. "This is nothing, Joy - a simple spell of telekinesis I put in a ring centuries ago so I wouldn't have to bother casting the spell myself. The most you've ever fought is a wolf or two and other giant-children when you were very young. You've never fought a *mage*, Joy, and I don't have the years it would take to train you to do so. You'd die. No." I set Joy down gently, and she gasped for a moment, catching her breath.

Once Joy was able to speak again, she glared at me. "Old Man, you *need help* to do this!"

"Hardly. I am fully capable of recovering Parial by myself."

"Are you *sure*?! Are you *certain*?! How do you know they aren't *waiting* for you, Old Man?! How do you know they aren't devising some kind of trap for you even now?!"

I shrugged. "They probably are. The Dark Elves aren't stupid, and when I tried a spell of summoning on a strand of Parial's hair, it failed. They are probably well aware that I will try to rescue Parial - if nothing else, Cordo would have warned them. Their involvement in this means that they have some kind of agenda - though what that might be, I have no idea. But, as I've said before, if the goal was to simply snuff Darian's line, Cordo would simply have killed Parial when he had the chance. Cordo has something else in mind - and, knowing the Dark Elves, so do they. It's even likely that their agenda runs counter to Cordo's, and they may be thinking of using him to accomplish some other goal I know not of," I replied, and shrugged. "There's no way of knowing. It's simply a risk I'll have to take."

"That's not good enough, Old Man! You *need* someone to watch your back!"

I shrugged again. "I probably do - but it isn't going to be you."

"Then take Lyota! She's a mage, and at least she'd be of some use to you!"

I rolled my eyes. "She's barely a journeyman, and hardly of more use than you."

"She can *learn*, Old Man! You can teach her a few tricks along the way!"

I snorted. "Sorcery is hardly a matter of 'a few tricks', though it may seem that way to a mundane."

"She also can see into the astral all the time - you have to use sorcery yourself to do that! And her vision may be helpful to you!"

I started to object again, then paused, and stroked my chin. "Hmm... Well, that's true. The lands of the Dark Elves are rife with illusion and trickery. Having a keen pair of eyes such as hers would be at least of

some use, there. If she were careful..."

"See?! There! She could help you! She could watch your back, she can see things for you, and perhaps even assist you in a fight, where I can't. So take her with you!"

I sighed. "Alright, I'll bring her along. Anything to end this argument."

"Swear it to me, Old Man! On your word of honor as a man of Hyperborea, swear you'll take her with you, to help you, and watch your back!"

"Joy, that isn't nec-"

"Swear it to me!"

I sighed again. "Alright, Joy, I swear. On my honor, I shall take Lyota with me."

To my utter surprise, Joy relaxed and smiled, then sat down at the table demurely, smoothing her golden hair. "There. I told you he could be quite reasonable if you dealt with him properly."

Lyota nodded, grinning. "Thank you, Auntie Joy. I knew if I just asked him, he'd simply say 'no', and that would be that."

"You-you-" I sputtered, dumbfounded. "You tricked me!"

Joy smiled at me. "Of course I did, Old Man. You said yourself that you would probably need someone to watch your back, and you said yourself Lyota was the best choice. I'm not an idiot, Old Man. I *know* I would be useless to you if it came down to a fight. I was a queen for nearly five decades, Old Man, and I've forgotten everything I ever used to know about fighting. You're lucky I remember how to grow food in a garden and cook, or we'd be stuck eating nothing but your atrocious gruel all year 'round," Joy replied, and Lyota burst into giggles as Joy continued. "Yes, Old Man, I tricked you. But I did it because I *care* for you, Old Man. You're my best friend. I also want to see you succeed and rescue my grandson - and as such, I want you to have someone with you who can help you. Now - you know she's the best choice, you've sworn to take her along, so that's that."

"Bah. An oath given under trickery is no oath at all," I snapped.

"But it *is* an oath when you know you've sworn to do what you know you should do, anyway," Joy replied sternly, wagging a thick forefinger at me.

I glowered for a moment longer, then finally nodded. "Well... Alright. I'm not terribly pleased about the *way* you got me to agree, but yes, she can come. However-" I said, and was interrupted by Lyota's whoop of joy.

"Oh, thank you, Master Eddas! You won't be disappointed, I promise you!" she cried, hopping to her feet and hugging me.

"*However*," I repeated, a bit louder, "there are some conditions."

"Yes, Master Eddas," Lyota replied, letting me go and hanging her head.

"First, your studies will continue - though we'll concentrate on spells that may be useful for what we're about to do, of course, your studies will not halt, and you will be expected to *learn* something each day."

"Yes, Master Eddas."

"Secondly, you'll have to agree to obey me *without question* - this is, in many ways, as though you were a mere journeyman going to their first battle alongside a master. Your life may depend on immediate and unquestioning obedience - indeed, both our lives may depend on it. And don't expect that you will be allowed to stand in the front lines - you probably won't."

"Yes, Master Eddas."

"Thirdly, you'll keep your staff about you at all times, and tap it first for the strength you need to cast any spells. If we get into a fight, you can't be making the typical journeyman's mistake of forgetting to use your staff - you haven't built your body up enough to be able to last long enough. This is not like our training drills, where we cast and rest a few minutes before casting again. In a real fight, you may be called upon to cast several spells, one after the other, in rapid succession. In addition, a good portion of your endurance may be expended in casting spells of transference to allow *me* to continue casting. Without your staff, you'll very quickly exhaust yourself, and possibly faint - or worse, fall to a blow that gets through your defensive spells that otherwise would have been nothing."

"Yes, Master Eddas," she replied again, extending her hand, her staff appearing in her grip. It was, like my own wizard's staff, a short fighting staff a bit over three cubits in length. Hers was made from a single shaft of white ash, sanded smooth, but unvarnished. It was, in my opinion, an acceptable staff, perfectly suited to a journeyman.

"And lastly, as we'll be traveling as Master and Journeyman, *you* get to handle the responsibilities of camp. That means lighting the fires, conjuring the food, etcetera, etcetera. And, as we'll be sleeping inside my Hidden Sanctuary each night..." I said, and pulled the rope from about my waist, holding it out to her. "You get to carry the rope."

"Yes, Master Eddas," Lyota replied, trying to pile the loops of knotted rope over her shoulder with one hand.

"No, no. Here - hand me your staff. Now, wrap the rope about your waist, like a waist-belt," I said, taking her staff from her and helping her arrange the rope. "No, neaten it up a bit, and tug your robe here and there to smooth it. Like I have my robe, beneath my waist-belt. Lift your arms a bit to get some freedom of movement, then pull it across the front. There - that's right. It's important you look presentable. You are, after all, my student, and a reflection of myself."

"How do I look, Master Eddas?" she asked, looking herself over.

I handed her staff back to her, then nodded. "Like a proper journeyman."

Lyota grinned broadly. "Thank you, Master Eddas. When will we be leaving?"

"I had intended on leaving as soon as I was ready. My Hidden Sanctuary is already stocked with anything I might need for a long journey - I've kept it that way for decades. If there's anything of yours you want to bring with you, get it now, and we'll put it inside."

As it turned out, Lyota had a small bag already packed - she and Joy, apparently, had thought ahead. I smiled quietly as Lyota climbed up the rope to put her belongings in my sanctuary - Joy could be truly devious, at times. I could only hope it wouldn't rub off on Lyota *too* quickly.

By the time Lyota finally had the rope tied around her waist again, a low booming in the distance announced the arrival of a giant. "Ah - that would be Softhand," Joy said with a smile, naming the young giant who was Strongarm's son, Dragonslayer's grandson.

"You're expecting him?"

Joy nodded. "In those three days I spent in their village, he was quite a comfort to me. He's very sweet, Old Man. I like him very much. I'll be staying with him, while you and Lyota are gone."

I nodded. "Well, let's go down and greet him, then, and we'll be off."

Softhand, Dragonslayer's grandson, reminded me very much of his grandmother, Felicity. His face was softer than his father's and his grandfathers, and his eyes more gentle. Like nearly all giants, his hair was black, his eyes brown, and his skin a ruddy hue. His main occupation in Dohbari village was tending the vast *byallar* plantations which helped provide the village its income - and he was quite skilled at it. He had received his 'adult name' from his uncanny ability with the *byallar* trees. He could, quite literally, get nearly every *byallar* seed from the branches of a tree by running his fingers through it, and hardly disturb a single leaf. At twenty years of age, he had not expressed any interest in any particular giantess of the village, but there was still plenty of time for that. "*Good afternoon, Eddas Ayar,*" he called, smiling as he gently knelt before us to bring his head down a bit closer to our level.

"Good afternoon, Softhand. And, unfortunately, goodbye, as well. I go to attempt to recover Prince Parial, and Lyota is coming with me. I presume Joy has already told you all about it?"

"Yes, Eddas - and we of Dohbari village wish you luck. Never fear for Joy while you are gone, however. I shall watch over her."

"In your hands, please, not at your feet," I replied, grinning.

Softhand chuckled deeply. *"Yes, Eddas, don't worry."*

Lyota looked at me in confusion. "A joke of some kind, Master Eddas?"

I nodded. "An old joke, told among the giants. More of a cliché, really. It started out as a dwarven proverb, but the giants heard it a long time ago, found it amusing, and began to repeat it themselves. It goes *'In the hands of a giant, anything is safe. At the feet of a giant, nothing is safe,'*" I replied, the last in the tongue of the giants.

Softhand chuckled, and nodded. *"Yes, that's right. It means both that a giant is a great friend and a terrible enemy because of our vast size and strength, but also means that our size and strength requires us to exercise great care. We must watch where we step, both literally and figuratively, lest we by accident harm something we did not intend."*

I nodded, smiling, and glanced to Lyota. *"To the dwarves, however, it simply means that giants are clumsy with their feet - they aren't, but that's what it means to a dwarf,"* I whispered in our language, and Lyota giggled.

Softhand held out his hand, palm upward, and Joy sat upon it with a smile. He then lifted her up, holding her gently in his hands. She was the size of a doll to him, and he smiled down at her warmly. Joy looked down at me, and smiled. "Farewell, Old Man - and find my grandson!"

"I will, Joy!" I called back. Lyota waved, smiling, and Softhand rose to his feet, then turned and strode away down the road.

Finally, Lyota turned to me, grinning. "Well, now what, Master Eddas?"

"Well, now we need to head south and east, towards the lands of the dwarves."

"Will we be following the old king's road?"

I shook my head. "No, it's in ruins, and difficult to walk along. The dwarven and elven traders have established trails that run parallel to the old roads, but they go from town to town for many, many leagues before they turn in the direction we want to go. So, we'll simply strike out, overland. See that peak, there?" I asked, pointing with my staff. Lyota nodded, and I lowered my staff again. "That's Janto Mountain. If we head for it, we'll find ourselves in the lands of the dwarves, fairly near the northern entrance to Iron City, in Janto pass. From there, we'll have to ask the dwarves to guide us underground."

"How far is it, Master Eddas?"

I shrugged. "Oh, about a hundred and fifty leagues, as the raven flies."

Lyota gasped. "I can't walk that far! My feet will fall off!"

I laughed. "Well, *I* can, but I'd never get to Parial in any decent time," I replied, and used the ring I'd obtained from Nials years before. In a moment, an invisible steed stood beside me. After commanding it to form its saddle into a side-saddle for me, I swung up into the saddle, then held out my hand for Lyota. "Come. An invisible steed will take us there quite a bit faster than our feet will." Lyota struggled for a moment, but finally managed to perch herself behind me. "Put your arm around my waist, so you have something to balance against while we ride - that's right. Alright, here we go," I called, and set the steed trotting to the southeast.

After riding around the ancient rubble that once was my mill, I simply rode the steed straight through the river. The spring run-off from the distant mountains had swollen it a bit, but it was still easily passable for a mount it's size. Lyota whooped at the splashing of the invisible steed as it trotted effortlessly through the water, then laughed as she saw the steed. The dripping water briefly revealed its true appearance - a large, squat animal summoned from it's home dimension, it resembled a cross between a draft-horse and a giant child's toy. A normal horse might have made a sound at the chill water - perhaps a snort - but the steed was utterly silent, as it was immune to anything of this plane, and just smart enough to know it. As it reached the other side of the river, I urged the steed to a canter, riding through and between the neat rows of *byallar* trees the giants had made on my plantation. This was about the fastest I judged would be safe, as I did not wish Lyota to slip off, nor did I wish either of us to be brained by a low-hanging limb.

Lyota laughed as we rode along, obviously enjoying herself as row after row of sweet-smelling, flower-bedecked trees whipped past. "Master Eddas, this is such fun, don't you think?"

I started to say something curt, like *'hardly, the matter of rescuing the prince is far too serious,'* then bit back my words. I supposed if I'd never ridden an invisible steed before, yes, I'd find it quite fun. Of course, Lyota had never even ridden a *horse* before, whereas I'd ridden the backs of centaurs and even once rode the back of a dragon. I smiled. "Well, I'm a bit preoccupied with how we shall find the prince, but yes, Lyota, it is a bit fun."

"We'll find him, Master Eddas, don't worry! I just know we will!"

"Perhaps, but our quest will not be unopposed, Lyota. Morgar demonstrated to me once already that he is just as capable of manipulating things on short notice as Yorindar is, when he puts his mind to it. We'll have to stay alert. Morgar has probably had this plan in motion for a thousand years or more - we could encounter anything to oppose us. The longer it takes to finish this quest, one way or another, the better for him. And it's even better if we fail, and better still if we die. Yorindar's attention will, most likely, be focused to the south. Despite what Noril may think, there is still a chance he may have an heir, and Darian's line will continue - but only if he wins against Cordo's army. Our only aid, I think, will come from

Vyleah... Though I doubt it will be very much, as she only has the Mountain Healers who worship her, and she's still quite weak. Thus, for the most part, we are on our own. We must be careful, and remain alert."

"Yes, Master Eddas," Lyota replied, her bright humor dimmed somewhat.

We rode in silence after that, I keeping an eye on the terrain ahead and keeping the steed headed for Janto Mountain, and Lyota glancing about, keeping an eye out for trouble.

Chapter Eleven

"The only difference betwixt a pixie and a tick be that a pixie can yet fly and do yet stop short of a sup of blood - though of the latter, there be some doubt."

- Dwarven proverb

"What could it be, Master Eddas?" Lyota asked, running a hand over the ancient stone archway that rose from the rolling, flower-bedecked plains.

I glanced up from my bowl of conjured gruel at the rubble of the ruins that lay around us. We had traveled fifty leagues, today, and would probably reach our destination by the evening of the third day - the ruins had simply seemed as good a place to stop as any. I had, in fact, chosen this spot simply because one of the stones of the rubble looked like it might be comfortable to sit upon - and, as I was sitting upon it at the moment, I'd found it was. There were a few trees out here, but not many - the deeper forests of the hill-lands still waited in the distance. Instead, the lands about us were rolling plains, covered with a carpet of spring flowers that was enchanting both to the eye and nose. Countless bees buzzed about, sipping the nectar of each blossom, and lent a rather peaceful air to the place. I pondered the stones, trying to compare what I thought our rough location might be with what I remembered of Hyperborea's ancient landscape. "A monastery, I think. I seem to recall one being roughly in this area."

"It must have been quite beautiful, once. It still is, really, with all the flowers..." Lyota said, her voice trailing off. "Oh! Look, Master Eddas! Aren't they beautiful?" she yelped, pointing.

"What? I don't see a thing," I replied, looking over the field of flowers she was pointing at.

"I'm sorry - I can see their astral forms, and they're quite beautiful!"

"What are they?" I asked, finishing my dinner and setting the bowl aside.

A high-pitched little squeak answered me. *"Oooooo! Look! A Dark Elf!"*

"Nasty, evil things, Dark Elves!" another chittered.

"Yes, yes! Bad Dark Elf! Evil!" a third chirped.

I sighed, hearing the buzz of wings. "Pixies. I should have known, what with all these flowers. They think I'm a Dark Elf, incidentally," I said, as my ring of translation allowed me to understand their tongue.

In a moment, the lot of them all appeared at once, buzzing about us. There were at least twenty of them, flitting about between Lyota and I. Each was fairly ordinary, for a pixie. Barely a hand and a half tall, with large wings like a dragon-fly, all were dressed in various oddments of flower petals, leaves, and spiderwebs. *"That one can see us!"* the first voice chirped, its owner pointing to Lyota. The voice, apparently, belonged to a male pixie, dressed in garments of green leaves.

"She's dressed all in white - she must be very nice!" a female dressed in flower petals replied.

"Ooooo, but this one's dressed all in black! Nasty Dark Elves!" a second female observed, buzzing in front of my face.

I snorted. *"I am not a Dark Elf!"*

"You look like a Dark Elf, you're dressed all in black, and you seem very cross at seeing us. You're a Dark-Elf," the pixie replied, crossing her little arms. The fact that I could speak their language - the very *utterance* of which was so sickeningly sweet to my ear that a *real* Dark Elf would consider it piercing, shrill, and instantly grating on the nerves - did not, apparently, register in her mind as being anything in my defense.

"Protect the lands!" shouted one.

"Drive out the evil Dark Elves!" answered another.

A moment later, all of them were buzzing around me, pelting me with pebbles, beetles, and whatever else came readily to hand. Lyota, of course, burst into gales of laughter.

I drew the hood of my robe up to cover my hair and keep the worst of the detritus out of it, and sighed. *"And this is why I hate pixies."*

"Are they always like this, Master Eddas?" Lyota asked, still giggling as the pixies continued their assault.

"No. The ones in the lands of the elves often have little swords, with a blade made from a steel needle. They trade flowers and various seeds they gather to the elves for them. They're much worse. I - yeek!" I shouted, leaping to my feet. I glared at one of the male pixies, who brandished his little elf-made sword as I rubbed my stung buttock. Lyota only made matters worse by whooping with laughter again.

"Hah! You mean like this?!" the pixie shouted, grinning. *"Go back home, Dark-Elf! We don't want you here! This is Hyperborea, and you're not welcome, here!"*

"I know this is Hyperborea. I'm a Hyperborean. So is she," I replied, jerking a gloved thumb at Lyota as I sat down again.

The pixies all paused at that, then buzzed over to swarm around Lyota, examining her closely. I sighed again. Pixies were not terribly bright, particularly when they were young, and had the attention span of a squirrel. Most birds of prey considered them food, as well, so few survived beyond their first decade or two. They were otherwise immortal, however, and the eldest of them were sometimes more reasonable once they had a few centuries of age behind them. Their people were considered to be a part of the Seelie court, and allies of the elves - though how the elves put up with them, I had no idea. They were almost as bad as brownies. Of course, unlike brownies, pixies did, eventually, mature. It was possible the elves simply tolerated them, knowing they'd eventually mature, but I doubted it. Knowing the elves as I did, it was entirely possible that they simply found pixie antics amusing.

"Alright," the one with the sword said, buzzing back over to me with the rest of them. *"We can accept that she's a Hyperborean. She has black hair, brown eyes, brown skin, and the round ears of a human. Word has come from the elves that the Hyperboreans had awakened again, and she is obviously one of them. You, on the other hand,"* he said, brandishing his little needle menacingly, *"are a Dark Elf! You have black hair, pale skin, black eyes, and pointy ears! Dark Elf!"*

"No, I am not. I am a Hyperborean battle-mage, returned from the Void and inhabiting this body for the nonce. My name is Eddas Ayar. I was born in Wilanda city on the fifth day of summer, in

the first year of the reign of King Darrak II, when the moon was eclipsed. In my youth I displayed a strong talent, and was accepted as an apprentice by the Dyclonic Circle when I was twelve, entering the Black Tower to begin my training. As a master, I cast the Spell of Hidden Life, and upon my death, my soul entered my animuary. Seventy years ago, a half-elf female entered my tomb, and I possessed her body. This body was nearly dead when I took it, however, a blow to the head having caused its owner's spirit to have fled just at the moment I took it. It was the strength of my will alone that forced this body to live, where its previous owner's will could not. Unfortunately, I fainted thereafter from the wound, and the part of the sorcery which would have allowed me to reshape the body into my own transpired without effect, lacking my will to guide it. As it turned out, however, this was all due to a plan of Yorindar, a god of the humans of the Southlands. To that end, this body received its final forging in the heart of a mana-storm, and is permanently as you see it today. Thus, I am Eddas Ayar, a Hyperborean battle-mage - and, in this body, the Raven of Yorindar."

The pixie scratched his head, and I could tell my explanation was too long for him, even though I'd made it as short as I could. It was impossible to guess his age - all pixies were fully an adult after only a year of life, and capable of having children of their own. As an immortal, he could be a year old, or a thousand years old. It was simply impossible to tell just from looking at him. Still, his attitude and demeanor suggested he couldn't possibly be more than a few decades old, or perhaps a century or so. Older pixies were usually a bit wiser. "Well... *You say you're Eddas Ayar, a Hyperborean. I say prove it!*" he snapped, and grinned smugly.

"Yes, yes! *Prove it, Dark Elf! Prove it!*" the others chorused, buzzing around me.

"*Alright, I will,*" I replied dryly, and without warning, I lashed out with my will, using my ring of telekinesis to grab him. The pixie squeaked in terror, struggling as I drew him into my fist, and his little friends buzzed off to a safer distance, shrieking in alarm. I snatched the little sword from his hand before he could use it on me, and closed my fist around his tiny body. I glowered at him, and he trembled with fear. "*I could kill you now, you little pest. I could crush you in my grip easily. I could take your little sword and run you through with it, slowly and painfully until you died in agony. I am also a battle-mage - with a single spell, I can reduce all your friends to ash,*" I snarled, then paused, remembering my experiences with pixies ages ago, while I was in the lands of the elves. "*I could even pluck off your wings, and leave you to crawl about in the dirt for the rest of eternity like a lowly, filthy little brownie,*" I said, and grinned wickedly.

"No!" he shrieked. "*No! No! Anything but that! I'm sorry, really I am!*"

"Yes, if I really was a Dark Elf, I could do all those terrible, cruel things to you..." I said, then opened my fist. "*But, since I'm not a Dark Elf at all, I suppose I'll have to let you go.*"

The pixie buzzed out of my open palm, then hovered before me, staring in astonishment.

"*Would you like your sword back?*" I inquired, holding it out to him with two fingers.

The pixies all cheered their friend's miraculous escape, and eventually, it was decided I was not a Dark Elf after all. Still, the question of what I really was remained an open one, and between sips of nectar from the countless flowers that grew among the ruins and across the rolling plains, the pixies discussed the matter.

"I don't understand what their confusion is, Master Eddas," Lyota said, sitting beside me. She could see their little auras, of course, and the confusion in their minds was readily apparent to her, even though she couldn't speak their language.

"My story is too complex for them to truly grasp it. Pixies simply aren't terribly bright when they're young," I replied, shrugging. "The oldest of this group is probably no more than a century old, and the youngest were probably born this spring, when these flowers first bloomed. You can't really have a sensible conversation with a pixie until they're at least half a millennium old - younger than that, and it's like talking to a rumbustious child. After they reach that age, however, they begin to approach their true potential," I said, and looked to Lyota seriously. "A mature pixie is nothing to be trifled with, Lyota. They can cast small cantrips of illusion and nature effortlessly, and the eldest of them can master true sorcery despite the frailties of their tiny bodies. They are also hardly the dim-witted children we see about us." I looked to the pixies as they buzzed about, chatting with each other, and waved a gloved hand at them negligently. "These, however, *are* merely children. I suppose they'll eventually get bored of the whole discussion, and fly off to go play somewhere. Or, perhaps, they'll simply leave at sunset, and go home to their little nests."

"I see," Lyota replied, nodding.

The young male with the sword then flew back over to me, hovering before my face. "*Well, alright. Come with us, and we'll take you to our Elder. She'll explain you to us.*"

"Or, knowing pixies, they'll do something completely different and utterly unexpected," I said dryly, looking to Lyota, then smiled at the pixie. "*Certainly,*" I replied in his language.

With Lyota in tow, I followed the pixies as they flitted and danced before me. We didn't go far - just around a broken and crumbled section of wall, and to a small area that appeared to have once been the monastery's graveyard. Weathered and worn tombstones evenly spaced inside an area bounded by the rubble of walls made it fairly plain what it once was, and despite the bright day and the colorful flowers, the graveyard still managed to retain an air of sadness and gloom. The pixies paused before a stone gargoyle near the far end of the graveyard. It had apparently fallen from the walls ages ago, and was now half-hidden by flowers and weeds.

"Master Eddas, there's something inside that gargoyle... Something powerful," Lyota said quietly.

I nodded silently, waiting as the pixies buzzed about, calling in their shrill little voices.

What emerged from the ancient drain spout that was the gargoyle's mouth was, at first glance, just another pixie - but, as I looked at her, I realized she was far more than that. Unlike the others flitting about us, this one was not shaped like a teenage child or young adult, but had a body that could only be described as buxom. She was dressed in dark, gray-furred leather garments I guessed were made from mouse-hide. Her clothing, on a human woman, would have been quite interesting - long gloves, hip-length boots, and a long strip of leather artfully wrapped about her torso that, while it did cover her breasts and sex, was hardly something one could call modest. Her little buttocks and abdomen were bare, and probably the only thing that kept her little breasts within the confines of the garment itself was pixie magic. And more, her hair was a brilliant blue, rather than the ordinary brown or blonde of the younger pixies - blue or green hair was a sign of great age among their people. "*Greetings, Elder one,*" I said politely - it was always wise to be polite to a mature pixie. "*I am Eddas Ayar. I am sorry for disturbing you, but it appears your children are a bit confused about me, and have brought me to you for an explanation. Shall I tell you my story?*"

The elder pixie buzzed into the air and hovered before my face, looking me over. Her eyes were like twin chips of sapphire, and her face bore an expression that could only be called grim - quite unusual, for a pixie. She gestured briefly, and there was a sparkle about her of pixie magic. "They are hardly *my* children, Eddas Ayar," she said in my language, and I smiled - she was old enough to master a spell of translation, which meant she was *very* old, indeed. "The parents of these children were blown to these

fields from the lands of the elves by a wind-storm a century ago. That one, there, Timmateo," she said, pointing, "bears his father's sword. He looks much like him, as well. His father fell to a hawk fifty years ago, and his mate died of a broken heart thereafter. I agreed to become their Elder after that, but I am hardly their mother."

"You have lived here long?" I asked.

The pixie buzzed down, alighting on the gargoyle's head, then sat, crossing her legs. "I have lived here since before the Great War, Eddas Ayar, when this monastery was little more than a dream of a small order of warrior-monks. My youth was spent here, hiding and listening and living invisibly among the solemn stones and tended flowers of this graveyard. My youth ended when that order marched off to war for the last time, and did not return. Yet, I remember them."

Before I could ask about that, Timmateo, the young pixie with the sword, reached the end of his patience. Buzzing down to hover before his Elder, he began to give a rapid and excited explanation of all that had transpired, and then ask for an explanation of what I might be, that the curiosity of himself and the others might be satisfied. The Elder simply sniffed. *"It is magic gone awry, Timmateo. That is a man, trapped in the body of a woman. Now shoo. All of you, shoo! It will be dark, soon, and the owls of the forest will come out to hunt the fields for mice - and they might just catch you, instead. Get to bed."* There was a brief flurry of activity as all the younger pixies buzzed about fearfully at the thought of owls, then they vanished, turning invisible again, and buzzed away, each to their own little resting-place.

"You would be about my own age, then," I said, once the other pixies had left.

"Yes, Eddas Ayar. As I said, I have lived here since before the Great War, drawn by the quiet beauty and gentle flowers of this little graveyard. I have remained, even as all has crumbled into ruin, as there has never been anywhere else I wanted to go. I learned of your return to these lands a few decades ago from the tales of the elven trader, Taliad. He often visits me, as he finds my company interesting."

I smiled. "I'm afraid you have the advantage over me, then, for I know nothing of you."

She smiled wryly in return. "And I know nothing of the Hyperborean woman by your side, who stands politely silent in the presence of her elders, yet taunts me *terribly* with the very fact of her existence. Perhaps we should sit awhile, and exchange tales with one another? I am called Kiriin."

I held out a gloved finger to her, and she clasped it for a moment in her little hands, smiling.

[Chapter Twelve](#)

"Perhaps the most beautiful of all beings are the pixies. They are also the most tragic - which makes them all the more beautiful."

- *Elven proverb*

"...And that's our story," I finished, leaning back on my cot to rest against the wall of my hidden sanctuary.

Lyota sat silently beside me on my cot, the moonlight from the single window of my sanctuary illuminating the small room. I had lit my brazier for a bit of warmth, as the spring evening was quite cool and the air that filtered in through the entrance at the bottom of the sanctuary might be a bit chill to a little pixie like Kiriin. Thereafter, I'd simply launched into my story, telling the tale from the beginning to this moment. Kiriin sat on the edge of my little desk by the window, swinging her feet as she listened the whole time. It

took several hours to tell the tale, and when I was finally done, she nodded. "Well, Master Eddas, I had hardly expected to encounter anyone my own age unless I should, by chance, encounter a dragon - and I hardly expected to *ever* encounter you. Still, having heard your story, I can see it is a good thing you have encountered me, after all. A good thing for both of us, perhaps."

"Oh? Why is that?"

Kiriin reached up to brush a strand of bright blue hair out of her tiny eyes, and looked at me quite seriously. "The lands of Hyperborea have changed much since you last breathed air, Eddas Ayar. Between here and Janto pass, the giants patrol less and less, as their villages are not so near, and the ruins of your people's civilization few and far between. Many foul creatures lie between this monastery and the safety of Janto mountain, where the dwarves themselves patrol the lands. And, even Janto mountain is not entirely safe, what with the goblins and their kin. If Morgar, that ancient Hyperborean deity, has truly gone insane and evil... Well, you can expect to encounter the worst the lands have to offer."

I shrugged. "Possibly. He is insane, however, and he is limited by the Arc of Time and the other Covenants of the Universe. The last time he tried to oppose me in that manner, seventy years ago, he failed utterly. The closest he came was with a chimera - but even then, he not only failed, but the chimera's very presence gave me hope to continue on past the barren wastelands of the Great Southern Dead Zone, and finally to arrive in what remained of Hyperborea."

"It will still be quite dangerous. You will need help."

I shrugged again. "I have all the help I'll probably need in Lyota."

Lyota smiled, but Kiriin shook her head. "And how do you expect her to sneak about in the lands of the Dark Elves?"

"I'll be teaching her an illusion to cover herself with," I replied offhandedly.

Kiriin shook her head. "The Malani are masters of illusion and shadow. She is no master mage. She will be detected."

"You have a better solution?" I asked, trying to remain polite.

"Yes. I'll accompany you, and shield her with my own magic. None are better than a pixie at illusions."

Lyota grinned. "What a splendid idea!"

I shook my head. "What of these children, here? How will they get by without you?"

Kiriin rolled her little eyes at me. "You know little of pixies, apparently."

I suppressed a snort, and managed a smile, instead. "With respect, Kiriin, when I was in the land of the elves in my previous life, I spent a good portion of my time *avoiding* your people. Your children are, in many ways, like cats - they're attracted most to the people who find them the most annoying," I said, and was relieved when Kiriin burst into tiny giggles. "Still, *someone* must watch out for these children, don't you think?"

Kiriin smiled. "Hardly, Eddas Ayar. They are pixies - death is a way of life for us. If it were not, we would soon carpet the whole planet with our numbers. We are immortal, can reproduce at a year of age, and can reproduce twice a year - as a mage, the mathematics of that should be obvious to you," she said, and I nodded as she continued. "An Elder will give guidance, education, and protection for those in their

presence, but otherwise, we let our children fend for themselves once they've learned to speak and fly. Our minds do not truly mature until we are about five centuries old, and our true powers do not appear until that time. Until then, our prolonged childhood and the predation of ordinary animals keeps our numbers at reasonable levels."

"Aaaah..." I replied, understanding. Now I understood why the elves cherished the pixies so. The deaths of pixie children were quite tragic, but the pixies themselves could not feel sorrow about it, as they were also quite necessary. Beauty and Innocence, Sorrow and Tragedy - a combination no elf could *possibly* resist. The brownies were probably cherished for similar reasons (despite how insanely annoying brownie-pranks could be).

Seeing my hesitation, Kiriin spoke again. "I... I realize that may make you uncomfortable, but it is simply the way our people are. Umm... If you let me come with you, I could also help teach Lyota. You said she was your student, and you were trying to instruct her as you went along on this journey. The magic of the pixies is hardly that of a Hyperborean battle-mage, but she could still learn a few useful things from me."

I raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps, but-"

"Please! I could help you so much!"

Now, I was definitely curious. I could think of *no* reason why she would be so desperate to come along.

Lyota grinned. "Come on, Master Eddas! Say she can come with us!"

I thought about it. Kiriin *was* a pixie, and a *very* old one - certainly the oldest I'd ever heard of, if not the oldest one alive. Her heart could only be filled with good - and if it wasn't, Lyota would spot that instantly in her aura. She could certainly be trusted, so far as a pixie could be trusted regarding anything. Still, her eagerness made me wonder... I leaned forward again, peering at Kiriin. "And just what is it you would get in return for helping us, Kiriin?"

Kiriin smiled back innocently. "Umm... Would you believe me if I said I'd do it just for fun?"

"If you were younger, yes. But you're my age - we're both older than the oldest elf, and well beyond such foolishness. There are damn few individuals our age left in the world, and nearly all of them are dragons. You didn't live as long as you have acting entirely on impulse - *no* pixie does. Now, just what is it you want?"

Kiriin paused, then hung her little head. "I can't tell you. If I do, I know you'll just say 'no'. But yes, I do want something. I-"

"And so you intend to prove your worth to me by helping us, and then ask later, when I'll feel I owe you for your aid, is that it?" I said, giving her the most intimidating glower this body could muster.

"Yes," she replied, hanging her head even lower, unable to meet my gaze at all.

I looked to Lyota. "And what of you? She'll have to be touching you for her illusions to have their strongest effect in concealing you, and there will be dangers we encounter that we can overcome, but she may not be able to cope with, herself. A spell which might only wound you would kill her instantly, so you'd have to keep her on your person at all times, so as to protect her within the aura of your own protective spells. Are you willing to carry her with you all the time, and watch over her as she watches over you?"

Lyota stifled her grin long enough to give me a serious look. "Yes, Master Eddas," Lyota replied, only the barest hint of a twinkle in her eye.

I nodded. "Alright."

Kiriin blinked, and Lyota giggled. "Alright?!" Kiriin squeaked.

"Yes," I replied, leaning back again and relaxing.

"You mean I can come?!"

"Yes," I replied. "Whatever it is you want, if we all survive this, just ask. If it's honorable and it's within my power, I'll try."

"Wheee-hee-hee-hee!" Kiriin cried, buzzing off the table to fly about my sanctuary, a sparkle of magic trailing behind her. Lyota laughed and clapped, and I was quite sure Kiriin's astral aura was very beautiful for her to look at just at the moment. After spinning about the room a few times, Kiriin hovered in front of my face, kissing my nose and cheeks over and over. "You won't regret this! Really! Honestly! I'll be more help than you realize!"

I held out my hand, and Kiriin landed on my palm, grinning broadly. "Alright, I'm sure you will. Now - go and get your things, and move them into here. It will take me a bit to attune everything to my sanctuary, and I may as well get started as soon as possible. I think I have a little box you can sleep in, so we can just pack your bedding into it. And *be careful!* The same warning you gave those children applies to you, you know. It's night, and the owls are out."

"Hah! Don't worry - they'll never see me! I *am* a pixie, after all!" Kiriin squeaked happily, then vanished. I smiled, hearing the buzzing of her wings as she flew out of my sanctuary and back to her little gargoyle-home.

Lyota burst out laughing. "Oh, Master Eddas! You should have seen her aura! I knew you'd say yes long before she did - I could see it in your aura. But she couldn't! She was *so* afraid you'd say 'no', and then when you said 'yes' she just *exploded* into brilliant sparkles of happiness and joy!"

I nodded. "I imagine it was quite beautiful. Still, there is the matter of what it is she wants - and more importantly, *why* it is she's here. It's too coincidental, I think. It *reeks* of Yorindar's work."

"It does?" Lyota asked, surprised.

"Yes. She's been here, in this monastery, for over two thousand years. Judging by her age and what she said, she's been waiting here even before I was born. Why? The answer is obvious - waiting for me. Whether she knew it or not, that's what she apparently was here for. Yorindar used *something* to get her to stay here all this time, or perhaps even a combination of things. And I've a feeling whatever she wants to ask me at the end of this will have something to do with what's kept her here, all this time."

Lyota nodded in understanding. "And because Yorindar knew he would be busy in the south now, helping King Noril... Just a few decades before you awakened in your tomb, the parents of those children were blown here by a wind-storm, so that Kiriin would be alerted to our arrival today by the children, themselves. It's all part of a grand plan, set in motion ages ago..."

"Exactly," I replied, and again felt a chill as the word fell from my lips.

Lyota stared at me in silence for a long moment, and I knew I had again spoken with Yorindar's words, whether I meant to or not. Finally, she shuddered. "Master Eddas, you should see your aura when you do that. It's quite frightening."

"Oh? What is it you see?"

Lyota nodded. "For the briefest moment, all I can see looking at you is an enormous raven."

I smiled wryly. "Somehow, that is precisely what I thought you'd say," I replied, and chuckled.

Chapter Thirteen

"Amazingly, I was able to gather my army and make ready for battle in just a bit over a week - Dame Raven's lessons in logistics came in enormously handy. Not only had my father prepared the kingdom for times like this, with armories and regular training, I had done likewise when my turn came to rule. More, I knew what our army would need, and when and where they would need it. I was actually quite astonished at how easy it was to prepare ourselves for war, simply because of Dame Raven's careful and patient instruction in the ancient Hyperborean science of logistics. Now, it only remained to be seen if her lessons in the Art and Science of War itself would serve me as well..."

- King Noril, *Autobiography*, 1729 NCC

"You are *ruining* a perfectly good journeyman for *any* kind of serious work!" I snapped, guiding the invisible steed between the trees of the forest. I tried to keep my eyes on the surroundings, in case we encountered anything dangerous, but it was quite difficult at the moment. I was certain that by the time we reached Janto pass, Kiriin would have completely corrupted Lyota beyond repair.

"Bah! You old fussbudget! You're raising her to be a stodgy old fart, I think!" Kiriin replied from her seat on Lyota's shoulder. Lyota, for her part, valiantly attempted to stifle a giggle. "There's more to magic than work, work, work, you know!"

"Bah, yourself! The path of a *true* mage is nothing *but* work! No one masters the greater spells without an *enormous* amount of work! Now, by the time we get where we're going, you'll have her so used to playing frivolous little games, she'll-"

"*Frivolous?!"* Kiriin squeaked, outraged. "Why, I'll have you know, you old fussbudget, that not a *single* thing I taught her was in *any* way frivolous! It's all a part of pixie magic!"

"Learning how to turn bees blue wasn't frivolous?!"

"No, it wasn't!" Kiriin snapped, then paused, and giggled. "Well, okay, maybe *that* part was, yes. But it's *still* an important thing to learn to master illusions! Besides, to a pixie, a bee is a good friend and a useful weapon!"

"Kiriin, I *really* think that you-*OOOOF!*"

The blow caught me completely unawares, tossing me from the saddle to land heavily on the ground. 'A *stone...*' I realized, seeing it lying next to me as I lay there, dazed. It was a small boulder, actually, and the size of my head. It was also covered in blood - my own. I couldn't breathe, my left arm was smashed, and already I could see the blackness at the edges of my vision.

"*Wurooo! Me gets one!*" shouted a voice in the guttural language of the ogres. The cry was echoed by at least two others.

My body was already healing, driven by the powerful knot of *mana* that maintained it as it was. The flinders of smashed ribs shifted and ground together within my chest agonizingly, and I found I could take a small sip of air. I could see Lyota casting a defensive spell. It was the wrong one - a simple magic armor spell would never resist the impacts of the stones these ogres were throwing. With a supreme effort of will, I fought back a wave of unconsciousness and cast a brief cantrip taught to me as an

apprentice. It was for use in communicating quickly on the battlefield when line-of-sight could be established. *"Giddiyap,"* I hissed, the spell carrying my words into the invisible steed's ear. It was not a horse, but was significantly smarter - and it was well aware of who summoned it. The steed broke into a trot. *"Hup!"* I hissed again, and it cantered off, carrying Lyota away from the danger. She was screaming to the 'steed, trying to get it to turn around - wasting her breath. She'd have been better off casting a more effective defensive spell, and simply slipping from it's back. Well, she was only a journeyman.

The ogres, not understanding that the last thing Lyota wanted to do was flee, trotted out into the clearing, then jeered and taunted her for several moments, waving their clubs. Each was typical of their people - about eight cubits tall, hairy, muscular, and possessed of large fangs that jutted from their lower jaw. I struggled to catch my breath to blast them as they trotted over to me.

"Thag! This one still wiggle!"

"Bah. Me fix," the bald-headed one replied, raising his club.

* * *

"Hee! Many pretties for to trade! Rings and boots and gloves and more!"

"Yah, goblins give much for this."

"How we split?"

"Hmm... Trade for gold, then split gold one-two-three. Good?"

"Good, yah."

"Me think good, too. Ooo! Look! Leg back, now."

"Already?! Wurooo! We eat good from now on! Gimme!"

A rending sound, and pain grown dull. I knew what was happening, but could do nothing. I couldn't even scream.

"Hah! Like troll, this one!"

"Yah. Keep 'um weak, no blood left, and they not get away. Last three, four days, like troll."

"This one magicker, me think. Maybe recover, maybe do magic, maybe hurt."

"Nah. No blood left. Like troll."

"You think?"

"Yah. Watch."

Another rending sound, and more dull pain.

"See? Like troll. No blood left, can't move. Just little trickle. Can eat legs and arms for three, four days, then eat rest when they die. Me full. You want arm?"

"Nah. Me full, too."

"Thag? You want arm?"

"Yah, sure."

A long moment of silence, interrupted only by the sound of crunching bones.

"Wuroooo! Look! Other one back!"

"Get 'um! Maybe they like troll, too!"

A deafening blast. Shouts of anger. Another blast, then another. Then silence.

A drop of rain fell across my face, and slowly trickled down to my lips. I tasted it. Salty... A sobbing sound.

A woman's voice, cracking with emotion. "Oh, father! I'm so sorry! It's all my fault!"

A tiny, high-pitched squeak. "No! It's all my fault! If I hadn't been arguing with him, none of this would have happened, ever! I knew we were in dangerous lands, and yet I kept on arguing and distracting and-"

"Kiriin," I croaked, my voice the barest whisper. "Do me a favor..."

"Yes! Anything! Anything at all, Master Eddas! I'm so sorry! Ask me anything! Anything!"

"Shut up."

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

"Even Lamias - those lone, solitary huntresses - will themselves kill ogres on sight and without mercy. This proves that even the snake-women are not entirely without redeeming qualities."

- Elven proverb

It took me days to recover - it might have been less, but Lyota simply didn't know what to do to help me. Her spells were far less effective than the regenerative powers this body already possessed, all her training at healing told her I should be dead already, and I was too weak at first to explain that all I needed now was *water*. The ogres had been right - like a troll, this body couldn't move if it lacked enough blood. The knot of *mana* that maintained it drew liquids from wherever they could be extracted within what was left of the body, but there simply wasn't enough. And without enough blood in my veins, I was literally too weak to move.

I suppose I should have died. Even a troll might have died - their regenerative abilities were driven by powers of the flesh, and feeding three full-sized ogres might have been more than they could have withstood. Yet, I did not die. The knot of *mana* which maintained this body was stronger than that. Despite how badly I had *wanted* to die, despite how desperately I had *wished* I would die, I did not.

Still, it wasn't until the second day I had recovered enough to tell Lyota that all I needed was some water - but by then, I was starving, as well. We camped in the forest those two days, as I simply didn't have the strength to summon my hidden sanctuary at first. Certainly, I could have tapped my staff for the energy I needed for the spell, but I literally didn't have the strength to toss the rope into the air so we could enter it. Lyota managed to repair the shreds of my robe with a spell of repairing, and afterwards snuggled close to me at night to keep me from freezing. Kiriin proved useful, as well. She gathered several dozen acorns and planted them in a ring around our camp - then, with pixie magic, she caused all of them to grow into mature oaks in a matter of heartbeats, surrounding the camp with a solid wall of living oak, their branches intertwined above us into a solid canopy against the spring rains. It wasn't much, but it would serve as a

passable defense against anything that might come by. It wasn't until the morning of the third day I was able to summon my sanctuary, and I spent the rest of that day prone on my cot, resting.

The morning of the fourth day found me sitting on my cot, nude, staring at the bag of items Lyota had collected. The ogres had simply bagged everything I owned, and I had lost nothing. And yet, as I stared at my body, which was utterly unmarked and still as beautiful as it had always been, I wondered if I had not, in truth, lost something more than physical.

I had once thought that being gang-raped repeatedly for three days was the worst experience of my life. I now found that being eaten alive was, in truth, far worse. And what made it all the more unbearable was to stare at chubby pink toes, hard-muscled thighs and arms, and realize that there was not even a mark. With a bit of water and an occasional biscuit, the ogres could have kept me at the brink of death for an eternity, and fed from my body endlessly - and would have happily done so, had they known they could.

That knowledge chilled me to the pit of my soul, and I found myself running my fingers over this body, trying to assure myself that I was, indeed, alright. For only the second time in my life, I found myself wanting to look into a mirror, to again see the strange woman who had gazed out at me for so long, and assure myself she was, indeed, alright. I resisted the temptation to cast a spell of returning to take myself back to my tower and look into my mirror - but only just.

A bowl of conjured cruel sat on my desk, cooling - Lyota's work, apparently. She was, in the end, a healer, and had anticipated when I would awaken. I took a moment to eat, and reflect. She might, perhaps, become a battle-mage, as well. She had done well, and destroyed the ogres with explosions of lightning, just as I taught her. I could hear Kiriin and Lyota talking to each other quietly, in whispers, below the entrance to my sanctuary. They were trying not to disturb me, as Kiriin continued her lessons in illusion. It pleased me to note that Kiriin concentrated more on the practical theory of illusions, now. There would be time enough for games and happiness once all this was over - just as there would be time enough for tears, and screaming nightmares.

It took an age to dress. Slipping on my rings and other items, then Dyarzi's elf-chain garments which I wore beneath my robe, then the gloves and boots, the robe itself, and adjusting the waist-belt over it. Somehow, each moment of it was special. I was *alive*. The simple knowledge of that, the simple sensation of dressing, of resuming the garb and appearance of the Raven of Yorindar... Somehow, that was greatly comforting, in a way I could not explain. It was almost as though I was, somehow, donning armor against the world, and against the reality of what had happened to me.

I climbed down the rope from my hidden sanctuary, silencing the whispered conversation Kiriin and Lyota were having between each other. Summoning my staff to my fist at a thought, I looked to them. "If you haven't eaten yet, I'll conjure something quickly, and we'll be on our way. We've lost several days of travel already. We need to get moving as soon as possible."

Kiriin looked at me, her tiny face showing deep concern. "Are-are you alright now?"

"I'll live, if that's what you're wondering. I doubt I'll ever look at trolls the same way again - though at least now, I understand why they hate ogres so much. One would think that they would get along quite well, really. They're both Unseelie, they both often work with goblins... Now, however, I understand why they do not."

Lyota gazed at me, and I knew she was looking at my aura, sensing my true emotional state. "You're keeping your real feelings bottled up, Master Eddas."

"Of course I am. We still have to rescue prince Parial. There will be more than enough time later for me to shudder and weep and even have nightmares over this. This body is immortal - I have the rest of

eternity to be horrified in my dreams by what's happened. But for now, I am needed, and my own weaknesses and frailties must be put aside," I said, and looked into her eyes. "And *that*, Lyota, is what it *truly* means to be a master mage. I cannot weep over this, and I cannot die from it. I have far more important things to do - as do you."

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

"Now come - have you two eaten?"

"Yes, Master Eddas."

"Then let us be off," I said, holding out my hand.

Lyota took my hand, and pulled herself to her feet - then suddenly wrapped her arms around me, sobbing. "I'm so sorry! I couldn't stop the steed! It carried us away and between the trees, and I couldn't cast upon them! It was ages before it stopped, and then I had to run back, and-"

I hugged Lyota in return, patting her back. "There, there. It's alright. The steed carried you away because I ordered it to. I used a spell of communication to whisper into its ear, and ordered it to ride away with you."

Lyota jumped, then leaned back, looking at me in astonishment. "You did?! *Why?!?*"

"Because I saw the spell you'd cast as a defensive spell - you cast the Spell of Magic Armor. That wouldn't have stopped the stones they were throwing, Lyota - you'd have died. My own enchantment on my ring is the same, and provides greater protection than even the finest articulated plate armor. Unfortunately, the stones they were casting were the size of catapult-shot. You'd have died, Lyota, so I ordered the steed to ride off. You needed to cast the Spell of Missile Reflection, instead," I replied, and smiled. "Still, you did far better when you came back. I'm quite proud of you."

"I didn't really, you know," Lyota replied, sniffing. "I forgot and didn't tap my staff. I was staggering, after. And then, when I saw what that spell could *really* do... I was ill. Almost as ill as I was when I saw what they had done to you. I had never truly turned my *Talent* towards killing before."

Kiriin buzzed over, to hover by Lyota's head. "It's as I told you, though, Lyota - it had to be done."

Lyota smiled at Kiriin. "I know, I know... It was just a bit shocking, at the time."

Kiriin nodded and continued, looking to me as she spoke. "Master Eddas was right, and I was wrong. You're learning to be a battle-mage - and from what I understand of your situation, that's what your people will need, for now. The lands of Hyperborea are still very dangerous, and your numbers few. I can't-" she said, then paused, covering her little mouth with a hand. "I can't make it up to him for distracting him. I can't make it up to him for what happened. But I can teach as best I can, so that you will be the best you can be at spells of illusion and nature. Perhaps that will be enough."

I smiled. "That will be more than enough, Kiriin. And yes, I forgive you," I replied, and reached out a gloved finger to stroke her little face gently. "But next time you and I decide to have an argument, let's both agree to wait until we're safely in camp, inside my sanctuary, alright?"

Kiriin kissed my finger, then grinned. "Okay!"

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

"Time do yet not quite heal all wounds - but a stout ale do yet go a long way towards the healing

of what Time may yet miss."

- Dwarven Proverb

It was far easier to get out of the little fortification Kiriin had made than I imagined it might be - she simply flew over to one of the oaks which surrounded us and pushed, fluttering her little wings with a sparkle of magic. The tree gently drifted back, like a boat upon the water, disentangling its branches from the others. When she stopped, it was as firmly rooted as it had been before, its branches again intertwined with the rest, but now there was easily enough room to walk out. "You've *no* idea how annoying we pixies can be to dryads!" she explained with a giggle. We laughed with her, of course - it was hard not to laugh at Kiriin's little jokes, really. Once I'd recovered the rope and handed it back to Lyota, then conjured another invisible steed, we were on our way again.

We rode in silence, our eyes on the woods about us. I knew that this had only been Morgar's first attempt to stop me - and one that would have easily failed, had I not been distracted. There would be another, of that I was certain. The only question was when.

Lyota kept the hood of her robe up, and Kiriin took to riding inside the hood, standing on her shoulder and whispering into her ear. Lyota had told her that her protective spells were, in most regards, linked to her aura. This meant to be shielded by Lyota's spells, Kiriin needed to be as close as possible to her, preferably in physical contact. In turn, Kiriin's illusions would have their strongest effect when she was in physical contact with Lyota. Both had decided that they would work very hard to be of better help to me, and I realized that now, what with Kiriin's mind being focused and intent, Lyota was probably receiving the best instruction she could receive at this point. Kiriin may have been a pixie, but she *was* over two millennium old. Once she was able to focus herself upon the task, she was an excellent teacher.

"It's the waiting that's the worst part, Master Eddas," Lyota said quietly as we paused for a brief lunch. The 'steed stood nearby, four dishpan-sized hoof-impressions in the grass, as mouthfuls of grass and weeds slowly disappeared, one after the other. Lyota held up a spoonful of conjured food beside her face and Kiriin would take a bit from the spoon, then Lyota would finish the spoonful. I, myself, ate only sparingly, keeping my eyes on the surrounding woods.

I nodded, swallowing. "Yes. That's part of it, unfortunately. The ogres were, as I said before, only the first attempt. Morgar *will* try again. At least the waiting is a bit easier for you, however. I find that simply *being* here is driving me to distraction."

"Oh? Why?" Kiriin chirped.

"Because the *real* battle is in the Southlands, with King Noril! I so *desperately* want to be there... Or, at *least* know what's happening. It's been a week - Noril should be nearly done mobilizing his army, if he's learned the lessons I taught him. Meanwhile, Cordo has had a week to ravage the towns and villages of the Southlands, and build the morale of the goblins through easy victories. He's a master battle-mage of the Dyclonic Circle, even as I once was, and that's what I would be doing, were I in his position. Building their morale, and fattening their war-chests with booty taken from small villages and towns..." I said, and swore. "Were I there by Noril's side..."

"But you're not," Kiriin observed. "You're here, doing something just as important, if not more so."

I nodded. "I know. It doesn't make it any easier, however," I replied, and sighed. A small movement caught my eye, and I looked up into the sky, between the overhanging boughs of the forest canopy. "Damn. Manticore," I said, setting my bowl aside and rising to my feet.

Lyota stood suddenly, looking up. A manticore was a fearsome sight, even at the distance it was above

us of nearly a quarter of a league. Part lion, with bat-like wings and a scorpion-like tail, it had an enormous head that was somewhat similar to that of a bearded man, with a maw of razor-sharp, shark-like teeth. They were incredibly vicious, utterly fearless, and aside from their claws and teeth, a single sting of their poisonous tail could slay an oilphant. "Does it see us?" Lyota asked nervously.

"Not yet, but it will," I replied, and began to raise my staff.

"Oh, no, it won't!" Kiriin said, and buzzed out of her hiding spot inside the hood of Lyota's robe, then around us in a circle, little sparkles of magic trailing behind her. After a moment, she hovered, grinning. "Okay, you can relax, now. Just don't cast anything at it or step outside of the circle I flew, and it won't see us."

I nodded and sat, picking up my bowl again. Pixie illusions were quite powerful, and a manticore lacked the brains to even have a chance of penetrating the ruse.

Lyota looked around as Kiriin buzzed back to her position beneath her hood. "I... I don't see what it is you did. I can see the blue sparkles of sorcery, but not the effect."

"That's because you're covered by the illusion, Lyota," I replied. "You can never see the effect of an illusion when it's covering you."

"That's right!" Kiriin chirped.

"So what did you make us look like?" Lyota asked, sitting again.

"A tree with a really large canopy. It's all I could think of that would fit seamlessly in this area and cover all three of us. And don't move around much, really. The area is only that circle I flew, okay?"

"Alright," Lyota said, picking up her bowl and holding another spoonful of food out to Kiriin, "but what did you mean, 'fit seamlessly'?"

I chuckled. "Remember your formulas, Lyota. The strength of an illusion is directly proportional to the degree of continuity the illusion has with the reality about it. An illusion of a dragon would cover us just as easily, and would also be something a manticore wouldn't be interested in approaching - but a dragon would have less continuity with the forest around us. A herd of deer, on the other hand, would have just as much continuity with the forest as a tree - but the opposite of the desired effect," I said, and chuckled again.

"Yup-yup! But this is just an image, the most basic of illusions. That's why you can't walk out of the area, or cast anything," Kiriin added.

I nodded. "Images have all the strength and durability of a soap-bubble - but in the right circumstances, they can be quite useful. A full illusion can be not only seen, but smelled, heard, and even touched, if it's done properly. Yet, more perceptive individuals or creatures who can see into the astral will be able to discern their true nature. At the far end of the scale are the spells of Phantasm - they are, for all intents and purposes, utterly indistinguishable from reality. They're also the most difficult and draining illusions to cast, and the most dangerous."

"Very dangerous. We pixies never use them, except in groups where we can share the drain of the spell. The drain is too great for just one of us," Kiriin agreed.

"Phantasms are dangerous, Master Eddas? How?" Lyota asked.

"They can escape your control, and assume a reality of their own. The better and more perfect your

phantasm, the more difficult it is to control. I've never seen it happen, but... Well, in theory, if a phantasm is perfect enough, the caster can utterly lose control of it, and it can become real."

"But... But how can that happen? I thought you said one of the founding principles of magic was 'Reality is Absolute'?"

I nodded. "It is. A phantasm, however, is an incredibly powerful illusion - so powerful, it verges on reality, itself. In truth, a phantasm is an illusion which draws upon the unreality of the Plane of Dreams. And therein lies the true danger, Lyota - not all dreams are pleasant. Some are nightmares."

We ate in silence for a while afterwards, and I kept my eye on the fell beast above us. Finally, I set my empty bowl aside, and stretched. "It appears to be hunting. More of Morgar's work, I imagine. The forest is full of deer - it should have spotted something by now. It's fated to meet us, apparently. Once you two have rested and are ready to travel, let me know, and I'll kill it so we can move on."

"That easily?!" Kiriin squeaked, peeking out from Lyota's hood at me.

Lyota giggled. "Master Eddas is the greatest battle-mage Hyperborea ever produced - though I'm sure I embarrass him to say it aloud. When he's not taken unawares..." she said, and blushed. "Well, just trust me, he can do it."

"But it must be a quarter of a league away, easily! Surely even *you* can't cast on something that distant!"

"Not quite. I could hit it with a bolt of lightning or fire, but it will have to get a bit closer, first. However, I'd prefer not to make that much noise. We don't know what else might be in these woods."

"Well, I believe we're ready to travel, Master Eddas," Lyota said, setting her empty bowl aside.

I nodded, and waved my staff beyond the edge of the illusion Kiriin had conjured. The illusion dissolved, and the manticore spotted us instantly. It roared, an eerie, hollow bellow intended to paralyze its prey with fear. "Stand still, please," I called, and gestured, casting a spell of abjuration.

Kiriin blinked in surprise. "An abjuration?! How will that help?"

"Hush. I need to concentrate," I replied, focusing my will.

The manticore stooped, diving down at us with terrifying speed.

"You might want to close your eyes about now," I remarked dryly.

Lyota did so, but Kiriin stared on to the bitter end. With a sickening crunch and a spray of blood, the manticore slammed into the edge of the abjuration at full speed. It might have smashed through the abjuration of a lesser mage, but I've held greater demons at bay with this spell. Its lifeless body fell to the ground before us in a jumbled heap, fifty stone of dead, twitching meat and broken bones. "Don't move yet - wait until it stops twitching. The tail's the truly dangerous part, and if you're accidentally stung, you'll be dead before I can do anything about it."

"Ewww!" Kiriin squeaked, looking at the mess.

"It just... Flew into the barrier?!" Lyota exclaimed, shocked.

"That's how they attack, Lyota. They fly over their victims at lightning speed, lashing out with their tails to sting them. At that speed, the tail can penetrate plate armor easily. Then they come back and eat a leisurely meal afterwards, as their poison is universally fatal. Because of that, the easiest way to kill them

is with a simple abjuration, since it's invisible and they fly right into it - though, admittedly, you have to be strong enough to maintain the abjuration against its impact. If you're not, you can get a similar effect with a wall of stone or iron, though you need to release the spell just before it hits, or they'll simply swerve to avoid it." I shrugged. "In the old days, I'd have harvested the tail. Alchemists paid quite a handsome fee for it, as they could make a very deadly blade-poison out of it. Nowadays, there's none to sell it to, though. All the alchemists of Hyperborea are long dead," I said, and sighed for a moment. "Ah, well. It's stopped twitching, now. Let's be off," I said, and dropped the barrier, stepping over to the invisible steed. It had stood quietly throughout the entire affair, as nothing on this plane could harm it.

Evening found us camped in the wooded foothills of Janto mountain, safely inside my sanctuary. As I finished pulling up the rope and coiling it, I considered our situation. Morgar was insane, but he wasn't stupid. He would have to know that brute force simply wouldn't stop me - it hadn't worked seventy years before, and there was no reason to assume it would work now. Yorindar's plans had, for the most part, begun to come together. The iron band I bore about my left wrist would give me free passage through the land of the dwarves - assuming the dwarven guards of Iron City didn't shoot me on sight as a Dark Elf, and allowed me to come close enough to be recognized. With a good guide, I could reach the lands of the Dark Elves in a matter of a few days. Once Parial was in my grip, a simple spell of returning, and this adventure was over. All too easy... Morgar *had* to know this. He *had* to have something planned. But what?

"You look concerned, Master Eddas," Lyota said, gazing at me from where she had bedded down for the night. "Is everything alright?" Kiriin peeked at me silently from the little box atop my desk, the one I'd given her to use as a bed.

I nodded. "Yes, yes. Everything's fine. Get some sleep, you two - we've a long day ahead of us tomorrow, and many more to follow."

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

"Even the dwarves know that a stout bow in good hands is a far more effective weapon than a blunderbuss. That they continue to use the foul-smelling things is hardly a sign of its true potential as a weapon, but more a sign that they, like many children, enjoy loud noises."

- Elven proverb

"Remember - no matter what happens, don't speak unless you're spoken to, and keep your protection and translation spells up. And no matter what happens, do not attack, do not run away, and do not make any move to defend me until after they understand who I am," I said, and Lyota nodded silently. "And Kiriin, stay hidden, and stay quiet. The dwarves aren't terribly fond of your people, as your children greatly enjoy annoying the hell out of them."

"Well, they wouldn't if the dwarves weren't such stuffy fussbudgets," Kiriin replied, then ducked into Lyota's hood to hide when I turned to glare at her, a small giggle escaping from within Lyota's robe.

I waved an ebon-gloved hand at the terraced fields around us as we rode slowly up the paved road that wound gradually up the mountainside. "Look around you. The farmers working these fields fled the moment we came into sight. Even now, I'm sure word of our arrival has been passed, and probably we've a reception waiting for us - and given my appearance, it probably won't be a friendly reception. Keep your spells up, and do as I've told you."

"Yes, Master Eddas," Lyota and Kiriin chorused, and Lyota struggled to stifle a smile while Kiriin giggled from within her robes.

By noon, we drew within sight of the city gates for the upper city - that part of Iron City that was above the ground. Knowing the dwarves as I did, I was certain that they would, in all honesty, prefer all their city to be safely underground - but crops would not grow without sunlight. I could very easily have simply ridden straight up the irrigated terraces and across the fields, and saved ourselves several hours of winding travel up the roads - but the dwarves would hardly take the stomping of their crops by my invisible steed as the act of a friend.

As I expected, the guards at the gate were out in full force, and they did not look happy to see me. Twelve dwarves in fine scale-mail armor glowered up at me from beneath their helmets, all with their blunderbusses carefully trained upon me. Behind them, several dozen ordinary dwarves of the city gazed on with expressions ranging from fear to hatred. The captain of the guard, a broad dwarf with a copper-red beard, pushed back the visor of his helmet to get a better look at me. Slowly, I slipped from the saddle, then helped Lyota to her feet and dismissed the steed. I walked over to the guards, Lyota in tow, and stood there quietly to give them a chance to size me up. I held my staff in my left hand, but made no move otherwise.

The captain looked me over. It was apparent he'd at least *heard* of me, though he'd never seen me before. Caution on his part was only reasonable, in my opinion - after all, I *did* resemble a Dark Elf. *"What be your business here, dark one? We've no truck with your kind, and if it be the entrance to the deep lands ye do seek, best ye should yet turn about and hie ye to the lands of the goblins,"* the captain growled at me in his language. I thought he was remarkably polite and controlled, given the situation, and I bowed politely.

"I be Eddas Ayar, a friend of the dwarves. Here be the sign of King Durin, himself," I said, shifting my staff to my right hand and thrusting out my left wrist.

There was a deafening *BOOM*, and I was knocked to the ground. My vision swam for a moment, then faded.

I knew not how long I was unconscious, it apparently was long enough for the pain of the wound to have faded to a dull ache. *'Damn... I moved too quickly...'* I thought groggily. A shape hovered over me, tugging at my left arm, but by the time I was aware of it, they let my arm fall limply to the ground again.

"Ye damn fool! She was who she did say she was!"

"Your pardon, captain, but she did yet have that staff in her hand, and I did think-"

"It'll be the last thing ye ever did think, Gunrim! Now a dwarf-friend be dead! My cousin's son or no, your head will yet come off before sunset for this! Fool! Idiot! Dross of your mother's womb, slag of your father's forge! Everyone has yet heard of the mage Eddas Ayar! Why did ye think I did not order all to fire when she first did come within range? The mage Eddas Ayar be a Hyperborean battle-mage, who did yet return from the void in this body! It may yet be another thousand years before they do return again! Fool! Slag! Ye did slay a dwarf-friend with your stupidity!"

"I... I be not quite dead yet, noble captain," I gasped, and fell to coughing. For a long moment, I couldn't breathe or speak - I could only cough violently. The acrid, brimstone stench of burnt dwarf-powder in the air didn't help matters. Finally, I coughed up something large and black. It lay on the ground before me, and I gazed at it numbly - a lead ball, a bit over half a finger wide, and covered in blood. Propping myself up on an elbow, I felt about my chest. Inside my robe was a handful more just like it, extruded through the original wound by the regenerative processes of this body, the wound apparently having been just below my right breast. I reached in through the hole in the side of my robe

made by the blast, fished them out, then dropped them on the ground. Looking up to the young dwarf who'd shot me, standing by his captain - they and all the other dwarves had expressions of utter shock and amazement - I spoke. *"How many balls did ye yet load into your weapon this morning, noble Gunrim?"*

"Twe-twelve, my lady," the dwarf stammered, his eyes wide beneath his helmet.

I glanced at the balls on the ground before me, then nodded. *"Good. I would yet hate to be coughing the damn things up for the next few days."*

"Ye-ye do yet live?!" the captain stammered, goggling.

I suppressed a sharp reply as I stood, and forced a smile to my face instead. Repairing my robe with a spell of repairing, I flicked aside the blood and dirt with a cantrip. *"Aye, noble captain. I be yet a bit more difficult to slay than all that."* I looked around, and saw Lyota was alright. She had, just as I'd told her, remained perfectly still. The expression of relief on her face, however, spoke volumes.

The captain grinned, then scowled. *"Ne'ertheless, I must now arrest Private Gunrim, damn the luck!"* he snarled. Snatching the discharged blunderbuss from Gunrim's hands, he backhanded the younger dwarf with a mailed fist, sending him staggering. *"Idiot! What will I yet tell your mother?!"*

I shook my head. *"An' it please ye, noble captain, as far as I be concerned, it were yet merely an accident, the cause perhaps a sear yet to lightly ground, and hardly the error of this noble dwarf beside ye. I be yet unhurt, as ye can see, and none the worse for wear. As far as I be concerned, the accident did ne'er happen. What say ye, friend Gunrim?"* I asked, looking to the dwarf who'd shot me.

"Ye-ye would yet forgive and forget, my lady?" he asked in return, gaping in astonishment.

I forced a smile to my face. Despite the fact I agreed with the captain's assessment and thought Gunrim was an idiot, I could not afford to appear to be foul-tempered at this moment. I *needed* the dwarves - I couldn't possibly enter the lands of the Dark Elves without passing through the territory of the dwarves or that of the goblins, and the latter was simply impossible. I had no idea where I might even enter the goblin lands, and even if I *did* know where to go and tried to slip by them by posing as a Dark Elf, I still had no idea where I needed to go from there - I needed a *guide* to reach the Sunless Sea, something no *real* Dark Elf would need, and if I asked for one in the lands of the goblins, they would know in an instant I was a fraud. No, I *needed* the dwarves. Thus, though it was obvious to me that Gunrim had been too nervous, stupidly held his finger too tight on the trigger and shot the moment I moved because of it, I was not about to allow him to die for his stupidity when I could appear magnanimous, instead. *"I do yet find I did forget so completely, friend Gunrim, that I do not e'en recall what it is I might yet have to forgive ye for."*

Gunrim pulled his helmet off and tossed it aside, fell to his knees before me, and took my gloved hand in both his mailed hands. *"By me beard, I be yet your servant, my lady. Simply ask, and Gunrim shall yet provide,"* he replied, swearing the beard-oath of a dwarf - a lifetime vow, and a vow a dwarf would never break.

Looking at his face without his helmet, I revised my estimate of his age - Gunrim was, perhaps, merely forty or so. A very young dwarf, impetuous, and eager to prove himself. At his age in his culture, Gunrim was considered the same as teenagers were in human cultures - and though they may have far more life-experience than a human teenager did, they often were just as impetuous. Most young males were like him, eager and desperate to prove themselves and earn enough to afford a proper bride. Unfortunately for him, it would be another forty years or so before he would even be considered old

enough to marry, and probably another forty to eighty years before he'd accumulated enough for a decent bride on only a soldier's salary. And, because of me, he'd now escaped certain execution - the dwarves took the concept of 'Dwarf-Friend' quite seriously.

Gunrim's captain grinned with relief, as did the rest of the soldiers at the gate, and the towns-folk behind them cheered at the happy turn of events. Though a part of me wanted to simply snatch my hand from this idiot's grip and move on, I remembered Arella's lessons, and smiled instead. I gently pulled my hand from his, and helped him up. *"Now, now, young Gunrim. It be yet not quite as serious as all that, and a beard-oath hardly be necessary. An' your captain will yet permit ye a brief leave of duty, ye can lead me and me student to the home of Mungim Oakenshield, the trader. An' that be possible, we shall yet call the debt betwixt us paid in full, and keep the rest of it under the anvil,"* I said, then grinned. *"Only next time, have a care ye do yet use a blunderbuss with a sear that be yet not so light."*

Gunrim grinned, bowing rapidly many times. *"I shall, my lady,"* he replied, then looked to his captain.

His captain jerked a thumb behind him. *"Go - and let this yet be a lesson to ye, twit. For though Eddas Ayar may yet forgive ye with the broad and open heart of a true dwarf-friend, I shall not. Pots and pans and hot, soapy water shall yet be your weapons for the next month, I do think."*

"Aye, Captain - and gladly shall I wield them," Gunrim replied, bowing.

I snatched up Gunrim's helmet and plopped it back on his head for him, smiling. *"Lead on, young Gunrim,"* I called, and took Lyota's hand.

Gunrim led us through the Upper City, then past the guards at the Great North Gate, and into the caverns below the mountain. Each step of the way when he saw other dwarves staring at me, particularly guards, he announced who I was, as though he was leading a royal procession. It made things a bit smoother, and we were soon within Iron City. I worried that the young dolt who lead us would have no idea where to go, but as it turned out, he knew where Mungim's house was. Mungim, it appeared, was moderately well known in Iron City (probably through his association with me).

Lyota had never seen a dwarven city before, though I had. The Upper Cities were never much to look at - just a simple walled city, surrounded by terraced fields. The fields themselves were far more beautiful than the Upper City, as the dwarves always built their surface inhabitations along the lines of an enormous fort, with very little eye for style or beauty at all. Their Inner Cities, however, were always quite grand - and the older they were, the more impressive. Carved from the living stone of the caves themselves, houses with glorious and intricate architecture abounded. Here and there, enormous pillars of natural stone, the remnants of ancient limestone columns that had formed in the caves aeons ago, reached up to the cavern roof far overhead. Each was sculpted by the hand of time alone, and possessed a weird and fascinating beauty all themselves that the dwarves refused to mar with hammer and chisel. Light abounded, everywhere - it was, indeed, always bright and clear inside an Inner City of the dwarves, and Iron City was no exception. Hundreds of permanent lamps, each enchanted to glow with a cold, eternal flame, hung on every street, and on every corner. *"It's beautiful, Master Eddas..."* Lyota whispered, awed.

I glanced back, and saw Kiriin peeking out from Lyota's hood with the same amazed expression. I grinned. *"This is just the upper levels. Wait until we get to the main chamber."*

And, indeed, the main chamber was even more glorious. It was a large, open room half a league across and a quarter of a league high, with a winding road that spiraled both up and down from the mid-point, where we had entered. Down in the bottom of the chamber, a large pool served as the main water

reservoir for the city, fed by a sparkling waterfall that came from the very center of the cavern roof - a spring, diverted ages ago from the surface lands by the sorcery of the dwarves for their own uses. All along the walls of the cavern were thousands of homes, each intricately carved into the living stone of the cavern. Thousands of lights hung, several along the outside of each house, illuminating the cavern with a brightness nearly equal to a warm and golden afternoon. Every few hundred paces, short stairs were carved between loops of the road, to shorten the time it took to go from one part of the city to another. From at least ten other spots, open tunnels led to other parts of the city, and beyond. And everywhere were thousands and thousands of dwarves, walking, working, talking, and simply living their lives. The air was cool and crisp, and smelled lovely, the smells of food and drink and work all mixed together. Lyota was rendered utterly speechless. I simply smiled. I'd seen it before.

Our passage had not gone unnoticed, of course. Dozens of dwarves followed us, chattering amongst themselves about us, and dozens more dashed ahead to spread the word of our coming. Many were a bit nervous of my appearance - which, I suppose, was to be expected. The Malani-elves and the dwarves had a long history of hatred between them, and my appearance could hardly have generated any kind of warm feelings. All, of course, were male - female dwarves were quite shy, and only made up a quarter of their population, anyway, by births. I would hardly expect any of them to come out of their little houses to peek at me, though an eye here or there at a parted window-shade told me they were watching, as well.

Gunrim halted before one of the houses, and bowed. He opened his bearded mouth to speak, but was suddenly interrupted by the door flying open. To my utter surprise, a blond dwarf-maid dashed out, squealing with joy, and hugged me tight. "Oh! Oh! Oh! It's you! Oh! Oh! Oh!" she cried, tears streaming down her face.

I knelt, and hugged her in return, patting her back. I didn't need to see Mungim's bearded face grinning at me from the doorway to know who she was. "Yes, Jhumni. It's me."

Chapter Seventeen

"Our first engagement went well. We fought on the large plain near Luneburg, with the battle beginning shortly after dawn. Within the first hour, I had managed to crush Cordo's battalion of undead. Dame Raven was right, they were old, dry bones and put up only feeble resistance. They were more a tactic to terrify my troops than anything else, and I had worked hard to insure my warriors would not fear them with many stirring speeches. Cordo's spells raked rank after rank with fire and lightning, but Arella was able to counter anything greater, and the simple press of warriors to his position and apparent exhaustion forced him to withdraw to the rear. By noon, the goblins and hobgoblins had fled the field of battle, and I had to restrain my troops to keep them from wildly chasing them - it was never wise to simply chase a fleeing foe, as they could lead you into a trap. Dame Raven had said Cordo was a powerful and experienced battle mage, and I respected her words. Better to proceed with caution than allow the flush of victory to lead us into something foolish. Still, I turned to Arella, and could not help but grin as my troops cheered in the background. 'We have won, Arella!' But Arella simply looked at me and shook her head, the exhaustion of her sorcerous exertions showing upon her weary face. 'This day, my liege, and this battle. We have yet to win the war.' How little did I know how true her words really were."

- King Noril, *Autobiography*, 1729 NCC

There were many introductions, of course. We were introduced to Mungim's parents, his brothers, his nephews, and many other members of the family. They had maintained an ancient form of Hyperborean as their little merchant-family's "secret language", and we were able to speak easily, without aid of sorcery for translation. Kiriin, fortunately, chose to remain hidden during the whole of the introductions and endless conversation which followed - it was taking long enough for me to have to repeat Lyota's

origins over and over to each new family member that stopped by to see me, and I *certainly* didn't want to have to explain Kiriin's presence.

And the new Hyperborean race fascinated Mungim's family greatly, particularly as they could see one of them standing before them. The whole notion of a race who survived on the power of their sorcery alone was astounding to them - and, I supposed, rightly so.

About the time that Mungim's father was talking about holding a vast banquet in my honor and feting my arrival for several days, Mungim finally rose and shook his head. "Pater dear, love ye I do, but that we should not do. Eddas is hardly here for a casual visit, I be certain. I have yet known Eddas for nigh onto seven decades, now, and I have yet heard his story several times, both from Eddas and from the giants of Dohbari village. If the Raven of Yorindar be yet present in Iron City, it be hardly for a friendly chat and feast. And more, I have yet known Eddas long enough to tell just by his face that a mob of happy dwarves be yet something he be unaccustomed to, having yet spent so many years alone. Mayhap another day, we shall yet greet and feast our family friend, but not this day, I do think. This day, he be yet here on *business*," he said, the last in dwarvish. In their language, the word meant more than simply what it did in mine, and the connotations of it went much farther - such were the ways of the dwarves.

I nodded. "The business of the gods," I replied, then smiled. "However, should I survive this, I would be pleased to return another day."

"Ah! *Business*. I do beg your pardon, Eddas Ayar," Mungim's father said, tugging his snow-white beard, then grinned at me. "Ye will, of course, return for Jhumni's wedding, howe'er."

"Of course," I replied with a smile.

"Oh, Pater! That be a thing unscheduled as yet!" Jhumni replied, rolling her eyes. "Karadin may yet take another two decades to meet my price!"

"But he will, Jhumni, never fear," Mungim's mother said, and smiled.

"Good!" Mungim's father replied, then rose from his chair. "Now, let us all do leave Mungim and Jhumni with our guests, that they may yet discuss this business uninterrupted. Come! Come!" he called, and shooed the family out of the room. He turned at the door, giving Mungim a serious look that spoke volumes, then closed it behind him.

I rose to my feet and dodged one of the low beams of the ceiling. The roof of a dwarf's home was quite low, as they were short people. "If you don't mind, Mungim, Jhumni, I'll conjure some food for Lyota. She hasn't had seventy years to harden her body, as I have, and as it's been awhile since breakfast, she's probably hungry."

"Oh, yes, thank y-OW!" Lyota said, rising to her feet and banging her head into one of the ceiling beams. Lyota staggered, dropping her staff with a clatter and clapping both hands to her head.

"Hee-hee-hee-hee!"

Mungim stared in confusion, but Jhumni spoke first. "What be that sound?" she asked, looking to Lyota.

"Umm... Nothing!" Kiriin replied, hiding.

Jhumni stepped over to look at Lyota, and caught a glimpse of Kiriin peeking back at her from inside the hood of her robe. "Ewww! Ye be infested with pixies!" she said, waving her apron at Lyota and stepping back quickly.

"Pixies?!" Mungim yelped, and made a face.

"It's alright, she's a friend," Lyota replied, rubbing her head.

"She's also as old as I am, Jhumni, and that makes her very mature and responsible for a pixie," I added. "Her name is Kiriin."

"There be only one?" Jhumni asked.

"One be more than enough," Mungim observed with a snort.

Jhumni nodded. "They be nothing but trouble, Lyota. Ye should rid yourself of the little pest before it does ye mischief."

I smiled. "I'm quite sure Kiriin will be very behaved. She's not a young pixie, after all. She's over two thousand years old, and in many ways is as responsible and proper as any elf could be. Don't worry - she'll be quite behaved," I said, then looked to Kiriin, who was peeking out of Lyota's hood again, and smiled broadly. "*Because if she's not,*" I said in the language of the pixies, "*she'll live to regret it.*"

Kiriin nodded at me in understanding, and buzzed out from Lyota's hood to sit on my outstretched hand. She then smiled politely at Jhumni and Mungim. "Hello, my name is Kiriin. I'm quite pleased to make your acquaintance."

Mungim and Jhumni just gazed at Kiriin silently.

"You can just hold out your finger, and she'll clasp it," I offered.

Jhumni made a face. "Be she clean?"

"More importantly, be she housebroken?" Mungim added.

Kiriin still smiled, but I could tell it was forced. Lyota reached down to pick up her staff, then straightened up again, this time minding the beams. "She's very clean, and definitely housebroken. She's really quite a nice person and a very good friend."

"Well..." Jhumni said, then finally nodded. "Alright. But have a care me mater yet sees her not! Mater would surely *die* on the *spot* to learn a pixie were yet in the house!"

Mungim nodded. "Pater would yet take a poker to 'er."

"I promise I'll be very quiet," Kiriin said solemnly, and flew back over to Lyota to hide within her hood again.

Jhumni watched for a moment, then shuddered. "Pixies..." was all she could say.

"I'm not a flea, you know!" Kiriin called from hiding. "It's not like I'm a parasite or something!"

"*Don't* say it," I called warningly, wagging an ebon-gloved finger at Mungim as we sat at the table.

Mungim looked to me, then snorted. Jhumni simply burst into giggles. I conjured a bowl of fine stew for Lyota, then smiled. "Really - your experiences with pixies have all been with pixie-children. You've never met an adult pixie before."

Jhumni sat, watching Lyota as she pulled out a spoon. "I must admit, Master Eddas, that it has yet been me good fortune to never have seen a live pixie before this moment - and, with luck, I shall yet live the

rest of me days without I should see another. Me brother, on the other edge of the axe, cannot claim the same."

Mungim nodded. "Aye. Once did I lose a good horse to pixie tricks - and nearly a brother in the bargain. They did taunt the beast, and it did break into a run until a gopher-hole did end the escapade and wreck the wagon. Me brother did end up with a broken arm, the horse we did shoot in mercy."

"*That*," I said forcefully, cutting off Kiriin's little squeak of explanation, "was probably the work of a pixie-child. An adult pixie is a far different thing."

Lyota looked up from her soup and nodded. "Yes, they're much different."

"Oh? What be they like, Master Eddas?" Jhumni asked.

"Well, the older they are, the more wise and mature they are, of course, and the less prone to trickery and taunts. By the time they reach Kiriin's age, they are very wise little creatures, and masters of spells of illusion and nature. Respectable, forthright, honorable and quite brave, they're also humble, shy, and gentle little beings. As I said, Kiriin is my age - older, in fact. And as such, she's quite an honorable and noble little creature."

"I am?!" Kiriin said, peeking out from Lyota's hood. "Umm... I mean, yes, I am, thank you, Master Eddas."

Lyota managed to maintain an absolutely straight face, but Mungim spoiled it by chuckling at Kiriin.

"Alright, Eddas. I can see you do yet trust this... Kiriin to behave. Yet I wonder, why ye do travel with her?"

"Because I can do this!" Kiriin chirped, and there was a sparkle of pixie magic from within Lyota's hood.

"Eek!" Jhumni yelped, startled badly.

"What?" Lyota asked, looking around. Mungim and Jhumni were gazing at her with expressions of astonishment.

"She's used an illusion to turn you into a Dark Elf, Lyota. A very mean looking, very male Dark Elf," I replied dryly.

"Really?" Lyota replied, looking down at herself - and seeing nothing, of course. "How do I look?"

"Ye do yet look and sound like one of the black-hearted demons themselves, Lyota," Mungim replied.

"Your face belike a scowl of rage and hate, your voice belike a snarl of fury, ye be yet clothed in ebon leathers, and a dozen small knives to I yet see, strapped to arm and leg and hither and thither. E'en your scent belike theirs to me nose, all cloying and sickly sweet with the stench of their foul drug, *cataah*."

I nodded. "The details are perfect. Look here," I said, pointing to where Lyota's right breast used to be.

"That's the outline of a *cataah*-pipe. And the illusion can even be touched," I said, reaching out to pat Lyota's illusionary, weapon-callused hand. "*That* is the power of a mature pixie - and that's why she is with us. I need her powers to help disguise Lyota in the lands of the Malani, down by the Sunless Sea."

Kiriin let the illusion fade, and both Mungim and Jhumni visibly relaxed. "But why would ye e'en wish to go there?" Jhumni asked, looking to me.

"The Dark Elves have captured Prince Parial, heir to the throne of Larinia. I must recover him. He's been taken down to the Sunless Sea. Unfortunately, I've never been there before in this body - I can't use

sorcery to get there. I have to walk."

"And ye will yet need a guide to get there," Mungim said, nodding in understanding.

"Ye will need a Berserk," Jhumni said, nodding in agreement.

"And I'll need you to get me one," I replied, looking to Jhumni.

Jhumni nodded again, then sighed.

Chapter Eighteen

"Ten thousand dwarves with cannon and shot may yet take one castle in the light of day, but ten berserks with sharp knives may yet also take the same castle, once night do fall."

- Dwarven proverb

Once Jhumni had made all the preparations, she led us down the streets and tunnels of her city, towards the Hall of the Berserks. She was silent all the way, lost in her own thoughts. Lyota, holding my hand as we walked along, looked to me. "Master Eddas, I don't understand - she looks terribly sad, and her aura shows she has deep pity. What is it about the Berserks that could cause her to feel like that?" she asked quietly.

"Well, it's quite complicated..." I said, then shrugged. "Well, I suppose we have the time," I said, and began to quietly explain as we walked.

"Each dwarven male must accumulate his bride-price. Without a wife, a male has no status in dwarven society - and even when he has one, his status is determined more by his wife than by his own efforts. Her wit, wisdom, charm and social graces make up a large part of it, as does her own social status before marriage. Their society is matriarchal in nature, really, though the leaders are universally male. As the dwarves put it, '*A man may build the house, but it's his woman who'll tell him where.*' The relationship between the genders is a rather interesting one - but, it's not without its sad parts. And one of those sad parts is the Berserks."

"How so?" Lyota asked, and as I looked at her, I could see Kiriin peeking back at me from within her hood, her expression showing utter fascination.

"Well, only one in four births to the dwarves is female - and the simple mathematics of that shows that some will, despite having accumulated a bride-price, simply never find a bride. Sometimes they manage to get the gold they need, only to return, and find the one they loved has married another. Dwarves are not like humans, and there are no dwarf sodomites. Most are able to overcome their sadness, and seek another bride. Some, however, cannot. Some dwarves who are left out like this return to the "surface lands", and live and work among humans, having the occasional dalliance with a human woman to relieve concupiscence - which, of course, produces no children, as dwarves are not inter-fertile with any other race. Others, however, become what the dwarves call *Akmaran*. The *Akmaran* live a monkish life, throwing themselves into their chosen profession with an obsessed vengeance. Some of these dwarves are peaceful merchants, or scholars who do great deeds in their profession. Others are artists or craftsmen, who, in the frustration of thwarted love and concupiscence, create masterpieces of incredible beauty - like the very carvings of the caverns we see around us. Some are mages, who spend their lives forging enchanted items of great power and beauty -"

"And some be yet warriors," Jhumni said, stopping and turning to face Lyota, "and they do become the Berserks. As a carver might yet create an endless series of masterpieces, as a smith might yet forge an

endless series of magnificent weapons, as a scholar might yet gather a vast library of knowledge, they do yet throw themselves into their profession - that of killing the enemies of the dwarves. They do lead the charges in war. They do lead the raids into the lands of our enemies. They do live the only life they know, the only life they be trained to know, and they do throw their heart and soul into the deaths of our enemies... And, eventually, their own deaths, as well. They be the Berserks, and to them, an artful and glorious death in battle be an honor."

I bowed my head. "I'm sorry, Jhumni, I did not mean to offend."

"Ye did not, Master Eddas. I am saddened, not offended. A dwarf-maid cannot look upon a Berserk and not be saddened - though I doubt ye will see them in that light."

I nodded silently, kicking myself mentally. Ages spent as a teacher had, in this instance, caused me to overstep myself. There were certain subjects the dwarves did not talk about publicly, and the *Akmaran* and the Berserks were among them.

Jhumni looked us over, then shook her head. "I did speak to them, of course, and did tell them what ye do look like, Master Eddas. Still, there be a risk... And I would ask that ye please not kill any of them should they attack ye."

"I won't, Jhumni, don't worry," I replied quietly. As she started to turn to lead us again, I reached out to take her hand. "Jhumni..."

"Aye, Master Eddas?"

"Has Mungim ever told you the story I told him of Dyarzi?"

"Aye, Master Eddas, and a sad tale it is. Ye did seek a spell to bring her back to ye for ages, and did become the master of vast sorceries in the search. Yet now that ye do have the way, a sad quirk of fate do mean ye cannot use it."

I smiled. "One does not need to be a dwarf to be *Akmaran*, Jhumni."

Jhumni gazed at me silently for a long moment. Slowly, a small smile lit the corner of her mouth. "I suppose ye be right," she replied, and hugged me, "Ye, of any Outsider, would understand the *Akmaran*, and see them in the proper light. I be sorry, Eddas Ayar."

I smiled, and hugged her back. "Thank you, Jhumni."

Jhumni let me go, then looked grim again. "Let us go. They do wait for us. And do be careful, the both of ye!"

Lyota nodded, quietly whispering an incantation to the Spell of Magic Armor. I simply willed my ring into activation, and we followed Jhumni quietly.

Jhumni turned down a tunnel where the lamps were a bit farther between, and deep pools of shadow were to be found. Ahead, we could hear a crashing din, and endless shouts like those of battle. "What is that sound?" Lyota wondered aloud.

"That be the Hall of the Berserks, Lyota. They do practice their trade endlessly, and do spar with each other to yet hone their skills to perfection. As the old saying goes, '*No axe ever be sharp enough*,'" Jhumni replied.

As we approached the Hall of the Berserks, their sentry at the gates called a warning. "*The maiden*,

Jhumni Oakenshield, do return!"

In a few heartbeats, all was silent from within the hall.

Lyota squeezed my hand tightly, and trembled.

"Remember your *chatto* lessons, Lyota," I murmured.

Lyota nodded, smoothing her face with an effort into an aloof and calm expression.

The guard at the gate was fairly ordinary, for a Berserk. His hair and beard had been bleached, then dyed a brilliant orange. Combined with the weird and intricate tattoos which crawled over his face, he looked incredibly fierce and barbaric. About his neck, he wore a long string of goblin ears - all left ears. His armor, a fine suit of scale, was buffed dull so as not to gleam in the caves. In his hands, he carried the war-axe of the dwarves - a truly impressive weapon, it was a double-bitted axe blade with a breadth of nearly a cubit, fitted to a wooden shaft two and a half cubits long and tipped with a spike two hands long. It was a massive and deadly weapon, requiring a warrior with powerful thews and quick reflexes to wield properly. He stood on the balls of his feet, ready to fight at a moment's notice, as the Berserks always were. The guard bowed politely, opening the door for Jhumni, but still keeping a careful eye on Lyota and I.

The interior of the hall was what I expected - a large, open area, with several pells for the Berserks to practice their skills against. Most of the pells seemed quite battered, apparently very well-used. There was a section of padded mats apparently for wrestling and other unarmed work, and countless blunt and padded weapons of several different varieties on racks against the walls. Fifty Berserks watched as Jhumni led us to the middle of the room, their hair and beards dyed red or orange, and even a few greens and blues. If looks could kill, I'd surely have been dead fifty times over from the gaze each of them gave me.

Suddenly, one of the berserks, a burly dwarf in coal-black scale armor and with a beard dyed a dark crimson, let loose a bloodcurdling howl, raised a two-handed dwarven war-hammer, and charged.

Lyota let out a small '*eep!*' of alarm, but I simply lashed out with my will through my ring of telekinesis, and lifted him a hand's width from the floor, holding him a full pace away from me. "*I beg your pardon, noble sir, but I'm not here to fight you. Perhaps another day?*" I said politely.

Screaming with fury, he hauled off and threw the war-hammer at me - I batted it aside with my staff. Without a moment's hesitation, he reached to his side and drew a knife, and threw that at me. Far faster than a clumsy throw of a heavy hammer, I couldn't stop it with my staff - but it was only a dagger, and could hardly penetrate the protection afforded by the enchantment on my ring. Had I put up a spell of missile reflection, as well, he'd probably have impaled himself on his own knife - but, as I'd already told him, I wasn't here to fight.

It was pointless to reason with a Berserk once the fury was on them, so I simply held him there in the air and waited. He tossed a few more knives at me which he apparently kept in various sheaths hidden about his body, until finally he had done all he could. After screaming a fierce battle-cry at me, he stopped, and just hung there in the air, panting.

I held him there in the air, and looked to Jhumni. "Just who is it we're here to meet, Jhumni?" I asked calmly.

"*Master Eddas Ayar, it be my pleasure to introduce Durgrim Ironfist, Berserk,*" Jhumni replied in her language, and pointed to the dwarf I was holding in the air. "*He be yet the most skilled of all the*

Berserks of Iron City when it do come to sneaking about the lands of the Dark Elves, and he do know the way to the Sunless Sea. Noble Durgrim, allow me to introduce Master Eddas Ayar, a Hyperborean battle-mage of the highest caliber, a Friend of the Dwarves, and a personal friend, as well. Beside Master Eddas be his daughter and student in sorcery, Lyota."

I set Durgrim down gently, and bowed. *"It be an honor to make your acquaintance,"* I said, pleased to see out of the corner of my eye that Lyota bowed, as well.

"An' it do please ye, the honor be mine," Durgrim replied, bowing in return. *"Your pardon for a greeting belike one might yet receive from a mad ogre, but I were yet sorely concerned that ye might yet lack the ability to survive a trek to the Sunless Sea. Maiden Jhumni did say ye had sorcery aplenty to disguise ye and likely e'en more to slay a foe at will, yet that be not hardly enough where ye do wish to go. Ye will also need speed, and control - both of which I see ye do have aplenty."*

"Thank you," I replied, smiling. He was right, of course. If I couldn't have stopped a simple attack like that, I'd hardly have been up to the challenge ahead. I was only glad, however, that he attacked me, and not Lyota. She might not have gotten a telekinesis spell off in time - or worse, as she was already startled by his battle-cry, she might not have even managed to dodge, and simply been smashed to the ground by Durgrim's hammer. Of course, she *was* only a Journeyman. With a gesture, I gathered up all his discarded weapons and floated them over to him telekinetically. *"How soon can ye be prepared to leave?"*

"A quarter hour, perhaps half," he replied, not even batting an eye as he calmly plucked his knives from where they floated in the air and slipped them back into their sheaths. *"Me scale be hardly the armor I do need for a stealthy trip to the Sunless Sea, and me hammer be the wrong weapon all entire should it come to fighting there."*

"I can yet conjure food and drink, so little in the way of supplies will ye need in that regard. Also I do have a Hidden Sanctuary I can yet conjure easily, and make resting safe and secure."

Durgrim nodded, hefting his hammer over his shoulder. *"Aye, that would be good. Call it a quarter hour, then. I shall yet meet ye outside the gate to the hall."*

I bowed to him again, and Lyota did likewise, following my lead. Durgrim then turned to Jhumni. She reached into a pocket and pulled out a pale white kerchief. Kissing it, she held it out to him. Durgrim bowed his head and took the kerchief while the other Berserks gazed on, smiling. With great dignity, he tucked it into his belt. Our business concluded, Jhumni led us to the gate again, and the guard closed it behind us. In a few moments, the usual din of the Hall had resumed.

"I will yet leave ye now, Master Eddas. Do take care, please. I do fully expect ye at my wedding celebration in a decade or two." Jhumni said, and hugged me tight.

I hugged her back. *"I'll be there, Jhumni,"* I replied, and we let each other go. Jhumni then turned, and walked away silently.

Once she was out of earshot, Lyota whispered to me, so the guard would not overhear. *"Master Eddas, what was the significance of the kerchief?"*

"It was half of Durgrim's payment," I whispered in reply.

"His payment?"

"Yes. If he returns alive, he'll get a kiss. It's part of their customs. A dwarf-maid can ask a Berserk to do pretty much anything, if she agrees to pay with a kiss."

Lyota blinked. "Anything?!"

"Anything. A long time ago, when they had that enormous fight with the goblins, the King of the Dwarves wanted all the Berserks under his banner to make a strike at one of the goblin's cities, in an attempt to cut their supply lines. It was a suicidal assault - the goblins had prepared their defenses well. The king's generals were opposed to the plan, since it was likely they would lose all the Berserks, their best warriors, in one engagement. The king, however, was convinced he had a plan that would work. So, Princess Higmi, the king's daughter, offered a kiss to any Berserk who would ignore the danger, and lead the assault. They all agreed - all five thousand of them. The battle was bloody and costly, but the dwarves won. About a third of the Berserks died in that fight. Higmi fulfilled her promise, and took two days to kiss each and every one of the Berserks, one at a time - even the ones who died. *Particularly* the ones who died. Such are their ways."

"That's so sweet... and so sad," Lyota said, sighing.

"I think so, too," Kiriin agreed quietly from her hiding spot inside Lyota's hood.

I nodded, gazing after Jhumni as she walked down the tunnel, and finally turned, and was lost to view.

Chapter Nineteen

"To yet know the Akmaran be to yet know the true heart of the dwarves."

- Dwarven proverb

Our first day of travel was, surprisingly, quite simple. Of course, 'day' was only a relative term - though Durgrim had no real difficulty knowing the approximate time of day underground, I found I had completely lost track of what time it might be after the first few hours. Still, the travel was simple. Once Durgrim was ready, we simply followed him out of the city, and into the tunnels that connected the myriad caverns beneath the mountains. The cold light of dwarven lanterns lit our way every few hundred paces, and Durgrim explained that we were still within the lands of the dwarves, and these smooth, well-traveled tunnels were, to a dwarf, the equivalent of a road.

Lyota found Durgrim's garb and equipment fascinating - and, really, I suppose I couldn't blame her, as much of this trip was entirely new to her. Durgrim wore soft, close-fitting leather dyed night black, with matching boots - and moved nearly silently in his garb. His shoulders were guarded by two black-lacquered steel plates, and small, round, shield-like plates similarly made covered the front and back of his chest. Judging by the shape of the leather, beneath was a layer of thin chain covering his entire torso, muffled by the leather above it. Over his hands, he wore studded leather gloves, leaving only his head bare. The outfit had several dozen small pockets, several knife sheaths on his arms and legs, and he bore a single-bitted axe at each hip. Several small, steel crossbow bolts were slipped into various spots on his thighs and arms, and he carried a light crossbow casually over one shoulder - unloaded, so I assumed we were relatively safe in these tunnels. His light pack, which apparently contained his bedroll and other supplies, was already inside my sanctuary, as we'd taken a few minutes to attune it to the environment of the sanctuary before we set off.

"We be not safe all entire here, Eddas Ayar," Durgrim explained as we walked. *"The goblins do, betimes, make like highwaymen might on the surface lands. Yet, our roads be better patrolled than any in the lands of the humans, as they be tunnels and caves. There be yet far fewer places to exit and enter thereby, so there be little to worry about in that regard. Once we do take the*

second turning past Kardin-Town, howe'er, we do enter the vast cavern complex beneath the Granite Mountains. Once past the guards at the cavern entrance, we be on our own. Me biggest concern 'afore then be not goblins, but other dwarves."

I nodded, but Lyota looked to Durgrim in confusion. *"Other dwarves?"* she asked with her spell of translation.

"Aye," Durgrim replied, and glanced to me. *"The Dark Elves be our mortal enemies, and most we will yet encounter will likely shoot first, and do ask questions later."* Durgrim then looked to Lyota. *"And more, ye be a human, and may yet draw some pointed questions from the guards. We did walk easily past the guards of Iron City, as word of your arrival and appearance had long since spread. We shall not do so at Kardin-Town, I do think."*

I nodded. I'd already discussed this with Lyota and Kiriin days before. *"Worry not, noble Durgrim. I can yet travel under cover of a spell of invisibility, as can Lyota. Ye simply do lead, and we shall yet follow."*

Durgrim nodded. *"Then best ye do cast your cantrips now, and yet save the trouble, later."*

I activated the invisibility ring I'd obtained from Nials years before, and faded from view. At the same time, there was a brief sparkle of pixie-magic from within Lyota's hood, and Lyota faded, as well. I'd taught Lyota a spell of invisibility, of course, but she couldn't possibly maintain it for more than a minute or two. Kiriin, however, could keep the both of them invisible effortlessly - such was the power of pixie-magic.

We walked past the guards at Kardin-Town easily, and by the end of our first 'day' of travel, we were well into the caverns. There were no lights, here, but glowing mosses here and there provided enough light for Durgrim's dwarven eyes to see passably well in the gloom. Lyota's ability to see astral auras meant that she could still easily see where we were going, due to the constant, soft glow of the astral plane. The eyes I had, though keen, could not see far in this darkness at all - nor, for that matter, could the eyes of a real Dark Elf. They, like all elves, had keen night vision, but only the dwarves and the other subterranean races could see in near-total darkness. As such, they normally went about with small lanterns containing magic *tashta*-crystals which glowed with a pale blue light, or used sorcery to see. As for me, I chose the latter option, and cast the Spell of Truesight. Kiriin did, as well, as her people had the same vision as a human - and to human eyes, the caves were pitch black.

Once Durgrim had indicated the spot we would rest, I had Lyota hand me the rope, and I conjured my Hidden Sanctuary, tossing one end of the rope into the air, where it hung. Durgrim waited below, giving us a few minutes to re-arrange the furniture inside my sanctuary, so he'd have a place to sleep safely. I also took a moment to light a small candle on my desk with a brief cantrip, so we would have better light in the sanctuary. Once we were done, Lyota looked to me. *"Master Eddas, he'll have to be told, eventually,"* she said in our language.

"About what?" I asked, knowing that though Durgrim could hear us below, he couldn't understand us.

Kiriin peeked out from Lyota's hood, and stuck her tongue out at me. *"About me, silly!"*

I nodded. *"Well, let me handle that. I know dwarves better than either of you two. His reaction will probably be poor, but that's not certain. Dwarves are, in the end, individuals, just like any other race."*

"Can we tell him before dinner?" Kiriin pleaded. *"I'm starving!"*

I peered down through the entrance to my sanctuary, then nodded. *"Alright."* I then looked down to

Durgrim, and called to him in his language. *"Noble Durgrim, if ye would yet climb up? I be about to conjure food for the lot of us."*

"Aye, Eddas Ayar. One moment," Durgrim replied. Passing his arm through the bow of his crossbow, he quickly climbed up the knotted rope. Near the top, he slipped the crossbow onto the floor, then pulled himself in.

After pulling the rope up behind him, I waved a gloved hand at the work we'd done. *"As ye can see, I do yet have a few hooks upon the ceiling beams, here. Should we have need of modesty, we can yet hang a blanket from there temporarily. I sleep here, on this cot, and I did move much of me boxes and other things beneath it for ye to have room. Ye can lay your bedroll there. Lyota sleeps here, near me."*

"Thankee," Durgrim replied, putting his crossbow against the wall and pulling off his gauntlets. *"I do have but little need for modesty when it do come time to sleep. Were ye not here and I just on a raid, I would but loosen the straps of me armor a bit, and just lie in me bedroll. If ye do have nightclothes or other female things ye do wear to bed, I will but turn my back, and save ye the trouble,"* he said, setting his gauntlets aside.

I nodded, stepping over to my desk and conjuring a bowl of fine stew for Durgrim, and two bowls of gruel for Lyota and myself. As I handed him his food and a spoon I kept in my desk, I smiled. *"There be yet one more thing I do need tell ye... And it may yet come as somewhat of a shock."*

Durgrim looked up from his stew in curiosity. *"What, that ye do in sooth be a man inside that body? This I do know, Eddas Ayar. Ye be a dwarf-friend, and your tale be moderately well known."*

"No... Not quite. I mean to tell ye that there be not three of us in here and on this journey, but four."

"What? Who be the fourth?"

"Umm... Me," Kiriin replied in the language of the dwarves, peeking out at Durgrim from Lyota's hood.

Durgrim blinked in surprise. *"A pixie?!"*

"Yes," Lyota replied quickly, *"but she's a very old pixie, even older than Master Eddas, and quite mature and responsible. She's not a pixie-child who will taunt you or do mean things."*

Durgrim paused, then nodded. *"Aye, that must be true, or I would yet have suffered the little creature's annoyances all day. They do love to taunt us, though only the gods who did make them do yet know why."*

"She be the source of Lyota's invisibility, and when we be near the Sunless Sea, she will yet cover her with illusions powerful enough to yet fool the Dark Elves," I explained, pleased that Durgrim was being so reasonable about the situation - and even more pleased Kiriin didn't explain to him the real reason pixies enjoy taunting dwarves.

Durgrim stroked his dyed beard. *"They be yet the best of the creatures of faerie at illusion, that be certain. And as ye do not seem a fool to me, it seem likely she do yet know the danger, and will behave. More, she did hide from me all day without a single peep, and ne'er did I e'en have the slightest hint she was there."* Durgrim was silent a long moment, thinking, then finally nodded. *"Aye, I have no objection. Only have a care she does not grow bored and think to play pranks upon me to while away the time - as we do near the Sunless Sea, such foolishness would yet kill us all."*

"Never would I do that to ye, Noble Berserk," Kiriin replied very politely. "I do yet seek to prove myself to Master Eddas. I wish to yet ask him a favor, should we all yet live at the end of this adventure. Ye see, many years ago, I..." she said, then paused, her eyes flickering to me briefly. "Well, it be a long tale, and of little import. All that matters is that I do vow to ye that I will not torment ye, Noble Berserk."

Durgrim snorted. *"Bah. A dwarf-friend do speak for ye, and vouch for ye. That be enough for anyone, I do think. Come ye here, little one,"* he said, and held out his hand. Kiriin flew over and landed on his palm, and Durgrim smiled. *"Ye be a pretty one, I do notice."*

"Thankee," Kiriin replied, smiling.

Durgrim reached to his stew, carefully extracting a large lump of conjured meat, shaking it off a bit into the bowl, then holding it out to Kiriin. *"There. That should be enough to last ye yet awhile."*

"Thankee yet again," Kiriin replied, taking the food. She flew over to my desk and sat, and began to tear off small pieces and eat. *"I did think ye would dislike me the instant ye did see me, Noble Berserk."*

Durgrim grinned. *"An ye were not vouched for by a dwarf-friend and we did meet in the surface-lands..."* he replied, glancing at his crossbow, then chuckled. *"Let us merely say that it be lucky for the both of us that ye be the friend of Eddas Ayar, and do leave it at that."*

Kiriin saw Durgrim's glance, realized what he meant, and giggled - a human might have been offended, but not a pixie. *"Aye, Noble Durgrim."*

We chatted over dinner thereafter, the three of us learning a bit more about our dwarven companion, and he learning a bit more about us. As it turned out, Durgrim was a hundred and ninety-two years old, which was about middle-aged, for a dwarf. We didn't pry as to his reason for becoming a Berserk, and he didn't offer - though I was certain the tale was a sad one, as they all were.

In the early days, near the dawn of elven history, the dwarves fought quite a bit both above and below the earth, and both their magical knowledge and their technology was not as sophisticated as it was today. Most young dwarven males died in battle, and the ratio of males to females was about one to one. As their technology slowly improved, however, the ratio became larger, and the first *Akmaran* appeared in their culture. To become *Akmaran* was to publicly announce that one had given up and was no longer seeking a bride, but was, instead, seeking to perfect one's skills in one's profession. That was, to a dwarf, a sad thing - dwarves do not like to admit defeat in *anything*.

I had learned of the *Akmaran* in my previous life, and had often wondered if the dwarves truly understood that their very existence only exacerbated the problem. As the *Akmaran* often were smiths and scholars, dwarven technology slowly out-stripped that of the other races, and was only matched by that of we Hyperboreans, who had learned of techno-magic golems before the Great War destroyed us. Yet, at the same time, that very knowledge meant more males survived in war, and were forced by circumstance to join the *Akmaran*. It seemed to me the dwarves probably already knew this, however - and it was probably another reason they preferred not to talk about the *Akmaran* at all.

Finally, it was time for bed. Durgrim was true to his word, and once I'd snuffed the candle, he simply sat facing away from us while we changed for bed. In truth, all Lyota and I did was remove our clothes - I didn't wear anything to sleep in other than my rings and other items, and Lyota had nothing to wear beneath her robe in the first place. Kiriin, apparently not wanting to annoy Durgrim, simply popped into her little bed, pulled the kerchief I'd given her as a blanket over herself, and pulled off her little clothes beneath that. While it was obvious that process could be easily reversed when "morning" came, I

resolved that if we awoke before Durgrim, I'd simply hang a blanket with telekinesis and we'd dress behind that.

I lay there in the darkness for a long while, thinking. There were still many, many days of travel ahead of us. Even with Durgrim as our guide, we would still take at least two weeks to reach the Sunless Sea. *'Of course, without him, I might wander these caverns for decades and never find it,'* I thought to myself. Still, the time involved gnawed at me, in a way I simply couldn't explain to anyone. I so *desperately* wanted to know what was happening with the campaign in the Southlands - and even more desperately wanted to *be* there, to insure Noril would succeed. Still, I could not. Parial had to be rescued, and only I could manage it. Or, at least, only I was expendable enough to try.

I sighed, and closed my eyes, trying to sleep. Worrying about it wouldn't help them, that was certain. I had done my best to train and prepare them for their destiny, for this war - though, at the time, I did not know that was what I was doing. I could only hope that I had prepared them well enough for Yorindar's plan to succeed.

Chapter Twenty

"My warriors were not pleased with my orders, of course, but I knew Arella was right. A victory in a single battle did not mean the war was necessarily over. Thus, I ordered my men to prepare the usual fortified camp, building the ramparts and battlements as Dame Raven had taught me. I had intended, come the morn, to advance and seek out what remained of their army again, and work on driving them from our lands... But that was not to be. For once night fell, they sought us out, instead."

- King Noril, *Autobiography*, 1729 NCC

"Here! Here's where the scent is strongest!" a little voice hissed.

I blinked sleepily, half asleep. The faint voice was little more than a whisper, and it wasn't until another voice replied that I realized I hadn't simply dreamed it. A faint blue light came into the sanctuary from the entrance in the center of the floor.

"Yes... Here. I smell it, too. One dwarf... A human... An elf from the surface-lands, definitely... Much magic in the air... Strange... Smells like a pixie, as well," a second soprano voice hissed.

I blinked away sleep, trying to hold still and listen.

"A pixie? Your brain's gone soft, runt! What would a pixie be doing in the caverns?" a third, tenor voice hissed.

With a start, I recognized the language my ring was translating for me - Goblin-tongue. Silently, I reached for my gloves and boots. The quiet whispers had not awakened the others, yet - only the sharpness of the keen half-elven ears I'd appropriated had allowed me to spot the sounds first.

"Runt?! Why you..." the second voice hissed, a bit loudly and indignantly.

With Dyarzi's gloves and boots on, I silently slid the blankets from me. I could not simply sit up and step over Lyota - she would awaken, and might groggily ask what was happening, alerting the goblins to our position. Though no light escaped a hidden sanctuary, sounds and smells did. A clever goblin-mage would realize we were above, hidden somehow - and would begin casting. Reaching up to the wall, I silently pulled myself onto it with the power of the gloves and boots, and spider-like, slipped around Lyota and down to the floor. The only sound I'd made was a small creak when I lifted myself from the

bed - and that hadn't been enough to alert the goblins.

"Yes, runt?"

It had, however, been enough to alert Durgrim. I saw his eyes widen as he looked at me in the faint light coming through the entrance from below. His face took on a look of stunned astonishment, then embarrassment, seeing me crawling across the floor in nothing but my gloves and boots. He opened his mouth to say something, but I clapped a gloved finger across my lips, then pointed down. Durgrim nodded, blinking away sleep and reaching for his crossbow.

"Nothing, sorry."

Durgrim quietly cocked his light crossbow, slipping one of his little steel bolts into place, then crawled over to me. Placing his lips against my ear, he whispered. *"Can they yet hear us in here, as well?"*

"Nothing', what, runt?" the third voice hissed.

I nodded, then put my lips to his ear. *"Sound and smell, but not sight. Light can enter the sanctuary, but cannot escape,"* I whispered, and Durgrim nodded. Smell was enough, however - the long, sharp nose of a goblin was quite sensitive.

"Nothing, master, sorry," the first voice replied in a resentful little mutter.

Durgrim and I examined our opponents carefully, looking down through the entrance to my sanctuary. There were six goblins, and a Malani-elf. The goblins all bore wicked little knives in their fists - shortwords, for them. The dark-elf had a small lantern clipped to a loop on his belt, barely half a hand tall, which contained a *tashta*-crystal. It was a very tiny one, and the soft blue glow it made would have been hardly noticeable to the eyes of a human - but to the eyes of an elf or half-elf, it provided adequate illumination, and to the eyes of a dwarf or goblin, it was enough light to read by.

"That's better, runt. Now... We know they're near, at any rate. Those enormous noses of yours are good for that much, at least. I'll cast a spell of astral vision, and assense what lies around us. Perhaps they're concealed by sorcery."

But the dark-elf never got a chance to try, for at that moment, Durgrim fired. The elf staggered back, then collapsed, a small steel crossbow bolt buried to its steel fletching in the top of his skull.

"They're here! They're near!" one of the goblins shrieked.

"Find them! Kill them!" screeched another.

My options were limited - we were in a cavern, and if I wasn't careful, I'd bring part of the roof down, and possibly trap us here. Loud noises also traveled far in the caves, and might draw even more goblins to us. I raised my hand.

"They can't be far! They-HURK!" a goblin shrieked, the last cut off as I gripped his spindly little throat with telekinesis, then snapped his neck.

As another goblin fell to Durgrim's crossbow, their leader snarled. *"Fie! It's a trap! Wicked Yorindar's maggoty slave uses sorcery upon us! We need a mage of our own to combat him! Flee, this way!"* he shrieked, and ran. The rest followed, and soon the cavern was silent again.

Durgrim and I looked to each other, and shared a silent grin known to all comrades in arms.

"Master Eddas?" Lyota called.

I looked to her - Lyota was sitting up, holding her blanket over herself. Kiriin was peeking out of her little box at us, as well. "It's alright - there were a few goblins and a dark-elf sorceror. Durgrim killed the elf, and together we've driven off the goblins."

"I must needs recover me bolts, Eddas," Durgrim said, sitting up and fishing a small pair of odd-looking pliers out of a pocket. The bolts his crossbow fired were sharply pointed shafts, and intended to pierce hard armor. They had no broadhead to ruin firing through a bone or armor plate. With care, he could easily recover them, and use them again.

"Aye, Durgrim. An ye do think it safe to take a moment to do so, could ye fetch the elf's lamp? I will yet need his lamp to help me pass as one of their people, I do think."

Durgrim nodded. *"Aye, and he may yet have enchanted rings or other gewgaws, as they sometimes do,"* he replied, flicking the rope down the hole with a hand, then swinging himself onto it with surprising agility and scrambling down to the ground, below.

I pushed myself to my feet, then stepped over to my bed beside Lyota. "Come on - get dressed, the both of you. We'll have to move shortly. Those goblins will be back, and they'll bring help. We won't want to be here when that happens."

Lyota nodded, and reached for her robe. "How did they find us in the first place?" she asked, quickly pulling her robe over her head.

I began to slip on Dyarzi's chainmail garments as I replied. "They're creatures of faerie, like Kiriin. They-"

"Not *quite* like me!" Kiriin interrupted in a highly offended little squeak. "They're of the *Unseelie* court, creatures of darkness and evil!"

I smiled. "My apologies - I only meant that they have powers beyond ordinary mortals."

"Oh... Well, that's true," Kiriin replied. "They're even better suited to life underground and in darkness than the dwarves are. They can see in total darkness as well as a dwarf can, and have *very* keen noses. Keen enough to smell magic, in fact."

"Smell magic?" Lyota asked, sitting on my bed and reaching for her shoes.

I nodded. "That's what they say of themselves, and from what I've seen of them, it's true - they sense *mana*-flow as a faint scent. Only a dragon's nose is more sensitive. A dragon can not only smell magic, but can even sniff out a virgin by scent alone, and smell a gold coin a league away," I replied, slipping on my robe quickly. "Had the dark elf that was with them been a bit more competent, the first we'd have known of their presence was when he started casting spells of fire and lightning through the entrance to my sanctuary. And more, the goblin's leader knew my name, and knew I serve Yorindar. Morgar has been quite thorough in his plan - I imagine Cordo has shared as much as he knows of me with the Dark Elves, and they, in turn, have shared it with the goblins. Judging by this encounter, I'd say it's likely there are patrols combing the caverns for us. Safe though this sanctuary may be, we'll still need to have watches throughout the night, apparently. For now, we'll have to move away from here as soon as we can, alright?"

"Yes, Master Eddas," Lyota replied, handing me my waist-belt.

"Stupid goblins," Kiriin groused, slipping on her little boots. "I was just having a very nice dream, too."

"There will be time enough for pleasant dreams when this is all over, Kiriin, if we survive," I replied, and Kiriin nodded.

Chapter Twenty-One

"...following the War of the Rift, our former brothers, the Malani, took themselves deep below the earth, deeper than even the dwarves lived, down onto the Sunless Sea, to live in that place of perpetual chill and perpetual dark forever. Such a fate we would never have wished on them had we known, but at that time our blood was too hot to have cared. Now, though our blood has cooled somewhat and time has eased our wounds somewhat, their hate has only grown and festered, like a sickening disease of the soul made worse by the eternal darkness of their home..."

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

"There it be, Eddas Ayar - the Sunless Sea. E'en we dwarves do yet not know the full extent of it," Durgrim said, waving a hand. Lyota and Kiriin simply stared in an awed hush. Nothing we had seen in the last two weeks had prepared them for this.

For the last two weeks, Durgrim had led us down seldom-used tunnels and ancient lava tubes that wound and twisted impossibly, past silent grottoes of gleaming crystal and over slender natural bridges of limestone that spanned swift, dangerous underground rivers. We had seen vast, cathedral-like rooms of ancient pillars, small pools of crystal water, and perhaps a hundred other marvels never seen before by human eyes. The stone of the caverns, carved by the hand of time through slowly dripping water over countless aeons, was eerily beautiful in a manner that defied description. Even the weird, pale, sightless creatures of the caves - crickets, spiders, and even a few mice - were strangely beautiful in their own way. Durgrim had explained there were also troglodytes in these caverns - pasty, pale creatures more fungus than animal, little humanoid horrors who had lived in the caves since the dawn of time. They were utterly harmless, however, and fled the approach of goblin, elf or dwarf.

Durgrim had led us past the true dangers of the caves, of course. Goblin and dark-elf patrols were out in force - Durgrim commented that he'd never seen so many goblins in all his days, and I found I had to agree about the twentieth time we silently avoided yet another search party. There were more than merely the goblins and dark-elves to contend with, however. The very caves we passed through were often slick with dampness, and a fall could send one tumbling down a well or other chasm to one's death. I wasn't worried for myself or Kiriin, as I had a ring of flight and she had wings, but Lyota had no such protection. Though she knew a spell of flight, she might not be able to cast it in time, should she fall. As such, I kept a close eye on her, ready to snatch her up with telekinesis should she slip and fall.

And yet, there were more dangers, still. There was a species of domesticated spiders the dark-elves bred long ago, now escaped into the wilds of the caverns. Large and pale creatures the size of a mouse with legs that spanned half a cubit, they wove strong, sticky webs that obscured entire passages, and their bite was deadly poison. The dark-elves bred them ages ago for their silk and their poisons, using both simple breeding skills and dark sorcery, and the resulting creature was actually quite dangerous. The blind spiders could be easily stomped and were only truly dangerous if they encountered you while sleeping on the cavern floor, however, and a small flame would clear a passage in a matter of moments as all their webs caught fire and burned with a bright, hot flame. Still, the smoke would also draw patrols of goblins, and the spiders often swarmed the unwary who set fire to their webs - thus, Durgrim had led us around their ominously webbed tunnels, down different paths entirely. Now, finally, we stood on the shores of the Sunless Sea, and stared in awe at its silent majesty.

Behind us, where the small tunnel had opened out into the cavern, the walls of this chamber rose nearly straight up, and vanished from sight. The basalt sands of the beach at our feet were black and

coarse-grained, the waters lapping quietly and endlessly at them. The other side of the waters could not be seen, and the silent sea swallowed up all sounds.

"Did... Did the Dark-Elves make this place?" Lyota asked, her voice hushed.

"No, Lyota. Aeons ago, when the world was young, there was a vast volcanic chain at the center of the Granite Mountains. As time passed, the volcanoes muttered, and fell silent. Deep beneath the earth, the great pools of lava which formed their hearts receded. Other pools above them were drained by this, and over aeons, filled with water seeping through the stones above. Time, weather, and the occasional earthquake has linked these vast chambers by collapse of the stone that separated them, creating the Sunless Sea," I replied, and smiled. "Or so the dwarves say, at any rate."

"Where do we go from here?" Kiriin asked, peeking out of Lyota's hood.

I shrugged. "Across the sea, to the city of the Dark Elves, *Baile'mor'Dorcha*," I replied, then looked to Durgrim. "*And here, me friend, be where we do part. We can yet return by sorcery to me tower, once we do yet have the prince in our hands. I do thank ye, Noble Durgrim.*"

Durgrim nodded. "*I will yet wait here awhile, Eddas Ayar, in case ye do need me. Perhaps a few days, I do think. I'll yet gather a few ears and a few coins from elves and goblins to pass the time - that may yet make them think ye have not yet crossed the Sunless Sea, and mayhap buy ye a bit of time in your quest. An ye do need me, come to this spot. I will yet check it daily, and see if ye did return.*" Durgrim looked out across the dark waters. "*Do ye yet intend to conjure one of their dark craft?*" I nodded, and Durgrim shook his head. "*I will yet take my leave of ye, then, lest the magic be spoilt by me presence. Farewell, Eddas Ayar - and good luck.*" And without a further word, Durgrim turned and silently walked back into the tunnel, disappearing into the darkness.

"What did he mean about the magic being spoiled, Master Eddas?" Lyota asked. She'd maintained her spell of translation, of course, and had understood Durgrim easily.

"Have Kiriin cover you with an illusion, and I'll show you," I replied. There was a brief sparkle of pixie magic, and again Lyota resembled the same Dark Elf she had in Mungim's home. I nodded, slipping out the small *tashta*-crystal lamp and clipping it to the side of my waist-belt. "He meant this," I replied, kneeling to take a handful of the black sand at our feet, then casting it over the waters. I rose, brushing the sand from my robe, and waited. "Say nothing, and remain absolutely still," I said quietly, and Lyota nodded.

After many minutes, from out of the darkness, a small, narrow boat appeared, drifting silently on the rippling waters of the Sunless Sea. Its design was ancient - millennia old, in fact, and cobwebs hung from the tall, delicately carved prow and stern. Long and slim, it was perhaps five cubits wide and twenty cubits long, with a shallow, inconsequential draught. Its approach was slow, cautious, and silent, like that of a wary cat.

Lyota looked to me in surprise, her visage concealed by the illusion. She started to speak, but I silenced her by placing my gloved fingertips over her lips. "*An age ago, the Malani walked in the light, with the other elves,*" I explained in the language of the Dark Elves. "*They lived along the crystal rivers of Valbeana, in the lands of the elves, plying their trades across their laughing waters. Yet, ever were their hearts drawn to places of shadow and darkness, and it was not long before they first discovered the Sunless Sea. When the Malani were driven underground by the War of the Rift, which sundered the Seelie and Unseelie courts, they brought their vessels with them. They cast twenty-one of these enchanted boats upon the surface of these waters, and here they have drifted for thousands of years in eternal darkness. Each is enchanted with ancient golemic sorcery, an*

animated object. And, like any other golem, each is possessed with intelligence, and will not approach any who are the enemies of the Malani."

The boat nudged into the beach and sat there, unmoving. Lyota gazed in awe at the tall-prowed vessel while I simply climbed aboard. After a moment, she followed. "*But how did you know?*" she asked carefully in the language of the Dark Elves, her voice deepened to a masculine snarl by the illusion.

I simply smiled. "*You'd be surprised what I know,*" I replied as the boat slipped off the beach easily, and slowly turned in the waters. I could not tell her the truth, of course - as I'd already told her, the enchanted boat was a golem, and was alive. To say aloud where and how I had learned of the Malani and their history would probably not be wise to say while aboard a golemic vessel of the Dark Elves.

There was no need to command the boat, as there was only one destination on the Sunless Sea - *Baile'mor'Dorcha*, the shadowed city of the Dark Elves. These boats only existed to ferry boatless passengers from the beaches to the city itself - for any other purpose, the Malani had other boats of a more mundane nature, driven by hard muscle upon sleek oar rather than ancient sorcery. Thus, we simply sat quietly as the ancient, enchanted boat silently drifted over the Sunless Sea, through the perpetual dark as black as the hearts of its creators, towards the city of eternal night.

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

"Sui' Baile'mor'Dorcha!" - 'For the City of Darkness', Battle-cry of the Malani

Lyota stumbled again, and I took her hand. She leaned close to me, and whispered into my ear. "I'm sorry, it's sometimes difficult to see here," she hissed, her voice a masculine whisper from the illusion that covered her.

"Hold my hand, and try to relax. You'll get used to it," I whispered back.

"I'm sorry... I expected it to be *dark!*" she replied, and I nodded.

To the eyes of an ordinary human, *Baile'mor'Dorcha* would, indeed, be a dark and oppressive place. The alien architecture of the strange, shadowed city loomed menacingly from the eternal darkness here, deep below the earth, lit only intermittently by the pale blue light of *tashta*-crystals hanging here and there from a streetcorner or two. We had seen the dim blue glow of the city in the distance for hours as we approached aboard the ancient boat. Now that we were in the city, however, we saw that for each small point of light, there were a thousand shadows. Yes, to the eyes of a human, *Baile'mor'Dorcha* would be little more than an ominous, shadowed maze of nightmarish buildings and gloomy alleys. However, Lyota was hardly an ordinary human, and her vision included astral sight - and therein lay the problem.

On the astral plane, the city glowed with twelve millennia of sorcery from nearly fifty generations of Malani casting every possible kind of spell, from vast and deep sorceries that warped the very fabric of reality to countless cantrips of everyday existence, igniting hearth-fires, conjuring food, cleaning clothes, and so on. The *tashta*-crystals that illuminated the streets only made the problem worse, really - each was the size of a human heart, and on the astral plane a bright and powerful beacon of illumination. And more, each and every building of the city was enchanted with privacy-spells to prevent any magical eavesdropping. Lyota was, quite literally, squinting against the vast astral glare of the city.

Kiriin, whose vision was equal to that of a human, had simply used a spell of truesight to see - and with it, the city was adequately lit, as it was for me with the half-elven eyes I'd appropriated. Kiriin suggested a spell of truesight to Lyota, but that didn't help. Indeed, it only made it worse, as the ordinary illumination provided by the *tashta*-crystals became brighter to Lyota. I'd never seen any journeyman cancel a spell so quickly - I'd have laughed, if the situation wasn't so serious.

We walked silently for a while, nodding to a few dark-elves we passed in the shadowed streets. My own appearance, as I had realized twenty years before once I understood the relevant part of the prophecy, insured that the dozens of dark-elves we passed on the street would take no notice of me. Those few passers-by who might have come close enough to perhaps notice that this body was that of a half elf instead kept their distance, as Lyota was at my side - and the illusion that covered Lyota was that of a surly, vicious, *cataah*-addicted mercenary who looked like he was spoiling for a fight. Thus, I led Lyota down the quiet, darkened streets, past huddled rows of ancient buildings with looming, elaborate, aureate details of door, window and roofline that seemed plucked straight from a nightmare - and we were entirely unmolested. Once I thought it safe, I drew Lyota close and put my lips to her ear again. "Just try to relax," I whispered again, "You'll get used to it."

Lyota nodded. "I know," she whispered back. "I am already, a bit." Lyota then looked to me, her illusionary visage squinting as well - which, oddly, only made her illusion look more fierce. "So what now?"

I pointed to the dark spires of the royal castle, dimly visible in the distance. "Do you think you'll be able to see, once we're there?"

Lyota gazed at the spires, and shook her head. "No. To me, that castle shines like the sun."

"It's really black as pitch, Lyota," Kiriin whispered, "with just a faint blue glow from the windows and such lighting it."

I paused, thinking. As we stood there, a deep bell tolled slowly in the distance... Four times, then a pause, then twice.

"What's that?" Lyota whispered.

"Lacking sun, moon or stars here, the Dark Elves in *Baile'mor'Dorcha* tell time by bells," I whispered in reply. "It is, by their system of reckoning, four hours to midnight."

Lyota sighed. "I'm sorry - I thought I'd be more of a help to you."

"Don't pout, dear, it makes your disguise look odd," I said, looking at the illusion Kiriin was still concealing Lyota within. The dark-elf male she was disguised as looked like a fierce warrior - but pouting, he simply looked ridiculous. "Remember your *chatto* lessons."

Lyota smoothed her face with an obvious effort. "Yes, Master Eddas," she whispered back.

"What do we do now?" Kiriin hissed from beneath the illusion.

I paused thinking, then took Lyota's hand and drew her to a nearby alley. Stooping, I lifted the hem of my robe, and slipped my knife from its sheath in my right boot. I took a moment to slit the hem of the robe, then tore off a long strip. Sheathing the knife, I cast a spell of repairing on my robe to restore it, then took the strip of fabric and carefully tied it about Lyota's eyes. "There - how's that?"

Lyota turned her head from right to left, looking about, and I watched as her illusionary male visage slowly grinned. "I... I can still see!" she whispered after a moment.

I nodded. "Your astral sight isn't a function of your eyes, dear - it's a power of your *mind*, focused *through* your eyes."

"And the astral glare here is bright enough that even with my eyes closed, I can still see," Lyota replied, nodding.

"Kiriin, can you conceal that blindfold within the illusion?" I whispered.

There was a moment of silence, then Kiriin whispered back. "The discontinuities are high, Master Eddas. I'm already concealing an olive-skinned twenty year-old human as a pale-skinned two-hundred year-old Malani... White robe as black leather armor... Staff as empty hand... Woman as man... I can do it, but I don't know if the illusion will be foolproof. A perceptive person may pierce the illusion if we add anything more... And the Dark Elves are masters of illusion. Pixie magic is strong, Master Eddas, but not *that* strong."

I thought about it for a moment. "Make her female, advance the age about six centuries, late-stages of *basaich*, alter the garb to a simple gray robe, and allow the staff and blindfold to be seen."

Lyota shimmered, and the change took place, the face of her illusionary form shifting to become the wrinkled and lined face of a female, and the hair lightening and lengthening to a shoulder-length pale white.

"Stoop, dear. You're old, feeble, near the end of your life, and suffering from *basaich*," I said, pulling off my right glove. "And lean heavily on your staff. You need it to walk."

"What's *basaich*?" Lyota asked, her voice aged and creaking from the illusion.

"The bane of the elves," Kiriin whispered.

I nodded, lifting up the jewel on my right thumb ring to reveal a tiny compartment and slipping my staff into the enchanted extra-dimensional space that the ring contained. "You remember I told you that once an elf reaches physical maturity at about twenty or so, their aging processes slow to a crawl?" I asked, and Lyota nodded as I pulled my glove back on. "Well, that lasts centuries, Lyota. A two-hundred year-old elf looks as young as a twenty-year-old human. At six hundred years of age, they still don't look a day past thirty. But, in the last two or three decades of their lives, their bodies age rapidly in a process called *basaich* - the Withering. It doesn't look unusual to a human, as by the time *basaich* sets in, the elf can be between six to ten centuries old, yet only looks as though they're forty or so. To human eyes, they simply start to age normally, and eventually die of old age. To an elf, however, it's a terrible sight - they wither and die in what is, to an elf, a dreadfully short period of time. Half-elves have the same thing happen to them - though their lifespans are only about half that of an elf."

"Master Eddas is wise - few elves will look at you closely enough to pierce the illusion, as they find the appearance of *basaich* repulsive," Kiriin added, and I smiled slightly at the compliment.

"Oh," Lyota replied, stooping. "How's this?"

"Better. That will help Kiriin maintain the illusion, as well," I replied, then took her hand. "Just follow. Oh - and you can babble and cackle a bit, too. Senility is a part of *basaich*, just as it is with human old age - that's why the elves fear it. Elves fear insanity and dementia like humans fear the plague," I said, and took her hand in mine. Shortly, we were strolling down the street again, heading towards the castle - only now, other pedestrians gave us a wide berth, avoiding Lyota.

"Hee-hee-hee! Now I'm the ancient parent and you're the young daughter, it seems!" Lyota cackled quietly, and Kiriin valiantly struggled to suppress a giggle from within the illusion.

"Exactly," I replied, and again felt a chill as the word fell from my lips.

Lyota fell silent as she saw the brief change in my aura, gazing at me. "It happened again."

I nodded. "I know, I felt it. And I now know precisely how to get us into the palace, as well," I replied,

and as we traveled down the shadowy streets of the fabled City of Darkness, I quietly whispered my plan.

Chapter Twenty-Three

"...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..." - King Gunim IV, Commentaries on History, 1348 NCC

Tuagh, the captain of the Queen's Guard, waved a leather-gloved hand at us, and made a face. *"My queen... It is with some surprise that I must announce that... This is Eddas Ayar, and his daughter."*

The throne room was as dark as I remembered, lit only by *tashta*-crystals. The Spider Throne was the same - a large, ornate, limestone throne, the back carved to resemble an enormous spider, and the feet of the throne resembling skulls. The room was draped in the same dark blue and black cloths, with pillars of limestone carved to resemble stacked skulls. Sycophants and advisors lined the walls of the room, waiting for their chance to fawn over the queen, and two guards stood by her side. The faces had changed in seventeen centuries, of course, and probably the names, as well - but it was otherwise the same.

Entering the castle had gone smoothly, and I suspected Yorindar had a hand in it. We simply walked up to the gate, and Lyota cast off her glazed expression, speaking firmly to the guards and announcing us as 'Eddas Ayar and Daughter.' I, meanwhile, affected a look of awed amazement and wonder at the sight of the castle, relying on the skills I'd gained at years of *chatto*. The guards, naturally, assumed that I was the daughter, and Lyota myself. After all - they knew I was old, an "Ancient One." Lyota maintained her stoop, however, and affected a slight tremble of palsy to her limbs - enough that they hardly saw her as a threat.

The queen was breathtakingly beautiful, her lips painted a deep red, her eyes delicately lined with kohl. Slim black slipper-like shoes of finely-tanned bat-hide covered her feet, and she wore a spider silk garment that concealed almost nothing of her perfect, elven body. I guessed her age at around three of four centuries - hardly old enough to have known me in my previous life. Elves simply don't live that long. At the moment, her perfect face was drawn up in an expression of surprise as she brushed a strand of ebon hair from her night-black eyes. *"You allowed them in unfettered?!"* she snapped to Tuagh.

Tuagh shrugged. He was the captain of the *Faelias Freiceadan*, the Shadow Guard, the queen's personal bodyguards - and, in truth, the royal assassins. Each was a skilled Shadow-Mage in their own right, and a deadly warrior. All wore the ebon soft-leather armor common to Dark Elves, enchanted to be as stout as fine chainmail and embossed with the royal insignia, a spider, over their left breast. When we had first arrived, Tuagh had carefully examined us with the eye of a skilled wizard and warrior, and yet had failed to penetrate Kiriin's illusion or my own simple skill at *chatto*. *"Have no fear, my queen. The old one is palsied and blind, and the young one hardly looks experienced enough to form a threat."*

The queen looked directly at me, then leaned back in her throne. Steepling her fingers, she smiled wryly. *"I congratulate you, Eddas Ayar, on an excellent ploy. I, however, know which is which - your enemy, Cordo, was quite thorough in his description of you. Quite a powerful illusion, to fool even Tuagh."*

Tuagh blinked in surprise. *"Illusion?!"* he snapped, his hand flying to the blade at his side.

"Calm yourself, Tuagh. If Eddas Ayar meant to kill me, I'm certain I would already be dead," the

queen snapped, then smiled at me disarmingly. Tuagh bit back a snarl at me and nodded to the queen, stepping back to his place by her side like a well-trained hound.

I smiled, extending my hand, and summoning my staff to my grip. *"I would hardly destroy the Rose of the Malani without at least speaking to her for a moment,"* I replied in their language, then glanced to Lyota. *"You can drop your illusion, Kiriin, but stay hidden and stay silent,"* I said in my language. In a moment, Lyota flickered and returned to her normal appearance, standing at my side in her white, hooded robe.

"But my queen-!" Tuagh began, bristling at seeing me summon my staff.

"No, Tuagh. Eddas Ayar is an Ancient One, and hardly a fool. He knows that if I am harmed or dead, he will hardly have a chance to recover the boy," the queen said, and smiled darkly at me. She then gazed at Lyota in curiosity, seeing she still wore the blindfold. *"Your daughter is blind?"*

"No, but would it matter if she was?" I replied, and smiled. I did not bother to address her formally. We both knew why I was here.

The queen smiled back. *"No, it would not - nor would it matter if she were even your daughter or not. You are here to speak of things far more important than that,"* she replied, and I nodded as she continued. *"I am Queen Duilla, Master Eddas. I still remember the stories my grandmother told of you,"* Duilla said, and waved a hand negligently at Lyota. *"Does this girl's presence mean you discovered the secret you were searching for, and brought your love back to you from the Void?"*

"I found the secret, yes, Queen Duilla. Unfortunately, due to a quirk of fate, I cannot use the knowledge I discovered. I am as you see - a half-elf female. This girl's mother is another woman of my race I raised from the void, and impregnated with sorcery."

"A vast and powerful sorcery, indeed. It is unfortunate we meet under these circumstances, Eddas Ayar. Another time, I might ask you what you might trade for that spell. It would certainly save me having to suffer the fawning inanities of the dozen or two noble sycophants who seek my hand," she said, smiling wryly again.

"If it's simply an heir you seek," I replied carefully, smiling politely, *"give me the boy, and I'll use the sorcery upon you. A few months later, you will have the heir you wish - and I can guarantee it will be female and possess a strong and sparkling talent, as well."*

"Ah, we finally come to the subject of the boy. You are remarkably civil, Eddas Ayar, despite the circumstances of our meeting... Much as my grandmother said you were when she met you, nearly two millenia ago. Of course, I hardly expected you to simply barge in here and demand him - you are an Ancient One, after all, and certainly not like your nemesis, Cordo." Duilla paused, as though considering my offer, and all eyes in the room were upon her.

With an act of will honed through years of *chatto*-matches and in meeting and dealing with Hyperborean kings, I kept my face totally calm and expressionless. It was my judgement she was simply toying with me - her decision regarding the boy had already been made, weeks before.

Finally, Duilla smiled, and shook her head. *"Tempting though that offer may be, I am afraid I have to refuse. What your nemesis offers is far more tempting - though he knows it not. An heir can be produced with a simple dalliance, a brief moment of pleasure spent with a willing partner - of which, there are many. I can even have Tuagh quietly slit the father's throat afterwards, and avoid much trouble later with royal lineage,"* she said, and chuckled darkly as her eyes glanced over the courtiers, advisors and sycophants who stood along the walls - they, themselves, quailed at her gaze

for several heartbeats before she looked back to me. *"No, no. Your nemesis offers me something far more, Eddas Ayar, and you have yet to match that."*

"And what might that be?" I asked calmly.

"Power, Eddas Ayar. His plan will establish a kingdom of darkness upon the surface lands again - though he is far too mad to rule it, I think. A bit of careful work in rebuilding old alliances, perhaps a quiet knife in his sleep... And the Unseelie Court reclaims its rightful place in the world. And then, firmly established on the surface lands, we can sweep the lands clean of the so-called 'Light Elves' and all the others of the wretched Seelie Court, and revenge our ancient wounds."

"You will find, Queen Duilla, that Cordo is far harder to kill than that. I ought to know - I've tried, twice," I replied dryly.

"Perhaps, Eddas Ayar... But then again, I have centuries to work on the problem, now don't I?" she replied, and smiled.

"If you plan on simply out-living him, as you elves often do humans who oppose you, you should know Cordo is immortal."

"Really? How interesting..." the queen replied, idly stroking a finger across her chin. *"I do believe, however, a few centuries trapped in that form will drive him utterly mad, Eddas Ayar. Of course, he is far from sane, now. Perhaps it won't even take that long."* Duilla gazed at me for a long moment, then finally shrugged. *"No matter. You do not offer me anything better than your nemesis offers, thus I have no desire to release the boy to you, Eddas Ayar. You may leave."*

"Oh, but Duilla... We have hardly begun to bargain," I said, drawing deeply upon my staff, then lifting my staff above the floor. I rattled off the incantation to one of my most powerful spells. Tuagh leaped forward, his sword flashing to his grip, but it was too late. I rapped my staff lightly upon the floor of the throneroom.

A dull, echoing *BOOM* reverberated throughout the courtroom, and the ground shook. Tuagh stumbled and sprawled across the floor, the others in the room staggering, some falling. Lyota herself staggered, but managed to remain on her feet, by my side. The queen was jostled on her throne, and stared at me wide-eyed.

I gazed at the queen with the coldest glare this body could muster. *"You, Queen Duilla, do not hardly remember your grandmother's stories half as well as you think you do. You have forgotten just who and what it is you are dealing with. I am a Hyperborean battle-mage, once a Master in my circle, returned from the void and inhabiting this body you see before you. Yet I remain what I was - a master battle-mage. I can smash an army at a gesture, I can level a castle at a word, and I can summon a roaring demon from the pit of hell at a thought. You will give me the boy, Duilla, or I will bring your entire palace down about your ears."*

Tuagh rose to his feet, and stared at me. *"You-you wouldn't cast the Spell of Earthquake in here! This is the Sunless Sea! You could crack the Bowl of the Heavens above us, and bring all of the Granite Mountains crashing down upon us!"*

"And exterminate most of the Malani in the process, yes. The resulting flood as the waters from the Sunless Sea were driven into the caverns would probably kill most of the goblins, and a good number of the dwarves, as well," I replied calmly. *"But I will do it, Tuagh. If you were more than simply a sciologist and knew more of sorcery than spells of shadows and darkness, you'd know I already have cast the spell. All I need do is strike my staff against the floor once more, a bit*

harder, and the Sunless Sea and all your people are no more." I glared at Tuagh, using the most fierce expression this body could muster, and he wilted beneath my gaze. *"I cast my first spell before your grandmothers were weaned, and fought my first battle before your grandfathers drew their first blade. Trifle with me not only at your peril, but at the peril of your entire race,"* I growled, then looked to Duilla. *"Now give me the boy."*

There was a long pause, as all in the court held their breath, waiting to see what would happen.

Finally, Duilla's face slowly split in a smile. *"Oh, marvelously, marvelously done, Master Eddas!"* she laughed, and clapped her hands. *"For a brief moment, I nearly thought you would do it - or, at least, try. The Sunless Sea is a bit larger than a simple cavern, it has existed since long before the first elf breathed air, and it has survived countless earthquakes over the aeons. I doubt a single earthquake spell would bring us all to ruin - though it would certainly frighten many, and possibly damage much. As for bringing my castle down about my ears..."* she said, and laughed again. *"I'm quite certain you can, and very easily. But I doubt you will, Master Eddas. Should you do so, I would be dead - and, almost certainly, so would the boy. You would never recover him, then."*

"Not without the aid of an earth elemental and a few years of waiting for it to sift through the rubble, no. Once I had his corpse, however - or what remained of it - I could restore his life," I replied dryly, my face smooth despite the frustration in my heart. I released my will, allowing the spell to fade. I had been bluffing, of course - and she had called my bluff.

"Ah, and I do believe it's just that ability in mind which brought your nemesis to us, Master Eddas. He asked us for a simple arrangement - one so terribly simple, in fact, I almost did not agree, thinking it to be a trick of some kind. He asked that we take the boy, and toss him alive into the Pit of Shadows, as we might those who are convicted of crimes against the state. Now that I think upon it, it seems to me what he desired was not to merely kill the boy, but to place him out of your reach forever. You might need an intact corpse to revive him - or, perhaps, merely a fragment of bone. No matter - once cast into the vortex at the heart of this castle, all of him would be gone, consigned to the Plane of Shadows forever. Thus, Eddas Ayar, I shall make you a counter-offer."

"And what might that be?" I asked, struggling to keep my expression smooth.

"Surrender yourself to me, and you shall be committed to the vortex along with the boy. If you are truly as powerful as you claim, you should easily be able to recover him, and accomplish your goal."

I paused, gazing at Duilla. She was grinning broadly.

My decision seemed obvious. There was, in the end, little choice.

Slowly, I pulled off my right glove, opened the compartment in my thumb-ring, and slipped my staff inside. With great care, I slowly removed all my rings and slipped them inside, tugging off my left glove to get the ones on my left hand. I then lifted the edge of my robe, drawing my enchanted knife from its sheath, and slipped it in with my other items. Finally, Dyarzi's silver skull-key beneath my left glove joined the rest. When I was done, I pulled my gloves back on, and held the ring out to Lyota. *"Lyota, take this and leave,"* I said in our language. *"Give my rings and things to your mother - she may find them of use."*

Lyota gazed at me from beneath her blindfold, her mouth open in an 'O' of surprise. I caught a glimpse of Kiriin peering at me from inside the hood of Lyota's robe - she looked equally startled. *"But-"* Lyota began.

I reached up to her, silencing her words with a gentle, gloved finger across her lips. "Do not argue with me. Just take the ring, and go. Use your spell of returning, and go. Now."

There was a long moment of silence as she looked at me from beneath her blindfold. Could she still see my aura despite the glare, I wondered? Could she know what was truly in my heart? Did she know that, despite everything, there was little choice?

Finally, Lyota nodded. After taking my ring from me, she slipped it upon her finger, incanted briefly while gesturing with her staff, and vanished.

I looked back to Druilla. *"Do as you will, Druilla."*

Druilla smiled in triumph for a long moment, then looked to her guard-captain. *"Tuagh... Fetter her properly, then toss her in the tower cell with the boy. We'll rid ourselves of both of them at midnight, when the rift opens."*

"Yes, my queen," Tuagh purred, stepping up to me. Then, with a sudden, vicious swipe of the pommel of the sword, he smote me across the temple, and I knew no more.

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

"Few who become the prisoners of the Malani are ever seen again." - Elven proverb

Darkness... Endless darkness, and chilling cold. Shadows flickered on shapeless surfaces, everything shifting, rippling... Flashes of pain... I struggle, but the pain begins again.

"Reach beyond yourself, Eddas... You are far more than you think, and the limitations you perceive are only in your mind..."

I looked up, searching for the source of the familiar voice... But there was nothing. "Yorindar?"

"Ah, Eddas Ayar... You have accepted what you are, but you do not yet comprehend what you are... Thrice now, you have seen your own power, and yet failed to grasp what you have seen... You have accepted my blessing, you have accepted your name, but you have not yet embraced your destiny..."

"Yorindar, I don't understand!"

"Exactly..."

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

"Two weeks later, our happy victory was long forgotten, and it had become simply a struggle to survive. The enemy only attacked at night, when my warriors were nearly blind, and the goblin-kin had the advantage. Slowly, we were forced to retreat, each day building new fortifications to defend ourselves for the coming night. I struggled at the verge of exhaustion - but Arella, despite everything she was doing, remained awake and alert for the slightest hint of shadow-magic. She was using herbs to keep herself going... And after awhile, it began to take a toll on her. And yet, I knew not what to do - without her help, Cordo's spells and the shadow-magic of his goblin allies would easily overwhelm us. I could not think of anything I might do to turn the tide of battle - my men were only human, and simply could not fight at night as well as the goblins did. Were it not for our fortifications, we would almost certainly have been destroyed weeks ago - half their troops were mounted on enormous wolves, and those wolves could do nothing against spiked pits and stout timber walls. I knew I had to do something, and

soon - but what?"

- King Noril, Autobiography, 1729 NCC

"Are you alright?" a young voice asked.

I groaned, blinking, and reached up to rub my aching temple - only to discover that my hands were chained together. I looked at the manacles, and saw they were engraved with elaborate runes. "Probably enchanted to negate magic," I muttered. Experimentally, I tried to cast a simple cantrip of illumination - and failed.

"I think the least you could do is talk to me, since we're sharing the same cell," the young voice said, somewhat petulantly. "I know you look like one of them, but for all the kicking about they gave you, it doesn't seem likely they're your friends."

I looked through the gloom - beside me, sitting on a cot, was a young lad of perhaps ten years of age. He was a handsome lad, and his brown hair and blue eyes complimented what was growing to be a strong and firm jaw. He bore a strong resemblance to his grandfather, and I smiled at the lad. "I beg your pardon, your highness. Greetings, Prince Parial. I'm terribly sorry if you thought I was ignoring you - I wasn't. I've just had a bit of a rough day," I said, then paused. I rubbed my head, and noticed I was not only sporting a sore temple, I was sore all over. "Gah. I couldn't have been out too long... But I feel like I've been thoroughly beaten." I looked down at myself - I still had on Dyarzi's gloves and boots and the elf-chain garments I wore beneath my robes, but my robe and waist-belt was gone. My hair was still held up in Dyarzi's silver hair-band, and oddly, the three raven feathers were still there, as well.

"Y-you know me?!" Parial said, surprised.

"Yes, I do. Odd as this may sound, I was sent to rescue you," I replied, and looked around. The stone cell we were in was circular, with a single door and a single, barred window for ventilation - and, naturally, it was pitch black outside. What little illumination there was apparently was provided by a *tashta*-crystal hanging in the hallway beyond the door, it's dim blue light coming in through a small, barred opening about head-height on the door. As I examined the room, I heard the tolling of the low, deep time-bell outside the window, far in the distance. Four times, then a pause, then four times again. "Two hours to midnight," I muttered.

Parial looked me over in the gloom. "Well, if you were sent to rescue me, I think you're off to a pretty bad start. They dragged you in here and you were already unconscious, then every time you started to wake up, they knocked you out again. I think they were searching you... I don't know. I think they finally just got annoyed at you constantly starting to wake up, so they just kicked you a lot until you were out again, and cut off all your clothes. They searched you a bit after that, then they left. They only left a little while ago... Maybe a minute, I think." Parial paused, staring at me. "Are-are you alright, now?" He asked again, his voice still showing concern. "What were they looking for?"

I stretched, and nodded. I could already feel the aches and pains fading - the knot of *mana* that maintained this body was far too powerful to be negated by the enchanted shackles - if it was that easy, I'd already have done it myself and restored my body to that of a man. "Yes, your highness - I'll be alright in a few moments. As to what they were looking for... Well, I imagine that if my fate is the Pit of Shadows, they were trying to insure I did not have a *tashta*-crystal hidden about me, which might shed a drop of light where no light has fallen since the dawn of time."

Parial shook his head, not understanding. "I... You know my name, but I don't know yours," Parial said, nervously.

I smiled. "Permit me to introduce myself, then, your highness. In your kingdom, I am known as Dame Raven, Defender of the Realm."

Parial's eyes widened. "Ooo! Dame Raven! I know about you! My father and mother told me *all* about you, and so did Lady Arella! They said your *real* name is Eddas Ayar, and you're a powerful mage, and you're a million years old!"

I chuckled as I rose to my feet. "I'm not quite *that* old, your highness, but yes, I am very old."

"Then how old are you, really?" Parial asked as I peered out the barred opening in the door. All I could see beyond was a spiral stone stair, leading both up and down, and the fist-sized *tashta*-crystal, hanging in a iron lantern attached to the wall outside the door. There were no guards outside - of course, there didn't really need to be. With nothing in this cell but a water bucket and a small guarderobe in a corner, there seemed little opportunity for escape.

"Hmmm..." I considered Parial's question while I grabbed the bars of the window, and chinned myself up to it to peer outside. We were, apparently, in a tower, and at least ninety cubits above the ground. I let myself drop to the floor, then turned to face Parial. "Well, your highness, I was born a Hyperborean, a long, long time ago - though I hardly look it today, I suppose. The calendar was different in my day, so I don't know *exactly* how old I am, really. There was also quite a bit of chaos following the destruction of Hyperborea, and your calendar was only adopted a few centuries ago, so the starting date of your calendar is, apparently, an approximation. Still, my head courtesan, Pelia, has made a study of our calendars and those of the Larinians, as she's working on a history of the Hyperboreans and the people of the Southlands. Pelia has estimated that I'm about one thousand, eight hundred and fifteen years old, give or take a decade."

Parial stared at me, boggled, and I chuckled as I stepped over beside him, then sat next to him on the cot. After a moment, Parial shook his head. "My mother was telling me an old story about the Hyperboreans when..." he said, and his voice trailed off. "Can you tell me - I mean, do you know what happened to her? The last I saw of her was... Well, that *monster*! And then these elves took me away, and after awhile, they put me here."

I looked at Parial, judging him. He was remarkably controlled, given the circumstances - he was probably a very mature lad, and was an obvious credit to his parents. "The truth?"

Parial nodded. "The truth."

"She's dead, Parial. The monster you saw is Cordo, an enemy of mine. He killed her."

Parial held the news very well, and for nearly a minute - quite good, for a boy of ten, I thought. Eventually, however, he hung his head, and sobbed.

I shuffled over by his side, then sat next to him and carefully looped my arms around him, as my wrists were still manacled together. I then held him, hugging him gently while he sobbed. He hugged me back, his tears flowing freely onto my breasts for many long moments.

"Why? Why?!" he sobbed at last.

"To insure that you would be the last, Parial," I replied softly. "Your father loved your mother far too much to even consider marrying again. There will never be another in his line, unless you grow up, marry, and have children of your own."

Parial sniffled. "And now the Dark Elves are going to kill me, too, I'll bet."

"Not if we get out of here, first," I replied.

Parial looked at me, his eyes widening. "We're gonna escape?!"

I grinned, slipping my arms from around him. "Well, we're sure going to *try*, at any rate."

"What do we do?"

"Well, the first thing is to see if we can't get these manacles off me. They're enchanted to suppress magic - I can't cast spells when they're on me."

Parial looked at the manacles about my wrists, then shook his head. "Those aren't gonna fit over your hands."

"Not without breaking the bones, no - we'll leave that as a last resort," I replied, nodding. "For now, let's try to snap them - that might break the enchantment. They can't be enchanted to be invulnerable to harm, you can't combine any other enchantments with the main one when you're creating an item like this. It looks to be merely ordinary iron."

"But..."

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

"How could we *possibly* break those?!"

I grinned. "I'm a lot stronger than I look, Parial - and so are you, I imagine, as you're quarter giant."

Parial rolled his eyes. "I am not! I mean, yes, I'm very strong, but I'm not part giant!"

I grinned. "Oh, yes you are, your highness. I know your grandmother, personally, and I'm telling you, she was and is a giant of Hyperborea - albeit a very small one, and only as strong as an ogre. Your father is half-giant, and when he was your age, he was nearly as strong as a full-grown man. You're a quarter-giant, your strength should be comparable."

"Really?!" Parial asked, amazed. "Is that why I'm so strong?"

"Yes, it is. Now come - grab the manacles, and pull. Together, we just might break them."

Parial nodded, taking hold of the manacles, and together, we pulled.

Parial, gifted by birth with a strength far beyond his years, was nearly as strong as a full-grown man, just as his father was at his age. As for me, 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 King Noril, as I had nearly the strength of three grown men. So, together, we strained at the manacles as hard as we could with a combined strength nearly equal to four men.

Many long moments passed, the silence broken only by the grunting of the two of us straining at the manacles...

And finally Parial stopped, gasping. I stopped, as well, and looked down at the links, panting. "Well, your highness... I think we've stretched the links a tiny bit. If we keep at it, they might break eventually."

"How... How long would that take?" Parial gasped.

"Hmmm..." I studied the links carefully. "Probably longer than we have, your highness - we'll have to

think of something else."

"H-how long do w-we have?" Parial asked nervously.

I sighed. "Well, your highness-"

"P-Parial," he interrupted.

"Mmm?"

"J-just c-call me Parial. My father says..."

"Yes?"

"My f-father says that 'highness' and 'majesty' a-and all that aren't necessary between friends... And right now, I really, *really* need a friend! It's dark and I'm scared and..." he replied, and sniffled. "Well, Lady Arella says that you were my grandfather's best friend, once, and you're the best friend the crown ever had. I want you to be my friend, too. So just call me Parial, and I'll just call you Raven."

I smiled. "Alright, Parial. We'll be friends, then."

Parial smiled slightly in the gloom, and wiped his nose on his sleeve. "Thank you. Now... How much time do you think we have?"

"Honestly?"

"Yes."

"Less than two hours."

Parial paled. "Wh-what will they d-do with us?"

I reached my arms around Parial again, and hugged him gently. "Well, Parial... We're in *Baile'mor'Dorcha*, in the Castle of Shadows. Deep at the heart of this castle, there's a dimensional rift the Dark Elves call the Pit of Shadows."

"What's that?"

"Well, the Sunless Sea is a place where the sun has never shone, in all the endless ages of our world. And, like a rift to the Plane of Fire might briefly open in the heart of a forest fire, or a rift to the Plane of Water might open deep within the oceans... Well, here, deep within the eternal shadows of the Sunless Sea, a rift to the Plane of Shadows sometimes opens. It's extremely rare - this is, perhaps, the only place in the world where that happens. But, because the sun never shines here and the shadows never change, the rift always opens in the same spot. The Dark Elves have lived here a long, long time, and they know when the rift will open and when it will close, you see - they built this castle atop it ages and ages ago, long before I was born. Well... They toss people into the rift they want to dispose of, permanently."

"And we'll b-be d-d-dead?" Parial squeaked.

"No, we'll be consigned to another plane of reality, the Plane of Shadows."

"Wh-what's it like, there?"

"I don't know, really. I've been a scholar and researcher for a long, long time, and I don't know much about it. I know that no one has ever returned from there - but that doesn't necessarily mean we'll die, it

just means it's quite difficult to get out of there. Fortunately, I'm probably the most powerful mage you could have helping you, Parial. Once we can get these fetters off me, I'm quite confident I'll be able to get us out of there, and take you home," I replied, though with far more confidence than I actually felt.

The Plane of Shadows wasn't like the Elemental Planes, which I had visited before. I knew enough about the Plane of Shadows to know our chances of survival were extremely remote. Matter was a transitory thing, there, and winked in and out of existence in the blink of an eye - existence being defined by the extent of countless flickering shadows in countless planes and dimensions. It was far more likely we would be destroyed within seconds, winking out of existence as our bodies were intersected by an endless number of conflicting shadows, and reduced to nothingness. One of the most devastating battle-spells, the Wall of Shadows, conjured a part of the Plane of Shadows itself. Anything even touching the wall was destroyed, and even the most powerful of sorceries could not penetrate it, as the very substance of *mana*-energies were split asunder in the flickering, chaotic reality of endlessly shifting shadow. It was an enormously draining spell, and the area it covered was usually far too small to be of any real use, but its intimidation value could not be underestimated.

Parial looked up to me. "C-could you... I mean, could you take me home if we got the fetters off you now?"

I nodded. "Instantly."

Parial squirmed out from my encircling arms. "Then let's try to break them again! Let's try and try and keep *on* trying until they break or our arms fall off!"

I grinned. "Alright - let's."

We tried again, then rested for awhile. There was no food in the cell, only water - Parial explained between snuffles that they'd fed him once a day until today, and it seemed obvious to me that they were only feeding him until they could dispose of him in the Pit of Shadows. While we rested, I examined the floor of the cell, and found what I thought I'd find - the floor of the cell had been inscribed with a circle of protection. This had prevented me from simply summoning Parial away when I was in Steelgate, and made this whole trip necessary. I sighed - if Parial had only known, he could have simply stood on tip-toe, and held his hand out the window of the cell, or out the little window on the door. With any part of his body beyond the circle of protection, I could have summoned him, and saved both of us a lot of trouble.

We tried again, then rested again. I looked at Parial, and smiled. "You're a brave lad, Parial."

"What makes you say that?" he asked, rubbing his shoulders.

"I can tell your arms must hurt quite a bit, and yet you're still trying as hard as you can."

Parial made a face. "That's not brave - I'm just too scared to give up."

I grinned. "Sometimes, Parial, that's precisely what bravery really is."

Parial grinned, and started to giggle.

Suddenly, the half-elven ears I'd appropriated caught a small sound. I held up my hand for silence. "What is that?" I wondered aloud.

"What is what?" Parial asked, listening.

"Shhh! Listen... Can you hear it?"

Parial was silent for a long moment. "That buzzing sound?"

I nodded.

"It sounds like a bee," Parial replied.

I grinned. "Or a pixie."

"A what?" Parial asked, but I did not reply.

Rising to my feet, I hopped up and grabbed the bars of the window, then chinned myself up to the window. "Kiriin!" I hissed. "Over here!"

Kiriin buzzed invisibly between the bars the moment I'd let myself down, and appeared hovering before me. "There you are! This place is *huge*, I thought I'd never find you!"

I grinned. "It appears you found me anyway, however - as well as Prince Parial."

"Great! You two stay right here - I'll be right back!" she said, and after turning invisible again, she flew back out the bars. I chuckled - it wasn't as though we could go anywhere.

"Wh-what was that?!" Parial said, gaping.

"A friend," I replied, smiling. "We just may be able to get you out of here, yet."

"Really?!" Parial gasped, his eyes wide with hope.

The bells tolled again - four times, then five. "Yes, and none too soon. Now sit back and relax, Parial. We don't want to make *too* much noise, you know."

Parial nodded, and we waited quietly. Soon, I could hear the sound of a woman struggling, and a clink of metal on stone. "*Hold steady there, girl, I do nearly have it,*" a familiar voice hissed.

I grinned. "*Durgrim!*"

"*Aye, Eddas Ayar - it be me. Kiriin do keep the three of us invisible, to spare the Dark Elves a bit of consternation,*" he replied, and chuckled. "*Thy daughter do know a spell of flight, and she do yet hold me up whilst I do attach me climbing rig to the window of this cage. One moment,*" Durgrim replied, and there were a few more metallic clinking sounds. "*There - I do have it, girl. Ye can let go. I will yet start to work on these bars, and perhaps have the two of them out in an hour or two.*"

"*Durgrim, there be not enough time remaining to cut the bars, they be two fingers thick - do not bother. I will yet hold the boy up to the window in a moment - do just reach through the bars and hold him up, that my daughter may yet take his hands,*" I said, then looked to Parial. "Parial, I'm going to lift you, now, and hold you up to the window. Poke your hands through, and my daughter will take your hands and pull you out. You'll be in the air, so be very brave and don't scream or you'll let the Dark Elves know you're escaping," I said, then looked to the window. "Lyota, the room is sealed with a circle of protection. Once Parial's hands are through the window and Durgrim is holding him up, grab Parial tight, then use your spell of returning and draw yourselves back a few feet. That will pull him out."

"What about you?" Lyota asked, invisibly.

I shook my head. "I'm shackled with enchanted fetters that negate magic, Lyota. You can't draw me out that way. If I even touch you, your spells will be negated, and you'll fall," I replied, and lifted Parial to the window. "Poke your hands through the window, Parial."

Parial did so, then goggled. "There's someone there! They have a beard!"

Durgrim chuckled, and I smiled. "Yes, that's Durgrim the dwarf. He's helping us, too. Now be brave, and hold your tongue."

Parial nodded, and I let go of him once I felt Durgrim had him firmly. There was a moment's pause, and then Parial vanished, to reappear hanging in the air, Lyota's hands about his. Durgrim and Kiriin also became visible, Kiriin standing upon Durgrim's shoulder. Lyota struggled for a moment, trying to lift Parial up into her arms, and I bit my lip nervously - if she dropped him, the fall would smash him to paste. I needn't have worried, though - Durgrim, seeing what was happening, simply reached behind him and grabbed the lad by the seat of his pants, and hefted him easily into Lyota's arms. There was a sparkle of pixie magic, and the four of them vanished, covered by Kiriin's spell.

"And now ye do the same, Eddas Ayar," Durgrim said.

"Impossible, my friend. I be shackled with fetters that negate sorcery - me daughter cannot pull me out that way."

"Then do yet hold the fetters up to the window, and I will yet work on them awhile."

I did so, and after a moment, the chain between my wrists lifted, and I could hear the sounds of a hacksaw at work. "Lyota, take Parial to your mother, and keep an eye on him. Tell her he'll need to be kept in a circle of protection and guarded carefully until we've resolved this - we don't want the Dark Elves summoning him right back into their clutches, or Cordo coming after him."

"But what about you? What about Durgrim and Kiriin?" Lyota asked, invisibly.

"Leave us. Kiriin can stay and keep Durgrim invisible - and if this doesn't work, her invisibility can help him escape the city. He can steal a rowboat or something - all he has to do is make it to the shores of the Sunless Sea, and he can walk home from there. Kiriin can go with him, and once she's back in Iron City, she can find her way home from there. As for me... Well, I'll either escape this, or I won't. That's not important - what *is* important is saving the prince."

"But-!"

"No, Lyota. What's important is *saving the prince*. That's why we're here. Kiriin knows this, and so does Durgrim. It's time for you to accept it, as well. Parial is necessary to Yorindar's plans. We are not. Save Parial, Lyota."

"Master Eddas is right, Lyota," Kiriin added. "Save the prince - I can get Durgrim out, myself. With a bit of invisibility we can sneak out of the city, and perhaps steal a boat from the docks and slip away. We'll do everything we can to save Master Eddas, don't worry. For now, though, you have to take Parial from here, and protect him."

"Mmm? What be the trouble?" Durgrim asked, pausing in his work on the chain between my wrists. Kiriin spent a moment explaining in his language, and he nodded. *"Aye - Eddas Ayar be right, girl. Save the prince, that be the important thing,"* he said, and shortly the sound of his hacksaw working on the chain resumed.

"Alright..." Lyota replied, then suddenly I felt her hand pressed into mine. "Take your ring, Master Eddas. You may need it."

I slipped my ring from her thumb, and slipped it over my own gloved thumb. I couldn't use it, of course, as the fetters were still unbroken. Still, it was a comfort to have. "Alright, I have it. Now go, Lyota."

"I..."

"Yes?"

"I love you, Father."

"I love you, too, Daughter," I replied, my heart moved. "Now go."

I heard Lyota mutter her incantation softly, and then silence fell, broken only by the sound of Durgrim steadily working on the links of the chain.

"It do cut quickly," Kiriin observed in Durgrim's language after a long moment of silence.

"Aye, little one," Durgrim replied. *"It be one of several small tools I do carry here and there in small pockets. It be just a palm's width o' blade and a small oak grip, so it be a bit tricky to use at times, but it be magicked so as to be invulnerable, as well. It never will dull, and as such it do cut quite swiftly, indeed. I would yet try to pick the locks, but it be a mite too dark for that, and yet too risky to strike a light."*

There was silence again, broken only by the quiet sounds of Durgrim's steady work. I admired his strength. It was far from easy to saw continuously at steel, cramped, one's arms reaching between the bars of a window - I was certain my own hands and forearms would have given out long ago, had the situation been reversed. Of course, were the situation reversed, I could shatter the enchantment on the fetters easily, without touching them at all.

"Oh, talk about something! Anything," Kiriin hissed quietly.

"Mmm? Why?" I asked in reply.

"I'm nervous. Just talk about something. Anything at all."

I shrugged. "I can't think of anything, Kiriin, I'm rather nervous myself."

"You-you are?"

"Yes, quite."

"But... But you look so calm!"

"Kiriin, I'm nearly two thousand years old. Even if you only count the years I have seen pass with my own eyes, I have seen nearly two hundred winters come and go. I was trained to be a Hyperborean battle-mage, Kiriin. The nearness of death is not an unusual situation for me, but one I have been in many, many times. Fear is my companion, not my enemy. Fear sharpens my reflexes, and prepares me for battle," I replied, and smiled. "Or, to put it more simply... I'm used to it."

At Durgrim's quiet grunt, Kiriin translated what had been said, and Durgrim nodded. *"Aye, fear be a life-saver - if ye can yet master it. Let it master ye, howe'er, and it be the ruin of e'en the mightiest berserk,"* he observed.

Kiriin sighed invisibly. "I wish Durgrim had a ring of translation, like you do. It's sometimes awkward to have to translate for him, and my spell of translation can't be cast on others. I suppose it's very fortunate you know his language."

I chuckled. "I don't - my own ring of translation is what allows me to understand him, and allows me to speak so he can understand me."

There was a long moment of silence, then Kiriin spoke again. "But wait... I thought you gave all your rings and things to Lyota? You mean you're still wearing your translation ring?"

"No, it's in my thumb-ring, with all my other... Items..." I said, my eyes widening in realization.

A voice whispered to me from my memory... Forgotten, at the time, but now recalled... *"Ah, Eddas Ayar... You have accepted what you are, but you do not yet comprehend what you are... Thrice now, you have seen your own power, and yet failed to grasp what you have seen... You have accepted my blessing, you have accepted your name, but you have not yet embraced your destiny..."*

I understood the speech of the ogres, even though they had stripped me of my ring. I understood Durgrim now - and more, I'd understood Tuagh and the queen after I'd removed my ring. Lyota had been right, but I had simply refused to see it, because I did not want it to be true.

And yet, there was no denying it. The knot of *mana* which maintained this body had absorbed the enchantments of my magic items, and echoed them. And more... Within my thumb-ring, I bore my own grimoire, and the tome I had written on the theories of magic. I was, at heart, a researcher, a scholar, and a teacher. And now, all the knowledge I had accumulated regarding magic theories from half a dozen races and cultures lay safely stored in my thumb-ring, knowledge of that spanned thousands of years of learning...

And I had conjured a friend from the Afterlife with a song.

"I am the Raven of Yorindar..." I said quietly, the truth finally dawning on me.

"Mmm? Of course ye be, everyone do know that," Durgrim replied. *"Do but hold still a moment more, I do nearly have it."*

I bowed my head. "I accept this, Yorindar. And I now comprehend it. Now and forever, I am the Raven of Yorindar," I whispered, knowing he could hear.

From deep within my chest, I felt a thrumming. The knot of mana shifted, altered... And blossomed.

I could feel the power of it, merging with my own *Talent*. I could feel the enchantments it had absorbed, echoing within me...

...and yet, it was so much more.

'Even the mightiest avalanche do yet begin with but the shifting of a tiny pebble,' an old Dwarvish saying went. Yorindar's manipulations of the future through small, subtle influences in the past had culminated in that day of chaos, when this body received its final forging in the heart of a *mana*-storm. And now, centuries, perhaps even aeons after Yorindar's plan had been set into motion, it had culminated in me, in this moment, here, and now.

And forever.

I choked back a sob with an effort of will. There was still much to be done, and my own tears could wait.

"Eh? What be ye doing?" Durgrim asked when I pulled my hands away, pulling the chain of the manacles out of his grip.

I shook my head, and just gazed down at the manacles. Using the power of Dyarzi's little skeleton key, a

power now mine, I willed the manacles to open.

With a click, the shackles fell from my wrists to clatter on the floor.

"If ye could do that afore, then why did ye wait 'till now?" Durgrim asked, his invisible voice showing surprise.

I rattled off a spell of truesight, then looked at them through the barred window. Both Kiriin and Durgrim had expressions of confusion and surprise. I shook my head - I could not possibly explain it to them in the time I had remaining. *"As ye did yet say, Durgrim - fear can be the ruin of e'en the mightiest berserk. I did let fear cloud my mind for two decades, and did not see the truth because I did fear it. Now, me mind be clear, and I do yet truly understand..."* I said, then shook my head again. *"But enough, for now. I can yet already hear the guards approach on the stairs beyond this cell. There be no more time to waste, my friend. Either we escape now, or we fight now. Which shall it be?"*

Durgrim blinked for a moment, then grinned. *"Given a choice, Eddas Ayar, a berserk cannot but choose to fight. Do but magic us inside past these bars, and we will yet give the guards a wee surprise."*

I nodded, and reached out to clasp his hand in mine.

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

"Death with glory, death with honor, death with beauty!"

- Battle-cry of the Berserks

'I don't think I could have asked for a better team, even among the members of my old circle,' I thought idly, sending another blast of lighting flashing down the hallway we were fighting in to finish the last of the guards before the throneroom.

And, indeed, the three of us made an incredible team. When the guards first entered the prison cell, Durgrim was upon them instantly, his two axes flashing in the dim light as he roared his battle-cry. We paused a moment to collect the tatters of my robe and waist-belt from a trash barrel outside the cell, and I spent a few seconds repairing my robe, dressing, and restoring my items to their proper positions. Thereafter, Kiriin and Durgrim followed me, Kiriin keeping Durgrim invisible as I went down the stairs from the tower, then progressed through the castle, slaying all in my path.

Durgrim, for his part, immediately realized his main duty would be to watch my back - and with the *Faelias Freiceadan*, that was necessary. Time and again a shadow would flicker, and a black-garbed warrior would bound out from it, blade flashing as they leaped for my back. Durgrim, protected by Kiriin's invisibility, would strike them down - often before they could land a blow. After the first ten, they began to grow wiser, and apparently were using spells of truesight. Still, this only brought the match to even footing - and Durgrim was a fast, powerful and extremely vicious fighter, as his opponents swiftly learned in the last few moments of their lives.

For my part, I simply cast a spell of missile reflection upon each of us to guard us against ordinary bows, crossbows and what-not, then proceeded to work through the guards on my way to the throneroom. Most were mundanes, and little prepared for the raw power I could unleash upon them in the form of explosions of lightning and fire. A few were mages, and some were even quite skilled - I spent nearly a minute exchanging blasts with one down a long hallway while Durgrim wrestled with yet another of the Queen's Guard, and for a long moment, I was unsure of the outcome. I foiled him with the same flea-spell I'd foiled Cordo with years ago, then while he was distracted and unable to cast, I finished him with a

spell of evisceration. Though Durgrim shouted a blood-curdling battle-cry at the sight and grinned broadly, Kiriin looked very green about the gills as I tossed my defeated opponent's bloody and still-beating heart aside - with a shudder, she ducked inside the hood of my robe. She remained hidden there afterwards, clinging to the back of my neck and shivering with fear occasionally - and yet all the while, still exerting her will to maintain the spell of invisibility she'd cast upon Durgrim.

Finally, the last of the guards before the throneroom lay in a smoking heap of charred flesh and ruined armor. After nearly a quarter hour of fighting, I was exhausted - and a quick glance at Durgrim showed he was, as well. Still, there was one last encounter to face. After pausing a few moments to catch my breath, I stepped over the bodies of the guards and burst the doors to flinders with a blast of lightning.

"Now that," Druilla said dryly from her throne, "is more the entrance I would have expected a Hyperborean battle-mage to make."

The sycophants and advisors were gone - apparently having fled to someplace where they were significantly less likely to be caught in a stray blast of lightning or fire. The last of the Queen's Guard stood before Druilla's throne, their weapons bared in their fists, glowering at me - apparently held in check by her order, rather than fear of me. Tuagh muttered a wordless curse as he gave me a withering gaze, yet remained by his queen's side.

I smiled disarmingly, again supremely grateful for the half-elven body I had appropriated ages ago - even wracked with weariness, I was still able to move smoothly and gracefully, concealing the true extent of my exhaustion. *"I simply wished to speak with you for a moment, Queen Druilla. I wished to thank you for your hospitality. Oh - and I have recovered the boy, so I will be on my way, now."*

Tuagh spat. *"Bah! What you have stolen, we will steal back! Shadows are everywhere, Eddas Ayar, you cannot escape us!"*

I gazed at Druilla, ignoring Tuagh. *"Druilla, call your dog to heel or I'll kill it."*

"Be silent, Tuagh!" Druilla snapped, then smiled at me. *"Well, Eddas Ayar... We are pleased you enjoyed our hospitality, and hope that you will visit us again, someday."*

"It's possible I may, Druilla. For if anything happens to the boy - anything at all - I will be back. And if I have to return, I will leave this palace a smoking ruin with your bones at the bottom of the rubble," I replied, and smiled. *"I would prefer, of course, not to have to destroy the Rose of the Malani at all. Your grandmother and I became quite close, actually, during the eight months I spent here researching magic..."* I said, and chuckled. *"Though I think she often toyed with the notion of having me quietly poisoned, just for amusement's sake."*

"So... It was all a trick, then? You only surrendered to us so that you could get close to the boy," Tuagh growled. *"But if you now intend to slay the queen-"*

"Be SILENT you fool! If Eddas Ayar meant to kill me, I would already be dead!" Druilla screamed, and Tuagh visibly winced. After glaring at Tuagh for a long moment, Druilla looked back at me, and smiled wryly. *"I was a fool, I think, Eddas Ayar. You are a true Ancient One. I'd have had better luck opposing a dragon, I think."*

I simply smiled in reply. Tuagh had been right, of course - I only surrendered to them in the hope that I could get to the boy. Things didn't work out exactly as I had planned, but he was still right. As an ancient elven saying went, *'Hindsight is always far clearer than foresight.'* Still, Druilla was right, as well. If I wanted her dead, I'd simply have leveled the castle and most of the city around it with the Spell of Earthquake and not bothered fighting any of her guards at all. The whole purpose of the battle, all the

deaths and all the destruction in her palace had been to teach the current occupant of the Spider Throne just exactly *who it was* she was dealing with - and why she didn't want to oppose me again in the future. Alive, she would respect my power, perhaps even fear me, and could be dealt with again in the future more peacefully should I ever have need to. Dead, she was simply a corpse - and her entire race would hate me until the end of time.

Druilla nodded at my silence. *"Still... Your opponent, I think, is your equal in power, if not in wisdom and sanity. It remains to be seen which of you shall prevail. If it turns out to be you, I will respect your request that we leave the boy alone - his usefulness to us would be at an end, anyway, so interfering with him would be pointless,"* she said, and paused meaningfully. *"If, however, your opponent should prevail..."*

"Then the Southlands will become a Kingdom of Darkness - and one ruled by someone who is my equal in power," I replied flatly.

"Yes, but one who is mad... And perhaps, eventually, his madness will be his undoing..."

I shook my head. *"No, Druilla. Cordo's madness is Morgar's madness, and his dream is Morgar's Dream. Twenty years ago, his dream was that 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 Morgar's name on the lips of every sentient being in the entire world, his 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. I stopped him twenty years ago, and I will try to stop him again. Should I fail, however, the shadow cast by Cordo's kingdom of darkness will have no room in it for your people, or the allies of your people. You will all die - as will anyone else who opposes Morgar's will,"* I said, and gazed at her with the gaze of a dragon. *"Your dream of establishing a kingdom on the surface lands, of soothing the ancient wounds done to your people in the War of the Rift... This will never happen, Queen Druilla. Not in your lifetime, and perhaps not ever. Hear me, Queen Druilla, Black Rose of the Malani, and listen well. I am nearly two thousand years old, and one of the greatest lessons I have learned as an Ancient One, I will share with you now,"* I said, and paused meaningfully. *"Some pains can never be eased, your majesty. Some wounds never heal. You simply learn to live with it."*

Druilla nodded, then smiled wryly. *"I shall remember your words, Eddas Ayar - though I doubt I will be able to heed your advice. The War of the Rift is still fresh in the minds of my people."*

"Tell them to let it go, Queen Druilla. Even to an elf, twelve thousand years is a long time - nearly fifty generations. To the elves of the surface lands, the War of the Rift is merely a sad part of a long history book. In time, it will be the same with you," I replied, and clapped my hand to Durgrim's invisible shoulder. *"Farewell, Queen Druilla, Black Rose of the Malani. I hope we shall not have cause to meet again."*

Druilla nodded. *"Farewell Master Eddas Ayar. It is, perhaps, quite fortunate my grandmother never did get around to poisoning you,"* she replied, then grinned wryly again. *"You've brought more excitement to my court than I've seen in a century."*

A smile lit the corner of my mouth as I cast my spell of returning, carrying Durgrim and Kiriin away with me. The world blurred, and we were gone.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"That which does not kill me makes me stronger."

- *Hyperborean proverb*

"And then what happened?" Parial asked, his eyes gleaming.

I smiled - the boy looked much better for having spent a day in the company of my courtesans, having been rested, scrubbed clean, well fed, and given a clean change of clothes. At the moment, Lyota and Pelia were watching over him - once Lyota had brought him back and told Pelia my instructions, my courtesans had kept him carefully within the boundaries of a circle of protection inside Pelia's small tower and guarded him closely. I smiled as I glanced at the little room Pelia had marked off her circle of protection in - the gloomy little tower chamber had been transformed, to a child's perspective, into a treasure-trove of toys and games and other interesting things, all donated by our children for the prince's amusement during his stay.

Of course, the most difficult thing Pelia and my courtesans had to deal with so far was simply our children's curiosity about the prince. To them, he was something utterly unique - a little boy. They had literally never *seen* anything like him in their lives, and the younger girls were *terribly* fascinated by him - almost as fascinated as they were by Kiriin. But, eventually, all our children had been shooed out of the room, and I was explaining the rest of the story to Parial.

"Well, I took Durgrim back, and we spent a bit in the Hall of the Berserks, treating his wounds. Dwarves have a very tough constitution, but the blade-poisons the Queen's Guard use were beginning to take their toll. I used a healing spell, and fixed him right up. Then, afterwards, he received his reward from Jhumni for helping us, and I brought myself and Kiriin to here with a spell of returning."

"His reward? What reward?" Parial asked, intensely curious.

Kiriin grinned as she sat on my shoulder. "A kiss from Jhumni the Dwarf-maid - it's part of their traditions."

Parial made a face. "A kiss? From a *girl*?"

As Kiriin, Pelia and Lyota giggled, I reached out and tousled Parial's hair with a gloved hand, grinning. "Yes, Parial. Someday, when you're a bit older, you'll understand."

Parial made a face again, then looked to me. "So what happens now? When will you take me home?"

I looked to Pelia, and she nodded. "He's fit as a horse, Eddas - and almost as strong as one," she said, and winked at Parial while he giggled. "Only... Do be careful," she added, looking at me seriously. "Taliad came through yesterday, and he says from what he has heard, the war goes not well at all in the south. The Council of Death has decided to support Cordo, and already half the goblin clans of the eastern continent are massing to join forces with his army."

I swore. "Then I can't quite take the prince home yet - his father may have already lost the war, and we'll need to protect the prince while we think of something else. And we'll need to *move* him, as well. Cordo will eventually search here for him. We need a relatively safe place that Cordo has never been to, and wouldn't dare go to alone."

Pelia nodded. "We should take him to see his grandmother, then."

"Ah! A splendid idea," I replied, nodding in agreement. "The giants of Dhobari village can protect him easily."

"And even more easily if I go with him," Pelia added.

"And me," Lyota said suddenly, then looked to her mother and I. "If... If that's alright, I mean."

I smiled. "Yes, Lyota - it's perfectly alright."

"And me!" Kiriin squeaked. "I wanna go, too! I can help you guard the prince - you've already seen what I can do! Besides, I've never met a giant."

Lyota giggled, and I grinned. "Alright, you can go, too, Kiriin."

Parial shook his head. "Wait... I have a grandmother? I mean... She's still alive?"

I chuckled. "Yes, Parial - and she'll be very happy to see you, I'm quite certain."

"But... But my father! You said he might already have lost the war!"

I nodded. "Yes, Parial. I'll have to go and see what has happened, and determine what needs to be done," I replied, then raised a hand to stifle an outburst from the prince. "I know, I know - you want to come with me. You want to know what's happened with your father and your aunt, and what is going to happen in the future. I want to know, too. For now, however, we need to keep you safe. Alright?"

Parial nodded, though his face showed *enormous* reluctance to agree. "Well... Alright."

"Good," I said, then looked to Pelia. "How soon can you get him to Dohbari?"

"Probably a quarter hour, Eddas. We'll need to pack a few things, then translocate to your tower, since I've never been to their village before. Afterwards, we'll simply walk down the road to their village."

"Just follow the king's road eastwards, Pelia. Take the turning at league marker 44. As giant's feet keep the ruins of the road fairly clear, you really can't miss it," I replied, and stood, summoning my staff to my grip. "Lyota, I've already removed your things from my Hidden Sanctuary and placed them in your quarters, so if there's nothing else..."

"There is something else, Eddas," Pelia replied, and rose to her feet.

My heart skipped a beat at the expression on her face. I knew that for some of my courtesans, it had been thirty years... Had they finally changed their minds? Was it possible that at long last, I might not spend my nights alone? "Yes? What is it?" I asked, trying to keep my voice level.

Pelia reached her arms around me, and hugged me tightly for a long moment. My heart pounded, and I reached up to hug her back...

Then, she let me go, and stepped back. "Be safe, and come back to us, Eddas. We were all very worried when you went off with Lyota on your quest... And we will worry even more until you are safely back with us. We all love you very dearly, you know. Please... Be careful," she said, and smiled.

A platonic hug - that was all. Lyota gazed at me quietly, her face the mask of a skilled *chatto* player, while Kiriin and Parial smiled at me.

I suppressed a sigh, and managed a smile in return. "I shall, Pelia, never fear," I replied, then cast my spell of returning.

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

"The beauty of an elf-maid passes all understanding. Annoyingly, they're well aware of how they look."

- *Vilandian proverb*

"Ho, the gate!" I called, shouting up to the guards upon the wall. I had to call to them - though it was broad daylight, the drawbridge of Steelgate was up.

I had appeared outside Steelgate in the same spot I preferred - far enough away to not draw immediate attention, but close enough to examine the castle before I approached it. It was, coincidentally, the same location I had feigned my death in seventy years ago, and the same location I had appeared in twenty-five years ago when I became Noril's teacher. I am, in truth, a creature of habit - perhaps a failing of mine.

I had examined the castle and the surrounding lands before I approached, my thoughts grim. Gone were the pastoral flocks of sheep of a quarter century ago - the threat of war had driven the shepherds from the fields. The castle itself looked well-prepared for a siege, and I could see archers stationed along the walls, carefully watching the surrounding lands. Still, there were no signs of a siege yet, so it was still possible Noril had not yet lost. Now, I stood before the castle, and called to the guards to let me in. Of course, I could simply have translocated myself inside - but there was hardly any reason to alarm the guards.

"Ho, there, woman!" a guard in an open-faced helmet called back. "Who are you, and what is your business here?"

"I am Dame Raven, Defender of the Realm, come to assist the crown in their hour of need! The prince is safe, I have recovered him from his abductors!" I shouted back, then paused. "And who are *you*, might I ask?!"

The guard's broad grin was easily visible, even from where I stood. "I am Captain Thedrin, my lady, and I command the King's Guard while Lord Tybalt is away with the King! And I swear, my lady, you shall get a far better reception from me than you did the last time we met!" Thedrin shouted back, then turned and shouted to the guards below him. "Lower the drawbridge and raise the gate! Pass the word - Dame Raven is outside the walls!"

A few minutes later, I walked across the drawbridge to the smiling reception of Thedrin, a dozen guards, another dozen halberdiers acting as the Princess' bodyguards, and Princess Dawn herself. I bowed, as was proper, and Dawn nodded regally in return, the broad grin on her face showing she could barely repress the urge to hug me. As I tossed back the hood of my robe, the guards gaped at me - Thedrin, however, gasped. I looked to him. "What is it, Captain?"

Thedrin quickly bowed his head. "Your pardon, my lady, but you... You are incredibly beautiful. Even more so than I remember from our meeting twenty-five years ago. And you have not aged a day."

I smiled, as was polite. For his part, twenty five years had grayed the hair I saw peeking out from beneath the edges of his open-faced helmet, and his face had the usual wrinkles one might expect of a man in their forties. "You are too kind, Thedrin."

"No, my lady, only truthful," he replied, his head still bowed.

"Where is the prince, Dame Raven?" Dawn asked.

"Safe, your highness. For now, I must know what is happening with the campaign."

Dawn nodded, and looked to Thedrin. "Captain, close the gate and raise the drawbridge again. See to it the lookouts remain sharp - Dame Raven's arrival must not distract them from their duties." Thedrin

bowed, then began issuing orders as Dawn held out a hand to me. "Shall we go, Dame Raven?"

With Dawn's bodyguards in tow, we proceeded from the gate, across the courtyard, and into the castle itself. Dawn continued speaking as she walked, her bodyguards opening doors and stepping through them first, as was proper for bodyguards to do. "The news from my brother is not good, Dame Raven. Initially, they did quite well. Mage Arella-Tor was able to thwart Cordo on the battlefield, and my brother managed to destroy nearly all his undead troops and drive the goblins from the field. Thereafter, however, Cordo's army switched to night-attacks, when our troops are blind and theirs are not. If it had not been for your teachings twenty years ago, my brother's entire army might have been destroyed that first night."

"Oh? How so?"

"He built defensive fortifications, as you said the Hyperboreans once did, each night as he camped. Ditches, palisades..."

"Ah," I said, quite pleased that he had remembered my lessons. "Do go on, your highness."

"Well, since then, Arella has been kept busy almost constantly, defending Noril and his army from various shadow-spells cast at night, during the battles. Squads of goblins and hob-goblins who leap from the flickering shadows cast by a campfire. Hideously twisted, shadowy *things* which leap upon our troops and rend them limb from limb..."

I nodded. "Shadow Beasts. They can be slain with a simple cantrip of light, but otherwise are quite dangerous."

"So Arella has apparently discovered. The last letter I received, however, says that the greatest problem is simply Arella's exhaustion. She is having to fend off Cordo *and* the goblin spellcasters each night - and she is only one mage," Dawn said, pausing before the door to her chambers. Her bodyguards opened the door and strode through before her, and as she and I followed, she continued the conversation.

"Swift-wing delivers the reports daily, here in my room. He does not stay long, so I write a report of what is happening here for my brother before Swift-wing arrives. He comes at noon, because the goblins apparently *do* sleep, and they do not attack during the day. His troop strength is waning, and morale is quite low - or so he said yesterday. What shall we tell him?"

"First, that the prince is safe, and being guarded by the giants of Dohbari village. Second... Well, how far away are they?"

"About three day's ride," Dawn replied.

"Or about a week's march," I muttered, stroking my chin with a gloved hand as I considered what to do.

"Will you go to them? I'm certain Swift-wing can take you."

"No. That would alert Cordo that his plans have run afoul of me. At the moment, he thinks he is winning. He's only toying with the king, I think. Word has probably already reached him that the Council of Death has decided to back him, and the forces of at least half the goblin clans are on their way."

"What?!" Dawn yelped, shocked.

I nodded. "It's true. Cordo is simply waiting for his reinforcements to arrive, so he can surround your brother's forces and crush them with ease. He believes he is winning, however, and so long as he continues to think so, he can be led into making a mistake. If he thinks things have gone wrong, however, he'll be more watchful. He may be insane, but he's not stupid. He is still one of the best battle-mages

Hyperborea ever produced."

"Arella-tor cannot hold off both Cordo's efforts and those of his goblin allies forever, Dame Raven. Sooner or later, she will collapse - or perhaps simply be killed."

I nodded. "I know. That she's lasted this long is a true testament to her power and skill as a battle-mage," I replied, then shrugged. "Well, basic strategy shows that when troops are tired, you pull them to the rear. Cordo and the goblins have the edge, both mentally and physically, and they will eventually win if your brother continues to try to hold them off, particularly once the goblins receive reinforcements numbering easily a hundred thousand or more. So, let's have him retreat to the castle."

"When?"

"Now. Immediately. During the day, when most of the enemy are still resting. A forced march to gain some distance, and a steady series of forced marches to get them here ahead of the enemy. This will also serve the dual purpose of pulling Cordo's troops out of position, so his reinforcements cannot join with him as readily. The goblins use Dire-wolves as cavalry, but they are still wolves, not horses. They cannot run as far each day without tiring. With a bit of skill and some luck, your brother can arrive here in three days, probably a day ahead of the enemy, and anywhere from another day to a week ahead of any reinforcements they may have coming."

"But Dame Raven! My brother has over fifty thousand troops! They won't all *fit* in the castle!"

"I know. But while they are coming, in the meantime, you can have the peasants build basic fortifications around the castle for them to use once they arrive. A few hundred *cheval-de-fris* will hold back their wolf-cavalry, and some simple palisades will give his troops a defensive position to fight from. Some food, water, and other supplies will also help refresh them, and restore their morale. And, hopefully, by the time they arrive, I'll have thought of a way to defeat Cordo's army."

"But how should these defenses be arranged? And exactly where?"

"Don't worry, I'll be here helping you - The largest part of the earthworks, I'll probably summon an earth-elemental to do for us. We'll get it sorted out, and have the best defenses we can make in the time we have available."

Dawn nodded, and after sitting herself at her table and dipping her quill in the inkwell, began to write. When she was done, we sat and waited for Swift-wing's arrival.

Finally, the air above Dawn's table shimmered, and Swift-wing appeared, hovering in the air. He looked haggard and worn, but brightened visibly the instant his little black eyes lit on me. "Raven! Raven!" he squawked, the letter he was carrying in his claws fluttering to the table as he dropped it.

"Yes, my old friend, it's me. There's little time, however," I said, and Dawn held out her letter to the king. "Quickly, now - take that back with you. The prince is safe, and the king and all his troops are to fall back to the castle. Now. Immediately."

Swift-wing nodded, fluttering over to Dawn to snatch up her letter in his claws, then muttered his spell of returning and vanished.

I turned to Dawn, and smiled. "Now, your highness, let's get to work."

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

"The message from Dame Raven and my sister brought great joy to my soul. My son was safe,

and our greatest ally had returned to aid us in our darkest hour! Yet, as I looked at how weak Arella had become, and how beaten my warriors had become, I wondered if Dame Raven's assistance had not arrived too late..."

- King Noril, Autobiography, 1729 NCC

"This is what's left of us, Dame Raven," King Noril said as we walked among his troops behind the barricades. "Our morale is virtually gone, and we are utterly worn out."

I nodded. Weeks of constant night-fighting and the last three days of forced marches had taken their toll on the king's army. His men were, one and all, completely exhausted and totally demoralized. When they arrived and saw the earth-works we had prepared as defenses, there was nearly a rout - some in the king's army assumed the earthworks meant the castle was already besieged, and the war was lost. The king himself looked visibly older, and looked as though the campaign had thinned him by about a stone. His fine suit of articulated plate, once polished to a gleaming finish, was now battered, scratched and dull. The visor of his great-helm was up, and I could see his face was drawn, lined and weary - yet, he looked little better than his men.

"Well, once they've some food in them and have had a chance to rest, your majesty, they'll feel considerably better."

Noril nodded. "What of Arella? How is she?"

"Sleeping, your majesty. She'd apparently been using her herbs to keep her going, and give her the strength she needed to carry on against monumental odds. That, unfortunately, has taken a toll on her health. Her heart is badly strained, and she is weak and thin from weeks of ceaseless exertion." It was only my skill at *chatto* which kept my true feelings from my face as I replied to the king. Arella was, in truth, near death. She was not merely a friend, but had once been my lover - and I found I still cared for her deeply. The thought of possibly losing her and Swift-wing, whose life was tied to hers, was heartbreaking. "She is quite ill, your majesty, but she's in the best possible care."

Noril nodded - he'd seen the slow deterioration of his court wizardess on the campaign, but as a mundane with no knowledge of healing other than binding the bloody wounds of battle, he could do nothing. Noril paused, the sunlight gleaming off his plate armor as he gazed down at me. "I saw that woman... That strange, dark-skinned woman you brought to care for her. Who is she?"

I smiled. "That is High Mistress Pelia Cydalion, the White Witch of Iolo Mountain, your majesty. She is the greatest healer in all of Hyperborea."

"It is... It is sometimes difficult to remind myself that there are *humans* in Hyperborea, now," the king said, nodding.

I smiled again. "There are *Hyperboreans* in Hyperborea, your majesty. Thanks to the efforts of your father and myself, the Hyperborean race has arisen like a phoenix from the ashes of the Great War of Devastation. And, like the phoenix, we are born anew, and different from how we once were. Thanks to Cordo, the Hyperborean race has no males - but we are not doomed. The Hyperborean race now survives and prospers on the power of sorcery alone, and our numbers will slowly grow over the years. Yet, despite the changes which have transpired in our race, we remain Hyperboreans, just as the reborn and transformed phoenix remains a phoenix."

"And you say she will bring more of her people here?"

"Yes, your majesty. We of Hyperborea are your allies, and always shall be," I said, and as Noril smiled, I

continued. "The task of feeding and healing your army is simply too great to manage myself, given the limited time we have left to us. Your retreat was expertly and skillfully done, and you've bought us an additional day before Cordo's army gets here - but it is only a day, your majesty. There is far too much to be done for me to accomplish it alone and still have the strength remaining to face Cordo."

"How *will* you deal with Cordo, Dame Raven?"

I shook my head. "I don't know yet. My only plan at the moment is to get your men rested, fed, and ready to man the defenses I have built. Beyond that, I can counter his spells in the battle, but..."

"...but we would be on the defensive," Noril finished for me. "And a war cannot be won on the defensive side of a battlement."

"Correct, your majesty," I replied, and smiled. "You have learned the lessons I taught you well, even as your father did."

Noril started to reply, then turned at the sound of approaching hooves. Commander Tybalt rode up on his armored gray stallion, leading a armored black destrier for the king. "Your horse, my liege."

Noril grinned. "Ah! Melchior!" he called, clapping an armored glove to the armor plates over the horse's neck. The horse nickered in recognition, and the king took a moment to mount, then looked back to me. "I thought I'd lost him. That last day's ride drove him near to death."

"It was the Hyperboreans, your majesty," Tybalt said with a grin. "The ones Lady Pelia brought back. They arrived a few minutes ago, about two dozen of them, and already are spreading out among the horses and men, healing with their sorcery. Good day, Dame Raven," he replied, the last said to me with a smile and a bow from the saddle.

"Good day, Commander."

Noril took the reins in his hand, then held out his free hand to me. "Come, Dame Raven. We'll continue on horseback, where it's a bit easier to see around us."

I gestured negligently, conjuring an invisible steed to my right. The enchantment of Nial's ring was now a part of this body, and required hardly a thought. After having the steed form a side-saddle for me, I mounted easily, and smiled back at the king. "Thank you, your majesty, but I have my own horse. Shall we go? There is still much to be done."

Noril and Tybalt both did a double-take at me, then Noril chuckled. "Yes, my lady."

Chapter Thirty

"The will is everything, the will is all. The Greater Magics cannot be mastered by just anyone who possesses the Talent, even if they do understand the underlying mathematics - the will of a Titan is required. Yet, one must be careful once one has built up the will to master the Greater Magics. If the will is strong enough, the body weak enough and the caster foolish enough, one can overtax the body with sorcery, and die. Like the horse who runs to far and collapses, dying, a mage who is not careful can overtax their flesh, even to their death. This is why a true Master Mage builds the strength of their body, not merely the strength of their will."

- Eddas Ayar, *The Mathematics of Magic*, Chapter 2, Date Unknown, presumed 17th century NCC

"She can see you now," Pelia said, her voice soft in the darkened corridor outside the door to Arella's

room. The night air was chill, and the flickering torches which illuminated the passageways of the castle cast dark and ominous shadows.

"How is she?" I asked, struggling to keep my voice level.

"Very weak, Eddas. Lyota is watching her, at the moment - she is weak enough that she must be constantly watched, so she does not slip away. The herbs she took to give herself the strength she needed have stretched her life thin... Too thin."

"Will she live?" I asked, my voice trembling.

Pelia sighed. "I do not know, Eddas. I have done all that herblore and sorcery can do. Now, we can only wait and see."

It was an effort not to weep. Pelia saw my expression, and hugged me gently.

"Come, Eddas."

I nodded, following Pelia into Arella's chambers, and in a moment, I was beside Arella's bed. Lyota sat beside the bed quietly, watching Arella closely. Pelia nodded silently, and as Lyota relaxed, Pelia took up a chair next to her, and turned her gaze to Arella.

The first thing that struck me was how dreadfully *thin* Arella had become. As she lay there in her bed, the soft blankets covering all but her arms, shoulders and head, I could see that she had lost at least a stone, probably closer to two stone in weight. She looked drawn and pale, and my heart ached as I gazed upon her. Swift-wing sat on the large pillow that lay beneath her head, asleep. As her familiar, his life was linked to hers - and he looked haggard, thin, and near death. I knelt beside the bed, and as I took Arella's thin, frail hand into my ebon-gloved hands, she opened her eyes.

"Raven..." Arella whispered, and smiled weakly.

"Yes, Arella. It's me," I replied, and smiled back at her, wiping away my tears with my free hand.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"It's alright," I replied quietly, squeezing her hand. "You did what you had to do, to protect the king."

"No... Not for that..."

"What, then?"

Arella did not reply, but instead closed her eyes, and fell silent. For a long moment, I thought she would simply slip away while I knelt by her side, holding her hand.

Then, slowly, Swift-wing opened a beady black eye, and looked at me. "She can't say it, you know." he croaked, his voice weak. "She simply can't. And she's fallen asleep again, anyway."

"Can't say what, my friend?"

"She left you forty years ago, because you did not age and she did... She knew it was wrong. You forgave her, and gave her the secret to eternal youth. She swore to you she would never leave you again... But she did. She saw you twenty years ago, after your change... And she feared you. To me, your change is nothing. All you mammals look very much alike, to me. But I know her mind... And to her, the change was drastic, startling... Awe-inspiring... And fearsome."

I sighed. This, I already knew.

Swift-wing gazed at me quietly for a long moment before he spoke again. "She learned your lessons well, Raven. She was power... Raw power. I've never seen the like from her since the War of the Twins - and even then, she was not like this. The slightest flicker of shadow-magic was met with bolts of lightning. I think she killed three of the goblin wizards doing that... Hard to tell. I scouted regularly, but as I said - you mammals all look much alike to me. And yet, there was more. Cordo's best spells were matched, countered, thwarted... Days on end, my mistress stayed awake, meditating and sipping at the herbal teas she made to remain awake and alert, and to give her the strength she needed to counter the Tool of a God... But to do all of this, she drew from the very well of her life... And now the waters of that well are low."

I simply sighed, the tears streaming from my eyes. There was nothing I could say.

"But this is what she is sorry for, Raven. She is sorry she left you the second time. Of all the wounds to her soul, I think that is the deepest... And it aches all the more for knowing that you forgive her for that, as well."

"I do, my friend... I do," I replied, sobbing quietly.

"Our time is short," Swift-wing said softly. "I can feel it. Her end nears - and with the passing of her life, so ends mine. But I am not like her, Raven. I have no regrets. I was nothing before the touch of her hand - a mere raven chick she found that had fallen out of its nest on a rooftop and landed in the gutter. I was nothing - too young to even fly, I could hardly flutter. By nightfall, I would have been dead. She took me in, she fed me, and eventually, she cast the spell that made me her familiar. For eighty years, I have served her as well as I could. And I have no regrets. I have met giants and dragons. I have fought a manticore with my mistress. I have watched the Hyperborean people rise anew from the ruins of their civilization. But of all this, of all the things I have done... I am most proud to have met you, and called you friend."

"And I, you, my little friend," I replied, stroking his feathered head softly. Swift-wing made no reply, instead slowly closing his eyes, as though falling asleep.

I looked to Pelia. "There must be *something* we can do!"

Pelia simply gazed back silently, her face full of sadness.

"Sing, Master Eddas," Lyota said suddenly.

"Wh-what?" I asked, blinking in surprise.

"Sing to her. Sing from your heart, as you did for your friend, Dragonslayer."

"But... But I have no song to sing!"

"Open your heart, Father. I can see the power within you, bursting, ready to be released... Open your heart, Father, and sing."

I paused for a moment, then nodded. I *had* brought Dragonslayer back with his song. Perhaps... If I could call upon the same power...

It was difficult, at first. I simply gazed down at Arella, and stroked her hand quietly - if there was a song within me, it did not come to my lips easily. After a long moment, however, I began to hum softly.

At first, it was simply tuneless - soft sounds one might sing to a babe as one laid them in bed. I reached up, and stroked her hair with my gloved fingers. And slowly, a melody emerged.

And as I hummed the soft melody which had come to me, gazing down at my dearest friend and one-time lover... My lips parted, and I began to sing.

Perhaps, on another world, in another life,

Perhaps, my friend, you would have been my wife.

Perhaps, in a dream, in a wish,

In a hope,

Perhaps, in a time long gone.

My heart belongs to another,

And this, you know.

She is long gone,

And this, you know.

Yet, on another world, in another life...

Perhaps, my friend. Perhaps.

The song came out in my language, that of the Hyperboreans. I knew it meant nothing to her, even if she could hear it. To her ears, it would simply be nonsense syllables. And yet, Arella smiled in her sleep...

And then, I felt it. The knot of *mana* that maintained this body, the same power which I had accepted and which had merged with my own Talent...

There was a deep thrumming from within me, and I felt the *mana* flow...

...and slowly, Arella opened her eyes, and smiled at me.

Hale and whole, Arella sat up in her bed, drew me into her arms, and hugged me tight. Swift-wing, his feathers smooth and gleaming with renewed health, gazed at me with a beady black eye, and cackled in amusement.

"Eddas!" Pelia gasped, astounded. "That was... Incredible!"

"Such is the power of the Raven of Yorindar, Mother," Lyota said quietly. "Such is the power of the father of our race."

I knew not what to say. All I could do was hug Arella tightly, and weep with both inestimable joy, and heartbreaking sorrow.

Chapter Thirty-One

"The most difficult part of a battle does not come once the ranks clash. The most difficult part of a battle is enduring the time between the first sighting of the enemy, and the first call of the bugle to advance."

- *Hyperborean proverb*

"They look ready," Arella said as she walked with me along the battlements of the castle walls. Her blue dress, a pale, pale blue like the morning sky above us, looked lovely on her, and set off the copper red of her hair wonderfully. Noril walked beside us in his battered suit of articulated plate, his helmet tucked under an arm, the sunlight gleaming off his armor. Below us, Noril's men were behind the ramparts we'd built, ready and waiting. They, like the king, had been healed, fed and rested - and their morale was considerably better, now. It seemed likely they would be able to hold off the first rush of the enemy, when Cordo's forces arrived later today. Pelia and the rest had already left, their work complete. The rest was up to me.

"Aye, they do," Swift-wing agreed, fluffing his feathers as he sat on Arella's shoulder. Swift-wing, like his mistress, had been restored to the peak of health - and his ebon feathers glistened in the sunlight with flickers of purple. "But will they be able to hold them off? Can we win?"

The king shook his head. "A war cannot be won from the defensive side of a battlement, little friend - or so my teacher once taught me, long ago," Noril replied, and smiled at me. "If we allow them to lay siege, they will eventually gain reinforcements, establish supply lines, and simply starve us out - assuming they don't tunnel beneath the walls, or destroy us with sorcery before then."

I nodded in agreement. "Just so, your majesty. And Cordo knows this, of course - he has to. He was and is one of the best battle-mages the Dyclonic Circle ever produced. He has to know that once he lays siege to this castle, his victory is nearly assured."

"So what do you intend to do?" Arella asked, touching my arm to stop me in my stroll.

I turned to Arella, a slight smile lighting my features. "I'll let them lay siege, of course."

"Whaaat?!" Swift-wing squawked, incredulous. "But you just said-"

"I know. And I also know how to defeat Cordo, and scatter his army. But I will not speak of it aloud. It is obvious to me that the conflict between Morgar and Yorindar is coming to its climax. It is certain that the attentions of *both* gods are attuned to this castle - and we have learned from past experience that Morgar *does* listen to our words, particularly mine, and responds. Yes, I have a plan for dealing with Cordo and his army. And Cordo certainly knows I have a plan, and will do his best to be ready for anything. But I will not risk speaking of it aloud, having Morgar warn Cordo of my plans, and having everything come to naught."

"You could conjure your sanctuary, perhaps?" Arella asked, but I shook my head.

"No. Not even in my Hidden Sanctuary. I will take *no* risks. Morgar speaks to Cordo nightly in his dreams, and expends vast amounts of power directly communicating with him whenever necessary. Yorindar has barely spoken to me five times in seventy years, preferring to hoard his energies and use them in other ways, through other individuals. Yet, what he has told me and what I have learned of myself is enough. I know how it can be done. Now, all that remains is to see if I can do it."

Noril remained silent, thinking. Finally, he nodded. "I trust you, Dame Raven. You are a Defender of the Realm, by my father's hand - and he once told me he trusted you more than he trusted his own heart. If you say you have a plan but cannot speak of it, I will not pry," he replied, then looked up, suddenly, his gaze on the horizon. "There. They come."

I turned to look, and nodded. A low dust cloud hung on the horizon, the sign of Cordo's swiftly advancing goblin-horde. "They are twenty leagues away, your highness, give or take a few leagues. They

will, most likely, be here within the next two hours. Keep your men safely behind the battlements, your majesty, and do not attack. Allow Cordo to lay siege undisturbed, for now. You will know when the time has come for you to attack."

Noril nodded, turning his gaze to Arella and I. "Arella, guard my sister well. Dame Raven, I am trusting in you to support my troops with your sorcery. As for me, I go now to my horse. Farewell." And with that, Noril slipped his helmet upon his head, then turned and walked away, shouting his first orders to his men.

Arella and I bowed to the king as he turned and strode away, heading to the stairs that led down from the battlements. Arella then looked to me. "The king wishes me to protect Princess Dawn, but... Are you certain you can manage? Alone?"

I smiled slightly. "In truth, no, I am not. Should Cordo anticipate my plan..." I replied, then shook my head. "Nevermind. Obey the king. Protect Dawn as best you can. Should I fail and the castle fall, take her away to my tower, and from there, ask the giants to lead you to Pelia's tower on Iolo Mountain. Even should all be lost, with the prince and his aunt in safe hands, there is still a chance that the bright future of Yorindar's prophecy may still yet come about."

"Yes, about the same chance as a snowball in hell," Swift-wing muttered, and Arella smiled wryly. Arella hugged me wordlessly, then turned, heading for the stairs.

I turned my gaze to the low cloud of dust on the northern horizon, leaning against a nearby merlon and waiting. There were no preparations I had to make, nothing I needed to do, other than simply wait. If I was correct in my understanding of the changes within myself, then Cordo would be defeated before noon. If I was wrong...

I drove that thought from my mind with an effort of will, and returned my gaze to the north.

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

"Many brave words are shouted from the safety of a parapet that would never be spoken by those standing in the front ranks - yet, often, those very words are what those in the front ranks need to hear."

- Hyperborean proverb

"Ho, the castle!" Cordo called, his voice rolling across the half league of distance between himself and the castle walls - apparently, he was using the spell of Voice Amplification, a common battle-spell that eased communication in war. *"Surrender now, and I promise that your deaths will be swift, and moderately painless!"* Cordo shouted, and there was a rippling cackle of derision from the fifty thousand or so goblin-kin he had at his back.

I had expected the goblins and hob-goblins to charge the defenses as soon as they arrived, but apparently Cordo had better control over his troops than that - or, at least, the leaders of the goblin and hobgoblin warriors did. Instead, they simply encircled the castle, just beyond bowshot, and while their front ranks kept up an armed watch, their rear ranks began to make camp. It was difficult to tell from this distance, but judging by the slight disarray in their lines, they were quite tired from the forced march, themselves. Cordo was no fool - he would give his troops a chance to rest before he attacked. And, almost certainly, he would attack at night again, when his troops would have the advantage. The day, apparently, he intended to fill by alternately threatening the defenders, and blasting the castle and the earthworks around it with sorcery - certainly, that's what I would be doing in his position, and I had to assume that madness had not dimmed his skills as a battle-mage. Unfortunately for Cordo, there was little

else he could do, since I was present to counter him, and with thirty thousand defenders, he would have to wait for his reinforcements to arrive before he stood a serious chance of taking the castle at all.

The battle-magic of the Dyclonic circle was, perhaps, the best in all Hyperborea. If I were not here, Cordo could level the castle with the Spell of Earthquake, or even conjure a greater demon to kill all who opposed him. But, all the Greater Magics had spells that countered them. The Spell of Earthquake was easily nullified by a master battle-mage, and the most powerful demon he could summon would probably be dismissed in a matter of heartbeats by me. My simple presence meant that he could not win that easily - he would have to lay siege. And the sorcery of the goblin-mages who accompanied him was a mere trifle to a master battle-mage - I doubted they'd even try anything until they could at least augment the power of their sorcery with the dark of night.

"Give up, you cannot win!" Cordo shouted again, his army jeering the defenders. *"I have reinforcements numbering three hundred thousand on the way! You cannot possibly win!"*

Once, I might have activated the ring which sat on the middle finger of my right hand, and shouted back to him. Now, I no longer needed to. The knot of mana which maintained this body had absorbed and echoed that enchantment, and now that I had joined that to my own *talent*, it was a part of me. I took a deep breath, and shouted back down to him from the castle walls, my voice amplified to the level of a thunderclap. *"We shall not surrender - however, I offer you all a chance to flee now with your lives, while you still can!"* It was a weak reply, and I knew it as I said it - and the jeering laughter of the goblins only confirmed it. Yet, honor demanded I at least make the offer.

"Ah, Eddas, it's good to speak with you again!" Cordo roared back. *"It is only sad that this shall be the last time we meet, old friend, for today is the day you will die!"*

"Hardly, Cordo! Your own madness prevents you from seeing the truth - and that shall be your undoing, whether you win or lose this day!"

Cordo's reply was simply a laugh.

At last, using the Spell of Farsight, I spotted him among the enemy. He was, in truth, a mirror to me - a warped and twisted opposite. We both wore robes of black, but there, the resemblance ended. Just as the body I was trapped in was eerily, terrifyingly beautiful, his was hideously, horrifyingly ugly. His olive skin had the appearance of melted wax, and was a raw and red fusion with the bone and muscle, beneath. His beard, what there was of it, was in patches here and there, and the odd tufts of hair were truly gruesome. His steel skullcap, fused with the flesh and bone beneath, gleamed from within the hood of his robe, pulled up to shade him from the heat of the sun. His staff was fused to his left hand, and gleams of silver and gold upon the fused fingers of his flipper-like right hand showed his rings had survived, buried amidst the melted flesh. He was grinning up at the castle, much as he grinned at me in my tower twenty years ago - his teeth and eyes were still perfect beneath his melted, warped visage, and that still somehow made him all the more horrifying. He had not changed. In twenty years, he had not changed one iota. He, like me, would remain as he was, forever.

Forever.

Did he know? Did he truly comprehend? Had he, as I, accepted this change, and allowed the power which maintained his own form to merge with his own *talent*? Did he truly comprehend and accept what had happened to him, as I now did?

I did not know.

If he had, then all was truly lost. If his mind was powerful enough to accept what had happened, allow

his *talent* to merge with the energies that maintained him... Then in truth, he was more powerful than I, for I could not possibly accept a body like his as my own. The will was everything, the will was all... And if his will was that strong, I could not possibly defeat him. He would simply counter my plan the moment it began, and all would come to naught - and then, once his reinforcements arrived, he would swarm the defenses and win the war.

I had to know.

"No, Cordo! You simply do not understand! You, like me, are as you were twenty years ago! You shall be this way twenty years from now, a century from now, a millennium from now! You shall remain like this until the end of time, Cordo! Is that the reward your god has promised you? An eternal life as a horror?"

Cordo laughed again. *"Pitiful fool! Once you are gone, I shall have an eternity to discover how to alter this body in any way I wish! It is nothing!"* he shot back, chuckling derisively. *"You are merely delaying the inevitable, Eddas Ayar! Surrender now, while I am still feeling merciful! You cannot possibly win!"*

I gazed down at him, a man who was once my friend, but now was my enemy. Morgar had not told him the truth, and he had not discerned it himself. Part of me wanted to rejoice - but another part of me simply wanted to weep at the tragedy and the horror of it all, and the horror that was yet to come.

"No, Cordo! It is over! Your dreams have ended, as of now! This war is ended, as of now! And more, the war between Yorindar and Morgar ends, here and now!"

"And what will you do, fool?! I can counter any battle spell you try, and you know it! You're too distant to threaten my troops with lightning or fire, and cannot possibly use any of the Greater Magics against them so long as I am here to counter you! How can you possibly win?!" Cordo shouted, sneering.

"With a song!" I shouted back.

Cordo sputtered, and burst into laughter. In a few moments, all the goblin-kin at his back were roaring with laughter along with him. Before their cackling could affect Noril's troops, I began. Raising my staff to rap out the rhythm on the parapet, I lifted my voice, and sang.

From the forest deep and dark and green,

Stepped the one and true and rightful King,

At his side was the brave and noble Witch,

At his heels was the horrid Raven.

So began the Long March, the Long March, the Long March,

Gathering the armies of the Dark and the Light,

For the Long March, the Long March, the Long March,

Even the dead would rise up and fight,

On the Long March!

The song was one all of Noril's men knew - even after seventy years, it was still popular among the

soldiers of Larinia. By the time I began the second verse, the men on the parapet beside me had joined in the song. By the time I began the third verse, all of Noril's men were singing along with me. Soon, all the lands rang with the song of brave King Darian, leader of the Army of Light, the noble Witch Arella-Tor, and the horrid Raven who followed them, bringing the Army of Darkness with her...

And then, I felt it again. The knot of *mana* that maintained this body, the same power which I had accepted and which had merged with my own talent, thrumming inside me with a vast flow of *mana* -energy...

And the laughter of Cordo and his army was instantly turned to shouts of surprise and screams of pain as the earth beneath their feet burst asunder.

I had buried thirty thousand human skeletons beneath these once-quiet fields, the remains of the Army of Darkness. Atop them were fifty thousand more skeletons of horses, dogs, pigs, birds, squirrels, and countless other animals who had also become a part of my army. As one, they rose from the ground, their weapons gleaming, seven decades of decay to their bones and equipment repaired by the power that flowed through me...

And as one, they fell upon Cordo's army, and began killing.

Cordo's ranks recoiled, and I saw him casting blasts of lightning and fire to clear away the undead that tried to cut him down. Unfortunately for him, the same blasts killed many goblins who were near him - and in a heartbeat, they rose and joined the ranks of undead, and began killing their fellows.

Seeing what was happening, Noril drew his sword, and raised it above his head. *"Sound the attack!"* With a throaty roar, his men rose from behind the ramparts, and charged.

I could feel the power flowing freely, now. Though the singing had stopped, the rhythm of the music was kept - drums had begun to play, a thunder of drums... I looked, and saw my old musicians standing near the line of battle, mounted atop their skeletal horses, once again playing their instruments ceaselessly, tirelessly...

I whispered my orders to my revived army. Cordo and his goblin commanders could only see what was immediately around them, and could only give orders through screaming over the din of battle. I, standing on the parapet of the castle walls, could see the entire field of battle, and gave all my troops orders by a much simpler expedient - I simply spoke. A rally here, dispersed. A thrust there, countered. The grassy fields grew slick with blood, and the corpses of each side lay still only a moment before rising again, obeying my whispered commands... And the power flowed, my army grew, and my musicians played on... And on...

And on...

My mind began to drift. My lips moved almost of their own volition, giving the orders to block off an attempted retreat. Cordo, surrounded, exhausted from the exertion of ceaseless spellcasting, used his own ring of flight and tried to escape over the heads of my troops. A flock of skeletal birds brought him down, far behind the ranks of the goblins.

I could hear Lyota's voice, speaking quietly out of my memory... *"You sang from your heart, your soul... That great knot of mana, there... That knot which maintains this body as it is... Well, it responded.... It's more than simply a knot of mana-energy forged in the heart of a mana-storm, as you once thought. I think that it's part of that artifact you told me of years ago, when I was younger - the Skull of Hyarlanoth. I think the enchantment which first bound you to this body is a part of it - and you retain some of the powers of that artifact, because of it. And more..."*

And as I whispered the commands to direct my forces, blocking off the enemy's retreat, encircling them, annihilating them...

I began to weep.

On this day, with this very battle, I knew I would give hope to the future. Yet, with this moment, I knew that my own hope was gone. As I had realized in that dark cell Prince Parial had been held in, deep beneath the earth on the Sunless Sea... I knew that my existence was not subject to change. My hope, my dream of restoring my old form and perhaps once again having Dyarzi by my side, would never come true.

Perhaps Morgar had forced Yorindar's hand. Perhaps, in that vast *chatto* game these two gods played, Yorindar had been forced to abandon one plan, and go with another to assure victory. Or, perhaps, he had simply lied to me, to get me to keep on living, keep on striving to fulfill his plans...

I did not know.

But it no longer mattered.

By noon, the last of the goblins had fallen, and the vast majority of my troops stood silent, awaiting my next orders. My musicians played on, but there was no longer anyone left to fight.

While Noril's men cheered and celebrated their victory, I ordered the goblins and hob-goblins who now served me to dig their own graves, evenly spaced around the castle, and climb in. Nearly three thousand of Noril's warriors had died in the battle, and unwittingly joined my own forces. Those, I simply let go. I began designating groups of the older undead to help bury the goblin-kin, gazing at my forces from my vantage point high on the wall of Steelgate...

...and noticed that a small knot of skeletons were still fighting something. Again and again their swords rose and fell. Again and again, blood flew. Yet, they did not stop.

At a thought, I stepped off the parapet, floating down to the ground beyond the moat with the power of my ring of flight. I strode through Noril's cheering troops, heedless of those who tried to stop me, to hug me, to thank me...

Finally, Noril himself rode up next to me, and dismounted, grabbing me by the shoulders. "Dame Raven... What's wrong?! Where are you going?!"

"Keep your men back, your majesty," I replied, and shook off his gauntleted hands. "For the sake of your lives... And perhaps your very sanity... Keep your men back."

"As you wish, my lady," Noril replied, and as I strode away, he mounted his horse again, and began shouting to his men.

It took several minutes to walk through the ranks of dry bone which were the soldiers of my army... But, eventually, I reached the spot where the war, apparently, still continued.

And there, a dozen of my skeleton warriors were occupied, methodically hacking at a pile of bloody flesh that constantly writhed and squirmed back together.

I felt the gorge rise in my throat as I gazed at what remained of a man I once called 'friend'.

There was no real organization to Cordo's body any longer. He was, in truth, merely a pile of writhing, bloody flesh. A mound of slithering gore my warriors had been slashing and chopping at for nearly an

hour. A heap of shredded organs, shattered bones and sliced tissue that twisted, squirmed and wriggled together, constantly being hacked apart again by the swords of my warriors. Only his staff remained whole, invulnerable to the relentless, remorseless attack. It surfaced briefly in the pile, lifted by a bit of shattered bones fused to the wood of his staff... Fused, broken, twisted bones that once were an arm and hand raising the staff into the air in a futile attempt to ward off the blows... Then it sank again, disappearing beneath the gore.

"Stop," I whispered, and my warriors paused, their white bones painted red by the ceaseless spray of blood they had brought with their relentless assault.

A mouth formed, briefly surfacing in the pile of gore. It was little more than a broken jawbone, shattered teeth, shredded lips and tongue, and the fractured and bloody bones from the superior maxillae.

"*Mercy...*" the mouth whispered, then sank beneath the surface again. A single eye gazed at me unblinkingly.

And, gradually, the squirming slowed, and stopped. After a long moment, the heap of flesh that was Cordo simply sat there, pulsing... Alive...

For a long moment, I stood there, gazing at the bloody pile of flesh. It might take days for Cordo's body to repair this - if it ever did. Yet, as I watched, I realized he was not healing, nor was he regenerating. Perhaps the damage was too great, the relentless chopping and dicing of his flesh too much...

'Or, perhaps, he has now attained his true form,' I realized, my mind reeling.

Morgar was, today, a god of Chaos and Death. And Chaos, itself, was a total lack of order.

And Morgar was insane.

As I gazed at the squirming, bloody heap of flesh, I realized that to Morgar, an insane deity, Cordo now was a perfect avatar, a perfect tool. He would never heal this. This, in truth, was how Morgar had intended him to be. Only Cordo's titanic will had prevented his body from being reduced to this state by the force of the *mana*-storm. Now, Morgar's original intent had come true.

"Now do you understand, Cordo?" I replied, my voice barely more than a whisper of horror. "They don't intend it to end here... They intend for us to battle for all eternity, until one or the other of us is the final victor. Me, trapped in this form, and you in that... Forever. Yorindar's dream is a golden kingdom, where I will be nothing more than a footnote in history. Morgar's dream is a Kingdom of Darkness, an empire of terror and chaos... Ruled by you, a living horror. All this... Everything we have done... Everyone who has died... The death of our civilization in the Great War of Destruction... Everything... I thought it was a vast *chatto* game between the two of them, with some gods on Yorindar's side, and perhaps even others on Morgar's. It was not, my old friend..."

"They were simply setting up the board," Cordo replied, his voice a series of bubbling burbles and plops from within his body. *"The real game has yet to begin."*

"Exactly," I whispered, and felt a chill as the word fell from my lips.

I bowed my head, and sobbed.

"He whispers to me, now, Eddas... Just as Yorindar spoke through you a moment ago, Morgar whispers to me now... I am perfect, he says... My form, my mind... So close to his reality, his truth, he can now whisper to me freely... A part of me feels joy, Eddas... Joy beyond measure, at being so close to my god..." Cordo bubbled, a mouth rising on a tentacle of twisted, writhing gobbets of flesh

and broken bone. The eye which had gazed at me lifted also, held aloft by a similar grotesquerie of flesh. *"And yet... Part of me... Just... Wants... To... Scream."*

And for several moments, he did.

Finally, Cordo fell silent. Eventually, my own weeping fell to silence, as well. I lifted my head, my cheeks damp with tears, and gazed at Cordo.

"Your army here is defeated - but you still have reinforcements coming."

"No... They are dead... Morgar whispers to me, Eddas... He is happy... Ecstatic... He speaks freely... He speaks of things which have happened, and things which have not yet happened, but will... He is mad, even as I am... Even as you said we both were... Yorindar's plan has come together, as Morgar knew it would... The armies of the elves and dwarves joined forces, and crushed my reinforcements two days ago... You are an Elf Friend, and a Dwarf Friend... And for the first time in history... The dwarves and elves have put aside their ancient animosities, to come to the aid of a common friend... You... They were guided by their gods, allied with yours... Just as the goblins were guided by their gods, allied with mine... Victory is yours, this day, and the game board is set... If we choose, Eddas, then the real battle... If we choose... The real battle is in perhaps another millennium or two... After the lines have been clearly drawn for all the races of our world... The lines between Light and Dark... Chaos and Order... You and me... If we choose..."

I nodded in understanding, my mind numb with the implications of it.

"It will be a different world, Eddas... When that final conflict between us comes... A world of techno-magic... Dwarven science... Elven sorcery... The power of steam... Machines that fly... And all the while... The lines being drawn between us... The kingdoms... The empires... Each taking sides... For the final battle..."

For a long moment, we stared at each other in silence. Around us, the world trembled. It was like an earthquake, but more subtle... More terrifying... And utterly silent.

*"Can you feel it, Eddas...? It is the Arc of Time... It is paradox... Event must always follow cause... And yet, I speak of events before the cause... Not guessing... Not prophecy, that may or may not come true... But *Events*... And the Arc of Time trembles... Perhaps... Perhaps it will crack... If I but speak more..."*

Finally, I found my voice again, somehow - and I knew what I had to say. Somehow, I had the feeling that these were the words I had been born to say, almost two thousand years ago. All my existence had been building up to this moment. I took a deep breath, and looked to what remained of a man I once called my friend.

"Break your staff."

Cordo paused, his eye gazing at me unblinkingly. *"What?"*

"Do not destroy the world to end the horror of your existence, my old friend. Break your staff."

"Fool! That will do nothing! The blast will not harm me, such is the nature of the enchantment!" Cordo spat, his staff lifting from within his body on another gory tentacle of bone and flesh. *"We are doomed, fool! You are doomed to spend the rest of eternity like that, and I am doomed to spend the rest of eternity... LIKE THIS!"*

"No, Cordo. Your staff fused with your flesh, twenty years ago. It is a part of your body, and your body is a part of it. Break it - and you will be consumed in its detonation. Your soul is still tied to your animuary, and I myself sealed your tomb eternally. Break your staff. End your misery, and return to the Dreamless Sleep."

"You mean..."

I smiled slightly. "Yes, my old friend. They made a mistake. The game can be ended before it even begins. As you said... We choose. And we do not have to choose life."

Cordo was silent for a long moment before he spoke again. When he finally did, his voice was soft, trembling. *"Will you stay with me?"*

"Yes. And I hope and pray that the blast kills me, as well. Perhaps then, I will finally see my beloved Dyarzi, in the afterlife..."

"While I sleep eternally in my tomb..." Cordo replied, then his voice took on a horrid hiss of madness. *"No! Either way, I die, you die, but you still win! Even if I shatter the Arc of Time and destroy the world, you still win! No, Eddas Ayar! You shall NOT die and enjoy a pleasant afterlife! You shall SUFFER! Just once, just ONCE, Eddas Ayar, I WILL WIN! I have never beaten you at anything! You beat me at chatto every time we played, you beat me in love by finding the woman of your dreams while I found no one, and now you have beaten me in war, twice, both now and twenty years ago! Just once, Eddas Ayar, JUST ONCE, I WILL WIN!"*

The strike of the spell of the Elemental Blast of Air caught me off-guard, and tossed me a dozen paces to slam into the earth, stunned. A heartbeat later, there was a flash and a thunderous detonation.

Chapter Thirty-Three

"How can one conceive of tens of thousands of undead rising from the ground at a gesture and yet not see the true heart of their summoner? Such is the true nature of the Ancient One - a cold, emotionless thing of the grave, twisted to Yorindar's will to serve the needs of prophecy. What matters it that the blasted wastelands of Hyperborea are populated by giants, dragons, fell beasts and hideous monsters that can warp one's sanity and steal one's life with a single glance? That the Ancient One can be found there should be enough of a shadow over those foul wastelands for anyone."

- Lord Caladis, *The Eddasine Chronicles*, 1817 NCC

I knew not where I was, save that I was in a smooth, featureless room of white, interspersed with blue. Golden light, diffuse and sourceless, filled the room. A low table sat in the center of the room, and at the table, two familiar figures sat, gazing at a *chatto*-board which lay between them. The first hand had been dealt, and the pawns were in position. Yet, as I gazed at the board, it seemed... So much more. More than merely a two-dimensional thing, it seemed to stretch into four dimensions...

"Game and Match," the Owl said, gazing at the board between them with his large, golden eyes.

"Bah," the wolf replied, gazing at the board with his own golden eyes. *"That's hardly fair. My king self-destructed."*

"Do you say I cheat?"

The wolf simply growled. Softly, in the background, I began to hear the faint sounds of martial drums.

"You chose his father, and his father before him. You knew what kind of man the grandfather would raise, and what kind of man the father would raise. You touched his mind with Chaos, to spark within him the madness you desired. You thought that madness would rob him of his free will. As I told you before we began, that is impossible. The very structure of the universe prevents that, and your king was doomed to self-destruct before you could make your first move - if he had not, the Arc of Time would have shattered, and all the games would come to an end. I say again, do you say I cheat?"

"No, I do not. I say it's damnably unfortunate that my king failed me, and I'll toss his soul in hell for all eternity to suffer for failing me, but I hardly say you cheat."

"Such is your right. He chose to follow you."

"Aye."

"And I say again - Game and Match."

The wolf nodded. *"Game and Match, Yorindar,"* the wolf replied, then grinned wickedly. *"You may have won this game, but the larger game goes on. You will not be so lucky with your next opponent, I think."*

"Perhaps I will, perhaps I will not. We shall see," the owl replied, bowing his head. Gradually, the drums grew louder... And louder...

The wolf rose, becoming a shapeless, dark mass of pure chaos that hovered above the table as the game board faded into nothingness. *"I would bid you farewell, but I hardly hope that you fare well,"* Morgar called, then faded from view.

The owl looked to me, his eyes meeting mine. He said nothing to me, yet I understood. The drums grew louder still, and as the light of the strange room flared to blinding brilliance, the face of the owl faded into the skeletal visage of one of my undead warriors, gazing down at me. The room was gone, and I realized I was staring at the blue of the sky, and the white of the clouds above. The golden light was the noonday sun, and I blinked, struggling to rise to my feet. The drums were those of my own musicians, still playing, still awaiting their next orders.

"Help me up," I whispered, and a dozen bony hands reached down to comply.

I stood gazing at the small crater in the ground for many long moments - all that remained of Cordo. He had cast me far enough away that I would survive, but only just.

I gazed down at myself. My robe was in tatters, my nose and ears were bloodied, and I was battered and bruised from the blast. Still, I was healing rapidly. The flow of blood from my nose and ears had stopped before I awoke, and they were already healed. As I gazed down at my skin beneath the tatters of my robe, I could see the bruises fading to green already. My ears still rang from the blast, but even as I noticed it, the ringing faded into silence, and was gone. The knot of mana which maintained this body still was doing its work, and a detonation that should have killed me instantly had done little more than bloody my face and tear my robe.

Dazedly, I realized I had nothing to clean my face. Numbly, I took a shred of my tattered robe, and wiped the blood from my face before it could dry.

I spent a moment repairing my robe with a spell of repairing, then cleaned it with a cantrip as an afterthought. My mind was still numb, and I gave my orders to my troops without really thinking about it.

"Let those of you who were once my bodyguards and musicians gather by my side," I whispered. "The rest, resume the burials, as ordered." And shortly, the burials resumed, and a thousand familiar skeletons stood by my side - five hundred musicians, and the rest warriors. Quietly, I gave orders that all the others should re-bury themselves, save the ones by my side. I was not ready to part with them, yet. Oddly, I found having my musicians back only made me remember how much I had missed them over the decades I had spent in silent loneliness in my tower.

Distantly, I realized I was in shock. The horror of what had happened to Cordo, and the truth of it all... My mind simply could not encompass it yet.

I had no idea how long Tybalt stood there by my side. It was an age before I noticed him, sitting astride his horse. At a whispered word, my musicians finally fell silent.

Tybalt gazed down at me, his face a mask. "So... You *were* her."

I stared at him numbly for a long moment, then finally remembered our conversation of twenty years ago. "Yes, Tybalt. I was her."

"Our prophecies said that Yorindar would send three ravens... One a mad thing, one a sad and lonely thing, and one a happy thing. You were the second, and the third. And now, I see that you were also the first."

"Yes, Tybalt."

"Why, Dame Raven?"

"Because the soldiers of Dorian's army were still Darian's people, and he did not want them to die. The only way to save their lives was to make them so afraid they would run in fear, rather than fight. And after, the hatred and fear I had generated with the Army of Darkness had to be buried with that army. Darian had to ascend to the throne as a redeemer, a savior... Not as a horror."

"So it was all a lie, intended to protect the king."

"Yes, Tybalt."

Tybalt was silent, gazing at me. In his eyes, I could see deep sadness. "What? What is it?"

"I loved you once, Dame Raven. Once, twenty years ago, I considered leaving my post, and riding off into the wilds of Hyperborea to find you. I could see the sadness in your eyes. I wanted to take you into my arms, comfort you... Then, when you came back at the death of the queen, just as prophecy foretold... You were different. The sadness was gone. And yet..."

"And yet?"

"And yet, I loved you still. I think I always will," he replied, and wheeled his horse about, riding back to the castle without a further word.

I simply stared after Tybalt's retreating form. I knew not what to say.

The last of my warriors whispered that they were secure in their graves - even the animal warriors. "Rest," I whispered, and let them go. Only the thousand I had set aside remained. Numbly, I summoned an invisible steed with a gesture, and mounted.

"Dame Raven! Where are you going?!"

I glanced over my shoulder. It was the king, riding out to meet me. Perhaps to stop me from leaving, perhaps to ask a question... I did not know. And I simply did not care. "Join hands, all of you," I whispered, and reached out to take the skeletal hand of the musician nearest me.

"Dame Raven!" the king shouted, but it was too late. I cast my spell of returning, and the world blurred.

Chapter Thirty-Four

"We searched for him for weeks after that. Weeks! We knew not what he had seen, we knew not what had happened. We only knew that something had struck him, and wounded him to the pit of his soul. We followed rumors, and brief sightings. The Black Tower torn down overnight, and destroyed - his work. Distant drums heard by giants patrolling the ruins of an ancient city - his drums. But it wasn't until after we finally found him that we learned what had happened. He had seen horror beyond measure, and seen the death of his hope. He was mourning. Yes, mourning! There! So much for your stupid notion that Eddas is some kind of emotionless creature, a heartless and inhuman tool of a god! He was, and is, a man."

- High Mistress Pelia Cydalion of the Order of the Mountain Healers, Letter of Rebuttal to the Sage's Guild of Greenhaven, 1820 NCC

"Parade March Number Four," I whispered, and my musicians complied. Five hundred drums thundered, and the slow music of the Grand Parade rolled out over the desolate, blasted wasteland of the Great Southern Dead Zone.

I slipped from the saddle of my invisible steed, then sat on the dusty, dead ground. It was noon, and the sun beat on the anvil of the bare rocks, hammering me with waves of heat - yet I did not feel it, nor did my musicians or my bodyguards.

I knew not how long I sat there. I was, for all intents and purposes, immune to the ordinary dangers of Hyperborea. Even the fiercest ogre did not dare approach the five hundred armed skeletons which made up my bodyguards, and those predators or scavengers who thought to gnaw upon their bones met a swift and bloody end. Heat, chill, rain... None of it bothered me. The enchantment of my ring of adaptation was now a permanent part of me, and activated with hardly a thought. Sometimes a drumhead would break, or a weapon, or a drumstick. My warriors and musicians had been instructed to simply bring any broken equipment to me, and I repaired it without a second thought.

No, I hardly gave much thought to anything around me, anymore. My mind was too occupied with the past.

As the proud music thundered over the barren wastelands around me, the memories of ancient glories lived again in my mind. Old friends, long gone, lived again in my mind. Glorious battles, proud parades, the Honor and Fame that were once mine...

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 had nothing - not even my manhood. 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. 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.

And all for what? Why had everything been taken from me? What purpose was served? Why did it all happen?

So that I could, nearly two thousand years after my birth, tell an old friend to kill himself.

"Exactly," a familiar voice whispered in my mind.

I looked up from the ground, and saw an owl flutter to an almost silent landing before me. I raised my hand, and at a whispered command, my musicians fell silent. The wind moaned softly over the broken, blasted stones as I gazed at the owl. It was many moments before I found the voice to speak.

"You lied to me! Again!"

"No, I did not," the owl replied, his silent voice echoing in my mind.

*"I am trapped in this body, eternally! How can I bring Dyarzi back to me if I can never again become a man?! She wasn't a sapphite! You told me that the restoration of my race and the restoration of my beloved were both *Events* you were working towards!"*

*"They were. That was not a lie. Unfortunately, I could not do both. I had to choose, Eddas. And Morgar's ninth pawn placement combined with his selection of Cordo as his king and my subsequent alliance with Vyleah meant I could not have both of those *Events* come to pass, no matter how the game went. I had to choose - and I chose your race over your beloved."*

"But you could have chosen Dyarzi!"

"Yes. And then what, Eddas? You live happily ever after in your tower, surrounded by the ruins of your civilization?"

"Yes!"

"Hardly. Vyleah's rabbit explained it to you before, I'm surprised you didn't think of it yourself, and realize that I'd already been forced to make a choice. Think, Eddas - you and Dyarzi live in the tower. You have several children. Then what? Who do your children marry? Who do they themselves couple with, to have children of their own?"

I paused, stunned.

"Exactly, Eddas. It was a choice between your people or your beloved - and I chose your people. You and Dyarzi could never have had children. Had this been allowed in your former life, you never would have gained the skills and knowledges you needed to defeat Vayanar and Cordo. Had this happened in your second life, your race would be doomed to a future of albinism, hemophilia and congenital idiocy, or even insanity - all as Vyleah's rabbit told you."

For a long moment, the implications of what Yorindar had said left me speechless. Finally, however, I shook my head. "No, that's too easy. *That* choice you were forced to make, perhaps - but only because you chose to destroy my people in the first place! You were a god of the *Invaders*, Yorindar! *You* brought your people to our shores, and *that* sparked the Great War of Destruction!"

"I had little choice there, as well. Morgar's selection of Cordo as his king left me in a position where I needed a king who could match him. So, I reached into the past about two billion years, and shifted a stone deep beneath the earth, to change the course of a lava flow that would form a few aeons later. The result of that, two billion years later, was a series of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions which caused the people you call the Invaders to realize they could no longer

live on the island they had called home. A small suggestion planted in the dreams of their emperor as to which direction to go, and they headed towards your lands. Meanwhile, I reached back to a few decades before your time again, and selected a different father for someone who I knew would be influential in the formation of my king - Vayanar."

"Vayanar was your pawn?!"

"Not in regards to the game, no. He was merely a tool I used to forge you. Instead of a father who would teach honor and respect, I selected a father who had clawed his way to the top of his field through cunning and deceit - attributes he passed on to his son, and which Vayanar chose to act upon, using his power of Free Will. Morgar knew that Vayanar's actions would eventually result in the death of your beloved, which would spur you to an eternal quest to recover her, which would give you the skills and knowledges necessary to be a proper king for me. Morgar did not oppose either of my two manipulations, as he knew that eventually this would result in the formation of this very Dead Zone which lies around us, and allow him the chance to forge his own tool in the manner he wished. And yet, there was more."

"More? What more?"

"The form you have now was necessary - as you should understand, now. Yet, to forge it, you needed a bit more than your will alone. And, you also needed a way to help forge, in turn, the First King of Tulan - Darian. He was an important part of my own future goals and plans - and without him, the very tool I had used to forge you, Vayanar, would eventually have destroyed you millennia later, before your own forging was complete. Thus, I reached into the past again, and whispered into the dreams of the Great Mage Hyarlanoth, telling him how to forge the Skull which you eventually bore - whose enchantment, millennia later, would allow you to survive your own forging, and lock you in a form which could not curse the revived Hyperborean race with congenital idiocy or any number of other problems. Of course, we haven't even touched upon the various alliances I was forced to make among the gods of the giants, the elves and the dwarves, nor have we even mentioned the alliances Morgar made with the gods of the goblins, hob-goblins, ogres and trolls - all to bring you and Cordo together, at that moment in time, under those conditions."

My mind boggled. Yorindar discussed layers upon layers of intricately woven plans with an ease that suggested he was only brushing the surface of it all. Truly, no mortal mind could completely comprehend the process by which the gods waged war across the Arc of Time - there was simply too much, all of it related in intricate and often obscure ways.

"Exactly," Yorindar replied, reading my thoughts.

I sighed. "Alright, I'm sorry. You didn't lie to me... And I agree with your choice. But..."

"Yes?"

"Well... Now what? What happens now?"

"Now, you build your race and your civilization anew. As you said yourself, your people are like a phoenix, arisen from the ashes. Build your race and your civilization, Eddas - for someday, my next match will begin, and you will be needed."

"But... But the children... They will still have to come to me! I am like a father to them!"

"Yes, you are. And yet, you are not. But that result will not happen, either, Eddas - you will simply

have to trust me on this, as paradox prevents me from telling you why. More importantly, however, you must cease your moralizing about them, Eddas. You said yourself that like the reborn phoenix, your race arises different than it was before. Do not curse your race with guilt over the very method they use to reproduce, Eddas. You will curse your race with eternal unhappiness and misery, and eventual extinction."

I nodded. I realized myself two decades ago that, 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.

"Exactly," Yorindar said, sensing my thoughts.

I gazed at Yorindar. Despite everything he had said, I still could not shake a feeling of anger. "You could un-do all this. You've won. You could go back, change back all the things you changed before, restore my race, my civilization, my beloved-"

"No, I cannot, Eddas. Paradox prevents me from restoring that which I have once changed. All the gods are similarly limited. Any act we take is, in that regard, like the act of a mortal. Once done, it cannot be un-done. Just as you cannot take back the arrow you have fired or the words you have spoken, we cannot take back the movement of even the smallest grain of sand. It would be a paradox, and would crack the Arc of Time and bring the universe to an end."

"But-"

"No, Eddas. I can see in your mind that you conceive of my initially reaching back into the past as being paradox. But, to a god, it is not. We exist beyond the mortal considerations of time. But, as I told you seven decades ago, we are merely gods, we are not the Creator. We are limited. What I have done, I cannot un-do. All I can do is try to make the best choices I can, just as any mortal might in their life."

"But why?! To what end?! What is the purpose of all this?!"

"You already know the answer to that. My goal is Tulan. In that kingdom, all races will live in happiness, peace and prosperity," Yorindar replied, then tipped his owl-head, as though smiling. *"But that future is not assured quite yet. There is still an enormous amount of work to be done, Eddas - and both you and your people are a part of it."*

"There is still one promise you made to me you have not fulfilled. You said I would see my beloved again. All your plans... Everything... It all requires me. And if you don't at *least* fulfill *that* promise, you can damn well bet I'm *not* going through with *any* of it!"

"Think carefully, Eddas... Are you certain this is what you want?"

"Very certain," I replied firmly.

"So be it," the owl replied, blinking slowly. *"Go home, Eddas. Return to your tower. Then, when you have had your wish, end your mourning. We've a great deal of work ahead, starting sooner than you think. You'll need to be prepared for it."* And with that, Yorindar took off with a flap of

nearly-silent wings, rising higher and higher into the sky, until he vanished.

I rose to my feet, my heart bursting with joy. To *see* my beloved again! "Join hands," I called, and took the hand of the nearest warrior. Casting my spell of returning, I transported the lot of us into my tomb.

For many minutes thereafter, it was incredibly crowded. Eventually, however, I got the lot of my minions to pile themselves along the northern wall in a great heap of bone. I reasoned I might need them someday, and they would be safe in my tomb until the time came to call upon them again.

Finally, they were all settled. I nearly stuttered in casting my spell of returning again to take me to my tower, as I was literally trembling with excitement and hope.

A moment later, I stood in my room at the top of my tower. I looked around, but I was alone. The sunlight streaming in through the windows gave the room a golden glow, but I could take no comfort in it. "Dyarzi?" I called.

"Yes?" a woman's voice called back.

My heart skipped a beat. "Dyarzi, where are you?"

"Mmm? I'm over here, why?"

I turned to the sound of the voice, and saw my mirror - the same floor-length mirror I had received from Taliad, ages ago. Yet, instead of seeing my own reflection inside the mirror...

...I saw Dyarzi, wearing her red dress, and gazing back out at me with an expression of curiosity.

Chapter Thirty-Five

"As distance makes even the harshest mountain seem more beautiful, time makes our memories more pleasant, dimming the harshest agonies to half-remembered discomforts."

- Hyperborean proverb

I leapt to the mirror, and caressed its cool surface with an ebon-gloved hand. "Dyarzi! My love!" I shouted, and wept. She was incredibly beautiful, just as I remembered. Her olive skin was smooth, her ebon hair long and soft, her dark eyes large and warm, her lips perfectly formed and inviting...

"Ummm... Who are you?" Dyarzi asked, staring at me in confusion. Then, after a long moment, her eyes narrowed. "And why are you wearing my gloves and boots?"

"Dyarzi, I-"

"Don't try to deny it! I had those gloves and boots specially made for me, and I recognize the stitching!"

"But, Dyarzi-"

"And what else have you stolen of mine?"

"Dyarzi, it's *me*! Eddas!"

Dyarzi blinked, and stepped back a pace from her side of the mirror. "Wh-what?!"

"I came back, Dyarzi! I spent the rest of my life trying to find a way to bring you back to me, and... Well, I'll just make a long story short and say I died, and when I came back, I found I was in this body."

Dyarzi peered at me, looking me up and down. "Ummm... From your animuary, right?"

"Yes, love."

"And you came back... As a woman?" she said, then peered at me again. "A half-elf woman?"

"Yes, love. She was one of several grave-robbers. She was the one who came closest, so I possessed her body."

"And you couldn't just...?" she asked, waving her hands in imitation of a magical gesture.

"No, my love. It's a long story, but... No, I couldn't use sorcery to fix it. I've been in this body for seventy years, now."

Dyarzi looked at me, then snorted. After a moment, she burst into giggles. Soon, she was roaring with laughter.

"It's not *that* funny," I replied, unable to keep the sourness out of my voice.

"Oh, Eddas! Yes, it is! It's hilarious! You always played the part of this virile, manly-man, and now you're stuck in the body of a woman!" she replied, screaming with laughter.

"I was not 'playing a part', I was who I was," I replied, offended.

"Eddas, you're wearing a *woman's waist-belt!*" she laughed, pointing. "And my gloves and boots! What else are you wearing under that?"

"I..."

"Come on, show me!"

I knew Dyarzi. If she didn't get her way with me, she was likely to throw a snit. I wanted our meeting to go well, not poorly, so I obeyed. Loosening my waist-belt and tossing it atop the table, I slipped off my robe and cast it aside.

Dyarzi gazed at me for a long moment, then burst into roaring laughter again. "You... You're wearing my dancing outfit!"

"Yes. When I awoke, there was nothing else for me to wear. Later, I decided to continue wearing it, to honor you. I even used your depilatory-stone, just as you had, to honor you. You were and are the focus of my life, and I hold every memory of you near and dear to my heart."

Dyarzi struggled to stifle her laughter. "Well... Eddas... I mean... Well, ummm... I'm sure I appreciate the honor, and I'm sure you had to wear *something*, yes..."

"I loved you, Dyarzi. I still do. I always will. Vayanar hired the Flame-Knives to murder me, Dyarzi, but they killed you, instead. I spent the rest of my life searching for a way to bring you back to me, my love. 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. I felt my end nearing, and I did not want to live the life of a liche for the rest of eternity, puttering about in my tomb and waiting for the circle's call while I mourned you eternally. So I sealed myself in my sarcophagus and suffocated myself."

"Oh, Eddas, I'm so sorry..." Dyarzi replied sadly.

"I awoke in the body of this female, centuries later. Our civilization was destroyed in an ancient war, and everything we once had was gone. Yet, my quest to bring you back to me drove me on. I learned even more of the sorceries of the dwarves and the elves, and eventually, I did find the way. But, even though I now have the spell that can restore your life, I cannot use it to bring you back to me. I am trapped in this body, my love, and will be forever - and I knew you were not a sapphire."

"Not hardly," Dyarzi replied, shaking her head.

"I have lost everything, my love. Our civilization is gone - all the vast wealth I ever accumulated is meaningless, now. My fame and prestige are buried in history, my honor has been destroyed... And yet, my love for you drove me onwards," I said, and stepped over to the mirror, touching it lightly with my gloved fingertips. "Oh, Dyarzi... I've missed you so..."

Dyarzi smiled, placing her fingertips atop mine on her side of the mirror. "I missed you, too, Eddas. Are you happy, now? I mean... In your life, now?"

I sighed. "For the most part, I'm incredibly lonely, my love. I..."

"Yes?"

"I took a lover, years ago, but..."

Dyarzi gaped at me. "You took a *man* as a *lover*?!"

"No, no! I'm not a sodomite!" I snapped, lowering my hand. "My lover was a woman - a sapphire woman."

Dyarzi made a face and quickly drew her hand away from the mirror. "Eww!"

"You'll be pleased to know it didn't work out," I replied sourly. "I've spent the majority of the last seventy years utterly alone, simply sitting in my tower in the middle of a ruined civilization, mourning you."

Dyarzi sighed. "No, Eddas, I'm hardly pleased to know that. I don't know all the details of what's happened with you but... Well, I imagine that woman you found as a lover didn't simply crawl out from under a rock. Somewhere, out there, is another land, with people. You should go there, meet them, and find another lover. You should get on with your life, Eddas. I'm dead - find another woman to love."

"I could never love another. You were the only love of my life."

Dyarzi rolled her eyes. "And I'll bet you told your sapphire lover that, didn't you?"

"Yes, of course."

"Gah! If I could slap you, I would!" Dyarzi snapped. "Of *course* your relationship with her didn't work out! What woman could *possibly* compete with memories of the dead?!"

"But-"

"No, Eddas. You listen to me. I'm dead - and I *know* I'm dead. I'm in the Afterlife - and in case you're wondering, it's beautiful, here. Large, lovely fields of flowers, gentle hills, smooth paths that lead hither and yon, even lovely, beautiful cities where some gather who prefer quiet streets to flower-decked fields. We do not hunger or thirst, here - food and drink are plentiful and available at a thought if we wish it, but we have no calling of the body for it. In fact, we have no need for anything, here, and everything we might want is only a thought away. Some new arrivals spend a few days thinking up huge piles of money

or food and enjoying themselves, but that swiftly fades as earthly desires slip away. For the most part, we chat, meet old friends, and explore the endless green fields and lovely forests. Well, this morning, as I wandered down a path I'd not seen before through a forest I'd never been to before, I saw a tower. A lovely white tower, like I always wanted you to make, Eddas. I thought it was very beautiful, so I went in. And when I reached the top, I heard a voice - and the voice came from this mirror, here. And now I'm looking at you and I can see in your face that you love me still even after all these many, many centuries... I'm looking at your face and I can see you want to return me to life so I can be with you... But I'm sorry, Eddas, I don't want that."

"But-"

"No, Eddas. I'm *happy* here. It feels like I've been here forever... You say centuries have passed, and I have to agree. I've been here centuries, at least. And I am *happy* here. There's no hunger, no thirst, no pain, no menstrual cramps, no toothaches, *nothing*. With you, I'd have to experience all the day-to-day travails of being *alive* again... And I'd be unhappy, because..."

"Because you're still not a sapphire," I replied, and she nodded.

"Well, yes, that too. But I'd also be miserable living in a ruined civilization, Eddas. I *need* people around me. I'd grow *deathly* bored sitting with you in your tower for the rest of eternity, without even *servants* to amuse me! Yes, we planned on getting married, and having children. And I thought I might enjoy the life of being your wife, the wife of a wealthy, prominent and influential battle-mage. But now, as I think about it... Well, honestly, I think I'd have probably sat around your tower, gained ten stone over a few years eating sweet-meats and trifles from that fabulous cook you had, just to stave off my boredom, and eventually ended up a fat, unhappy shrew." Dyarzi sighed. "Oh, Eddas... If I could hug you tight, I would. Yes, I still love you. But I didn't love you at first."

I blinked. "You didn't?!" I decided to sit - my knees felt weak. I pulled a chair from the table over to near the mirror, and sat before it.

"No, Eddas. I was a lowly commoner, a simple rogue. Well, okay, maybe more than just a simple rogue," she said, and winked. I chuckled as she continued. "Well, I was just a commoner, Eddas. A commoner whom you fell in love with one dark night when you and I met in an alley. You were after that cup I nicked from that dragon, and I was trying to hock it. You looked at me, and I could see you had fallen head-over-heels for me. Not surprising, I was wearing my black silk cat-suit. You'd lived a life almost like a cloistered monk for years, teaching those students and going off to various battles. I was certain your eyes were about to *pop* out of your head," she said, and laughed.

"I was not a monk," I replied sourly, but Dyarzi only laughed again.

"Oh, Eddas! I planned on letting you woo me, wine me, dine me, take me to your home, then rob you blind the moment your back was turned!" she said, and laughed again. "I didn't, at first, simply because I realized that you were *powerful*. You weren't just some mage who'd been hired to try to find me, you were a *battle-mage* of the *Dyclonic Circle* - the most powerful and respected circle in all the land. I figured if I annoyed you by robbing you, I'd be *dead*! So, I just sat back and enjoyed the ride for the first few weeks, and let you wine me and dine me and woo me... And that was *very* nice, I must say," Dyarzi said, and grinned. "Well, later, as I got to know you, I realized what a sweet, gentle and wonderful man you were inside, beneath that cool exterior you liked to show to the world. And slowly, I fell in love with you."

"While I loved you from the moment I saw you, and my love only grew from then on," I replied quietly.

"Yes, I know. But you were *still* extremely stuffy."

"I was not!" I retorted hotly.

Dyarzi grinned. "Oh, yes, you were. Always worried about your image. I said we could just live together - who cared, really? Yet, you said that we would have to get married, it was expected of a man of your social rank. Which, because I was a commoner and you were a respected and high-ranking member of a battle-circle, meant I'd have to become your courtesan, and behave properly before your friends and associates for several months before I could be socially considered an 'acceptable' wife. And let me tell you, *that* was a pain, Eddas. Having to be a proper courtesan and obey the rules of the 'upper crust' of society, all that bowing and scraping and proper table manners and proper speech and..." Dyarzi shook her head, and snorted.

"Bah! I'm a city girl, Eddas. My father was a poor tailor, and I was the last of eight children. I was cast out on the street when I was ten to beg for my food because my family couldn't afford to feed me. I grew up on the streets, eventually joined the thief's guild, and started building a reputation as one of the finest thieves in Wilanda City. You thought you were lifting me up from a lowly life on the streets, Eddas... But you weren't. Those boots and chain and all my other things didn't come from nowhere, you know. I *paid* for them. I was hardly a poor street urchin any longer, Eddas. I was one of the wealthiest thieves in the city, because I was one of the best. Yet, in all that time, I did my best to live by the same rules my mother taught me. I never killed anyone, I never stole from anyone who couldn't afford it... I suppose that's why I ended up here. I did the best I could to live a good life, and my crowning achievement was that I stole the heart of a good man."

"And as you said many times, my love, what you steal *stays* stolen," I replied softly. "My heart has been yours for over seventeen centuries."

"So I see..." Dyarzi replied softly, and sighed. "But now, Eddas... Dearest love... It is time I gave what I stole back to you."

"I don't want it back, Dyarzi. I love you..."

"I know. But I'm dead, Eddas. Our time is past," she replied, and smiled wryly. "We had a good run at life, Eddas. We laughed and loved and shared something special. But now, it's time for you to move on."

"I could never do that," I replied, my heart breaking.

"Oh, yes, you can. I'm a good judge of character, Eddas - and as I look at you, I think that you've grown even stronger than you ever were when we were together. I won't ask you to forget me - I know you, and you never will. But if you ever loved me, Eddas, then I ask you now to *let me go*. I am returning to you that which I stole, Eddas. I give you back your heart. Take it, and be happy, my love," she said, and turned away from the mirror.

"Dyarzi, wait!" I called, leaping to my feet. But she did not walk far - only over to the fireplace that was on her side of the mirror. Picking up a poker, she strode back towards the mirror. "Dyarzi! Noooo!"

"Goodbye, my love," she replied, and smashed the mirror.

I leapt back, expecting a flying shower of glass. Yet, there was none. Instead, Dyarzi was simply gone, leaving only the reflection of a strange, half-elven woman behind. I knew who she was, of course. I'd gazed at her alien, terrifyingly beautiful features for decades, now. She was, of course, the Raven of Yorindar.

And as I gazed at her, the Raven of Yorindar began to sob.

Chapter Thirty-Six

"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

I went out to my parapet and sat in my chair, gazing out over my plantation of *byallar*-trees. A gentle breeze rippled their leaves like waves on a green ocean. I had seen this sight countless times before, of course. The quiet beauty of the trees, a sight I had gazed upon decade after decade, had always been familiar and reassuring. Yet, today, they brought no comfort to me.

I had wept until I simply had no more tears to weep. My soul felt empty, and hollow. Thus it was that though I heard the buzzing of little wings, I did not look to the source of the sound, nor did I really care when I noticed a little friend sitting nearby me, on the edge of the parapet.

Kiriin gazed at me silently for a long moment, her blue hair gently wafting in the breeze. I did not return her gaze, I simply continued staring out over the trees of my land. Finally, she spoke, her tiny voice hushed as she gazed at me.

"Thank you," she said, and fell silent again.

I looked to her. "For what?"

"I was here, on the parapet. I saw it all, through the windows. I heard every word. I didn't know if you intended for me to see it, but I did. And then I remembered that you were the Raven of Yorindar. Even if you did not intend me to see it, Yorindar probably did. And now I have seen it. And now I know... That he is happy."

"Who is happy?"

But Kiriin did not reply, she simply turned her gaze to the horizon. I thought about pressing her for an answer, but found I simply did not have the energy to do so. She would tell me, when she was ready.

"They are searching for you, you know."

I nodded silently.

"Your courtesans... Your daughters... All the giants in Hyperborea... There are even parties of elves and dwarves scouring the lands for you. Longtooth says he has tried to speak to you using his magic ring many times."

"I know. I've been ignoring it."

"Lyota asked me to remain here, and I agreed. I knew that eventually, if you lived, you would return here."

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh? And how did you know that?"

Kiriin gazed at me, her tiny sapphire eyes smiling slightly. "You are an Ancient One, Master Eddas Ayar, even as I am. This is your home. Despite the war, despite centuries of ruin and decay, despite everything... This is your home. You, like me, have nowhere else to go."

I nodded, gazing at Kiriin. She knew me well, despite having known me for such a short time. "You said once you had a favor to ask me, Kiriin. A favor you wanted to ask once you had proven yourself to me. Well, I would say that what you did in the Sunless Sea to help rescue the prince... More than proves yourself to me. So ask."

Kiriin was silent for a long moment, simply gazing at me. Finally, she nodded. "I told you once, Master Eddas, that I learned of you through the tales spun by the trader, Taliad?" she asked, and I nodded. "Well... Taliad and I have spoken many times over the years. He enjoys my company... And I his. He would never understand, of course, but..."

"Yes?"

Kiriin sighed. "Many centuries ago, I lived in that monastery with my mate. We were happy, Master Eddas, very happy. Yes, the death of the Hyperboreans was sad... But aside from that, we were happy. The monastery was slowly crumbling as the centuries went by, of course, but we did not worry. Then, one day, a bit of stone fell..." Kiriin explained, and sighed.

I nodded in understanding. "And today, you finally learned that your mate is, in all likelihood, very happy in the afterlife - just as mine is."

"Yes."

"Do go on, Kiriin."

"Well... I have been alone since then, Master Eddas. I have not gone anywhere else, because I have nowhere else to go. The monastery is my home, and I have many happy memories there... Just as you, I suppose, have many happy memories here. Then, one day, about a century ago, Taliad began coming by. I find he fills a void in my heart, Master Eddas, in a way I cannot properly describe. I wish to be his mate... But I am too small for him to even take such a notion seriously, I think."

I smiled. "You misjudge Taliad. He would be deeply honored if he knew that was your desire."

"Perhaps... But... If I were just..."

"You mean to say that if you were just a little larger, he would be less likely to reject you."

Kiriin hung her little head. "But I am merely a pixie, Master Eddas. I know little of spells of transformation - our forte' is spells of illusion and nature. I would need a master mage to help me derive the formula for a spell that I could cast, and perhaps maintain..."

"An interesting challenge..." I replied, stroking my chin. "Most growth spells cannot be maintained for long, and certainly not by a pixie. The drain is simply too much."

Kiriin sighed. "So it is impossible, then."

I smiled. "Hardly. Come, Kiriin. Let's see what I can come up with."

After perusing my book of theory for a while, I pulled out my magic quill and my writing desk, and had it work on a few formulas. The quill saved me an enormous amount of time, and as the sun slipped lower on the horizon towards late afternoon, I paused in realization. "You know, all the growth formulas here modify your *dimensions* - and dimensional alterations have specific upper and lower limits, and definite points of diminishing returns. I wonder..."

"Yes?!" Kirinn asked, hope in her voice.

"I wonder what would happen if we simply altered *mass*, with density as a constant, and just allowed the dimensions and tissue structures to self-adjust?" I asked aloud. And with that, I returned to my work. An hour later, I grinned. I had it. "There. That's the formula you want, Kiriin. The transformation can only be cast on the caster themselves, and it only lasts an hour, but it's easily within your capabilities." I gazed at the formula, considering it. "Hmmm... In an item, it could simply be activated, and it would last indefinitely. However, I doubt you have the strength to imbue it. And you wouldn't want to, anyway."

"Oh? Why not?"

"Because you couldn't possibly fly, Kiriin. Your flight is not a power of levitation, but true winged flight. If you were permanently enlarged, you would be forced to walk all the time-"

"Like a *brownie*?!" Kiriin squeaked.

"Or a human, yes - but aside from that, your feet and legs are probably not used to that at all, I doubt you'd enjoy it."

Kiriin stared at the formula, her little eyes wide. "That... That is *extremely* complex, Master Eddas. And I do not understand your notes on the reagents."

"Well, I'll have the quill write out the full spell for you so you can understand it. It's really not that difficult - the illusions you were casting on the Sunless Sea are, in truth, far more complex. This is simply an area of sorcery you are unfamiliar with - but once I have the full details of the somatic and verbal components written out for you, you'll be able to understand it. And as for the reagent," I replied, and shrugged. "An acorn would do."

"An acorn?! That's all?!"

I smiled. "Yes, Kiriin. That's all. And you'll only need it when reading the spell from a grimoire, or if you wanted to imbue it into an item. If you can manage to master the spell as a skill, you'll be able to cast it effortlessly, without worrying about reagents."

"I can get an acorn! I can get one now!" Kiriin squeaked excitedly.

"Alright - why don't you go get an acorn, while I write out the full details of the spell for you so you can try it out?"

"Okay!" Kiriin squealed, and zipped out the open door to my parapet, and flew away. By the time she returned a few minutes later, the magic quill had finished its work. Kiriin dumped what was for her a

double arm-load of acorns onto my table - three, to be exact. "Alright, what do I do?!" she asked excitedly.

"Apply your will, reading the verbal components off from these pages, while following the instructions about the somatic components. Hold the acorn in one hand while you gesture. If you do not slip, the spell will be cast."

Kiriin nodded, then looked at the acorns. "Ummm... Is it alright if I hold it under an arm?"

"It should be, yes. Try it."

"Ummm... How big will this make me?"

"You *should* end up two orders of magnitude larger in mass... I'd say you'll probably end up about my height, or perhaps a bit shorter."

"Oooo!" Kirin squealed.

"Calm yourself - you need to concentrate while reading the spell, or you'll fail and waste an acorn. Take your time."

"Yes, Master Eddas," Kiriin replied, and turned her attention to the pages I'd laid out before her.

Kiriin spent a full minute carefully reading and incanting the spell I'd written out for her, gesturing as precisely as she could. When she was done, the acorn disappeared in a puff of smoke...

...and suddenly, Kiriin was ten times her usual size, and teetering on the edge of my table.

"Aaah!" she squealed, fluttering her enormous wings.

I leapt to my feet, grabbing her gloved hand to steady her. "Careful, Kiriin. You're not used to walking about at this size. Bones can break in a fall at this size."

I helped Kiriin down from the table, then looked her over. She was, perhaps, only a hand shorter than myself. Magnified to my size, her face looked... Odd. Her eyes were positively *enormous*. Her face was long, with an extremely narrow nose that, from bridge to nostril, was perhaps half again as tall as a human or elf's nose. Her blue hair looked quite odd, and her translucent wings shimmered in the light with the colors of the rainbow. Her body was incredibly sensual, however, with large, full breasts. Overall, she was still beautiful, yes - but very odd looking, to my eyes.

Once she was steady on her feet, Kiriin quickly went over to look at herself in my mirror. "Yes!" she squealed, bouncing with joy. "Now I can hug him and kiss him and even-" she said, then suddenly looked to me, and blushed deeply.

I smiled. "The spell's effect isn't permanent, Kiriin. You can will it to end at any time, and you'll have to exert your will to maintain it if you wish it to last longer than an hour. And you should *not* exert yourself with sorcery at this size in *any* way. If you do, you'll hardly notice the drain of pixie-magic at this size - but once you return to your normal size, the total drain of all your exertions might kill you."

Kiriin nodded, then returned to gazing at herself in the mirror. "I'll be very careful. One casting, no other spells, and I won't maintain it, I'll just let it wear off on it's own," she said, then gasped. "Oh!"

"What?"

"What if I..."

"What?"

"What if he and I... I mean, what if I got pregnant?! I mean... I'd *explode*!"

I burst out laughing. "That's impossible, Kiriin, don't worry! The spell hasn't changed your germ-plasm. You are still a pixie - and pixies and elves aren't closely enough related for that to happen. Look - compare your face to mine," I said, standing next to her and smiling at her reflection in the mirror. "See? We're really completely different people."

Kiriin gazed at herself, and frowned. "Aaaah! I'll look *odd* to him! Look at my nose! And look at my eyes! They're twice the size of yours!"

"Of course they are - you're a pixie."

"But they'll look *odd* to him!"

"Hardly. They'll look beautiful - particularly when you tell him the story of how you got the spell, and all the danger you had to go through to get it, just because you wanted to hug him properly, and tell him you loved him," I replied, and smiled. "And you forget, Kiriin - Taliad is Sylvani. Wood-elves know *precisely* what pixies look like... And they adore you, and think you are very beautiful." Kiriin smiled slightly, and I hugged her. "And more, I've looked at you, and I think you're *very* beautiful, Kiriin. Yes, perhaps your features are a bit odd by the standards of the larger races - but they are hardly ugly," I said, and smiled. "Now, go on and will the spell to end, and we'll work on copying it to some smaller pages you can fold up and take with you when you go home. Practice it carefully, and you should be able to master it as a skill in a few weeks. I'll make a quill from a wood-silver, and help you with dipping it in the ink."

Kiriin hugged me back, her enormous wings fluttering. "Thank you, Master Eddas. Thank you for this... Thank you for everything!" she cried, then *poofed* back to her normal size of a hand and a half in height.

After I spent a few minutes with my knife cutting some smaller sheets for her, we spent two hours copying the spell. We paused at sunset so I could spark a fire in my fireplace, and I took a moment to hang a pot of *byallar* to warm while we worked. I checked the copy extremely carefully - my own magic quill couldn't possibly form letters that small, and if there was an error in copying, the spell would fail.

Finally we were done, and I was satisfied the copy was true and accurate. I slipped the tiny sheets into an empty reagent bag I had lying about in my supplies, and she slipped the little leather pouch over her shoulder. "Well, now that you've helped me, it's time for me to help you again."

I smiled, pouring a cup of *byallar* for myself, then leaning back in my chair. "Hardly, Kiriin. You've worked hard enough in recovering Prince Parial - we're even, I say."

"Perhaps - but there's one more thing I need to do for you. It's night, now. They've probably returned to the village again. I will tell them you are here, then head home."

I sighed. "Kiriin, don't. I'm not sure if I'm ready-"

"Master Eddas Ayar, you are an Ancient One, just as I am. Perhaps I am merely a pixie, while you are something far greater... You are one of the Great Mages, like those of legend and song... The equal of a dragon... The servant of a god. Yet, I have learned something in my two thousand years of life, something you apparently have not. And, I will tell it to you now, as a friend, to a friend."

"What?"

"You cannot mourn forever, Eddas Ayar. At some point, you must let them go, and get on with your life."

Your mate told you this, too - and you should listen to her, and to me. Let her go, Eddas Ayar. End your mourning, pick up your life again... And be happy."

I sighed. "I will try, Kiriin. I will try."

"That's all anyone can ask," Kiriin replied, rising into the air on a flutter of tiny wings, then vanishing in a sparkle of pixie magic as she turned invisible. "Farewell, Eddas Ayar..." she called, and I heard the sounds of her tiny wings buzzing out the open door onto my parapet, then away, into the moonlit night.

I sat there in my chair after that, gazing after her. Kiriin's visit had been like a sudden splash of cool rain, and now that she was gone, I found I could actually think about what had happened to me.

The love of my life, Dyarzi, still loved me. But she was dead. It was time for me to let her go.

I knew in my heart Dyarzi was probably right. Had she lived, she would have been terribly bored, abandoning the exciting life of a master rogue to become my wife. Had she lived, she probably *would* have fattened herself on the delicious sweet-meats my cook, Kylinae, made for us. I remember Dyarzi loved to snack on them... And as I considered it, I realized she had probably been bored already, even then. I was a scholar - and, in truth, an enormous bookworm. I could entertain myself easily by reading the latest theoretical work on magic, or working on my next lesson for my students. Dyarzi could not - though she *could* read, and I once had bought several works of fiction for her entertainment, she found reading to be a chore, and a bore. She was, quite simply, a woman of *action*. Certainly, I could have taken her with me when the circle called me to help fight various battles, but there was, in truth, little a lone rogue might have been able to *do* there - even if I could have overcome the horrid thought of her being killed in battle, and somehow managed to take her with me. Besides... In the end, bringing her along would have been a clear violation of the rules of my order. No, living with me as my wife, she would have eventually become *quite* bored. And, being bored and unhappy, would have eventually become shrewish - and both of us would have ended up miserable.

As I thought about it, I realized that my memories of her had been colored by my own perceptions... And, in truth, by my age. They were the recollections of an old, old man, who had met and lost his one true love in the prime of his life. I had, in my mind, idealized her as the decades of my life had rolled by... I had transformed her into the perfect woman; flawless, exciting, and sensual. And while she was exciting and sensual, she was hardly flawless. She was, in the end, a mortal... A human woman, not a perfect goddess. She had her good moments and bad, as all mortal men and women did. She had her moments of kindness and love, and her moments of spite and tantrums.

I chuckled, remembering her little snits. I had stripped my robe off before her to avoid just such a little tantrum - but until that moment where she demanded I do so, I had hardly remembered her moments of anger. Now, those memories came back to me easily. In truth, back then, she probably could have made me do anything, even leap through flaming hoops, just to keep her happy.

I chuckled again. Dyarzi had been a fiery woman - and, as I thought about it, I realized she'd probably developed her temper and her ability to push me around from her life as a street urchin. On the streets, only the strong survived. She'd had to learn to be assertive and strong before she had even reached puberty. And when she'd reached puberty, she had to learn to fight with ferocity, to keep the other street-dwellers from simply raping her at will.

I sighed, shaking my head at myself. In truth, time had altered my own memories of Dyarzi, until she had become a cherished and idealized part of an old-man's heart. Time and my own love had polished away her flaws, leaving only a perfect, sparkling jewel of memory behind. I had forgotten what she truly was like... And that hardly did justice to her. She was not a perfect, pristine goddess. She was a mortal

woman. And I loved her. I knew in my heart that I always would.

But now, it was time to let her go.

I leaned back in my chair, sipping at my cup of *byallar*, thinking about Dyarzi, and remembering our time together. Finally, as I drained the cup and set it aside, I smiled.

The air shimmered, and Pelia, Lyota, and five of my courtesans appeared - Kylae, Yoria, Hala, Pylota and Fylass. Behind them and towering over them was Joy - and she did not look amused.

"Eddas!" Pelia shrieked, dashing over to me and hugging me tight.

"Father!" Lyota cried, weeping as she struggled to hug me among all the other arms that tried to surround me.

"Old Man, where the *hell* have you been?!" Joy roared, her clear alto voice trembling with emotion. "We've all been *worried sick* about you!"

"Mourning, Joy," I replied.

"Mourning *who*?!" Joy snapped.

"My old friends. My people. My civilization. Millions and millions of ordinary people who once laughed and sang and quarreled and warred and lived and loved and died, and who are now long gone to dust and forgotten. My friends, my teachers... High Master Frarim, who once was my teacher, and in many ways like a second father to me. Grand Master Dyclon, who never could have foreseen the tragic and shameful end the circle he founded would come to. Master Kardak and Master Barad, whose finest work and grandest achievement was in repairing the war-machines of the Invaders... Work I had to destroy. Master Natchok, who voted against me, his best friend, and regretted it to the end. Master Gorol, who wrote of the last, frightening, shameful days of the Dyclonic circle in his diary, and who only wished to one day sit with me and sip a cup of *byallar* again in peace. Master Cordo, who became Morgar's tool... I never knew how he truly felt about me, until the very end. He always saw me as a rival, and his deepest wish was, just once, to defeat me... And his end was horrifying, Joy. A fate I would not have wished on him, had I been given a choice... A fate I would not even have wished on Vayanar, whom I hated from the very depths of my soul. And Dyarzi..." I replied, and sighed. "I have mourned Dyarzi, Joy. I have mourned her since the day I lost her, all those many centuries ago. I have wept an ocean of tears over her. And, finally, I mourned myself."

"Yourself?" Joy asked, gazing at me in confusion.

"Yes, Joy."

Slowly, Pelia, Lyota and the others let me go, and sat beside me on the floor in a semi-circle, surrounding me. I reached out and caressed their hands and faces, one at a time. "Eddas," Pelia said, squeezing my hand as I clasped hers, "why would you mourn yourself?"

"Because my old life is gone, and shall never return. I am the Raven of Yorindar," I replied, and stroked her hair softly. "For the rest of eternity, I shall reach out to each of the last women of Hyperborea, bringing life into your wombs and pleasure into your life, restoring our race as some strange race of immortal sorceresses... Yet, forever remaining apart from you. Loved, but untouched... Revered, yet never caressed. It appears my fate is to sleep alone for the rest of eternity."

Pelia blanched, her gaze flickering to Lyota. Lyota gazed back at her coldly for a moment before her expression smoothed. I simply smiled, and caressed Lyota's face for a moment. "Do not worry. I have

come to accept this. I have come to accept all of this. The death of my people and my civilization, my friends, and even my beloved Dyarzi... All of it. I have come to accept it."

Joy gazed at me for a long moment, then slowly crossed her arms and glowered at me. "Oh, you *have*, have you? You've come to accept your fate in some typically noble and honorable and *stupid* Hyperborean male fashion, where you will simply sit there and allow the weight of it all to slowly grind down your soul over the course of a few millennia, is that it?"

I rolled my eyes. "Hardly, Joy. It's just that I-"

"Bah!" Joy snapped, interrupting me. Joy wagged a finger at Pelia and the others. "Do you know what these women have been talking about for the last three weeks? Do you have *any* idea?!"

I sighed. It was obvious my long absence, my extended mourning, had only worried Pelia and her women nearly to death. "Probably me. I'm sorry, but-"

"Shut up!" Joy roared. "Just *once* in your life, Old Man, you are going to *sit* there and *listen*!" Joy looked to Lyota, stabbing a thick forefinger at her. "Tell him, Lyota! Tell him about the argument you had with your mother last week!"

Lyota paled. "I..."

"Tell him! Tell him all of it!"

Lyota nodded, gazing at the floor for a moment as she attempted to collect herself. Finally, she spoke. "When you first vanished, we knew not what had happened. It was two days later before Arella arrived to fetch the prince... They had been expecting you to bring him. When you did not, she went to fetch him herself. The king had wanted to thank you, but you left. You took that army of skeletons with you, and just... Left. That was the first we knew that something was wrong."

"We went first into the Southlands, to ask the soldiers who might have been near enough to see what had happened... But the Larinians had no idea what had happened to you. They heard the blast, they saw you leave with your skeletons, but that was all. Some believed that you, a holy warrior of Yorindar, had simply returned from whence you came - the Halls of the Gods. Others who knew you better, like King Noril and Arella, believed you had simply gone home to Hyperborea. Arella had not seen the moment you left. When we told her what the others had seen, she nodded, and said something dire had probably happened. We knew there was a crater in the ground, and the astral residue I could see showed me clearly that a mage had blasted themselves to vapor in that spot. It was obvious, to me. You had not killed Cordo. He had killed himself. The astral plane still held traces of deep horror, even several days after the event, when I finally was able to examine the crater. Arella's familiar, Swift-wing, is more skilled at reading astral emanations than I, as he is easily four times my age. He simply looked at it, and shuddered. We knew something dire had happened... Something terrible, that had wounded you deeply. But we knew not what."

"So, we began to search. The giants immediately offered their help, and we accepted, of course. A week later, word that you were missing had reached the elves and dwarves. You are an elf-friend, and a dwarf-friend. King Durin of the Dwarves sent a hundred thousand warriors, including eight thousand berserks, to destroy the goblin's reinforcements. Not to be outdone, the Queen of the Elves sent a hundred and twenty-five thousand warriors, ranging from plate-mailed Katani knights on their proud war-steeds to green-garbed Sylvani archers who slipped through the forests like emerald ghosts. It was a historic battle, or so Mungim said. Never before had elf and dwarf met on the battlefield as allies - and both Queen Eliande and King Durin realized it was not a moment that should be allowed to simply fade into the history-books. Thus, both the elves and dwarves sent search parties throughout the lands of

Hyperborea, looking for you, their friend. Finally, last week, mother went to see Karg the Terrible, the great dragon whose territory our lands on Iolo Mountain fall within."

I raised an eyebrow at this, looking to Pelia, but at Joy's glower, remained silent.

"She meant to ask for his help in finding you. We had nothing to offer, unfortunately. Mother only hoped he might help out of his ancient friendship with you. But Karg simply yawned, and said "He will return to his tower eventually. Simply set someone to watch for him." Then, he rolled over and went to sleep." Lyota sighed, her gaze still on the floor.

"Mother was very upset by this, as were all the others. But I remembered you had told me that dragons never speak idly, and they gain much of their knowledge through their dreams. If Karg said you would return to your tower eventually, then eventually, you would do so. So I asked Kiriin to watch your tower day and night. Mother said this was foolish, as they checked your tower once a day or so, and that would be enough. And then..."

"Go on, Lyota," Joy said.

"I exploded at her," Lyota said, and fell silent.

"Tell him why. The whole *village* heard that screaming fight. We all know what happened - everyone save him. So tell him."

"Because it didn't matter!" Lyota snapped, glaring at Pelia. "Even if you returned, *she* would still be the same! Oh, she loves you and respects you - I can *see* it in her aura! But she will never *touch* you! You will give her pleasure and companionship, and all the women of the First Generation, but none of them will ever touch you in return! They hold some stupid, *stupid* notion in their mind that someday, perhaps, you'll be a man again and they can lie with you but you *won't, ever!* All of us of the Second Generation can see it, even the little toddlers! We see it when we look at you! That great knot of *mana* that maintains your body can *never* be broken! And now, looking at you, I see it has even merged with your *talent, your very soul!* It's a *part* of you! It's *never* going to go away, and *nothing* is ever going to remove it! So you will sit here and be lonely and they will sit there and hope *forever* because they are *stupid! And meanwhile, all of us of the Second Generation will forever be alone at night, just like you, because you are stupid, too!*"

I blinked. "What?!"

"Tell him, Lyota!" Joy snapped.

"You won't *ever* touch us! Yes, maybe in a few centuries, you might consider giving us children - but that is *all!* To you, we are like your *daughters!*" Lyota snapped, and shook an accusing finger at Pelia and the others of my courtesans that sat near her. "*They will never touch you! They love you deeply but they are stupid and all they want to do is wait and hope for something that will never happen!* I want to be with you, but I know you will *never* do that! Who else am I to be with?! My sisters?! The others of the Second Generation?! I am not interested in *men*, as my mother and the others of the First Generation are! None of us of the Second Generation are interested in men! How *could* we be?! We have been raised to think of *you* as the ideal mate, and we have all been told that it's only through *you* that our race can survive!" Lyota shrieked, and leapt to her feet.

"Yes, we look to you as a father! But you are *not* a father of the blood! And yet your *stupid, stupid, stupid morality will never ever let you touch any of us! You will never touch me! All you want is her and the others, and they will never touch you!*" Lyota screamed, and suddenly burst into tears.

I sat, stunned, for many moments. Lyota stood there, sobbing, and Pelia and my other courtesans sniffled. Even Joy seemed moved.

Gently, I reached out, and pulled Lyota into my lap, hugging her. For a long moment, I knew not what to say. I simply sat there, stroking her hair, and thinking. Finally, I lifted her chin with a gloved finger, and gently wiped away her tears. "There, there, Lyota... It's alright..." I whispered, and hugged her again, patting her back. "It is as your mother said, once... Before you were born... We are voyagers through time, who have awakened to see our civilization in ruins around us. We cannot rebuild it the way it was. 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 we can plant a new oak. We can 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."

I took Lyota's shoulders, and leaned her back in my lap, gazing into her eyes. "Lyota, all this pain and anguish you've felt is because at the moment, I *am* the only way our people can reproduce, and you've grown up with a small group of other children who are, in your eyes, like sisters to you. Like a birth, the early stages of our new civilization's life will be painful. Yet, it will get better."

"How?" Lyota asked, drying her eyes.

"In a century, there will be nearly two thousand of us in the world. And, by then, each of you will be using a spell I constructed ten years ago - a spell you can use to give yourself children. With our people able to produce their own children, instead of everyone growing up looking to me as their father and to their fellows as their sisters, you will be able to live and love each other normally. You will all be able to live in happiness, as a race with a single gender."

Pelia and the others gasped, and Lyota's eyes widened. "But *how*, Father?! Mother said the Law of Tantivity prevents any enchantment of that nature from being useful! The drain would be impossibly high!"

I smiled. "Impossibly high for *them*, yes. They are *healers*, Lyota, and they do not have the vast will and enormous reserves of endurance that a battle-mage must learn to develop by the time they reach the rank of Master - which is what *you* are learning to become, and what all those of your generation and all the generations to follow will learn to become. The drain is difficult, yes. About as taxing as summoning a greater demon, in fact, and hardly something you'll be doing on a regular basis. Still, it *will* work, Lyota. I realized ten years ago that it would be necessary, as simple mathematics showed that even at our infinitesimally slow rate of growth, in a few centuries, there will be thousands of us, and I simply will no longer be able to act as the 'bee' for all the 'flowers' of our people."

Lyota smiled for a moment, then her face took on a serious expression. "It *is* like a bee to the flowers, you know - it's *not* copulation! It's not intercourse, it's sorcery! I am more my mother's twin than your daughter, and I carry none of your germ plasm within me!"

I smiled. "I know, Lyota."

"So will you... I mean..."

I smiled again, brushing a stray lock of hair from her eyes. "Lyota, nothing pleases me more that you have asked. I am deeply honored. But no, I will not."

"But-"

"No, Lyota. You are not a daughter of my flesh, no. But you are a daughter of my heart. In twenty or thirty years, when you have attained the rank of Master, there will be probably over a thousand in the Second Generation. Most of them will hardly seem like sisters to you, but will be more like friends and acquaintances," I replied, and sighed. "And now, as I see the pain in your heart, I know that my only course is to *only* use your mother's gift on her and the others of the First Generation. For the rest of you, once you attain the rank of Master, you will be taught the spell which will allow you to reproduce by yourselves. In time, you will select life-partners from among each other. And you will bear your own children, without me being involved in any way," I said, and smiled. "We are, in the end, humans, Lyota. Bees and flowers are bees and flowers, Lyota, not humans. There is no copulation involved, but there is also no love. And I do love you, my daughter. Thus, I cannot lie with you."

"But *why*?!" Lyota wailed.

"Because of the principle of Absolute Ethics, Lyota," Pelia said quietly. "Eddas is right to refuse you... And I was wrong to argue with you that night. It was something you needed to talk to him about, not me, and..." Pelia sighed. "Well, when you started screaming, I became angry, myself. I'm sorry for that, but... Well, we aren't just building a family here, my daughter - we are rebuilding our civilization. We must stay true to the principles of Absolute Ethics, or the very civilization we build will be like a bent tree. It will never grow straight and strong, but will be flawed from the start. You are learning to be a battle-mage. Absolute Ethics are required, and you should *know* why, by now. The powers you are learning to wield are far greater than anything I or those of my circle can ever teach you. We are simple healers, and our spells are trivial in comparison to the raw power wielded by your father."

Lyota sat silently in my lap, hanging her head and sighing. Finally, she nodded. "Alright... I can see you're right. Father has taught me enough that I understand it. I don't *like* it, but I understand it, and I accept it. Your plan will work, Father. If you teach each of us the spell we need to reproduce by ourselves... Well... Eventually, yes, we will choose life-partners from among our number," she said, then looked up suddenly and glared at Pelia. "But *you*, mother, I *cannot* understand! How can you and all the others let him sleep alone at night?! You cannot *see* his aura, but *I can*! He is *miserable*! *How can you leave him like this?!*"

"Because I'm *afraid*!" Pelia snapped, then suddenly covered her mouth with her hand. After a moment, she began to weep.

"Afraid of what?" Lyota asked, surprised.

"I... I don't want to give up my hope, Lyota. None of us do. That's all we have, is hope that someday... Someday, perhaps... Things will be better," Pelia replied, and sobbed. The other women with her nodded, some sighing, some weeping.

"I... I don't understand, mother," Lyota said softly.

Pelia sighed, sniffing. "Do you remember he said... Like a birth, the early stages of our new civilization's life will be painful?"

"Yes, Mother."

"For us, these birthing pains are literal. We discussed this years ago, when I was pregnant with you, and we discussed it even before then... When there were still men among us. There is little choice - each of us of the White Mountain Healers must give birth to one child about every five years for the next several centuries. This is necessary just to give the new Hyperborean race a large enough population to be able to survive on it's own. We refused the men, because we did not like the idea of becoming merely millstones they used to grind out the next generation. Lyota, we... We were still trying to come to terms

with the *shock* of it all... Everything we knew was gone, destroyed, and crumbled to dust. The men grew desperate, and tried to abduct some of us, to simply rape us over and over to produce the next generation. Eddas saved us from that... And we are eternally grateful. Yet... Perhaps... Perhaps if we had not refused them that first time... Perhaps they might not have become Eddas' enemies. Perhaps they might have eventually adjusted to the shock of the devastation... Perhaps they might not have become desperate... Perhaps... Perhaps..." she said, her voice trailing off into sobs.

Kylae nodded. "Lyota, you live here, and accept the lands of Hyperborea you see around you as being normal. Your mother, your father and all the rest of us remember it differently. You've seen Wilanda city... It was once a vast and beautiful city teeming with a quarter of a million people, not just a few stones poking out from among the grass of the forest. The village of Dohbari was a quaint and beautiful little place, not just a few scattered stones surrounded by the huts of giants. There was a whole civilization, Lyota, not merely a few hundred humans living among ruins."

Yoria and Hala nodded, while Pylota comforted Pelia. Fyllass looked up to Lyota, and sighed. "I suppose we've all been afraid, Lyota. Afraid that if we truly acknowledged your father's change was permanent... That we would have to admit everything was gone. It's as your mother said, we've all been living on the hope that somehow... If we could just hold on... Things would be better, someday. Yes, we refused the men. And I still think we were *right* to refuse them. And when I think about how I was taken away by force, stripped and geased to remain silent, and then tossed in a cell to be used at their whim once they had figured out how to capture the rest of us..." Fyllass shook her head. "No, we made the right decision. And yet..." Fyllass said, and sighed.

Pelia sniffled, and wiped her eyes. "And that is how it is for all of us, my daughter. We wait and hope and pray that perhaps, someday, your father's rightful form will be restored. Perhaps, someday, if we can just hold on long enough, things will be alright again."

Lyota sighed. "Things *will* be alright again, someday, mother. Someday, we of the Second Generation and all those who follow will build a civilization again. We talk about it, you know."

"You do?" Pelia asked.

"Yes. We talk about it a lot. We have many plans. Nice, comfortable houses, raised with the power of sorcery, cooled in summer and warmed in winter with sorcery... Gardens tended by cute little golems - Myota can't wait until she is able to make golems, you know. She wants to make a scarecrow that can run around the fields and scare off the birds properly. She's only eight, but she has a head full of dreams," Lyota said, and smiled. "We all do, really. *Your* dreams, *your* hopes, given to us."

"That would be wonderful," Pelia said, smiling, and the others nodded.

"Yes, but... Mother, Father will never change back into a man. Ever. This is his form, from now until the end of time. Without him, all of you would be dead, sleeping in your tombs. Without him, I and all of us of the Second Generation would never have been born. Without him, our people would be nothing more than a brief note in a history book, and a quiet song sung by Auntie Joy's people over silent, broken stones. Don't leave him alone, and miserable. We owe him better than that. I..." Lyota said, her voice trailing off into silence.

I sighed. "Enough. Go now, all of you. Go back to Iolo Mountain, and tell the others I am alright. Spread the word to all that I am alright, so all the giants and elves and dwarves and gods-know-who-else you got to help you find me will stop worrying. The rest of this discussion is probably one you should have among yourselves, without being embarrassed by having me listen in on every word. Tell the children what I've decided - when each of them achieves the rank of Master, I will teach them the spell they need

to know to produce their own children. You'll have to explain it to them, and judging by Lyota's feelings you've a *lot* of explaining to do. Go. Now."

"Yes, Eddas," Pelia said, bowing her head.

"Farewell, Father," Lyota said, hugging me tight. I gave each of my courtesans a hug, and after a few more brief farewells, they joined hands, and Pelia cast her spell of returning. In a moment, only Joy and I remained.

I sat down with a sigh, pouring myself another cup of *byallar*, then looked to Joy. "Would you like a cup?"

"Yes, please," Joy replied. After taking a moment to fetch a cup from the cupboard, she sat next to me at the table. I poured a cup for her, and we sat together in silence, sipping at our cups.

"By the gods, Joy," I said, and sighed. "My heart feels like it's been wrung dry with all that's happened this evening."

Joy nodded. "I know. Kiriin told me a bit about what had happened while we waited for your courtesans to ready themselves. They wanted to be perfect for you, you know."

"I suppose they would."

Joy smiled. "Since you seem to be giving birth to a new race of people, I'm glad I was able to midwife a bit, and help it go a bit smoother. I've had a feeling for years your original idea wouldn't work, you know - and I told you that before. To the children, you *are* their father, whether you wish it or not."

"You were right, Joy - and I thank you for your help, this evening. Things were said that *needed* to be said. I thank you."

Joy smiled from behind her cup. "You are welcome. Tell me, though..." Joy said, pausing to sip at her *byallar*. "What happened with the mirror, exactly?"

I sighed, and told Joy what had happened, including what I realized about my relationship with Dyarzi afterward.

"She's right, you know, Old Man. You *should* let her go, and move on with your life. And you were right, too. Your memories of her were colored by time and love. She probably *wouldn't* have been happy as your wife, had she lived."

I nodded. "I'm surprised you've been able to tolerate being my companion these last twenty years, Joy."

Joy laughed. "I am *hardly* Dyarzi, Old Man. I'm no little rogue who was used to a life of excitement and danger. I am a giantess, and we prefer a more quiet and sedate life. Besides... It was my *destiny* to help you, Old Man. You told me so, yourself. And you needed me, too. When I first came here, you were so miserable at your fate, I was afraid if I took my eye off you for longer than ten seconds, you'd leap from your parapet."

I nodded. "I might have - though that probably wouldn't have killed me. I'd just have lain there, smashed and broken, until this body finally healed. I've been shot from a distance of a pace by a blunderbuss, I've even been eaten by ogres - I don't think ordinary means will kill me."

Joy shuddered. "Kiriin and Lyota told me about that... It must have been horrible."

I nodded. "It was."

We fell silent at that point, I lost in my own thoughts, and Joy apparently lost in hers. I poured us both another cup of *byallar*, and we sat and sipped in silence for a long while after. Finally, I looked to Joy, and saw the expression on her face. "Joy? What is it?"

"Hmm? Nothing, Old Man."

I smiled. "Joy, I've lived with you for twenty years, and I think I know you fairly well, by now. Something's bothering you. What is it?"

Joy shook her head. "It's nothing, Old Man. Don't worry about it."

I grinned. "Joy, I've also been a *woman* for over seventy years, I know that when you say 'it's nothing', then it's *something*," I said, and Joy laughed. "Tell me - what's the matter?"

Joy giggled. "Only in body, Old Man - you are still a man at heart, and this *everyone* knows."

"Don't avoid the question, either! Dyarzi used to be quite skilled at dodging a direct question, and though I might have let her get away with it, I'm *hardly* going to let you do the same," I said, and grinned again. "Now tell me - what's the matter?"

Joy shook her head. "Ah, the dreams of a little giantess, Eddas, nothing more. Don't worry about it."

"What dreams?"

Joy sighed. "Oh, I suppose I might as well tell you. You'll pester me for years until I do, I'm certain."

I grinned. "You're right - I will."

"Well..."

"Yes?"

"I've always wanted to be a proper giant-wife, as you know. I was, with Darian, but... Well, that's ended. And yet..."

"Yes?"

"And yet... I find my heart has been taken by another," Joy replied, and sighed deeply. "Oh, Eddas! I'm in *love* again!"

I blinked, surprised. "W-with *me*?!"

Joy did a double-take, then burst out laughing. "No, no! Not with you!"

I didn't know whether to be relieved or offended - I decided to simply smile. "Well, that's good. Who have you fallen for, then?"

"Softhand," Joy replied, and smiled dreamily. "He is so wonderful, Eddas... So sweet, so gentle, so handsome... And he asked me to marry him."

I shrugged. "So marry him, then."

Joy glowered at me. "Don't toy with me, Old Man, you know that's impossible! I'm only five cubits tall! How can I *possibly* marry him?!"

And then it struck me - the very spell I had so casually and easily researched for Kiriin was also the very spell that would allow Joy to live her dream of being a *real* giant-wife. Yorindar's work, almost certainly. Probably a repayment for the gods of the giants giving him Joy to be Darian's wife in the first place. And Darian had *needed* Joy when they met - there were no other females in Hyperborea his size that we knew of except for Arella and I, and neither of us was *ever* going to lie with him. And, at the same time, Darian needed progeny for his kingdom to come - and more, his son had needed the enormous strength he inherited from his mother to help him stay alive in the war *he* would fight against Cordo. Plans within plans, wheels within wheels... I shook my head. "Joy, you forget who you are talking to. I've had seven decades to work on your problem," I replied, and smiled.

Of course, I hadn't bothered to work on it until just today because I hadn't really *thought* about it, but I saw no need to tell Joy that - she was already whooping with happiness. Then again, that's probably one of several reasons Yorindar had when he arranged it so I would meet Kiriin - and *those* arrangements had probably been made millennia ago.

Suddenly, Joy paused, and looked at me seriously. "Wait! I *still* can't marry Softhand!"

"Why not?"

"Well... Who will look after *you*?"

I smiled. "Joy, I'm sure Yorindar has already made arrangements in that regard." *'Or, at least, I hope he has,'* I thought to myself. Spending the next few centuries alone in my tower did not sound appealing.

"And a dowry! I'll need a dowry!"

"Joy, you will be bringing the same dowry to Softhand that you brought to Darian - your incredible wit and intelligence. Longtooth knows the story, he'll hardly insist on a common dowry of steel knives and such."

"And a dress! I'll need a proper wedding dress!"

I shrugged. "Your wedding dress and all the things you and Darian left behind I packed in a trunk when I returned to my tower, seven decades ago. It should be in my closet, just there."

Joy whooped and leapt to her feet, dashing over to my closet. In a moment, she'd dragged out the small trunk I'd gotten from Taliad decades ago, tossed aside various oddments that lay atop the dress and pulled it out. She then let out a pitiful wail. "It's *ruined*!" she cried, and began to sob.

I looked at the cowhide dress she held in her hands. Seven decades had not been kind to it, and apparently, moths had been at it, as well. The leather of the dress, once soft and supple white cowhide pounded thin by Felicity's hand, was now dry and cracking - bits of it were flaking off as Joy turned it around. Most of the fur was still there, but large chunks of it had been nibbled by moths over the years, and it looked terrible. Joy brought the dress over to me carefully, then knelt before me, holding it out to me as she wept. "Please, Eddas... Please fix my dress. Arella's stitching was perfect... I cannot ask her to do it again. It was my fault for not remembering to bring it along, all those years ago. Please... Please fix it for me, Old Man."

*'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.'*

The voice was from my memory - Yorindar's words to me, twenty years ago. A chill went down my

spine for a moment, but finally, I smiled. Casting a spell of repairing, I tapped the dress almost idly with an ebon-gloved finger. In a moment, it was pristine and new again. I then leaned back in my chair and grinned as Joy danced around the room, whooping with the very emotion of her name.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

"Byallar does not ease pain by itself. The most it does is keep one awake when one is sleepy. And yet the sharing of a cup of byallar between friends can often ease more pain than the most profound of healing magic."

- Hyperborean proverb

"You look tired, Old Man," Joy said, in the language of the giants.

I nodded as I sat in my chair in the shade of the tree at the base of my tower. "A bit, yes, but I'm improving slowly," I replied, pouring myself a cup of *byallar*. Joy paused in her work at the millstone, gazing at me, and the other giantesses who were working around her also gazed at me curiously. Joy, of course, spoke in their language in deference to the others around her.

"Oooo, you're right, she looks very tired. Will she be alright?" Charity asked, gazing down at me for a moment before pouring another pan of roasted seeds into the center of the millstones to be ground.

"He," Joy corrected, smiling, and gripped each side of the two-ton millstone in her hands, then began turning it slowly, grinding the seeds. The task would have been impossible for her three months ago - but now, it was quite easy. Of course, this was because she was the same size as any other giantess sitting nearby, helping with the yearly harvest.

Making the enchanted bracelet Joy now wore had been simple - I'd simply picked up a stone, and used the Spell of Stone Shaping I'd discovered researching dwarven magic years ago, and shaped it into something that would easily fit over her wrist. Enchanting the bracelet, however, had been far more difficult. Any permanent enchantment causes a permanent drain to both body and soul, and for her bracelet, I needed three separate enchantments - invulnerability, so it would never break, a sizing enchantment so she could shrink it down to her wrist and never lose it, and of course the growth enchantment itself. I also added a fourth enchantment - the same age-restoring spell the Mountain Healers used to maintain their eternal youth, and the one I would eventually use on this body in a few centuries when it finally began to age. I told myself at the time it was because I knew it would make her happy. At night, however, as I lay there alone in the darkness, I realized it was simply because I couldn't stand the thought that someday, she would be gone. It would probably be another six months of meditation and strict physical regimen before I was back at my former strength - but the results were more than worth it.

Now, at a simple thought, Joy could alter her size to that of a giant - and, because the enchantment came from an item, the effect lasted indefinitely. I warned Joy about the dangers of shrinking herself down to her normal size while tired or wounded - she could die - but she simply laughed, and said it was *highly* unlikely she would ever reduce herself down to the size of a Little Person again. *'It feels right to be this size, Old Man... As though this was how I was always intended to be - and I will always be grateful to you.'* I had shaped the stone in more of an oval than a simple circle so it would fit her wrist better, and Joy wore it snugged down with less than a finger's width of room between it and her skin - the only way it could come off was if her hand came off, first. Naturally, the growth enchantment altered the size of the bracelet, as well as anything else she was wearing - her wedding dress was now tremendous in size, and lovingly stored and cared for in her new home in Dohbari Village.

"Oh! I'm terribly sorry, Eddas Ayar! We've all heard your story countless times, I should have

remembered!"

"It's nothing, Charity. I am not offended. And yes, I'll be alright in a few months," I replied, smiling up at her.

Charity smiled. *"Alright. Thank you,"* she called, and slowly rose to her feet to get more raw seeds to roast.

Joy smiled, her gaze upon her mate as he worked with the other giants, harvesting the seeds from my byallar trees. *"Old Man,"* she rumbled, *"you will never know how happy you made me. Softhand is... Everything, to me."*

"So, he's that much like Darian?" I asked, smiling.

Joy paused, looking down at me, and sighed. *"No, Old Man. Darian was... Darian was a warrior, and a King of the Little People. He had the same gentle touch, with me, but... Other than that, he was a different man. I loved him, as well - I always will. But Softhand is not Darian, nor would I ever want him to be. I love him as he is, just as I loved Darian as he was,"* she replied, then smiled at me. *"No, no... I can see by your face you think you've offended me, and you haven't. I've known you too many years, Old Man. I know you didn't mean to offend, you were trying to be nice."*

"Thank you - I was, as well."

Joy grinned. *"Besides... To Darian, I was a blonde goddess, as you and he often put it. But to Softhand and the rest of my people, I am quite ugly,"* she said, and laughed. *"I have the face of a Little Person, really - long, not round, and my nose sticks out too much. If it were not for my hair and the color of my eyes, I doubt Softhand would ever have noticed me."*

I smiled, shaking my head. Blonde hair was *extremely* rare among the giants, as were blue eyes, and both were considered marks of high beauty. *"You are hardly ugly, Joy, but I won't argue with you, today. I'm a bit too tired for that."*

Joy frowned. *"I am sorry for that, Old Man. Are you sure you'll be alright?"*

"Yes, Joy. It's nothing - merely the rigors of imbuing an item. I should be back to my old self again sometime this spring."

Joy smiled again, and resumed turning the millstone. *"Well, that's good. And I have a surprise for you that may make you smile."*

"Oh? What?"

Joy grinned broadly. *"I am carrying Softhand's child."*

"Joy, that's incredible!" I yelped, leaping to my feet. I took a moment to assense her mana-flow, and grinned. She was pregnant. I was elated.

"Are you looking at my baby now with that wizard's eye of yours?"

I nodded, widening my perception and examining her astral aura, and the smaller aura within her that was the unborn child.

"Good, because I want you to tell me..." she said, then paused. *"I want you to tell me if it will be alright, Old Man,"* she said in the language of the Larinians, because many of Dhobari village could now

speaking Hyperborean, thanks to Joy's patient tutelage over the twenty years she had been my companion.

"Mmm? What do you mean?" I replied, in the same language.

"You said once my ability to bear children was due more to a quirk of my own germ plasm than it was any relationship to humans that giants may have. I am worried, Eddas... What will my baby be like? Will it be a human, or a giant? Or perhaps half-giant, like my son? Or even-"

I smiled, my gaze still upon the auras I was examining. "Joy, don't worry. You are a giant, not a Little Person, and what I said was true. That's why it took you so many years of trying with Darian before you finally conceived your first child, yet you've conceived easily with Softhand. The child is a giant, and nothing else. And it does not carry that quirk that made you small, either. It will be a normally sized giant-child..." I said, then paused, and chuckled. "Which means you had *definitely* better not take off your bracelet, my dear, or you will be in *trouble*. You are enlarged by its enchantment, but the *child* is *not*!"

Joy threw back her head and laughed for a long moment. "*Never fear, Old Man, that will never happen,*" she said, returning to the language of the giants.

I grinned. "*Would you like to know the baby's gender?*"

Joy laughed again, and shook her head. "*No, Old Man. I think I'd rather be surprised in a few months. But thank you anyway - once again, you have made me very happy.*"

I smiled again, and sat down again in my chair beneath the shade of the large tree at the base of my tower. "*I am glad that you are happy, Joy.*"

"*And what about you? Are you happy, now? I mean... It's been three months... They haven't just left you alone, have they?*"

"*I'm alright, Joy. Don't worry about it.*"

Joy peered at me. "*They did leave you alone, didn't they?*"

I sighed. "*Joy, it's alright, really. There's an enormous difference between knowing something in your mind, accepting it in your heart, and being able to act on what your mind and your heart have understood. Yes, my courtesans have finally understood what I have known for twenty years, and what Lyota discovered as she grew up just looking at me. I will never be a man again. I am as you see, and always will be. And they have finally come to accept in their hearts that our civilization is truly gone. They will never touch a man of Hyperborea again, nor will they ever see the familiar sights of our homeland again. It took me thirty years to really accept that our civilization was gone, Joy - and that's about the length of time they've had, as well. It's not easy giving up hope, Joy. I should know,*" I said, and managed a smile as I continued.

"*Still, they now have a new hope, Joy. The children. They will grow up and create a new civilization, in a few centuries. Each and every one of them has the Talent, Joy, and it's quite strong. The civilization they will build will be unlike any other in the history of the world. A civilization built entirely upon sorcery, by an immortal race who survives and prospers on the power of sorcery alone. In a millennium or two, the civilization they will have built will be wonderful to behold. And all of Pelia's women will be able to watch it grow and mature, and enjoy the wonder and beauty of it all as it slowly unfolds over the centuries.*"

Joy gazed at me as she slowly and gently turned the four-ton millstone back and forth. "*Meanwhile, you*

sit here in your tower, alone. That's hardly fair, Old Man."

"Perhaps," I replied, sighing. "But it's as I said, Joy... There's an enormous difference between knowing something in your mind, accepting it in your heart, and being able to act on what your mind and heart have understood. They know in their minds our civilization is gone. They have, because of your help that night, finally accepted in their hearts that they will never touch a man of Hyperborea again. But being able to act on that..." I said, and shrugged. "I don't know, Joy. They may never be able to. Since that night, I have met with them and talked several times, both with all of them in a large meeting two months ago, and with each of them individually over the last three months. And they are still talking among each other. Lyota's lessons have come to a halt while my courtesans discuss themselves and their future with the older children - and while they discuss me, I suppose," I said, and Joy nodded while I continued.

"They love me dearly and respect me deeply, yes, but... Their feelings towards me have changed. They know their hope is gone. They will never touch a man of Hyperborea again. I can see it in their eyes, Joy. They do not desire me. They love me, they respect me, but they have no desire for me. What they desired was the hope, the dream that one day, my original form might be restored, and they might once again caress a man of Hyperborea. And that will never happen," I said, and sighed again. "Do you remember, once... You said that you thought they looked at me, and they did not see me as I was, but had an idealized vision of me in their minds?"

Joy nodded. "They did not see you as you are, a pale-skinned, dark-haired half-elf woman. You are, in their hearts, an idealized, perfect man - a kind, gentle, respectful, attentive, patient, and loving man, a man of their dreams. 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."

"Well, no longer. With the loss of their hope, that illusion has been shattered. Now, they look at me... And they see me as I am. And they are, in the end, women of Hyperborea. Even if they were sapphites, this body still holds little attraction for them."

"I don't understand - why not? Do they not find you beautiful?"

"They find me quite beautiful... But, in truth, as I have seen in my own mirror, the Raven of Yorindar has a terrifying, awe-inspiring beauty. This body received its final forging in the very heart of a mana-storm, Joy. It's beauty, in truth, borders on the surreal. My gaze is intimidating... And bereft of their little illusions of me, somewhat frightening," I replied, and shrugged. "Combine that with the fact that they in truth are not sapphites, but ordinary women caught in an extraordinary situation, and the fact that at the time they died, the culture of my people had yet to really interact much with other races aside from the giants, and we hadn't even met other humans at all..."

"And you become like the rose Taliad often says you are - beautiful, but not human to their eyes," Joy finished, understanding.

I nodded silently.

*Joy sighed, and sat there silently, thinking. The *byallar* in my cup had gone cold. I gazed at it for a moment, then set it down on the little table beside me beneath my shade tree. For a long moment, the only sounds were the quiet conversations of the giants as they worked the harvest, and the slow grinding sounds of Joy working my millstone. Finally, Joy looked to me, and spoke softly. "Old Man, I have something to tell you, and it is important," she said, in the language of the Larinians.*

"What?" I asked gazing at my cold cup as it sat beside me.

"Old Man, I intend to spend the next few decades with Softhand, bearing his children, and leading the life I might have had, had things been different. You say the gods stepped in, and changed my life before I was even born, to fulfill a destiny I did not even know. Perhaps they did. But I think they did this with you, as well. Thus, I do this for me... But I also do this for *you*."

I blinked, looking up at her. "For me?"

"Yes, Old Man. For you. I will live the life with Softhand you never were able to live with Dyarzi. I will dance for him. I will sing for him. I will love him in the darkness of a winter night. I will bear his children, and raise them into proper adults who will make their father proud. And when he dies, I will mourn him, as a proper giant-wife should. And all the while, I will be visiting you, and telling you what happens, each and every day. In this way, you can share in the life you were not able to have... A life you have given to me twice, out of simple friendship and the nobility of your heart," she said, and paused in her turning of the millstone to reach down to me, and gently stroke my cheek with an enormous finger. "And when he is gone, I will come back to you, Old Man, and be your companion again, and we shall sit and share the quiet evenings as we once did."

My eyes misted with tears. "Would you?"

"Yes, Old Man. And gladly."

"Thank you," I replied, and dried my damp cheeks with an ebon-gloved hand.

[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)

"Women have true power, regardless of whether or not they possess the Talent. Every woman who gives birth receives the power to curse her children with the ancient mother's curse - 'May your own children be just like you!' And even if the mother is a mundane and incapable of sorcery at all, the curse always works."

- Hyperborean proverb

Mungim came by two days after the harvest was finished. I bartered for the usual supplies I'd need until next spring - a much greater amount than it was years ago, since now the children and my courtesans stayed with me over the winter months. Yet, Lyota did not return to resume her lessons. I did not know what to do - I wanted to ask whether or not the lessons would resume, but I was afraid that my simple presence might disturb whatever discussions they might be having. So, I simply bartered for what I might need, and bid Mungim a fond farewell.

Taliad arrived a week after that - and to my surprise, Kiriin was with him, riding on his shoulder. They both seemed truly happy, and I chatted with them for well over an hour before I got down to the serious business of bartering for the vellum, ink, books, and other supplies I would need for my children when they came for their lessons - if they ever came at all. The days of fall came and went, however, and none but Joy came to visit me. Her daily visits became a true pleasure - though I told her that once winter came, I expected her to stay home. I hardly expected her to risk walking to my tower through the snow, slip, fall, and die. Joy agreed, though very reluctantly, that when the first winter snows came, she would stop coming until the following spring, once all the snows had melted. Our parting that day was very tearful - yet, she knew I was right. A fall, for a giant, was usually fatal, and most giants stayed indoors during winter.

I took a day expanding my tomb with the help of an earth elemental, giving my warriors and musicians enough room to stand comfortably. The notion was ridiculous, I knew - they were undead, and felt no discomfort. They were just as happy lying in an enormous pile of bone as they were standing quietly

inside my tomb in parade formation. Yet, I felt that they deserved it. They had served me honorably in war, twice, and their services had carried me through a difficult time of mourning. They deserved better than to simply be cast into a pile, or left to rot with the others I'd buried and released at Steelgate. My tomb looked truly ominous, now, as I walked among the pillars, gazing at my warriors in the darkness. After satisfying myself that all of them, even the horses the bass-drum players rode, were all placed properly and honorably, I then turned to the small chamber that was Dyarzi's tomb, and sealed it with a dwarven spell of stone-joining. In a moment, the stones were fused together, smooth, and indistinguishable from the wall itself. She, too, deserved to be treated honorably.

Slowly, the last days of fall faded into the early days of winter, and to my surprise, the children arrived, as they always had. I was totally unprepared for them - I had not cleaned out the rooms that my courtesans and their children would stay in, nor had I prepared lessons for the older children. Suddenly, my life was a bustle of activity while I tried to get everything ready as soon as I had finished greeting them all.

"Father, I don't understand," Lyota said, pausing in her industrious sweeping of the room on the bottom floor of my tower where she and the apprentices would be staying - though she was technically learning her journeyman's lessons, I hardly had the room in my tower to separate them, nor the desire. It seemed obvious that this year was the last the apprentices and the journeyman would be together, anyway - there were now a hundred and six apprentices sleeping in bunk-beds stacked three high, and next year there would be even more. I would have to build a separate building for them to all live in before next year arrived. "You're never this unprepared. Didn't you know we were coming back?" The other children also paused, gazing at me, waiting for my answer.

I paused in my own efforts to clean, and sighed. "Well... Honestly, no. After that night... Well, it's been six months, Lyota. I knew you were talking among yourselves, and had been for awhile... I thought that you had simply come up with another plan for your future... One that wouldn't involve me."

Lyota dropped her broom, dashed over to me, and hugged me tight. In a moment, all the girls were hugging me and sniffing. "Oh, you silly, silly goose!" Lyota wept. "We would *never* do that! You are *everything* to us! What you will teach us will make *everything* possible, and we *love you!*"

I could not reply for the longest moment - my voice was simply choked, and my body wracked with sobs as I hugged each one of them.

Finally, Lyota pulled herself free, and looked to the others. "Lassa, Koria, Melia, Jolie, you start work on the beds. Folia, Yoria, you two are the oldest, so you're in charge. The rest of you keep sweeping and dusting - there's still a *lot* of work to be done. As for me, I'm going to talk to mother again."

"Yell at her some more, you mean," Melia said, and she and the others giggled.

"That, too," Lyota replied, and snatched open the door, dashing out into the chill of the early winter afternoon. "*Motheeerrrr!*"

The girls all burst into giggles as they picked up their brooms again, and I couldn't help but smile at their laughter as I dried my eyes. "So, there's been a lot of yelling?"

"Quite a lot," Melia said, to more chorused giggles.

"Well, not *all* yelling," Folia interjected. She was the oldest, and would likely start her journeyman's lessons this spring - which under our previous plan had meant she would stay with me, but now I had no idea. "There's been a lot of calm discussion, too, among the older ones. The babies and the little ones get upset if we fight all the time. But yes, there's been quite a lot of yelling."

"Really?" I asked, surprised. I pulled up a stool, set aside my broom, and sat down. "What about? What's all the fuss been about?"

"Well, mostly you," Folia replied. "Not *all* you, of course. We have our own plans and our own dreams and we want to see them come true. We like the idea of being able to have babies ourselves, and we can't wait until we've all reached the rank of master. Well, of course, the First Generation thinks that's a smashing idea, because they hardly like the notion of having to have babies all the time. So a lot of that discussion was about the how and the why of it, and the rate of growth we'd have to have, and all sorts of things like that. We can't grow too fast, we'd crowd out the giants, and there would be trouble. Well, the First Generation has settled on producing one baby each every five years - or about one thousand, seven hundred and eighty a century for the first five centuries. After that, they're done with it - it's all up to us. We all agreed that any babies the Second Generation might produce in that time would come from that total, and once we're at about eight thousand nine hundred or so, that's that, they're done. And we like that idea fine, but we *don't* like what they want to do after that, not at all!"

"What is it they want to do?"

"They want to go back to their *old* life! They want to just wander the countryside, healing and birthing babies and doing what they did before the Great War blew everything up!"

"So what's wrong with that?" I asked, confused. "The giants would probably appreciate their services, and it would certainly strengthen the alliance between their people and ours."

"What's *wrong* with it is there's no place for *you* in that! You make *everything* possible, we *all* love you *very* much, even the First Generation, but they just want to finish the job and wander off and leave you alone?! If we couldn't see it in their auras, we'd *hardly* believe they cared for you at *all*!"

I sighed. "Folia, they're not like you of the Second Generation. When they were alive, it was a different world. Our people hadn't even met other humans, and aside from the giants, we had little contact among the other races, like the elves and the dwarves. You see-"

Folia rolled her eyes. "Yes, yes, Father, we know *all* about that! We've talked and talked and talked about all this for *months*! They literally don't *see* you the way we do! We see who you really are, inside! We see what you *really* look like! They only see the surface, like being able to see clothes, and not the person beneath!"

I smiled. "It's the same with every other race in the world, my dear, even the dragons. Dragons and some other creatures see auras, but no race can see everything that you can see. Only *you* will have this power - and the new Hyperborean race that will spring from your loins will be all the more powerful for that."

"Yes, Father, but it's still *very* silly! All they want is a *male*! They can't see that you're a male inside, they can't see that what they're doing hurts you, none of it! All they can see is this!" Folia replied, and poked my shoulder with a slender forefinger. "And *that*, Father, is like clothes. It's nothing!"

"Oh, but they don't want just *any* male, either!" Melia chirped, and the girls fell to giggling.

"No, they don't," Folia agreed. "They want a Hyperborean male. Brown skin, black hair, brown eyes. We suggested they might try a Curse of Infertility for awhile and just visit the Southlands and *oh*! The *row* that caused!"

"Their auras got all shot full of ickies just thinking about it!" Melia giggled.

"Almost as many ickies as they got when we suggested they simply take turns each night and lie with you

and make you happy because it was the right thing to do," Folia added, to more chorused giggles.

I could already hear the shouting outside, and I sighed as I rose to my feet. "Alright, girls. Keep working on this - I expect the room to be fully cleaned by dinnertime, or I'll be *very* disappointed in you. Alright?"

"Yes, father!" the girls chorused.

"Alright. I'm going out to put a stop to these arguments, once and for all," I said, and strode out through the open door, pulling it shut behind me.

I didn't have far to walk. Lyota and Pelia were screaming at each other in the middle of the road that ran past my tower and the little houses my courtesans and their children lived in during the winter months. A few flakes of snow were drifting down from the skies - in an hour or two, it would likely be snowing and bitterly cold. A handful of my other courtesans stood nearby, watching, visibly upset, and nearly two hundred children of various ages gazed on with expressions that ranged from amusement to weeping fear.

I was struck for a moment, looking at Pelia and Lyota, just how much alike they looked - Pelia preferred to keep her physical age at about thirty-five, but the relationship between the two was plainly obvious, despite Lyota only being twenty. They were very much like twins - and, indeed, both were fiery women who were not afraid to raise their voice when angry.

"*Six months*, mother! You mean to tell me in all that time not *one* of the First Generation thought to come visit him and at least hold his hand and *chat* for awhile?!"

"No, we didn't! We've all been extremely busy! Aside from having to work out everything with *you*, we've had to work on the gardens, keep watch on those who were pregnant, tan hides, chop wood and do all the million little things we all need done every day! He's been alone before, Lyota, we hardly ever visited him during the year before! He's not a child, it won't kill him!"

And at those words, my heart went cold. Despite everything she'd been told, despite hearing my own tale countless times from myself and Arella, Pelia did not understand me. No, I was not a child. But being alone for decades on end *would* kill me. I would literally go mad with loneliness, and destroy myself. I had died of loneliness in my first life, and I had nearly died of loneliness fifty years ago, when Arella abandoned me the first time. Had it not been for Joy's companionship these last twenty years, I might have died again. It was my own dark nature, a nature Joy helped me understand and alleviate through her companionship.

"This is *different*! You *knew* he was lonely, we *told* you he was lonely, we *told* you what Kiriin told us happened to him, and-"

"Enough!" I shouted, but the screaming went on. I took a deep breath, then *screamed*, the force of my scream backed up by the enchantment that now was a part of me, amplifying my voice to the level of a thunderclap. "**ENOUGH!**"

I could hear the echoes of my voice returning from the edges of the small valley of my lands as I glowered at Pelia and Lyota. Shocked into silence, the two of them gazed at me wide-eyed. So did everyone - doors opened, and in a few moments, all my courtesans and all my children were looking on.

"Lyota, you have forgotten something," I said quietly, glowering at her.

"Wh-what, Father?"

"Your parents deserve at least a modicum of respect. I never want to see you raise your voice to your mother again," I replied, and looked to all the others who gazed at us. "And that goes for *all* of you! You will all give your mothers, and *all* those of the First Generation *respect*. You *are* allowed to disagree with them, even disagree *strongly* with them, but you are *not* allowed to scream at them. *Ever*. Is that perfectly clear?"

"Yes, Father," came the reply, chorused by the children. The toddlers gazed on in confusion and fear, and some wept. They hardly understood what was happening, but there was time enough for them to understand, later.

Pelia was smirking, and I glowered at her. Her smirk instantly disappeared. "And as for you..."

"Y-yes, Eddas?"

"The relationship of courtesan to man is based on the notion that someday, the courtesan will marry the man. It is a trial period, taken so that the courtesan can prove herself. It is normally done when the woman is of a significantly lower social status than the man, giving her a chance to prove her worth and ability to assume a higher station in life."

Pelia sniffed. "I am *hardly* of a lower social status than you, Eddas. I am High Mistress of my circle."

"And I am the *Raven of Yorindar*," I replied, glaring at Pelia. Pelia looked at me, then wilted before the fierce and terrible gaze this body gave me. "*I am the servant of a god. I have leveled castles with a word, and I destroyed an army with a song*," I said, raising the volume of my words with my own enchantments.

"I-I'm sorry, Eddas, I didn't mean it like that, I only meant-"

"*Beneath your feet are a thousand undead - my warriors, awaiting my call*," I said, and whispered a brief command. A heartbeat later, the drums began to play from within my tomb. The muffled sound chilled the women more than the cool winter breeze that began to pick up, and many shivered. "*I have walked the Elemental Planes. I have summoned greater demons. I have sailed the Sunless Sea. I raised each and every one of you from the Void. It was I who allowed you to give birth to these children, and my power is such that I no longer even need your bracelet to do it. Do you claim to be my equal, Pelia?*"

"N-no, Master Eddas," Pelia replied, bowing her head.

I raised my hand and whispered, and the drums fell silent.

"Each of you agreed to become my courtesan in the hope that someday, I might perhaps become a man again. This will never happen. *I am the Raven of Yorindar, now and forever, until the Arc of Time collapses and the universe dissolves into the chaos of the Elder Days, and finally fades back into the Void from whence it came*. As per the Third Vow of Acceptance, I have never asked any of you to lie with me. And, it is plainly obvious that none of you want to. And yet, a relationship cannot be maintained between husband and wife without conjugal relations. You have taken pleasure from me each time I have touched you to give each of you a child, yet you have no intent of ever returning that pleasure to me. You know that I receive no pleasure from this - I do this because it is necessary, and because I care for each and every one of you, and hope to build a new civilization among the ruins of our old. And now I discover that your plan for the future, once that civilization is begun, is to simply walk away from me, and return to your old life."

"But, Eddas, we-"

"*Silence!*" I roared, hating that it came out as a woman's angry shriek. "It is obvious to me that this will not work. You will never become my wives, because I will never become a man, and you will never be able to lie with me, for the same reason. Thus, I release you from your vow."

"Eddas, no!" Pelia wailed, and several others joined her.

"Yes. It is done. You may stay or go as you wish, but you and all the rest of your circle are no longer members of my household, and are no longer entitled to a place at my hearth. You may stay as my guests, if you wish, but you are nothing more than that. By the Fourth Vow of Acceptance, our children remain a part of my household, and they retain the right to a place at my hearth. You, however, do not." I said, and turned my back on Pelia, striding quickly to my tower.

"*Now* look what you've done, Mother!" Lyota growled as I walked away.

But Pelia did not reply, she simply fell to her knees and wept.

As I stepped back into my tower, the girls there all reached out to me. "Father! Please say we don't have to go away!" Folia wailed.

I reached down and hugged each of them, drying their tears. "No, no. None of you ever have to leave. You are all my daughters, by Hyperborean law and tradition. Your mothers don't have to leave either - though they probably will," I said, and sighed. "If they choose to take you with them, then you must go with them. Such are our ways - it is the mother's right to choose where the child shall live. Still, those of you who are sixteen years old can remain here if you wish, despite what your mothers may want. This also is our way. But no, none of you have to go away unless that is what your mothers wish. You will always be my daughters, and I love each and every one of you."

"Well, I'm seventeen, and I'm staying with you!" Folia said firmly.

"But I'm only fourteen!" Melia wailed.

"Go and talk to your mothers, all of you. Go on - I'll still be here after. Go."

Eventually, I shooed the last of them out of my tower, and closed the door. I could already hear the babble of hundreds of conversations - and much weeping. As I walked up the stairs to the top of my tower, I found that I simply didn't care anymore. It was time Pelia and her women realized that I was *Yorindar's* tool, not theirs. They could not simply use me as it pleased them, and then leave me alone to rot in a few centuries when my task was done.

I reached the top of the stairs, and began to walk into my room - then paused, surprised. Sitting atop my table was a small white rabbit, which gazed at me quietly with bright, golden eyes.

"Vyleah, I presume."

'Yes, *Eddas Ayar*.' the rabbit replied, its words a soft woman's voice echoing in my mind.

[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)

"There have been, perhaps, six Great Mages in all of the history of Hyperborea prior to the Great War of Devastation. To that number, the elves add four more, and the dwarves five. The defining element of what makes a Great Mage is the ability to make Artifacts - a knowledge lost to all the races of today. Yet, apparently, the possession of this knowledge brings with it an understanding of the Deep Magics which underlie the universe itself, for all the Great Mages are characterized by the possession of power even greater than that of the most powerful of the Hyperborean

battle-mages. Knowledge of the Deep Magic goes beyond anything discussed in this humble tome - and, perhaps, beyond anything that could be explained in any book of this nature, anyway. Yet, the secret is out there, somewhere. And, someday, I shall find it."

- Eddas Ayar, The Mathematics of Magic, Afterword, Date Unknown, presumed 17th century NCC

I bowed. It wasn't every day an ancient fertility goddess of my people decided to grace my home with her avatar's presence, and it seemed the appropriate thing to do. "Welcome to my tower, Vyleah."

'Thank you, Eddas Ayar. Though you are not mine, Yorindar has allowed me to speak with you.'

"With respect, Vyleah, I hardly have anything to say to you. As I understand it, your deal with Yorindar was worshippers in exchange for assistance in giving birth to the Hyperborean race again. So far as I can see, that deal is complete. The White Mountain Healers worship you. They are immortal. Their children worship you. They are immortal. You have what you wanted."

'It was hardly that simple, Eddas Ayar. Please... This particular manifestation is extremely tiring - I hardly have time to argue. Just take back your words, and take my children back into your household again.'

"So that they can simply use me to procreate, then abandon me in a few centuries? I hardly think so."

Vyleah looked upwards. *'Yorindar! Please!'*

The air shimmered above my table, and an owl appeared by the rabbit. *'Alright, I'll talk to him - but I doubt it will do any good. He has a point, you know.'*

'It was her choice, her free will... I erred when I chose her.'

'Hardly. She was a perfect choice, given your board position. Your err was in not speaking to Eddas sooner.'

'I wasn't sure he'd listen.'

'Don't judge Eddas just by his relationship with me. Yes, he argues - he always argues. But he always listens. That's why I chose him. I wanted someone who was strong, and who would think, and who would do the right thing because he could see it was the right thing to do. He always listens, Vyleah. He may not agree with me all the time, but eventually, he does come to understand my choices once he thinks about it long enough. Even now, he understands why I was reluctant to allow him to even see his beloved Dyarzi.'

"Because I might have lost hope," I said, sitting down at my table and looking the two of them over. "And I did. My dream to recover Dyarzi has driven me for years. Now, I have nothing. Yet, I am still here. I know what Yorindar's goal is, and I am willing to work towards it. Not in the manner of a donkey following the carrot Yorindar dangles on the end of a stick, but in the manner I was born and trained - that of a Hyperborean battle-mage. *However:*" I said, and poked an accusing finger at Yorindar. "If you think I am going to sit here in my tower like a liche in his tomb, gathering dust while I sit alone and wait for the call to your next battle, you've another think coming, Yorindar!"

Yorindar tipped his owl's head, as though smiling. *'Have I ever failed you before?'*

I crossed my arms. "No, but you've let me rot for a decade or two from time to time."

'Only when necessary, as you should know by now. And that was another reason I chose you - you are strong enough to take it. Few other mortals are, Eddas.'

I nodded. "Alright, I can accept that."

'You see, Vyleah? Just talk to him. Tell him why.'

'Alright... Eddas Ayar, do you know the Law of Tantity?'

I rolled my eyes. "Of course. *'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.'*"

'He is a Master Mage, Vyleah,' Yorindar said, his voice sounding amused. *'In fact, he's one of the Great Mages - a truly rare birth. I expect he'll be puttering about and making artifacts in a few centuries, once he figures out how to get around the limitations of Tantity.'*

'Ah, sorry, I'm nervous. Well, Tantity is a subset of the Law of Karmic Balance-'

"It is not! It's an absolute, not a sub-law!" I snapped, rolling my eyes.

'Or perhaps sooner,' Yorindar observed, chuckling.

I blinked, then peered at Yorindar for a moment. "What's the Law of Karmic Balance?" I asked, then suddenly looked back to Vyleah. "And how can a goddess be nervous?"

Yorindar chuckled. *'The law of Karmic Balance is one that affects us, Eddas.'*

Vyleah nodded. *'And a goddess can be nervous when her existence depends on a single move in the game.'*

"Wait... I'm threatening your existence?"

'No. My sixth move will determine whether or not I win. But I cannot make the move if my pawn is no longer there. My pawn will not be there for that move if it does not exist. My pawn will not exist if it is not born. My pawn will not be born if you alter the situation to remove yourself as the Karmic Balance. The pieces on my board depend on the pieces on Yorindar's board.'

'And, to a lesser extent, mine on hers, and on several other gods, including the gods of the giants, the elves, the dwarves, the-'

"Enough, enough, I get the idea. It's that... 'Greater Game' that Morgar mentioned."

'He is very astute,' Vyleah commented.

'Another reason I chose him,' Yorindar replied, almost smugly.

'Unfortunately, I had to choose for strong leadership, wide hips and a fiery temper - such was the board position.'

"*'You play the hand you're dealt,'* as we Hyperboreans used to say," I remarked dryly.

'Exactly,' Yorindar replied.

"Alright, so what is the Law of Karmic Balance? *Exactly?*"

'You remember when you asked me why the Invaders had to come to your shores?' Yorindar asked in return.

"Yes, you gave me an incredibly convoluted explanation where a hundred things were linked to another hundred things both forwards and backwards in time and it ended up making my head hurt," I replied, making a face.

'All the laws which affect us are like that, Eddas. It is not 'If A, then B', as the laws which affect you are. It is always 'If A, then B. Meanwhile, C and D are E, which must derive from a function of B. Also, F is always G, but H is never I unless J and K are equal to L, at which time I is equal to H and E is equal to M, which is also equal to a function of G', and so on, to infinity. And I mean to infinity, Eddas. If I tried to explain how the Law of Karmic Balance affects us using words your mind can comprehend, we would be sitting here until the end of time.'

I grinned wryly. "It's quite tempting to take you up on that offer, Yorindar. Listening to a god explain multiversal laws until I fainted with exhaustion? The scholar and researcher in me is intrigued by just what I'd learn even trying to listen to a few hours of it," I said, then paused. "Wait, though - you said that the Law of Tativity was a sub-set of the Law of Karmic Balance. So that means there is a version of it which affects *me*. So explain *that* to me."

Vyleah shrugged. *'It won't make much sense in this context, but to you, the Law of Karmic Balance is; The effect of any given application of mana is directly limited by the degree of causally-related selflessness relative to the caster, with the absolute degree of universal resistance being logarithmically proportional to an inverse of the causally-related selflessness of the caster's desire.'*

"Ah! Of course!" I said, slapping my forehead. "Why didn't I see that myself? I could have made Joy's bracelet with hardly any effort at all, if I'd just- Ah! And palliations! Why, I could easily-"

Yorindar nudged Vyleah with a wingtip, nodding to me. *'Watch this,'* he muttered. *'So, Eddas, can you see how that applies to you and the White Mountain Healers?'*

I paused, considering what had been said, and what had been happening to both myself and the White Mountain Healers. After a long moment, I nodded. "I'm the balance. I give them respect and affection, I care for them deeply, and I even give them my child - and they can return very little of it, because of their situation, and the way they see me in their hearts and minds. Yet none of it's their fault - Pelia and her women cannot help being the way they are. They want to make it up to me, but they just can't - neither they nor their daughters can really do anything about it. Thus, they suffer enormous guilt and anguish over this, but cannot do anything about it... Yes... It sets up a debt... A debt of suffering, in fact. This debt of suffering balances against any that they may owe, themselves. Thus, *I* suffer so as to produce the guilt *they* suffer that they may live a life relatively free of suffering. Which, given that their numbers are so small right now, makes sense. There's not much they can take and survive, either as a group, or a people. There's just too few of them at the moment to handle anything more serious happening to them than simple communal guilt over one man's loneliness and concupiscence."

Vyleah nodded, flicking her ears towards me respectfully. *'Truly one of the Great Mages, Yorindar. How did you ever manage to get him away from Morgar?'*

Yorindar chuckled. *'I bluffed him into thinking that if Dyarzi died, Eddas would marry another. Morgar realized that would have stabilized Eddas' life, he'd eventually have become the High Master after Frarim, and his tomb would fall within the ninth Dead Zone. Morgar chose Cordo,*

leaving me free to choose Eddas.'

"You *bluffed* Morgar?!" I said, and burst out laughing.

'Of course. It's the nature of the game.'

I wagged an ebon-gloved finger at the golden-eyed owl. "I am beginning to like you, Yorindar."

'I would hope so, Eddas. We'll be working together for a long, long time,' Yorindar replied, chuckling.

I looked to Vyleah. "Alright - you get what you want, Vyleah. Now, you and Yorindar have both said that these kinds of physical manifestations are tiring. So shoo, little goddess - save your energy for your opponent."

Vyleah boggled for a moment, giggled, then burst out laughing. *'Oh, Eddas Ayar - I see again why Yorindar selected you! Farewell, Great Mage.'*

Yorindar also was laughing. *'Ah, Eddas! What a prize you are! Yes, you're right - it's quite tiring. But my game with Morgar is over, and my next game has yet to begin, so I have the energy to spare. Vyleah does not, as her game is still on - and she was asleep, Eddas. One of the Dead Gods, until you spoke her name aloud for the first time in centuries. I needed you to speak her name. I needed her as an ally. And, I'm grateful you came through, once again. But, she awoke to a board where the majority of the opening positions of her pawns and her first hand were already played - by me.'*

"A terrible position to start, in *chatto*. Probably worse in the game you play," I replied, nodding.

'Yes, it is. She could hardly spare the energy to speak to you - but I'm sure that the laugh you gave her was well worth it,' Yorindar replied, and chuckled again. *"Shoo, little goddess!" Hah!"*

I considered what I'd learned. For Vyleah to lose, that meant all her worshippers would have to die. My courtesans, my children - all of them. And what might prevent that is one woman, yet to be born? Meanwhile, Yorindar needed my people to help bring Tulan about, sometime in the future. Almost certainly, I would be involved. And that meant that sometime before this woman was born, Yorindar's next game would begin.

"Exactly," Yorindar replied, reading my thoughts, and vanished in the same shimmer in which he'd appeared.

I sat at my table, stroking my chin and thinking for a long while. Finally, I rose to spark a fire in my fireplace and make myself a pot of *byallar*. I understood Yorindar far better now than I ever did before - in truth, I understood all the gods better than I had before. I doubted I completely understood them, of course. They *were* gods, and the very nature of their existence was infinite. There was probably an endless number of facets of their existence I had not been exposed to. As I considered it, I realized that even the 'games' they played were probably not even as I understood them to be - some kind of vast, four-dimensional *chatto* game. That was, in all likelihood, merely the way my mind interpreted them. An ant gazes up at the boot of a man, and sees a mountain - yet a man is more than a mountain, and far more than the ant can ever truly grasp.

I was so engrossed in thought, sitting and sipping at my cup of *byallar*, that I didn't notice when Pelia finally came up the stairs. I only noticed her when she finally spoke, her voice trembling, her words interrupted by snuffles.

"Eddas... Please... I'm sorry. I know this has been difficult for you... I know you care for us... Perhaps you even love us, as we love you... But we just can't. We *want* to, yes... But we can't. Yes, we have... I mean... It's been *thirty years*, Eddas... And sometimes, in the dark of night, when the memories of what we once had become too much... Yes, some of us have... Have even..." she said, and sobbed. "Yes, you are beautiful... But not... Not in... Not in a human sense, Eddas, I'm sorry! You are so beautiful and powerful it's almost as though you were a goddess, yourself! And yet, we know you are not, Eddas... Eddas, please... Forgive us... Take us back, Eddas... Please... You are all we have left..." she said, and sobbed again. "You are all we have left..."

I turned my head and gazed at Pelia silently. She was kneeling before me, her head to the floor, sobbing and sniffing. I considered carefully what I would say. I couldn't simply say '*it's alright, I talked to the gods, all this is necessary so you'll feel guilty over me and suffer that instead of perhaps suffering something else that might be worse, it's all a part of the games the gods play.*' Aside from the fact that she'd probably not understand that, if she *did* understand what was happening, *truly* understand, she wouldn't feel as guilty over it, and the whole balancing effect that Vyleah needed to insure their safety and happiness would evaporate. No, it was all a part of the game - and the game was not merely a game of physical dimensions, but emotional, spiritual, and temporal dimensions. Perhaps Vyleah would select another 'king' for her second game - one more powerful, whom she could invest greater effort into, as Yorindar had done with me. Perhaps, as time passed, Pelia herself would grow and become more powerful. Perhaps this was all a part of Pelia's own forging. Perhaps not. No matter - I knew there was only one thing I could say.

"*Forglamma*, Pelia. *Forglamma*," I replied, sipping at my cup of *byallar*. "It never happened."

Pelia looked up suddenly, her tear-streaked face lighting up with joy. "Really, Eddas?! You would-"

"*Forglamma*, Pelia. It is forgiven, and forgotten. I take you and all the rest back into my hearth. We shall never speak of this again after this moment. It never happened. Now leave me, and tell the others."

"Thank you, Eddas! Thank you!" Pelia wept, leaping to her feet and hugging me tightly for a moment. She then turned and dashed down the stairs.

I gazed after Pelia for a moment, then resumed sipping at my cup. Yes, I understood the gods and their conflicts far better now than I ever had before - though I was certain my own comprehension was limited by my own mortal mind. The Greater Game was both war and peace, existence and nonexistence, a struggle for domination, and yet a struggle to bring about in the world each god's vision of how the world should be. Perhaps the reason Yorindar was able to make the alliances he made was simply that *his* vision of the world, the vision of the future *he* was struggling to bring about, was a world where there would still be more than one deity - but the games, themselves, would no longer matter, as the war between the gods would be ended, just as the conflicts between the races would end.

I smiled. It was a worthy goal - and I didn't need Yorindar's enigmatic 'exactly' to know I was right.

Chapter Forty

"The true measure of a man lies not in his fame or achievements, but in the horse he rides. Any churl can ride an ordinary nag, but a horse of true fire, spirit and intelligence gives its rider the greatest measure of fame and honor. Likewise for his wife, the woman who agrees to stand by his side and share his life - but without the bit and bridle, as they usually find that objectionable."

- *Mysantian proverb*

"Ah, Eddas!" Taliad said, grinning. "Now my joy is truly complete. Not only have you given me the

most beautiful and sparkling little wife I could ever possibly have asked for, but for once, I have finally beaten the hairy one to your door!"

Kiriin giggled as she sat on Taliad's shoulder, pausing in toying with his long, blonde hair in the spring sunlight. *"You only needed a bit of pixie-magic to help you do it, dear,"* she replied, in Elvish, in deference to her new husband. Whether she had learned the language in just a few months or whether she was using a spell of translation, I did not know - I suspected the latter.

I smiled as we sat together beneath my shade tree, and poured another cup of *byallar* for Taliad. Winter's snows had come and gone, and the first days of spring were upon us - and so far, this spring promised to be warm and lovely. *"I only regret I was not able to attend your wedding. It must have been beautiful."*

Taliad simply smiled and nodded, but Kiriin sighed and smiled beatifically. *"Oh, Eddas... It was. A beautiful symphony of crystal magic and woodland sorcery, the likes of which no pixie has ever seen. It was so lovely... Like the petals of a daffodil, slowly opening to the morning sun."*

"Such are the weddings of the Sylvani," Taliad replied, smiling.

"I've seen a Katani wedding, ages ago," I said, pouring myself a cup of *byallar*. *"That was lovely, too. Never in all my days had I seen a larger collection of more beautiful, more elegantly crafted enchanted armor. Everyone gleamed like the sun, and the bride's mithril dress was so finely made, the chainmail rings so small and delicate, it looked like shimmering samite."*

Taliad nodded again. *"Aye, Eddas, I've seen that, too. The rings are each the size of a small bead, and enchanted silver threads are woven through them to lend opacity and silence to it. Very lovely - of course, even with the enchantments upon it, it also weighs about two stone,"* he replied, and laughed.

"Is it clothes, or armor?" Kiriin wondered aloud.

Taliad grinned. *"To our noble and beloved cousins, the Katani, there is no difference between the two, my love."*

I nodded. *"I sometimes wish I had more of their work. I have a set of..."* I said, and found myself blushing. *"Well, Kiriin's seen it, I wear it beneath my robe. It's women's undergarments, I suppose, but made of fine elven chain. Once you get used to it, it's actually quite comfortable. Unfortunately, it's hardly armor. It only covers my..."* I said, and blushed again.

"Mmm? What does it look like?" Taliad asked. Kiriin, seeing my embarrassment, whispered in his ear. *"Ah! A nephní. Thank you, Kiriin,"* Taliad said, nodding to his tiny little wife.

"Is that what it's called?" I asked, struggling to regain my composure. *"I've worn it for over seven decades and never known - in fact, I don't think Dyarzi knew what it was when she owned it. It was just... Her 'dancing outfit',"* I said, and found myself blushing again.

Taliad grinned. *"Well, my friend, if she wore it to dance for you, I hardly think those dances were a simple pavane,"* he said, and winked. *"But yes, it's called a nephní - literally, 'nothing', or 'a trifle'. It's actually a rather common undergarment worn by Katani females, please don't be embarrassed."*

"And you say you like it, and might want more?" Kiriin asked.

"Well, yes. As we discovered during my encounter with those ogres, Kiriin, my own enchantments

may give me protection equal to that of the finest articulated plate, but that, sometimes, is not enough."

Kiriin blanched, but Taliad leaned forward slightly, sensing a business opportunity. *"Ah, I see. So a fine suit of light armor would be of some use?"*

"Perhaps - but light in weight, not protection, Taliad. I would want the best possible enchantments."

Taliad reached to his side, picking up his portable writing desk and laying it across his lap. In a moment, he had quill and ink ready to write on a sheet before him. *"Alright, my friend - exactly what might you be interested in seeing, when I return this fall?"*

I considered the question. *"Well... I'm hardly used to wearing armor, so it would have to be as light in weight as possible, and as comfortable as possible. A good sizing enchantment would be a must on each piece."*

"Naturally," Taliad replied, taking notes.

"And I hardly have the time to care for a hundred thousand links of chain or polish up plates, so I'd want a proper invulnerability enchantment on each piece, as with the nephní I wear."

Taliad nodded. *"That's not a problem, my friend, nearly all their armor is enchanted like that, save that worn by the poorest or youngest of warriors."*

"Hmm... A full suit of chain, I think, to start. Not chain like the Larinians wear, Taliad, I mean Katani chain - proper elf-chain, preferably mithril."

Taliad nodded, writing down what I wanted, but Kiriin scratched her head. *"What does that look like?"*

"It covers from the top of the neck all the way down to the toes, my dear," Taliad replied. *"It's much like a glove for the entire body, made of light, silvery metal. It's in two pieces, you see. You slip on the top like a tunic, then the bottom like a pair of breeches, then you adjust the sizing enchantment and it's much like a second skin. It's quite airy, not hot and sweaty, and properly enchanted it provides excellent protection."*

"A Katani short cuirass, as well... Ah, I've forgotten what they're called. You know, the rib-length ones? Arced in front so you can bend over, and coming to just below the ribs?"

"Ah, yes, a nodash."

"It has a special name?" Kiriin asked.

"Yes, love. I am Sylvani, a wood elf, as you know. Nodash is a name used by our noble and beloved cousins, the Katani. They are the best of us at the Art of War - and as with any other art, there are many special terms the artists have developed for their work," Taliad explained, and grinned.

"It's intended for defenders in a siege, standing at the battlements of a castle," I explained. *"Elven castles use crenelated walls combined with permanent roofs, called hoardings, above. For a defender standing behind a crenellated wall with a stout hoarding above, only their upper body is ever exposed. So, the abbreviated design allows the defenders to duck quickly."*

"And ducking quickly is somewhat important when a shower of arrows come by to interrupt one's enjoyment of an otherwise pleasant afternoon," Taliad said, and chuckled as Kiriin giggled.

"And I want it myself because ducking and dodging are half of the defensive techniques I was taught. A full cuirass would probably make me feel like a turtle in a shell - inflexible, and unable to really move."

"Ah, I see," Kiriin replied, smiling.

"What else, Eddas?" Taliad asked.

"Well, pauldrons, of course. And not those insanely flared ones the Katani love so much, just a simple set of pauldrons - you know, like the Larinians wear."

"One plate here, front to back and across the top, then a second plate beneath, curved to cover the rest of the shoulder, yes?" Taliad asked, indicating from base of his neck to the tip of his shoulder, then cupping a hand over his upper arm at the shoulder.

"Yes. And a set of articulated plate sleeves and gauntlets. It's difficult to cast if my arms are broken. And I want the pauldrons to attach to the cuirass, the sleeves to the pauldrons, and the gloves to the sleeves. Oh - and a set of full greaves. Ankle to knee."

Taliad scribbled more notes. "And a helmet?"

"No. My own enchantments already protect me enough from blows to the head. I could increase it, but it's hardly worth bothering. No matter how much protection I may have on my head, a strong enough blow will break my neck, anyway. Oh! And I expect the cuirass to be..." I said, and glanced down at my bust. "Err... Properly shaped."

Kiriin burst into giggles, but Taliad merely smiled. "Don't worry, Eddas. It will have the proper basic shape, and the sizing enchantment will do the rest," he replied, and looked the list over. "All in mithril, and with only the best protection enchantments, yes?"

"Yes."

Taliad nodded, taking a few more notes, then smiled as he put away his writing kit and examined the list again. "It will be an impressive suit of armor, my friend - but I'm afraid the price will be impressive, as well."

I nodded. "Easily two years worth of my crop, if not more. However, as I know you collect interesting things, I had something else in mind," I replied, and reached to my side, pulling out a small, brown leather sack from beneath my waist-belt. I laid it across Taliad's lap, then steepled my ebon-gloved fingers against my chin.

Kiriin peered at the pouch as Taliad picked it up and examined it. "An empty sack?" she asked, scratching her head in confusion.

"Hardly, my little love..." Taliad replied, his eyes widening as he assensed its mana-flow. "It is... There are a few like myself who collect interesting things... And of all the artifacts we search for, this is one of the rarest. It is a Bag of Holding, and it's worth a king's ransom."

I smiled. "The opening of the bag is a circle approximately three hands wide, though of course it's flexible within those limits so that you could slip a flat painting or similar object in that was up to a cubit wide. Anything that can fit inside the opening will be stored in stasis until called forth or

the bag is dumped out. The bag has a capacity of two tons, and full or empty weighs but a few ounces - though you can tell when it's getting full, because it will begin to bulge as you place objects inside it and it nears its capacity. You'll have to carry it with you for about a day before it's attuned to you, and until then you can't even open the drawstring. Afterwards, however, you can easily retrieve objects from the bag by merely placing your hand inside the opening and thinking of the item to be withdrawn. The bag can also be turned over and dumped out, and everything inside will simply pour out in a rapid stream of paraphernalia until the bag is empty. Oh - the bag is magicked in such a way as to prevent the entry of liquids not contained within a sealed container, thus the bag is also waterproof. And, of course, it's invulnerable to harm, so there's no worry about sticking sharp objects into it."

Taliad stroked the bag gently with his fingertips. *"It's lovely... The leather is soft and supple... Kidskin, it looks like... The stitching is excellently done, looks like dwarven work... It's in perfect condition, not a single stain or a speck of dirt on it..."* Taliad looked to me. *"My friend... I will be honest with you. I cannot accept this."*

I simply smiled, but Kiriin blinked in surprise. *"What?! Why not?"*

"I would be robbing him blind, Kiriin, and Eddas and I have known each other far too long for me to take advantage of him like that. This bag is extremely rare... I know of perhaps four in existence. Eddas could take this to the lands of the elves, knock on the gates of the queen's castle, and easily fetch fifty thousand gold for it."

"Whaaaaat?!" Kiriin yelped, shocked.

"Yes, my love... It's incredibly rare, and millennia old."

"Oh, hardly, Taliad," I replied. *"I finished the enchantment on it last week, and the bag is one I got from Mungim last year. The leather in it can't be more than two years old."*

I basked in the stunned silence that fell over my two friends for many long moments thereafter.

"But-but how?!" Taliad sputtered when he finally found his voice again. *"No enchantment of extradimensional space can possibly be made that large! The drain to create an artifact like this would be tremendous... Insane! The palliations you would need to bring it down to something even a dragon could survive would violate the Law of Tativity! The Law of Tativity-"*

"Is not an absolute," I interrupted, and smiled again.

"Yes, it is!" Taliad shot back, then paused, and gazed at the bag in his hand while Kiriin giggled. *"Well... No, I suppose it isn't,"* he said, then snorted. After a moment, he burst out laughing.

I smiled as my two friends laughed, sipping at my cup of *byallar*. It was quite awhile before Taliad managed to catch his breath, but when he did, he flashed a broad grin at me. *"Oh, Eddas! You are a fine and marvelous friend, and obviously one of the Great Mages of history - for only a Great Mage could possibly make an artifact. Even though the joke was on me, it's still a lovely and wonderful thing! I thank you,"* he replied, and held the bag back out to me.

I smiled. *"It was hardly a joke, Taliad."*

"But Eddas! I can't possibly take this in trade! It's worth twenty times what that armor you want is worth, easily! You're a friend, Eddas, I couldn't possibly cheat you like that!"

I shrugged. *"Keep it then, as a gift."*

Taliad blinked, astonished. *"You're kidding."*

"No. Keep it. Your companionship has meant a lot to me over the decades, Taliad. There have been times..." I said, and smiled wanly. *"There have been times when only the expectation of the next arrival of you and Mungim have kept me from tossing myself from the top of my tower in despair and loneliness. Keep it, Taliad. As a gift, from me, to you."*

Taliad rose from his chair, and we hugged for a long moment. Afterwards, Taliad and I sat again, and he gazed at the little leather sack. *"The prize of my collection, Eddas. Easily the crowning jewel. And worth all the more because it's the first new artifact created in the world in perhaps three thousand years, by the first Great Mage to appear in our world in as long as I can remember. Literally priceless, in fact."*

"I'm still experimenting with the technique I used to make it, Taliad. Though I've discovered how to circumvent the Law of Tativity, I've yet to completely map out all the details of the law above it which supercedes it. That work may take me several decades, perhaps another century. Once I'm done, I'll probably revise the book of magic theory I've written to include what I've learned."

Taliad eyed me sharply. *"You've written a book of magic theory?"*

I smiled, sipping my cup of byallar. *"Yes. I call it 'The Mathematics of Magic'. It includes all the knowledge of the Hyperboreans, the elves, the dwarves, and the Larinians, and several other notes on magic theory, both ancient and modern. Oh, and I've a few chapters on draconic magic theory, which I learned talking to Karg the Terrible ages ago. Lyota and Folia are studying a copy of it now, in my room in the tower - they have a test coming up this afternoon. As I said, however, it does not include my most recent discoveries, which allowed me to make that bag - I'm still experimenting and learning about that. Would you like to see it?"*

Taliad controlled himself well. *"Ah, Eddas - as I've said before, much to my regret, your language has been all but lost to living memory among our people, and only a handful of scholars know it. And, as I've yet to add a translation spell to my grimoire..."* he said, and sighed. *"Much as I would love to read your work, I literally can't."*

Kiriin perked up. *"I could translate it for you, dear! I know a translation spell! I could just read it to you!"*

"Yes, my little love, but the true value of something like that would be in copying it, not simply keeping it to myself - though I would keep a copy myself, of course, as it would be quite valuable to me. Still, I've no plans on becoming a scholar and giving up my trading for the interesting things I seek quite yet - and to gain the interesting things I seek, I trade. Certainly a single copy of that work in elvish, once I copied it myself, I could trade for the very armor Eddas wants, easily. However, the only Magic Quill I've come across in four decades I traded to Eddas himself, years ago. Since I can't read it, copying it by hand would take years, and I would easily lose out to the hairy ones on these trading routes if I took a few years off to do the work. And, with it written in Hyperborean anyway, the value would be much less, as it would require sorcery to even read it."

I smiled, reaching behind my chair. *"As it turns out, Taliad, I anticipated that about twenty years ago, and made a copy of it for you in elvish with that very quill you traded me - and I've one in dwarvish for Mungim, as well. I've been saving it for a day when I might need something that I couldn't trade for with my yearly crop. That day appears to be today,"* I said, and held the book out to him.

Taliad produced a kerchief from a pocket, carefully wiping his fingers, then took the book from my

hands. As he paged through the work, he grinned. *"I love your opening statement. Spoken like a true Great Mage. 'Mathematics is the soul of the universe. Anyone who tells you otherwise is a fool.' Hah! I love it!"*

"That copy is for you to keep," I said, reaching behind my chair again. *"This copy is for you to trade. If you need more copies, you'll have to hire a copyist, or buy a copying spell."*

Taliad took the second book, and placed both of them in his lap, thinking. Finally he looked up at me. *"Do you need that armor by this fall, my friend?"*

I shook my head. *"No. I know I'll need it, but I don't know precisely when. It's my guess I will need it sometime in the next fifteen to twenty years - perhaps longer, but no sooner than fifteen years,"* I replied. It was only a guess, of course - I knew that Vyleah's pawn had yet to be born, but I did not know how old she would be before Vyleah would need her, nor did I know precisely when Yorindar would need me. Fifteen years was a guess, assuming that one of the eighteen women I impregnated this winter gave birth to Vyleah's pawn, and assuming Vyleah would want someone who would at least be old enough to have learned an apprentice's lessons. I could be wrong, of course. Vyleah's pawn might not be born for centuries. Still, no matter when her pawn was born, I doubted Vyleah would trust her very existence into the hands of a child. As I understood it, the situation was far too critical, for her - though, in the end, she just might. I didn't know everything, after all, and a child might be the only possible pawn to do whatever it was she needed done. Still, fifteen years was probably a reasonable guess, and probably the soonest it would happen.

Taliad nodded. *"Good. There's a Katani armorer in Thall-Aibhne'. He's quite good, possibly the best, and his enchantments are legendary - but he works one piece at a time. I can take your list to him, and offer him this second copy in payment. If he accepts - and I'm certain I can get him to,"* Taliad said, and winked, *"he'll be the one to make it. But it won't be done by the fall, my friend. It may take him a good five years just to finish the chain."*

"So long as it has the very best enchantments, and can be delivered within fifteen years - no later."

Taliad grinned. *"I'll tell him five, just to tweak his nose, then wave this book before his face a bit and see if we can't get him to agree to ten or twelve."* Kiriin giggled at her husband, and I chuckled. Taliad took a moment to carefully affix the bag to his belt so it would attune to him by tomorrow, then carefully put away the books in one of the enchanted boxes on his wagon. *"Well, now, my friend,"* he said, smiling, *"we get down to the business of haggling for your byallar. For once, I have beaten the hairy one here, and I am certainly not going to leave here without at least taking advantage of that!"*

I smiled. *"There's little I need at the moment, my friend, aside from a ream of vellum and another quart of ink. This fall I'll need my usual supplies for the children's education, but aside from that, what I received from you last fall has quite nicely met my needs to now."*

"Ah, but you haven't seen what I found for you yet, have you?"

"Show him the robe! Show him the robe!" Kiriin squeaked.

"What robe?" I asked, curious.

"This robe, my friend," Taliad replied, and with a sweeping gesture, lifted the robe in question from his wagon. *"The finest black velvet. Soft on the skin, a true delight. The hood is stiffened with a slender wire, just here, so that when you draw it up it does not drape into your eyes, but forms a*

proper shade from the sun. It's enchanted, as well, with a sizing enchantment and an enchantment of invulnerability. It will never wear, tear or fade, and will fit you perfectly."

I stroked my chin, thinking. It was *very* elegant, and a fitting and proper garment for me to wear when it came time to finish Parial's education in seven years. Arella had already visited me this winter to tell me Noril still wanted me to come, and I had already told her I'd agreed. I affected indifference. *"It's alright, I suppose, but my own robe is comfortable and adequate for my needs. Four barrels."*

Taliad grinned. *"Nay, greatest of mages - examine the stitching! The seams are virtually invisible. Imagine the impression you will make when next you must meet royalty - and first impressions are quite important, you know. And look here - the shoulders have a slight pad to allow the sleeves to drape more smoothly, and to give your overall bearing even more strength. Twelve barrels."*

I smiled. The haggling session had begun.

Chapter Forty-One

"May you live forever."

- Ancient elvish curse.

The years slowly passed, and the number of students I had grew. After ten years, I was nearing the point where I dreaded the approach of winter. Five hundred and thirty-four children simply could not be taught by one man - even if they *were* the Raven of Yorindar.

Thus, I wasn't surprised when Lyota and Folia finally attained the rank of Master, after only eight years of work. No, far from it - I was enormously relieved, and immediately put them to work teaching the others. This was doubly necessary, as I had to take two years off to teach Parial the same lessons I had taught his father, and his father before him. And, as more and more of my children finally reached Master level, I put them to work teaching the others, as well. By the end of another five years, we had a proper and standardized course of education worked out.

Yet, my life still did not become any less hectic. We now had six hundred and twenty-three children, and just cleaning the rooms and preparing everything for them took me weeks. More, I realized that I was simply running out of room. I had already re-built the bridge across the river that went through my lands, and built more houses for my children and courtesans to live in on the other side of the river. I had built them along the short lane the giants had made for their own use when harvesting the *byallar* on the other side of the river (the giants had simply built the lane as an extension of the already-existing road and hadn't worried about a bridge, as the river's deepest point was hardly past their ankles). Still, I worried that eventually, I'd have a full village here - a village of thousands. That simply wouldn't *fit* on my lands without chopping down the very trees I needed to trade for the materials they used in their winter schooling. I still had a forest on the other side of my river, beyond my plantation, which was a mixture of *byallar* trees I'd left in their wild state with oaks and a few other hardwoods that grew there. Yet, I needed that area as a source of wood - I couldn't simply cut it down, either.

I was struggling to find a solution, but after another five years, the situation changed. Lyota and all the others of the Second Generation finally had enough master-ranks among them (or 'mistress', as they called themselves, which I supposed was more appropriate) to begin to take over more and more of the teaching themselves, and the problem began to evaporate. Slowly, over the course of another ten years, less and less of the children began to come as they reached the age where they would begin apprentice training, simply remaining behind on Iolo Mountain, and continuing their education there. Only the ones below age twelve were brought, where their mothers could easily handle their care during the winter, as there were only two or three children for each woman to have to deal with.

Pelia's women treated me well during the winter months, spending time with me, chatting, and generally doing all that they always had done, which was pleasant. Still, of course, nearly the only time we touched was when I caressed their abdomens with a gloved hand, and gave them children. The enchantment of the little band Pelia had given me was now echoed within me, but its effect was still the same - they experienced intense pleasure, while I felt nothing. I reached out to them anyway, touching each of them with respect, care and compassion. I reasoned that though I could not share their pleasure, that was hardly any reason to lessen what they felt by reaching to them with feelings of sadness. Their love, respect and admiration for me was still strong, and each time I touched them, it was renewed again. Each time they lay on my bed, fully clothed, and I would gently stroke their abdomen over their wombs - and each time it was, for them, as though I was making love to them from the depths of my heart, my soul. Many still wept afterwards, as the experience was powerful and moving to them, and I would hug them quietly afterwards until their tears finally stopped. Yet, each time, their eyes were closed as I touched them. They did not look into the face of the Raven of Yorindar, but closed their eyes and dreamed of Eddas Ayar - whatever it was each of them conceived me to be in their imaginations. They still could not lie with me as I was, touching the fearsome beauty of the Raven of Yorindar intimately. As the years passed, I eventually grew resigned to it. After all, I knew the reason.

Happiness and sadness visited as the years slowly rolled by. Joy gave birth to a strapping son, and later, a daughter - just as she had with Darian. Noril, of course, was introduced to his half-brother and half-sister, as was Parial to his new aunt and uncle. Yet, Longtooth's funeral a few weeks later was a deeply sad moment. His son, Strider, took his place as the village het-man, and I presented Longtooth's ring to him in a public ceremony in Dohbari village to renew the long-standing friendship between the giants and myself.

Happiness visited again when Mungim, after an *age* of work, had finally accumulated the money he needed for his bride-price. I met Lumri, the lovely little bride he'd chosen - she was *very* cute by the standards of my people, with flame-red hair, sparkling eyes and a warm and friendly face. To a dwarf, however, the little flame-haired dwarf-maid was *astorishingly* beautiful - it was no wonder Mungim had to work so long to accumulate a large enough bride price to afford her. I could not watch the wedding ceremony, of course. The dwarves considered me a Dwarf-Friend, but I was not a dwarf, and their religion was still a very personal and private thing to them. So instead, I visited Durgrim while the ceremony was taking place, and renewed my friendship with him during the two hours the ceremony actually took. The reception afterwards, however, was marvelous - almost as fabulous as the one for Jhumni's wedding to her beloved, a few years later.

It was a joyful day when Lyota selected Folia as her mate years later. The ceremony they came up with was quiet, yet elegant, and I found it quite beautiful. The guest list, however, read more like list of every living person who was important to the Hyperboreans. King Noril, still a strong and regal-looking man at the age of sixty-eight, brought his son, Parial, now thirty-five. Prince Parial himself was already married, and brought his blushing wife for the occasion. Parial was overjoyed to see me again, and exacted from me the same promise his father had - that I would come to train his heir when he came of age in a few years. Dawn and her husband of twenty years, Lord Vasadin, were there, Arella transporting the lot of them with her spell of returning. Arella enjoyed the ceremony immensely, and wept profoundly all throughout it.

Joy was there, of course, as was Strider, Mungim, and even Taliad and Kiriin (Mungim and Taliad remained remarkably civil to each other throughout the whole day). Indeed, everyone who was anyone to me arrived to see it - and I was certain that Yorindar and Vyleah gazed on invisibly, somewhere. And happiness again visited when Strider's son married Joy's daughter, a ceremony well-attended by all.

Our alliances with the other races about us went well, also. The dwarves, elves and giants were all quite

pleased to have the 'Witch-Women of Hyperborea' (as our revived race had become known over the years) as their friends. Lyota and the others of the Second Generation decided to establish their own circle of mages, naming it the Eddasic Circle in my honor, and basing it on my teachings - aside from the usual function of a thamaturgical circle, it would also serve as the *de-facto* government for the revived Hyperborean race. I was deeply honored and enormously proud, and was even more proud when I learned that the establishment of this de-facto government by Lyota and the rest of the Second Generation had caused the elves to decide to ask the 'Witch-Women of Hyperborea' if they might wish to join the Seelie court, and fulfill an ancient dream of theirs. Wisely, however, Lyota and the rest demurred, saying that they would like to take at least another few centuries to build their numbers and their civilization before they became more involved in external politics - a notion the elves completely understood and agreed with. They had waited over two millennia already, another few centuries to a millenia sounded quite reasonable to them. I was certain that when the Second Generation was finally ready, the elves would welcome them with open arms.

Our only difficulty in our relations with the other races came with the people of the Southlands. They were still somewhat apprehensive of us, as they feared us a bit - or, more precisely, they feared Hyperborea in general (though that was what I wanted, as I hardly wanted tomb-robbers and adventurers skulking about our lands). All that changed one year, however, when a plague broke out in Rivervale, one of the larger cities in Larinia. Once Arella had let us know what the problem was, my courtesans and all my daughters who were old enough to be of use came with me to the Southlands, and we all worked night and day for two weeks to heal and cure the victims - and, in the end, the death toll was only a few dozen, rather than ten or twenty thousand. This built a great deal of love and friendship between the people of the Southlands and ours, and we were all quite pleased. The people of the Southlands still feared the hideous beasts, shadowed forests and blasted wastelands of Hyperborea, but they no longer feared the Witch-Women of Hyperborea, themselves.

Yet, despite these happy moments, there were still the sad moments, as well. As the years wore on, Joy was able to visit less and less, simply because she was growing older. She did not use the youth enchantment I had given her to restore her youth, but merely to retard her aging slightly by reversing a few years of age every once in a while. She did not wish to alarm her fellow giants by constantly remaining youthful and vigorous, nor did she wish a long string of giants to beat a path to my door, begging me to give the secret of eternal youth to them. Everyone believed that I had simply cured whatever it was that made Joy a midget, and as such, she now aged normally. Unfortunately, this meant that eventually, she grew too old to visit me every single day, and had to reduce her visits to once a week - and, eventually, once a month. But, there were still more sad moments.

Noril died at the age of eighty-six, and Joy was miserable that she could not attend the funeral - even if she went at the size of a human, the reappearance of Queen Joy would have caused enormous consternation in Larinia, as most assumed she was long dead. Parial's ascension to the throne went smoothly, at which point Dawn died a few years later. Arella had become Parial's most trusted advisor, even as she had been for his father and his father before him - even more so, really, as she now was nearly two hundred years old. She was considered the wisest and most powerful mage in the Southlands (which, really, she was), and her advice on matters of herblore and sorcery were sought out by individuals from many lands. Unfortunately, all this meant that she still only had time to visit once a year. Then, the saddest blow of all came - Softhand died in his sleep at the age of ninety.

And I was not asked to attend the funeral.

I wasn't offended, of course. I knew Softhand, yes, and I was quite close to Joy, but I simply didn't know *enough* about him to actually be able to contribute to his deed-song. We were friends, yes, but we were hardly close, as his grandfather and I had been. The regular visits the giants made to me had, for the

most part, been assumed by Joy, and I simply had never built a close relationship with Dragonslayer's grandson. As the funerals of giants were extremely small affairs, often with only half a dozen participants, it was likely the majority of his immediate family was not invited. So, no, I was not offended. I was merely deeply saddened that he had died.

Softhand died in the fall, about a month before Pelia and her children arrived - and, of course, Joy entered the traditional year-long period of mourning for giant-wives, and stopped visiting me. Lyota and the others of the Second Generation were now just as busy raising and educating the next generations as I had been with them - their visits slowed to perhaps twice a year. Pelia and the rest of my courtesans only visited in the winter, and both Mungim and Taliad only came in the spring and fall. Thus, by the end of summer, one hundred and forty years after I had first awakened in this body, I found I had been utterly alone for four months, simply puttering about in my tower, working on my research into the Law of Karmic Balance.

And then, on that day, I stopped my research, because I was done.

I gazed at my work. I had the secret to making the great Artifacts before me. A secret mages had sought for thousands of years, a secret thought lost to the ages... The secret of the True Power the Great Mages of legend and song had wielded. Knowing this, nearly all my spells could be cast with far less effort - or even cast to colossal effect with the same effort I'd expended before. It was a true accomplishment. Power on the level of an elder dragon, in fact.

And yet, somehow...

I felt no satisfaction in it.

As I gazed at the completed formulas, theorems and notes, I found I was simply disappointed that the work had only taken me seventy years to complete.

As I copied the last of my notes into a revised work on magic theory, I considered my future. I literally was not needed yet. The children would need me in the winter, certainly - but eventually, even that would come to an end, as the Second Generation and all those who followed began to produce more and more of their own children. Indeed, the houses I had built on the other side of the river, and most of the houses at the base of my tower were no longer needed.

"Well, perhaps it's time I cleaned up a bit, then," I said aloud, more just to hear a voice in my own tower than anything else. After placing my revised work of theory into my magic thumb-ring with my other works and my grimoire, I rose to my feet, and got to work.

It took weeks to complete, moving the logs myself with telekinesis, carefully storing them in the barn that the giants had built ages ago. The yearly harvest came and went during this time, and I greatly enjoyed chatting with the giants as the harvest was brought in. Taliad and Mungim came and went, as well, and their visits were a true joy - and, unfortunately, over all too soon. Once the annual visits were over, I returned to work, tearing the unneeded houses down and storing the wood.

Finally, even that task was done, with still a month and a half yet before my courtesans and the younger children would arrive to be with me for the winter. I walked to the top of my tower, tired from the day's exertions, and walked out to my parapet to take a seat. I considered rising again to make a pot of *byallar*, but... Somehow, I found I just wanted to sit, and gaze out over my lands.

I watched the sun slowly sink to the horizon, then watched the lovely colors of the sunset spread across the darkening sky. It was beautiful. It was inspiring. It was a symphony of soft light, gradually fading into the silent, twinkling stars. And yet, as I gazed on, I could see the stars themselves contained an elegance

and grace of their own. The moon slowly drifted across the sky, and I gazed at it silently, awed by its simple beauty - a beauty I had, perhaps, simply never taken the time to notice before.

The night slowly passed, and eventually, I could see the sky was lightening behind me. Still, I continued watching until the last of the stars had faded into the brightness of the morning sky. I considered rising, then... But realized I had nothing to get up for. There was nothing for me to do, I was simply not needed yet. So, I returned to gazing to the west, towards Wilanda city, and watched the golden brown autumn leaves on my trees rippling in the morning sun as a stray breeze passed over them.

I smiled, watching the trees of my lands. Birds fluttered from branch to branch, while far above, an eagle soared. Quietly slipping among my trees was a young doe, headed for the forest on the other side of the river. Squirrels chattered among the branches below, and I chuckled at myself. I wondered what it ever was that had made me so unhappy, at times.

What did it matter if no one touched me? In truth, I did at least have something. I received a hug once in awhile from my older children, the young ones still lavished attention on me during the winter months, and occasionally my courtesans even held my hand as we chatted. Did I really need more? Was the caress of a lover truly that important?

I shook my head. No, my own research had filled the empty days and nights adequately. Yes, I had been alone for months on end - sometimes decades, in truth. Yet, I had spent this time wisely. Indeed, I had spent the majority of time over the last one hundred and forty years researching the mysteries of the universe - and yet, there was still so much more.

What made the sun rise and set? What made the moon slowly drift across the sky? What made the stars slowly turn in their annual wheel about the world? Their positions could be predicted with the utmost precision - mathematics was, indeed, the soul of the universe. But what was it that caused them to move? Why did the moon change phases? What caused each leaf to form where it did on each of the trees of my land? No, despite all the research I had done, there was still so much more to learn, so much more to know. An infinity of knowledge lay before me, undiscovered.

It was as we Hyperboreans used to say - *'The more you learn, the less you know.'* Yes, I was lonely. My heart ached, at times, for true love, and the soft caress of a lover at night... Even now, the thought of returning to my cold, silent room and sleeping in my bed alone drew a sigh from my lips. But it didn't matter - there were far more important things. Before me lay an infinity of knowledge to be explored and discovered. I was at heart a researcher, and a scholar, and always had been. I would simply fill my days and nights for the rest of eternity exploring the endless secrets of the universe, waiting for Yorindar's call to fight his next battle. I didn't really need anything more, did I?

I pondered these questions as the sun slowly rose again, sailed across the sky like a blazing boat adrift on a pale sea, then sank again to present me with the glorious colors of sunset and the beauty of night. The gibbous moon slowly became a full moon as I watched its nightly voyage across the glittering sea of stars. It all was so beautiful...

And yet, as I sat in my chair, gazing out over my lands and pondering which of the endless questions the universe posed that I might research next, watching the sun rise and set again, and then again... I discovered there was only one question I truly wanted to know the answer to. Despite the beauty of the trees and the animals, despite the glorious wonder of the heavens above, none of it held the answer I sought. Yet, perhaps in my gazing at them... Perhaps the answer would come to me, in time.

"Eddas?" a woman's voice called as I waited. The sun had risen again, concealing the stars from my eyes. But, they would be back shortly, once night fell again.

"Old Man, where are you?"

I thought about replying, but decided not to. It wasn't as though I was hiding, after all. If they truly needed to talk to me, they could make the effort of finding me.

A quiet creak, the door to my parapet opening. Footsteps behind me, then someone standing beside me. "Eddas? Are you alright? You... You've got spiderwebs between your arms and the chair..."

A gentle hand drew back the hood of my robe. It was Joy, and she was again the beautiful blonde goddess that had captured Darian's heart, one hundred and forty years ago. She had restored her youth and returned to human-size - apparently, the traditional period of mourning had ended, and she was now prepared to resume her life as my platonic companion. However, Joy's lovely face looked shocked as she gazed upon me. "Eddas! How long have you been sitting here?!"

"I don't know," I replied, my voice a soft croak. "A week... Nearly two, I think."

"What?! Why?!"

"I wasn't needed, Joy. I won't be needed for perhaps another month, when the children come... So while I waited... I thought I would search for the answer to a question..."

"You haven't eaten or drunk anything, have you?!"

"No... I was a bit hungry and thirsty at first, but that passed..."

"Old Man, you are *dying!* *Why are you doing this?!*"

I paused. I knew the answer to that. I knew the answer to that when I sat down, even though I hadn't thought about it at the time. I turned my head slowly, and gazed up at Joy. "Do you think..."

"What?"

"Do you think... Someday... When all this is over, and Yorindar no longer needs me... Do you think... In the Afterlife... Do you think perhaps someone will touch me, there?"

Joy burst into tears, reaching down to me. After brushing away the spiderwebs that had formed on and around me, she reached below me to lift me from the chair and cradle me in her arms.

"I have delved the secrets of the universe, Joy... Probed the powers of the Gods... And yet what I know is perhaps only a small fraction of what can be known... An infinity of knowledge lies before me, undiscovered... What makes the sun and the moon rise and set? What makes the stars turn in the night sky?"

Joy carried me into my tower, still weeping, and gently laid me upon my bed. "Shhh... Save your strength, Old Man. I'm going to go through those supplies you buy for the children, and see if I can't come up with the basics of some soup for you. You can take all the time you want to research the sun and the moon and the stars, and discover all the secrets of the universe - but later, Old Man. For now, let's try and get some soup in you."

"Joy... You don't understand..."

"Understand what, Old Man?"

"I have learned... These last few days... That of all the knowledge I could explore and discover... Of all the questions I could answer... There is only one question I want to know the answer to..."

"What is it, Old Man?"

"The only thing I truly wonder... Is if I will ever embrace a lover again... If I will ever hold someone in the dark of night, and hear them whisper their love to me in the shadows of the evening... That is all, Joy..."

Joy took my hand, squeezing it gently. "You will, Old Man."

"Only in the afterlife, I think... And perhaps... Perhaps, not even then..."

"No, Old Man. You will. In this life. And soon. Now lie there, and save your strength. I'll make you some soup."

Chapter Forty-Two

"Aye, to yet understand the Hyperboreans be to understand Honor - true Honor, that noble and delicate flower which many do claim but few do yet truly possess. It be my one fervent hope that me own people will yet read this small work, and just as the Hyperboreans did once learn the Art of War at the edge of our axes, we may yet learn the lessons of Honor the Hyperboreans do yet teach us in return with the full of their history."

- King Gunim IV, Commentaries on History (Conclusion), 1348 NCC

Joy worried that it would take me months to recover. I was thin, emaciated... My skin even paler than this body usually is. But, I knew it would not. In truth, I was Yorindar's tool, and I would live until he had no further use for me. Even if I *could* kill myself, it was unlikely Yorindar would allow that to come to pass until he was through with me. Which he might never be. Yorindar's enemies might be able to kill me, but it was unlikely I could ever kill myself.

So, though Joy was worried it would take me months to recover, once I had eaten and rested, I simply began conjuring food and drink, and eating again. By the evening of the second day, I was fully recovered - much to Joy's astonishment. Two days later, Joy had changed into one of her old dresses (which I had to use a spell of repairing on, as in seventy years, the moths had nearly destroyed it), and we were sitting together at my table in my room at the top of my tower.

"You were very foolish, Old Man," Joy said as she poured each of us a cup of *byallar*. "What if Lyota or the others of your older children had come to visit? You'd have made them *terribly* upset and unhappy."

"Perhaps, Joy," I replied, sipping at my cup. "But I'd have recovered shortly, and they'd have left, happy again."

"I don't understand why you did it at all," Joy said, sitting across from me.

"I was at the brink of my soul, as we Hyperboreans used to say. I knew that when I sat down, Joy. I wasn't thinking about it at the time, but that's the reason."

"But *why*, Old Man? What could have driven you to the brink of your soul *again*?"

I gazed into my cup for a long moment. "I... I don't know if I can even explain it to you, Joy. It is... Somewhat shameful to admit."

Joy looked at me seriously, then reached out and took my hand in hers. "Old Man, I swear that what you say is between you and I, and none other - living, dead, or undead, as you Hyperboreans used to say," she said, then squeezed my hand gently.

I sighed. "Well... alright," I replied, and paused a moment, thinking. "Did I ever tell you the story of King Darrak's menagerie?"

"No, I don't think so. Do tell," Joy replied, sipping at her cup.

"Darrak was a good and honest king. Quite brave in battle, as well. I liked him enormously - it was he who granted me these very lands, in fact, on the edge of his territory. Of course, he did it because he knew that I would, as the owner of the lands, defend them far better than any feudal baron could... But, no matter. Of all the dozen or so warring kings who wanted to be Emperor... Well, he was the one I thought should succeed."

"I think you've mentioned him from time to time. Go on, Old Man."

"Well, King Darrak had a menagerie. He collected many beasts from all across our lands - and from far off lands, as well. The elves and dwarves sometimes brought him incredible beasts we had never seen before... In his menagerie was where I first saw an oiliphant, in fact."

"Ah! We giants know of that beast through our legends of your people. Very large, as big as a giant, with a large nose, yes?"

"Yes. Its ears were huge, like sails... Its legs much like tree-trunks, with the forelegs longer than the hind-legs. Its nose was long, like a rope, and thick... It could pick things up with it. It fed itself with its nose, in fact. Grasses and such it picked up and stuffed in its mouth, and when thirsty, it would suck up water into its nose and squirt it into its mouth."

Joy burst out laughing. "You're teasing me!"

"No, really! Quite a fascinating beast. The dwarves brought it when it was only the size of a draft horse. Quite young, they said, and from a land far, far away. It grew over the years until it was quite enormous."

Joy smiled. "Alright, I believe you. Go on with your story, Old Man."

"Well, as I said, he had quite a large collection of animals, many of which were from far off lands. Monkeys who chattered and jabbered, parrots who could speak... Many interesting beasts. Most were ordinary beasts, but some were fell beasts. For instance, he had the sole manticore I'd ever seen in captivity-"

"What? How?! They're incredibly vicious!"

I shrugged. "Darrak had a wizard who cared for his menagerie. The wizard knew spells of communication that let him speak with the beasts... Soothe them, calm them, and get them to understand that no harm would come to them - and, at the same time, learn from them what would keep them content in the cages. The oiliphant, for example, eventually got a large leather ball filled with feathers that it could kick about its cage. Quite enormous - it was taller than I am, in fact. It greatly enjoyed bouncing the ball off the bars. The ball never broke, as Darrak paid to have it enchanted with invulnerability. That, too, the beast enjoyed, as it discovered on those rare moments it became frustrated or upset that it could squash the ball or stomp it or pretty much do anything to it, and the ball would come to no harm. Most of the time, though, it played with it happily."

"So how did they keep the manticore content? What was it the beast enjoyed?"

"Meals that squirmed and shrieked before it killed them," I replied, and Joy shuddered. "It really was a vicious thing, but Darrak's keeper kept it happy with a lamb or two from time to time."

Joy shook her head, and smiled. "I keep interrupting you. Go on with your story."

"Well... One day, some hunters brought in a most unusual catch, and Darrak immediately bought it and added it to his menagerie. It was a unicorn."

"A unicorn?!" Joy yelled, surprised.

"Yes. It was a mare, and was incredibly beautiful, as well. A spiralled, fluted horn that gleamed like mother-of-pearl... Flawless, snow-white hide... Eyes like the blue of the ocean... Incredibly beautiful," I said, and smiled, remembering. "Well, anyway... The cage was placed within an enormous circle of protection - the beast could not use its powers to escape. So, unfortunately, she simply lay down, and stopped eating. Darrak's keeper tried everything to keep the beast happy. They are not dumb brutes, as are horses - they're as intelligent as a human, really. But nothing could satisfy her. She only wanted one thing... Freedom."

"Ah, how sad," Joy said, sighing. "Still, Old Man, I don't see how that relates to why you would starve yourself."

"Well... You have to understand... Darrak's keeper was no fool. He was skilled at caring for all creatures, both beasts and fell beasts. He tried everything that might keep the unicorn happy - soft, fine grasses gathered by hand, sparkling clear water gathered in buckets from the purest mountain stream, gentle maidens to brush its coat lovingly and sing soft, sweet music to it... In truth, it was pampered to a degree more befitting an emperor's cat. It's every possible need was catered to, and it was far more comfortable in Darrak's menagerie than it would have been in the wild. And it knew it, as well - as I said, they are not dumb beasts. But, despite all this, the unicorn refused to eat, lay itself down, and waited to die. Despite everything, it only wanted one thing... Freedom," I said, and sighed.

"I am like the unicorn, Joy. I have children who love me, and whom I am proud of. Lyota, in fact, has established a new circle of battle-mages, founded on my teachings. It will be the largest battle-circle in history, because it will include all of the Second Generation and those to follow. It will also function as a de-facto government for the new Hyperboreans, as time goes by. She has called it the Eddasic circle - and I am deeply honored by that, as well as tremendously pleased and proud. I have better research texts than the Dyclonic circle ever possessed, and my own researches have allowed me to learn the deepest secrets of magic, secrets lost for thousands of years. I am honored by kings and dragons. I am respected by the giants, elves, dwarves... And yet..."

"Yes?"

"And yet... Despite all of that... I find that all I really want is to hold a lover in my arms in the dark of night, and hear them whisper their love to me as we exchange a tender moment in the moonlight. That is all," I said, and turned my face from her. "There. Now I've said it - and by saying it, I've shamed myself even more by admitting how truly small a thing it was."

Joy rose, setting down her cup, and stepped around the table. Kneeling beside my chair, she reached her arms around me, and hugged me tight. "No, Old Man. You have not shamed yourself. It is not a small thing. It is a vast, wonderful and special thing. I think..." she said, then looked at me. "I think you were lonely even when you met Dyarzi, were you not?"

I thought about it for a long moment, then finally nodded. "Well... Yes, I was. I was a *battle-mage*, Joy. We were respected in those days, yes. Highly respected. But, we were also *feared*. It was..." I said, and sighed. "It was sometimes difficult to meet anyone, because of that. I suppose... I suppose I'd had a hole in my heart for years, really..."

"So you fell in love with her - and the hole in your heart was filled. And then, when she died, you spent the rest of your life trying to bring her back to you, to fill the hole in your heart again."

I nodded silently.

"Pelia and her women love you deeply, but their love is the love of respect, admiration... And dreams. If you could somehow transform yourself into a man, they would be miserable, I think."

"What? Why?" I asked, confused.

Joy simply smiled. "Who would you sleep with, Eddas? There are eighty-nine of them, and they all want you to themselves. Choosing one would make the others miserable. Sleeping with each in rotation would be eighty-nine nights... Three months before each could touch you again. And that would make each feel... Lessened, somehow," Joy said, and shook her head. "No, Old Man. With you as they are, they still can imagine... And dream... And love you for that dream." Joy smiled again. "You once said they had lost their hope, and now only see you as you are. Perhaps that's so, Old Man, but they have not lost their dreams."

"Perhaps... But I have lost mine. My dreams died two thousand years ago, when the Flame-Knives stole the life of my beloved," I replied quietly, setting my cup down on the table.

Joy smiled at me from where she knelt at my side, and softly stroked my cheek. "And what if I were to tell you there is another who loves you deeply and dearly?"

I nodded. "Arella. But..." I said, and sighed. "Her destiny is in the Southlands, Joy. For Tulan to come about, continuity of thought in the government is needed. There must be a single voice, whispering the same dream into each king's ear throughout all the centuries it will take for that dream to come about... And that voice is hers," I said, and sighed again. "I suppose Yorindar chose her because as a sapphire, it was unlikely she'd have any complications like children or husbands drawing her away from that duty. He's a very practical god, Joy. He has a lovely sense of artistry and balance and humor, but in the end, he's a very practical god."

Joy laughed. "No, Old Man, I did not mean Arella. You do not understand Arella half as well as you think you do," Joy said, and winked. "Yes, Arella loves you - but she is also in awe of you, and fears you, a little. She cannot see who you really are inside, and never could - nor does she really want to. That is why, even after well over a century, she still calls you 'Raven'. She has no interest in Eddas Ayar, the man. She has only ever been interested in Raven, the woman. Such is her nature, Old Man. She sees the outside. She cannot see who you are, inside, and does not truly wish to - because inside, you are, despite everything, a man."

I nodded - I knew Joy was right. "So who, then?"

"Me, of course," Joy replied, and grinned.

I blinked, surprised and stunned. "Y-you?! How can you love me?!"

"Old Man, when I was little, I had a dream to one day be a true giant-wife, and be with a husband I loved with all my heart and soul. You gave me that dream - twice, in fact. How could I *not* love you for that? I am not like Pelia and the others. I can see who you are, without fantasy-images getting in the way. I am not like Arella, who sees you as some awe-inspiring tool of the gods. Nor am I like your children and grand-children, who will always see you as the noble and powerful father of their race. No, I am not like them, and I do not see any of that. Do you know what I see when I look at you, Old Man?"

"What?" I replied, not really knowing what to think or say.

"I see a man who has been my friend for one hundred and forty years. A man of nobility, honor, and purpose. A man who can commit his heart to one woman, and stay true to her for centuries. A man who, when he opens his heart, experiences the true depths of love, without reservation. I see a man who twice gave me the life and the love I had dreamed of since I was a child - and both times did it not simply because it was destiny, or he was required to by the gods, but who did it simply out of the compassion in his heart. I see a man who has waited nearly two thousand years for a woman who will stand beside him, love him unreservedly, hold him when he needs to be held, push him when he needs to be pushed, and box his ears from time to time when he's being silly. I see a man who *needs* me, a man who has *always* needed me, and a man who *deserves* me."

I felt my face heat in a deep blush - I didn't know what to say. Joy simply hugged me for a moment, then rose to her feet and resumed her seat at the table. "Tell me, Old Man - whatever became of King Darrak's unicorn?"

"Well... The mare was dying, as I said... But Darrak had fallen in love with the beast - as had many thousands of people who had come to see it, paying the admission fee to visit his menagerie. Darrak's keeper was at his wit's end - he could do nothing. So, Darrak himself made a deal with the beast."

"A deal? What kind of deal?"

"Darrak told the unicorn that he would have his keeper remove the cage, remove the circle, and allow her to leave at any time she wished. She would stay only so long as she liked, but while she stayed, she would be treated with love. And all under one condition - if she chose to leave, she had to promise to return. She did not have to promise *when* she would return - unicorns are immortal, and if she chose, she could take all of eternity before she came back. She only had to promise to return."

"And what happened?"

"Well, the unicorn promised she would return, of course. And as soon as Darrak's keeper broke the seal of the circle, she vanished."

"Ah, how sad."

"Well, no - eventually, she did return. About a month later, she came back, and stayed for an hour. Then, a few months later, she came back, and stayed for a day. Each time, she was treated with love and kindness, and eventually, she decided she would simply return once a month, on the full of the moon, and stay for a day. Darrak himself fed the beast the finest grains when she was there, to show his gratitude and love, and she would eat them from his bare, cupped hands. At the Battle of White Creek, he had his court wizard bring him back briefly so he could feed her for a few moments, renewing his vow with her. And even today, she still returns. I've seen the mare and spoken to her once, when I visited the ruins of Darrak's castle, a few leagues up the road from the ruins of Wilanda city."

"You *have*?!" Joy said, surprised. "She *still* returns?"

I nodded. "She said she could do no less for his memory. He was a good king, and a good man, she said."

Joy smiled dreamily. "Ah, Old Man..." she said, then grinned at me. "How can you tell a beautiful story like that and wonder why I love you?"

I sighed deeply. "Joy... I'm sorry. I've always thought of you as a friend, and I love you as a friend..."

But... I'm sorry, Joy, that is all."

"And, in truth, you can't believe that I would truly love you, much less lie with you," Joy said, gazing at me, then nodded. "Alright, Old Man. If that's what it takes, then I shall make a deal with you, as well," she said, and rose to her feet, stepping over to my closet.

"What deal?"

"I know you, Old Man," Joy replied, going through the things in my closet. "You have spent the last seventy years trying to come to terms with never having another true love in your life, never being touched again... It's the way you are. Now, you look at me, and because in your heart you are a *man*, not a woman, you can't understand how I could fall in love with you out of friendship, gratitude, respect, and appreciation for who you are and all that you have done for me. So, I will make a deal with you - I will prove myself to you, Old Man, just as I proved myself to Darian, and to Softhand. And all you have to do, in turn, is let me do it. Ah, here it is!" she said, and pocketed something small. "And what's this?" she asked, opening a box and lifting out the suit of magic chain I'd ordered, decades ago.

"It's part of a suit of armor I ordered from Taliad, about seventy years ago. The whole suit took about ten years to complete, though the armor-smith misunderstood Taliad's explanation and threw in another *nephni* that I didn't really need along with it. You see, I-"

"Ah! Splendid, Old Man. I'll need armor if I'm to be by your side from now on. I've a feeling the next time Yorindar calls, it will probably be just as dangerous as the last, if not more so."

I rolled my eyes. "Joy, it's as I told you seventy years ago - you *still* don't know how to fight!"

"Of course not," Joy replied, looking at the rest of the armor. "You'll have to teach me, Old Man. It will be difficult, of course, and I'll probably get many bumps and bruises while you teach me all the little tricks I would need to know, and I'll probably end many a day feeling utterly wretched. But, it's necessary," she said, and put the armor away again. "Besides - once I've learned, I'll be a far more useful companion to you. Particularly since I'm no longer limited to simply five cubits of height, thanks to you," she said, then grinned at me. "And you just *try* to tell me it wouldn't be useful to have an armored and battle-trained *giantess* by your side when next you need to fight Yorindar's enemies, Old Man!"

I started to object, then paused. "Well, no, you're right. But there would be far more, of course. We would have to work on your fear of ghosts and the undead, Joy. An enemy could turn that against you - the wars the gods wage are not merely physical conflicts, but conflicts of time, space, spirit, and emotion."

Joy shuddered for a moment, then steeled herself and gazed back at me firmly. "I will do it, Old Man."

"And you'll need a decent weapon... You can't face everything with just your fists. And it will probably need several enchantments, as you're not a spellcaster, and I can already envision several situations where you'd be utterly helpless despite everything I might train you to be able to do. That might take years to complete."

"I can wait, Old Man. Besides, I can think of a few things myself, as well," Joy replied, and smiled. "And yes, I can see the question on your face, Old Man. Yes, I have been giving this a lot of thought over the years. I made my decision as to what I would do seventy years ago, when I first told you that I would return, and be your companion. I heard your voice, I looked at your face, and as my heart melted with love for you, I knew what my destiny was."

I paused, gazing at her. "You're really serious about this."

"Very, Old Man. It's as I said - I *know* you. I've been your friend for one hundred and forty years. If the gods are willing, I'll be your companion for the rest of eternity. And if you are willing, I'll be more than that, as well," Joy replied, and placed her hands on her hips. "So, is it a deal? Will you let me prove myself to you?"

I wasn't sure what Joy had in mind, but just having her back in my life again was like a breath of fresh air, blowing away the dark clouds that had overshadowed my soul for decades. I smiled. "Alright, Joy."

Joy grinned. "Good! Now I *know* you haven't been caring for my garden for the last seventy years, Old Man, so I *sincerely* doubt there's any vegetables for our dinner. So, conjure us some food, Old Man - and not that gruel you usually conjure, either! Make it a *nice* dinner, for once! Take your time about it, too, Old Man, I'm going to go get ready." And with that, Joy turned and walked down the stairs, apparently heading for what used to be her room.

I chuckled and did as she asked. My own discoveries of the Deep Magics now allowed me to cast the spell almost effortlessly - I took my time, however, weaving the spell carefully so as to conjure a fine feast for the two of us. No mere gruel, or even a bowl of soup - no, a fine dinner of roast pheasant was my goal. And when I finally released the spell after half an hour of careful incanting and gesturing, the results were perfect.

"Ah, that smells heavenly, Old Man!" Joy called, coming back up the stairs. I gazed at her in curiosity - she was still wearing the same clothes she had been when she went downstairs. All I could tell that she had done was brushed her hair a bit. Joy caught my expression, and smiled as she turned to my closet. After pulling something small out of her pocket and putting it into the closet, she closed it back up again. "Now - let's see if that dinner tastes as good as it smells, Old Man."

It did - but the conversation we had over dinner was far more filling to my soul than the food could ever have been. We talked over many things, shared many thoughts and memories... Darian, Arella, Dragonslayer, Softhand... All the people who had, in one way or another, touched our lives. It was a special, magical moment, truly... And before I knew it, the dinner was long gone, the pot of *byallar* long empty, and the moon high in the evening sky. I had already lit a fire in my fireplace, and it's cheery crackling and Joy's pleasant conversation lent a warm atmosphere to my room at the top of my tower, a warmth that truly had been absent for decades.

"I have to use the garderobe, Old Man," Joy said at last, rising to her feet with a smile.

"Well, I should probably be getting to bed, myself," I replied, yawning. I rose to my feet and gave Joy a hug. "Goodnight, Joy."

Joy simply smiled, hugging me back, and turned to go down the stairs. I thought I caught something in that smile... But then chuckled at myself, shaking my head. "Impossible," I muttered, pulling off my waist-belt and laying it aside, then slipping off my robe. It was a ridiculous thought, I knew, and I chuckled again at myself as I pulled off my boots, gloves and *nephní* and laid them aside. Joy was who she was, and expecting more from her was meaningless fantasy. Besides, I hadn't lain with another in nearly a century - truly, it was time I got used to that. '*No, there's far more important things coming, and soon,*' I thought to myself, pulling my hair-band free and setting it and the three raven feathers aside. Yorindar would need me someday - and perhaps, someday soon. If Joy was truly to be my companion, there would be a great deal of work ahead. She would have to be trained to fight, at least, and that would take years.

After extinguishing the fire in the fireplace with a brief spell, I lay back in my bed, gazing at the stars through the window. No, just having Joy back in my life again was more than enough.

I was half-asleep when the sounds of bare feet padding across the dwarven carpet in my room awoke me. I blinked sleepily, turning my head to look...

...and gazed in open astonishment.

Joy stood near the bed in the moonlight that streamed into my room through the windows, gloriously, beautifully, rapturously nude. Tall and powerfully built, Joy's giantish heritage was apparent in the feminine curve of the well-developed muscles of her body. And more, apparently she had used Dyarzi's little depilatory stone, as her skin was totally smooth. She raised her arms above her head, and turned slowly. Even the skin beneath her arms was smooth, just as Dyarzi's had been. When Joy faced me again, she ran her fingers over her smooth hips, up her perfectly curved sides, over her magnificent breasts, down across her taut belly, then across her bald sex. "This feels deliciously wicked, Eddas." she said with a smile. "Does it meet with your approval?"

I gaped openly. "I... I..."

Joy grinned wryly. "I see that it does. I remembered that conversation you, I and Pelia had all those years ago when you first gave her the makeup kit." Joy looked the bed over for a moment, then shook her head. "Your bed is quite small, Old Man, but I think we'll manage for now. When next we see Mungim, we'll see if we can't get a larger one." Joy then lifted the blanket from me, and carefully got into bed beside me.

My heart pounded, and I was struck utterly mute.

Slipping her arms around me, Joy smiled at me in the darkness. "I fear I've no idea how to... I mean... I don't really know where to begin," she said, and giggled. "It seems it's another thing you'll apparently have to teach me, Old Man," she said, then leaned in and kissed me passionately.

I reached my arms around her, and kissed her back with equal passion.

* * *

In the warm afterglow that followed, Joy softly stroked my face with her fingertips, while I caressed hers in return. *"I love you, Old Man," she whispered. "You have given me everything I ever desired. Every hope, every dream I ever had, you made come true. Now, I shall give you your hopes, and your dreams in return. I love you, Old Man. Now and forever."*

My heart was singing as I drew her close, and kissed her softly. *"I love you, too, Joy,"* I whispered in reply, because I did.

Chapter Forty-Three

"My dearest lady Pelia: Much as I appreciate your ardor in protecting what you see as the Honor of Eddas Ayar, please be aware of something: I, Lord Caladis, did not write that book which has made you so wroth. I was asked to take the credit for it by someone you know, as I am very old, have no children, I have been sick for many years and will probably not live much longer, anyway - which is good, because there are some in the religious community who are strongly in favor of having me stoned for having the temerity to assault the honor of the Raven of Yorindar in the first place. In any event, the individual in question asked me to do this because they wished to keep your lands free of those treasure-seekers who might be too impious to respect the Priests of Yorindar, too brave to fear the King's Men at the Great Wall, and too stupid to fear the Giants of Hyperborea. You see, your people are our dearest allies, and we have nothing but love for you. Still, there remain those in our society, low, craven and greedy individuals who, despite the

ancient law against grave-robbing passed by King Darian, still may think to try to sneak into your lands and loot the ancient tombs, possibly releasing some unknown danger upon the world. Thus, I was asked to present this work as being the definitive secular study of Eddas Ayar, that the word might spread, and those who did not love your people and had no respect for our faith would at least fear the founder of your race. So who asked me to do this? Who gave me the manuscript which was published under my name? Why, Eddas Ayar himself. Or is it herself? I'm sorry, I've never been exactly clear on that point. No matter - I hope this puts your mind at ease. We, the people of Larinia, love and respect the Witch-Women of Hyperborea as our friends and allies, both in peace and in war. Those who do not will, I hope, at least fear the wrath of Eddas himself (herself?) enough to where they will leave you in peace. Sincerely, Lord Caladis of Greenhaven."

- Lord Caladis, Private letter to High Mistress Pelia Cydalion, 1820 NCC

"Grampa!" a little voice squeaked.

I grinned, turning my head from where I sat upon the parapet to see Lyota and her daughter, Kyrie, standing in the doorway to my room at the top of my tower. Behind them was Pelia, Lyota's mother. It was the middle of summer, and I was utterly surprised to see them. "Hello, little one!" I called, holding out my arms.

Kyrie dashed across the parapet, hopping into my lap for a hug. "Grampa!" she crowed, hugging me tight.

I hugged her back, chuckling as I patted her little back with an ebon-gloved hand. "You know, someday your mummy really *must* explain things to you," I said, looking to Lyota as she sat beside me in a nearby chair. "Otherwise, my little flower, you're likely to grow up with some very strange notions about what constitutes our family relationships."

Lyota giggled as Pelia pulled up a chair and sat beside her. "I have, Father - she is ten, after all, and is old enough to understand. She just knows that you enjoy having her call you 'Grampa.'"

"Is that true, my little flower?" I asked, looking at Kyrie and smiling.

"Yes, I understand," Kyrie replied, grinning. "It's magic - inside, you're a boy. You look like a girl because you got stuck inside this body, and can't fix it. And you're not *really* my Grampa, Mummy Lyota used a spell on Mummy Floria and made me with sorcery. Mummy Lyota and Mummy Floria explained that you got the idea for the spell from the band Gramma Pelia made. Gramma Pelia and all my aunties got together and made a magic band for you, and it lets you help them have babies because there aren't any more men of our people in all the whole wide world. Well, there's one, but he doesn't count, because he's with Rhane the Dryad and he loves her very much and mummy says even if he wanted to be my daddy he couldn't because there's only one of him and we'd all end up inbred and dumb as chickens! Buk-buk-bukaaawk!" Kyrie replied, flapping her arms like a chicken.

I burst out laughing for several long moments, and Lyota and Pelia joined me. "Well, yes, my little flower, that's about right. Your germ plasm is really that of Floria, herself - you're really more like her twin than her daughter."

"I know! Mummy Floria and Mummy Lyota and Gramma Pylota explained it to me! At first I was very sad because I thought that meant I didn't have a real mummy. Then mummy explained that she gave birth to me, she suckled me at her breasts, and that makes her my mummy! Well, I thought about it, and I asked mummy if Gramma Pelia could have had Mummy Lyota without you helping her, and she said no, the magic didn't work that way. Well, if she couldn't have Mummy Lyota without you, then that makes you my grampa! So there!"

I laughed again as Lyota and then Pelia took turns hugging the precocious little child. Kyrie's explanation, though simplistic, was accurate - and very telling of her true intellectual potential.

"Besides," Kyrie said, turning to me and continuing our conversation as soon as her grandmother had let her go, "I have better eyes than Gramma Pelia or any of my grand-aunties, anyway! I can see what you *really* look like, you know, just like Mummy Lyota and Mummy Floria!"

I nodded, smiling as I gazed at Kyrie's grinning little face. "Yes, that was another side-effect of the spell. Your life was sparked by sorcery, and that attunes you to magical things and lets you see things that the other races cannot. It's a very special and wonderful gift - and one that someday will serve you well, once you begin your studies of sorcery," I replied, and fuzzled her hair. Kyrie stuck her tongue out at me, and giggled.

"Tell me again what Eddas really looks like, Kyrie," Pelia said, smiling.

Kyrie looked at me for a moment, her gaze unfocused. "Well, Grampa is very tall, maybe four cubits and two hands tall. You can't tell in *this* body because it's only three cubits and three hands tall, but he *is*. Very tall. He has a beard that comes down to here, too," she said, poking a chubby finger at my breasts as she gazed at me. "His head is smooth... No hair. Shaved, I think. Lots of muscles, not like a girl. Very broad shoulders. And he doesn't have pasty-white skin like this body. It's brown, like ours. Bushy eyebrows, too - very large and bushy," Kyrie said, then blinked, looked at me, and grinned. "And he has a big nose!" she added with a giggle.

"I do not!" I snorted, and Pelia and Lyota giggled along with Kyrie.

"You do, too! A *huuuuuuuuge* nose! Enormous! Like a beak!"

I knew she was teasing me, of course - but I pretended to be highly insulted. "I do not have a big nose. My nose was perfectly normal for a man of my people. Many women called it handsome, in fact."

"I could hide my shoe in it!"

"Bah. Lyota, your daughter is insufferably rude. I shall have to tickle her to death," I said, and began tickling Kyrie's little ribs.

Kyrie squealed and giggled and struggled in my lap. After a long moment, she finally gasped "Okay! Okay! I lied! It's not that big!" I let her go and she hopped off my lap, then dashed over to hide behind her mother. Peering around her, Kyrie stuck her tongue out at me. "But it's still pretty big."

For a long, happy moment, Pelia, Lyota and I laughed, and Kyrie giggled. I looked up, and Joy was stepping out onto the parapet. "Ah, I thought I heard laughter up here. Hello, Kyrie!"

"Hello, Auntie Joy! Mummy and I are visiting because she wanted to come visit Grampa and I wanted to come, too, so she brought me along with her spell and here we are!"

Joy smiled. "How wonderful! How are you doing in your studies?"

"I am at the top of my class! I can name every bird and plant and animal on Iolo Mountain, now, and I am good at mathematics and I can read and write, too! Mummy and Auntie Kylae are teaching me! They traded herbs to Taliad and got many books in elvish, and Grampa finished translating them into our language and they are all neat and have lots of pictures!"

Joy nodded. "Well, your grampa has a magic quill to help him with that - that's why the pictures come out so good. I don't think he could draw to save his life," Joy replied, and winked at me.

I rolled my eyes. "I should have checked my calendar this morning, and noticed it was 'taunt Eddas' day."

"It is?" Pelia replied, pretending to be surprised. "I thought when I drew up our new calendars, I set that for the middle of the week! Bah! All those years of researching those obscure elven and Larinian history books you translated for us, all to line our calendars up perfectly, and I'm off by a day. Humph. Next you'll tell me I got the year-count wrong, and it's not 1784 NCC, either."

For a long moment, I was the center of laughter. Though I pretended to be annoyed, in truth, I was quite happy with all of them.

Once the laughter had settled a bit, Joy grinned. "Come, Kyrie. Let's go visit my garden, and let your mummy and grandma talk to Eddas in peace. Would you like that?"

"Sure!"

I smiled as Joy led Kyrie back into my room at the top of my tower, then down the stairs. Joy was a perfect companion for me - she knew that Lyota hadn't just come for an idle chat without me having to tell her, simply because she'd been a queen for nearly five decades, and my companion for twenty years after that, and now my mate for the last ten years. We kept the true nature of our relationship to ourselves, of course. Pelia and my courtesans would be utterly miserable if they knew that Joy was able to give me what they could not. The giants, knew, however. There was some obscure prophecy of theirs that apparently was about Joy - and our relationship had been predicted by that prophecy thousands of years ago (though the true nature of it was hardly what any prophet could have foreseen - the prophecy didn't mention Joy would love a man trapped in the body of a woman). Now, I had spent the last ten years training and equipping Joy, as we agreed, and she was perhaps one of the most dangerous warriors in Hyperborea, because of that.

Still, Joy could see that Lyota had something on her mind other than a simple conversation just from looking at her - for that matter, so could I. Once Kyrie was well down the stairs and out of earshot, I turned to Lyota. "So what is it that's brought you and your mother to me today, Lyota?"

"This, Father," Lyota replied, reaching into her pocket for a moment. When she held her hand back out, she was holding a brass key in the palm of her hand. It was small, barely reaching across her palm. Yet, it gleamed as though it was made only yesterday. It looked like a key one might expect to see fitting the lock to a small chest.

"A key?" I said aloud, gazing at it. "Why would any of us make a key? We've no locks in Hyperborea, as we've no thieves."

"We did not make it. Look again, Father. Assense it - it is no ordinary key," Lyota replied, and continued speaking as I examined the astral aura of the key. "It is an artifact of some kind, though the nature of its enchantments are concealed by a final enchantment none of us can see through. It was found by one of our children - and to that child, it is little more than a toy. Yet, when I hold this key, I get a dark sense of foreboding... Much as I want to keep it from her, I cannot. The child who found it can summon it to their hand any time they wish to play with it, and she says she can feel, just by holding it, the direction she would need to walk in to find the lock that the key fits. She wants to follow the key, Father, but all we know is it leads east. We have forbidden her from doing so, for now, until we could at least talk to you."

"But this cannot wait forever," Pelia said, nodding. "I myself have had a dream, Eddas... Inspired by Vyleah, I think. The key must be taken to the Utter East, and used. The longer we delay... The more likely it will be too late."

"Too late for what?" I asked, looking to Pelia.

Pelia shrugged helplessly. "I do not know. I only know that the dream showed our fate rested upon its use - perhaps, even, our very survival."

"I see..." I replied, nodding. "And which child found the key?"

"My own, Father. Kyrie," Lyota replied quietly.

I stroked my chin, thinking, and idly missed my beard again. It was an *enormous* risk Vyleah was taking - it was obvious that Kyrie was the pawn whose birth she had been waiting for. Yet, this meant that Vyleah's very survival would be placed in the hands of a ten-year-old girl - and, by extension, the survival of all Hyperboreans, save perhaps for me.

"And here we are, back again," Joy called.

"Grampa! Grampa! Look what I found!" Kyrie called, dancing over to me.

And in her little fingers, she held out a long, black raven's feather.

"It was just lying in the garden, Grampa! It's just like the feathers you wear! Would you like it?"

I smiled, reaching out my hand to take the feather from her pudgy fingers. "Thank you, Kyrie," I replied, and smiled again. I then looked meaningfully to Joy.

Joy looked back to me, and nodded. "I'll go put on my armor and begin packing for the trip. Don't forget to let the giants know we'll be gone for awhile, Old Man."

"I won't," I replied, nodding.

"You're leaving?! Where are you going, Grampa?" Kyrie asked, upset.

"You should ask 'where are we going', little one. You'll be coming along with us."

Kyrie clapped excitedly, hopping up and down. "I will?!"

"Yes. We're going to follow that little key you found, Kyrie, and see where it leads us."

"Yippee!" Kyrie squealed, and spent the next several moments dancing about the parapet.

"Lyota," I said, looking to my daughter, "go home and pack for Kyrie. She'll need extra clothes, blankets, and all that. You've traveled with me before, you should know what to pack."

"Yes, Father," Lyota replied, bowing her head. She rose to her feet, setting the key down in her chair, and her mother stood beside her. I rose, and hugged both of them in turn. Lyota then reached out, and took her mother's hand.

"Farewell, Eddas - and thank you," Pelia called, then cast her spell of returning, and Lyota and Pelia vanished.

As Kyrie skipped inside my room at the top of my tower, babbling questions at Joy, I lowered my hood, and slipped the ebon feather into place beneath my hair-band, alongside the other three that were already there. I gazed up into the blue sky of the clear summer's day, but the drifting wisps of clouds there offered no hint at what might be in store.

I nodded. *'Alright, Yorindar. It begins again.'* I then rose to my feet, and strode into my tower.

[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."