

The Cornerstone

By

Craig C. McCabe

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This book is dedicated to my wife, Joyce and our two daughters, Desiree and Shannon. Without their support and patience, I would not have had the opportunity to write The Cornerstone.

Cornerstone: Stone forming a part of a corner or angle in a wall. A stone laid at a formal ceremony. The most basic element—Foundation.

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1

The Search

Imagine this, if you can: A land that time has twisted and warped; A land of spiked mountains and deep valleys; trees gnarled and bent; A medieval land of sorcery and myth, legend and prophecy; A land that seems to be stuck in the autumn of the year, waiting for winter to come. Darkness has replaced the day as the creatures of the night emerge from their hiding places until the sun pushes them back into the shadows. A cold wind is blowing, not a normal wind that you feel on an October night that foretells of the coming winter and snow, but a cruel wind that blows into your bones and that a coat can't stop. There is a strange fog that seems almost unaffected by the wind. It hovers around trees and rocks, and hides in holes that you could trip in. The moon gives off just enough light to shadow the land with evil shapes that you hope are trees and rocks, not animals waiting for their evening meal. The only sound is that of the wind. It sounds like a thousand banshees screaming as it echoes off the mountains and the crooked trees. There is a pervasive smell of rot that bleeds and oozes from the ground. Death is just behind the next rock or beyond that fallen tree, in a land like this you just never know!

He should have been here two days ago to prepare to meet them. It wouldn't give him much time. With that strange fog building, it would be harder to find the exact spot he was looking for.

He was a man with dark thoughts, dressed in dirty rags and an old dirty coat that had been passed down from generation to generation. Now he was searching the shadows of this valley between the tall mountains of this accursed land. He would find the place in time; he had to. His now dead master had told him that he would.

When he first began his training as a sorcerer, he was a nobody, and still would be had his master not taken the time to teach him true magic. He missed him now as he looked back. His master had been a true friend; and it was his fault that he had died.

He was born and raised in the Town of Hillshire, just outside of the kingdom walls of Ravenfall. It was a nice little town full of farmers, tailors, and craftsmen of all kinds. It was quite a wealthy town because of the closeness to the king and the fact that they supplied most of what the kingdom needed. He was seven years old when his mother died during the Black Plague that killed most of the people of the town. His father had been killed in a war for the King three years earlier. His sister was two when the town paid their respects and laid his father down for his final rest. He had been a great warrior, but in a war, even the best men die when they are outnumbered.

Rathsmus didn't remember his father much. His name was Victor. He had been a big man, large of bone and stature, with dark brown hair and a full beard and mustache that had just a tinge of gray around the edges. He had a great sense of humor and a laugh that could bring down a mountain. Victor could best any man in

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the kingdom with a sword and he could hold his own with the best from any kingdom within a month's march. One of Rathsmus' best memories was when his father won the king's greatest warrior contest. The winner had to be the best with five different types of weapons, both on horse and afoot; sword, bow and arrow, crossbow, lance, and a whip, all with full armor. The celebration lasted several days.

That took place about six months before the war began with the local kingdom of Damonwood. It was a foolish war over a mistress belonging to the King of Damonwood who was now with the King of Ravenfall. A month into the war Rathsmus' father was dead; within two weeks the Kingdoms were friends again and the war was forgotten, along with his father and the other men that had died. Rathsmus hated the King for his stupidity and the Town for putting up with him. His mother instructed him never to tell anyone how he felt for fear they might not be allowed to remain in the house. A few words of advice as a child, memories of the family picnics, and the memory of a man dressed in metal armor with the blue and red markings of the King, were all Rathsmus had left. His mother had saved the armor and shield and kept it in the attic. Rathsmus went there to look at and fondle them often. He even tried them on and pretended to fight off the King's enemies. He wished that he could remember more, but the memories just weren't there.

The memories of his mother were clearer. She had been a pretty woman, kind and sweet, tall for a woman, but when she had trouble with a neighbor or other townsman she needed the height and they usually backed down when she gave them the eye. She held herself with the pride of a queen and never said a mean word of anyone. She would laugh a shy little titter that endeared her to anyone she met. Rathsmus' mother would help anyone, even if it meant a hardship for her; she always told Rathsmus that God knew who was good by how much you would give up for your fellow man. Deep down his mother had a profound impact on his life. How he felt about other people and how much he did to help his neighbors that were having trouble with their health or other problems. Since his mother's death, God had become nonexistent in his life. He felt that most people only wanted to use him and gave him nothing in return for his help, and he hated people in general.

After their mother's death, Rathsmus and his sister went to live with their aunt and uncle while they waited for their estate to be settled by the Town. Of course, as in most towns, the corrupt governments kept most of the estates that were any good and gave the remains to the families of the deceased. In this case, the house they had lived in was a comfortable cabin, but was not worth much, even though it was probably the only thing of real value his mother could keep after his father died. The Town sold the house and kept the money in return for supporting the widow of a great warrior of the King. They had let them stay in the house "tax free" until she would remarry, which she never did. Now, with two extra mouths to feed and no money to pay their way, Rathsmus' aunt and uncle sold him to a sorcerer as an apprentice. However, he was treated more like a slave. He didn't put up a fight because he was told that the money would support his sister and maybe even send her to a school. He believed them, until he learned that his sister had been sold to a wealthy merchant as a wife. He figured that he would never see or hear of her again.

As the apprentice of a local sorcerer Rathsmus assumed that after a few years he would pick up enough magic to go after his sister and get his revenge on his aunt and uncle. However, that was not to be. The “sorcerer” was nothing more than an amateur magician who fooled the locals with his tricks and, as the apprentice; all he did was clean up after the failed experiments. What the sorcerer didn’t know was that at night his apprentice studied all of the magic books he could sneak into his room. Most of the books were simple mythology and wives’ tales, but some were old and were written in a strange language that he could only understand by studying other books. The sorcerer never used these books because even he couldn’t understand them and he didn’t want to take the time to study the old books in order to understand other old books; he wanted quick knowledge.

One day the sorcerer left for a guild meeting that would take him to another town for several days. “Don’t get into anything while I’m gone or I’ll knock you when I get back!” he warned his apprentice. Rathsmus knew that the sorcerer wouldn’t hesitate to hit him if he thought he should. He had beaten Rathsmus many times when he had first acquired him. Now that Rathsmus was getting older, the sorcerer found it harder to beat him unless he was really angry, but even then he knew enough to stop before the apprentice got angry enough to hit back. The sorcerer knew it was getting time to replace the apprentice with a younger boy, one he could discipline and not be afraid of. In part that was the reason he went to the guild meeting. Perhaps, he thought, he could sell his apprentice as a young mage ready for further schooling; it didn’t matter that he had had none. By the time the new owner found that the student had no magical ability, it would be too late and he could afford a new apprentice.

During the sorcerer’s absence, the apprentice studied the books day and night. He even did a few experiments, with unexpected success, that made him redouble his efforts. Rathsmus had removed the covers of the old magic books, putting blocks of wood inside the covers so the sorcerer would not miss the books on the shelves. He had seven books now and there were three others, which he had read and replaced that he had determined were too advanced, but now with the success of the experiments, he would even take these to study. That was all of the old books the sorcerer had that were any good. The rest were minor magic books that he had already surpassed in ability. Rathsmus was planning to take the books and leave before the sorcerer returned from his trip. However, he didn’t leave in time, and when the sorcerer returned he told him that he had found a new master for him who would take over his schooling. Rathsmus was to pack his belongings; he would be leaving in the morning. The sorcerer locked the door to make sure he didn’t escape before he could be brought to the new owner.

That night the apprentice packed all the books in an old chest he had purchased at one of the local junk shops in the village. He had built a false bottom in the chest in case the sorcerer got nosy. After all of his belongings were packed, Rathsmus lay down on the pallet he used for a bed. Sleep did not come easily that night; it was filled with fitful dreams of what his new owner would be like.

In the morning, he put his chest in the small cart that belonged to the sorcerer and sat beside it while the sorcerer nudged the old horse to move out of the village. It had been a day and a half when they came to an old stone building with

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moss and vines covering the sides and windows. A large wooden door stared at the apprentice as he stood beside his chest and the sorcerer drove away without a word.

Rathsmus stood and watched the sorcerer disappear over the hill then he turned toward the door. There was now a large man standing in the open doorway. His face was hidden in the folds of his hood. "Come inside lad, I will show you to your room, then you will be tested on your ability for magic. The man I bought you from said you were a good student and that he had taught you all he could." "I'm afraid you were lied to, he never taught me anything except how to sweep and clean. I was but a servant, but as I got older he became more afraid of me. He likes to beat his servants. It makes him feel like a strong sorcerer. He was not much of a sorcerer. None of his experiments ever worked, but the villagers liked to have him around, made them feel safer. He had some good tricks, but that was all they were, just tricks." The man just stood there and looked at him, unmoving and seemingly unbreathing. "If you want, I will leave you and never return". "I paid good money for you and I will get my money's worth. If I have been cheated, your previous owner will wish he had never met me. Now pick up your things and I will bring you to your room. We will speak again after you have freshened up from your journey". The man led the apprentice to his room to clean himself and to rest. When the Rathsmus awoke there was a platter of food and something to drink on the stand in his room. He ate ravenously for he had not eaten since he had climbed into the cart with the sorcerer. There was a knock at the door and the man entered the room and sat on the bed. "I see you have awakened from your slumber. I had hoped to test you yesterday but you slept the day away and then the night". The man pushed the hood off his head to reveal shoulder length black hair with gray streaks, a tanned face with blue eyes that sparkled and danced with the light from the window, a beard and mustache that matched the color of the hair of his head, but with a little more gray. The man smiled a broad smile that showed his teeth and he shook with an internal laugh.

"So, lad, I can't call you 'apprentice' as your old owner called you, especially if you have no magical ability. What is your name?", he said with a smile. "Rathsmus, sir." "Well, Rathsmus my name is Roman. You will find me a much easier man to get along with than your old owner. In fact I don't want you to consider me as your owner. I paid 50 gold pieces for you. If you have no magical ability I will release you in one year. However, if you do have the ability, you might wish to stay and learn". Rathsmus looked at Roman and nodded, "I would like that".

Roman led Rathsmus into a stairway that spiraled down into a dark and musty cellar. They walked from one room to another, and another, and finally came to a double wooden door with black iron bindings and a big iron lock. "This is my laboratory. You must never enter it without me or my express permission". Rathsmus nodded. From around his neck Roman pulled a gold chain and a big brass key. He slid the key into the lock and turned the key with a loud click and the lock snapped open. Roman pushed the door open to show Rathsmus an enormous lab with books, flasks, candles and tables. A warmth emanated from the room that made it seem more like a kitchen in a home than a cellar in an old rundown stone house. All Rathsmus could say was "Wow!". "I see you like it", said Roman. Rathsmus nodded again with the wide-mouthed stare of a young boy in a candy store for the

first time. "I think this is my favorite place in the house," said Roman, "I spend most of the time here trying new experiments and making potions to sell to the nearby village. That is how I support myself. Now that you are living here you will have to help." Rathsmus looked at Roman and said, "I'll do my best, sir." "I believe you will. I'm a good judge of character and I think we are going to get along just fine. Come over here and we'll get the test under way." Rathsmus did as he was told and noticed a design on the floor where Roman motioned for him to stand. "I want you to stand in the center of the design and hold your arms close to your sides." That was all Rathsmus remembered from the test. The next thing he knew, he was waking up in his bed.

There was a knock on the door and Roman entered the room. "How are you feeling?" he asked. "Okay, I guess, I feel kind of strange." "That is normal after going through the testing procedure, but I have good news for you. You do have magical ability within your being. Although I'm not sure how strong you will become, if you continue your schooling, because there were conflicting results during the test. Sometimes you registered off the scale and other times it showed you had absolutely no ability at all. It was a very confusing test. I've never given a test quite like it before. You have some kind of block that will not let you show your full potential." "I don't understand," said Rathsmus, "You mean that I have the ability, but that I won't be very strong?" "No, not exactly. You have some ability, but you will not know your true potential until you can remove the block you have. I don't know what is causing the block. It might be something that can only be temporarily removed, such as in a defensive or protective type of magic when you feel in danger. That was when I noticed the strongest power in you. It might be something that just disappears when you reach a certain age. I have no way of knowing what your situation is. We will do our best to work it out. Your first lesson is in an hour, which will give you a chance to clean up and eat. When you are done come to the laboratory, and bring your magic books. I have set aside an area for you. Under my supervision, you can do some more experiments from them. Rule number one, you never try an experiment on your own until I say you are ready to do so; only under my supervision. Agreed?" Rathsmus' mind raced. How did he know about the books and the experiments? He must have found out from the tests he had performed on me, thought Rathsmus. "Agreed?" Roman asked again. Rathsmus nodded slowly, still wondering how much more Roman had discovered from the tests. Not that there was that much else to find out, and at least Roman had not taken the books from him, not yet anyway.

Rathsmus went to the bathroom and cleaned up. There was a large brass tub with pipes that came out of the wall and hung over it. He turned the spigot on one of the pipes and water ran into the tub. "Wow", thought Rathsmus, "You don't have to lug water in from the well!" Rathsmus turned the spigot off and then turned the other one on. Water ran in again, but this time the water was hot. Rathsmus was awed by the thought of hot and cold running water. This was something that he had never seen before. He decided to take a bath.

Rathsmus was enjoying himself in the tub so much that he forgot about Roman waiting in the laboratory for him. When he finally remembered, he jumped out of the tub and tried to dry off. He got a strange feeling that someone was

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watching him. Turning quickly, he saw Roman standing in the doorway with an angry look on his face. "I'm sorry but I lost track of time, I was just coming down to the laboratory to..." but Rathsmus didn't finish the sentence because of the look Roman had on his face. "I expect discipline, efficiency, and punctuality. You have not been here very long and are still getting used to things. However, I am not a patient man when it comes to my apprentices. When I tell you to do something, I expect it to be done in a timely manner. Taking two hours to clean up and eat is too long." "I'm sorry, I have no excuse," said Rathsmus, "I have never seen running water in a home before, especially hot and cold water together." "Oh, I forgot you really haven't had that much experience with true magic. It is a minor magic to have hot and cold running water. The fact that you haven't seen it before is proof that your previous sorcerer was really nothing more than a magician," Roman spit the word magician with hate and disgust. "I will be talking to him soon about that fact. I do not take lightly getting cheated by a fake. He will wish he never met me, when I'm done with him, and he will know what true magic really is." His voice was deep and menacing. Rathsmus almost felt sorry for his previous owner, almost.

Rathsmus learned a lot from Roman in their years together. One day Rathsmus wanted to try a particularly difficult spell, but Roman did not like the idea because it was a type of magic that he had always avoided. It was magic that foretold the future, and tell the future it did. It told Rathsmus that he would find five sisters, and in turn, unlock his future. It was a type of magic that had evil tendencies, and if it was not done properly, it could kill you. It killed Roman and scarred Rathsmus for life. Not a physical scar, but a mental scar that he would feel for a long time.

As Rathsmus was thinking of his late master, he tripped on a root in the ground that was hidden by the fog, and fell. The wind was dying down and the fog was building, and so was his anger. The time was getting close and he had to find the stone. He should be close; it had to be here, near! As he tried to get up, he tripped again on a large log that was hidden by the fog and fell backwards over it. Angrily he jumped to his feet, drew his sword, and swung down at the log. Striking the log, his sword clanged off at an angle and a big spark shocked the air. He looked at his sword and noticed a large dent in the cutting edge.

Damned his anger! His master had always told him to control his anger, but after his master's death, it became harder to control the fits of anger over simple problems or stupid mistakes. Then, he was refused entry into the guild because of his uncontrollable temper. They said he could not control the magic if he could not control his anger. Of course, they were talking about white magic. They did not want him to know about dark magic. They had hoped he would give up magic and go into farming or something, but he would show them. Since Roman's death Rathsmus had been practicing dark magic. Dark magic was easier to learn than white magic. You had to have anger in you to practice it, to control it. The more anger, the easier it was to do the magic. You just had to know where to focus your anger. When he was ready, they would bow down to him and ask him to join their precious guild, if he let them live long enough, that is.

He sheathed his sword. Upset at his own stupidity, he had ruined his sword on a stupid rock! That stone he was looking for should be here and he knew it. He

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knelt down to feel for his bag that he had dropped when he had tripped, and felt the rock that he had hit with the sword. It was smooth! Was this it? It couldn't be! The stone should be standing, not lying down. He felt the stone again. His sword had not even scratched it. This was it! The cornerstone! It must have been an awesome force to have knocked down such a magical device as this. He noticed, as he felt toward one end, it ended in a pyramid. This was the top. As he felt toward the other end he found magic runes on the side. Further down he felt caked on mud and dirt and the stone continued to a squared off end. It was approximately ten feet long, eight inches wide, and had four sides. It was intact! Complete!

2

The Summoning

The next step was to stand the stone up. The only way to do that, considering the fact that he was alone and could not lift it by himself, was to use magic. He did not know what effect magic would have on the stone, since it was magical itself. If he used the wrong spell it could rebound against him and burn him to ash. He explored the ground with his hands to find his pack and then pulled out a bundle of old rags. Wrapped within the bundle was a magic amulet. This had belonged to Roman, his old master. As he thought of him, a feeling of sadness crossed his face. He did not let the feeling last long.

Luckily, this object had no preference as to which type of magic you used with it. Some did and could burn you to ash where you stood if you used them wrong. Rathsmus unwrapped the amulet and hooked it on a chain he wore around his neck. He then pulled out an ancient looking book. It was one of his books of magic, the he'd had the hardest time learning. Sitting cross-legged, he opened the book and set it on his lap. Rather than using magic directly on the stone, he decided that he would solidify the air around the stone and then lift it into place. He started the spell. The amulet's blue stone glowed slightly as he weaved the magic around the stone. The fog around the stone dissipated and the air began to shimmer, then turned opaque and solidified. As he continued the spell, the stone slowly lifted into the air and turned to a vertical position. It was about ten feet above the ground, when suddenly it was thrust into the ground with such force that only six feet of it remained above the ground. It impacted with such force that it knocked Rathsmus over and he passed out when his head struck the ground.

When he awoke the wind had stopped and the fog had built and hung everywhere. The morning was fighting the night in a battle to the death. It wouldn't be long before the sun was rising over the horizon to burn the fog away. He could not even see the cornerstone, though he knew he could not be more than three to four feet away from where it now stood. The book was still with him and the amulet was still around his neck. Rathsmus grabbed the amulet and held it out as far as the chain would let him. Closing his eyes, he started a minor spell that he had learned a long time ago when he was still an apprentice. The amulet's stone glowed a dull blue and then changed to a bright blue. As the spell continued, the amulet changed color to a sickly green. The fog around the cornerstone started to swirl and pull away. When the spell was done, there was a dome around him with twenty feet in all directions; the cornerstone was in the exact center.

The space within the dome was filled with brush and tall grass. It would need to be cleared. He grabbed his bag and stuffed the book of magic in it. He started chanting again and a bubble of air shimmered around him and his possessions, and was raised into the air. The grass and brush smoldered and flared into a very hot burning fire. He could feel the heat through the magic bubble. Shortly, the fire burned out and, again, the air swirled to remove the smoke, ash, and

heat from the area, which was added to the existing dome making it opaque. Nothing could be seen on the outside of the dome. Within the dome, a glow emanated from the dome itself, allowing Rathsmus to see. As he settled to the ground, the bubble disappeared. The area inside the dome was completely flat.

Reaching inside his pack, Rathsmus removed a canister and a small brass scoop and laid the pack on the ground. He walked to the cornerstone and set down the canister and the scoop. Next, he did a quick rite of chants and bows then removed the amulet and a small brass fixture from the chain. He took the fixture, placed it on the point of the cornerstone, and balanced the amulet on the fixture. It looked like a compass arrow. In fact, that is exactly what it was. Rathsmus chanted and the amulet slowly began to spin several times and stopped. He then took the cover off the canister and scooped out some white powder and sprinkled the powder in a straight line away from the stone in the direction of the arrow. This was north. He did this three more times for south, west, and east. After making the fourth line, he made two more lines at the end of the first lines to make a point like an arrow. From the end of each of the last two lines he made another line back toward the stone until they intersected with the lines coming from the direction at a right angle. Where the lines intersected, he made four more lines in the directions of northeast, northwest, southeast, and southwest. Again, he made them into arrows and made more lines from the point toward the stone until they touched a line of the first arrows. The secondary arrows did not extend as far away from the stone as the four major arrows. He now had a crude compass with the cornerstone as its center. Now he was ready for the meeting, it was time.

Rathsmus put a little oil on the fixture where the amulet rested on the cornerstone and then sat on the ground cross-legged with the book of magic in his lap. He sat in front of the southern pointing arrow facing north toward the stone. His arms were stretched out toward the northwest and northeast. As he started chanting, the amulet glowed a faint blue, but as he continued, it changed to a brighter blue. The amulet started to spin slowly from one compass point to the next. It changed color to a sickly green and spun faster and faster no longer stopping at the compass points. As the chanting increased in speed and volume, so did the amulet's speed increase. The dome began to glow the same pea soup green as the amulet and there was a whistling noise coming from the cornerstone. As the amulet spun faster, the whistle became a screeching noise. "I didn't put enough oil on the fixture", thought Rathsmus, "no matter, I'm almost done". The fixture was putting off little tendrils of smoke as the oil was burning off. As he was finishing his spell, the amulet rose off the cornerstone and spun faster. The sound was a high pitched whistle once more, not the screech of metal on metal.

Rathsmus finished the spell and the amulet's light went out like blowing out a candle. It was so dark within the dome, he could see nothing, even the dome had stopped glowing. There was a slight trembling in the ground and, when it stopped, there was a faint glow about ten to fifteen feet in the directions of north, west, and east. As the glow got brighter, a sort of fog bubbled out of the ground by the source of the glow. Suddenly, there was a large lump by the glow. In fact, it was the lump that was glowing. They were about four and one-half feet tall and two and one-half to three feet wide. The lumps moved toward the cornerstone. They were

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not exactly walking, but it was as if they were floating above the ground, which Rathsmus believed they were. As they stopped by the arrows he had made, he felt a fourth one behind him. He felt his skin crawl up his back and then up the back of his neck. He wanted to run away as fast as he could, but he knew if he made any sudden moves he would die before he could even get to his feet. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to regain his courage and strength, which seemed to be seeping into the ground.

Opening his eyes, he saw that the lumps had transformed into hideously malformed old women. They had stringy gray hair, wore dirty old rags for clothes, and were missing teeth here and there. They had huge warts in various places on their faces, and they cackled when they laughed, and they did that a lot. It was not a laugh of mirth, but of evil.

The old woman that was behind him, floated in front of him so that she was now between him and the cornerstone. The other three women floated up beside her. When the cackling stopped, the first one stared at him and, in a scratchy voice, said, "stand". He tried to stand but the blood seemed to have drained out of his legs and he stumbled. After a couple tries he was successful, but he was stiff and sore. "So, what is your name?" the first woman asked, adding with contempt and a sneer, "magician". "I am a sorcerer", he replied with anger, and then realized that he had made a big mistake. These women could kill him with just a thought; he had to remain calm. The blood rushed to his feet and he felt flushed and dizzy. "My apology, mistresses", he said, giving a small bow. Looking at him with an evil eye, the other three women gave soft, evil cackles. "You best watch yourself, sorcerer, you might not leave this valley in the same condition as you entered". He gave another short bow. "My name is Rathsmus, mistress". "What is your purpose for bringing us here?" the woman asked. "To learn the secret of the cornerstone, my mistress". "Many a man has come here for that very purpose and have not passed the necessary tests before that knowledge could be given. What makes you think that you will do any better? Just because you call yourself a sorcerer? You can still back out now, once the testing begins they must continue to the end. If you stop now, we will at least let you live, albeit not in your present condition, but still alive". "I would like to continue, mistress". With a sneer she said, "so be it", and clapped her hands. In an instant he was on a plain of dry grass and parched dirt.

3

Reunion

There were trees off in the distance and purple mountains beyond that. This was not the same land where the witches were. The mountains were not pointed and the trees were not the twisted evil shapes he was used to. The sun beat down through wispy clouds. There was no wind to cool him off here, just the unbearable heat. If it wasn't for the heat he could have laid down and slept in the comfortable grass. The smell of the grass reminded him of the hay fields he worked in when he was young. The sounds of birds filled the air. He started removing clothing; it had been very cold where the cornerstone was. There was such a difference in temperature he thought he was going to black out. He regained his composure and did not know what to do next. If this was the test, he did not know its purpose or how to pass it. They had not said anything about what was expected of him. He did not even have any of his magical supplies or his sword.

He searched the horizon for any indication of which direction to move. First things first, shade and water, in this heat he would need both to survive. The closest trees looked dry and dead, that seemed like south. He did not know how he knew that, but he was sure that he was right. To the north he saw tree tops over a small rise. He decided to go in that direction. He tied the clothes he had removed in a small bundle, slung it over his back and started walking.

After what seemed like an hour, he reached the top of the rise and looked down over a beautiful meadow with a wide stream running through it. He thought about running to it but remembered that this was a test, it could not be this easy. From where he was the ground sloped down to the edge of the meadow. There was tall grass and he could not make out the exact layout of the land, other than it was a slope down to the meadow. Someone or something could easily hide in a ditch covered by the grass and he would not see it until he was upon it. He looked around to see if there was a safer way down. Off to the right the rise curved off toward the stream and became a cliff. This might be a better way down. He walked toward the cliff. When he got to the cliff he found a cleared path that followed the cliff down the slope to the meadow. He wished he had his sword, but he did not and he had to continue.

When he got to the meadow it seemed cooler. He walked to the stream to get a drink. The water was greenish brown and seemed thick and sluggish. He decided that he was not thirsty after all. He followed the path into the meadow. This was a thriving garden of plants and flowers he had never seen before and trees with strange looking fruit hanging off their limbs. He decided to wait to eat also. If the water was bad and it made these plants thrive, they were probably also bad. As he got further and further into the meadow the path seemed to get narrower. The underbrush was getting thicker and there were more trees also.

The stream curved to his left and crossed the path. He did not dare to wade through the stream. He went to a tree and found a vine that was thick and strong. He

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had to find a way to cut the vine and, again, wished for his sword. He found a rock with a sharp edge and pounded on the vine until it was cut. He pulled on the vine but it was caught and twisted into the branches of the tree. Putting all of his weight on the vine, he pulled it out and he swung out over the stream, almost to the other side, and then back to the side he had started from. He tried again, this time pushing off, and swung over the stream to the other side and let go when he knew he would land on the hard ground. It was not the most graceful thing he had ever done, but it worked.

As he followed the path, the trees got taller and thicker. The path got darker. The roots of the trees worked their way into the path and made walking more difficult as it got darker. After he had gone a couple hundred feet he turned around. All he could see was a light at the beginning of the forest. The trees prevented almost all of the light from reaching the forest floor. He turned and continued walking, deeper into the forbidding forest of twisted giants. The trail, at first, continued straight as an arrow. Every now and then he would turn to see if the light at the beginning of the forest could still be seen. It was barely a pinprick of light now. As he continued along the path, it gradually worked into a downgrade and curved slightly to the right. It seemed as though he had been walking for hours, when he stopped for a sight he could only stare at in awe. Directly in front of him the path split in two. The trees had opened up enough to let a stream of light down to the ground like a spotlight to light up a museum piece. This object was both a thing of artistic beauty and fierce grotesqueness.

It was a statue of part animal or monster; he was not sure which, and part beautiful woman. At the ground they were connected, parts of the woman's feet and legs were apparent here and there, but there were parts of this other thing that were unidentifiable. Claws here, hooves in another place, fur lined muscular legs that looked very powerful. The higher up the statue, the more the two split and became their own entity. They were still connected at the hips, but not as closely as at the feet. The woman was very beautiful, and very much a woman with all of the parts and curves in all of the proper places. Even though the body was beautiful, the face was even more so, with a long flow of hair framing it. Though it was carved from stone he thought it would be soft to the touch; it looked so real. As the woman's body came away from the animals, it turned towards the right. Both arms, which were held in front of her, were connected and held the most enormous diamond he had ever seen or even heard of. The animal part of the statue was larger. It almost made up a sort of background to frame the woman. The beast had hair on its back and sides, but had scales on its stomach and chest. Its arms, if you could call them arms, were similar to a muscular man's, but with hair and scales the same as the body. The hands were all reptilian from the wrist to the claws. The head was very large and hairy with scales up the neck to the face. The face had remnants of humanity, but the features were too large. The mouth and teeth were much too lizard-like with a forked tongue. The ears were partially hidden in the hair, but a point rose through it on both sides of the massive head. The strangest part of the whole creature was the large "longhorn" horns atop the head. It was as if someone had taken pictures of every animal ever seen or imagined, ripped them into pieces, and then tried to glue them together as one. The animal's body curved over the

woman and the arms circled around her toward the diamond. The eyes were large eye-shaped blood-red rubies, which seemed to stare at the diamond.

The big question was, what did the statue mean and what did it have to do with the test? Was this a test to see if he was greedy and would take the diamond and rubies, and if it was a test, was he supposed to take them or not? Was he supposed to be greedy? He decided that he should be sensible. If he was in a forest alone, wealth would not help him; however, it was possible that there was some magical element to the statue that he could use or that could help him pass the test. He sat on the ground, crossed his legs in front of him, closed his eyes and concentrated on a minor spell to sense magic in or around objects. He opened his eyes and started the spell. His sight went black as he concentrated on the statue. He started methodically on the ground around the statue; there could be traps to catch the unwary. Yes! a trap on the ground below the large diamond. Anyone that would touch the diamond would be caught or killed. It was hard to tell what a trap would do. He only knew it was a trap and there was no such thing as good trap. He marked it in his mind so it would not catch him and continued his search. He found nothing magical through most of his search. There were a few minor traps in various places on the statue to catch anyone trying to get at the jewels from different angles. Then he noticed on the top of the creature, on the end of each horn, was a gold ring. They had some kind of magic in them. He checked the air around the rings and could find nothing around the rings for traps. He magically removed the rings from the horns and they dropped into his outstretched hand. He had no idea what these rings were and did not want to put them on until further investigation of them, so he removed the chain from around his neck, strung the rings on the chain, and put it back around his neck. His next problem was which way to go. He did not want to wait around here to see if the owner of the statue came to investigate the removal of the rings. Left or right? Feeling a strange pull toward the left, he went with the feeling at a run in case he was right about the owner of the statue.

Of course he had been right and the owner was now standing in front of the statue and had just missed Rathsmus. The rings had been the only things that kept the statue in its present state and now it was melting. The diamond was just a lump of soft oozing mud that dripped through the hands of the woman. The woman was no longer beautiful, but old and ugly. The woman moved and the stone cracked, split and flaked off. She now pulled herself from the mud base of the statue and walked to the watcher of the statue. The watcher watched as the larger part of the statue crumbled and fell away. The only part of the statue that remained the same was the horns. He was a Mineotaur. The Mineotaur pulled himself from the mud base of what remained of the statue, and walked up behind the old woman.

"You are the man who imprisoned us in the statue?" the woman asked. The watcher of the statue just stood there. He did not understand what had just happened and had been too scared and dumbfounded to turn and run as the statue had crumbled. His father had not told him this secret of the statue; he had only told him that he could capture slaves with the magic traps of the statue. The amulet around his neck controlled the magic and told him when someone had been trapped.

The old woman asked again, "Are you the man who imprisoned us in the statue?" The Minotaur bent down and roared, "Well?" This broke the watcher's

silent stare and he started babbling about not knowing that anyone was in the statue, that the amulet had been passed down from generation to generation, and that the origin of it was not known, but he himself had not imprisoned them in the statue. "Give me my amulet", the old woman said. The watcher said "No! its mine". Before he could finish the Minotaur struck the watcher with a massive fist on top of his head, like a mallet striking an anvil. The watcher slumped to the ground with a broken neck. The old woman turned and gave the Minotaur a dirty look. "You didn't have to kill him, did you?" "Sorry", the Mineotaur growled, "I'm hungry and he should make a nice snack for me", he finished. "Go ahead, but hurry up we have to find the one who freed us and get the rings back".

She turned and walked toward the split in the path. Shortly, the Mineotaur returned to her side and handed her the amulet. He had kept all of the jewels and money that the watcher had for himself. "Which way?" she cackled. The Mineotaur sniffed the air, "to the left", he growled. He bent down, she hopped up on his neck and shoulders and then he stood up straight. She grabbed his horns and he started running up the path to the left.

Rathsmus was not in very good shape and it wasn't long before he got tired and out of breath. He slowed and continued to walk. It seemed that he could hear his own heart beating in his chest, it almost seemed to shake the ground. It did not seem a normal heartbeat. Then he realized it was not his heart, but the ground. Something was running up the path in his direction and it sounded very large. Apparently he had failed the test and would now die. He was too tired to run anymore, and by the sound it, would not matter anyway. The thing running up the path was moving very fast and would overtake him any minute. He just stood there waiting for it to come around the curve and squash him into the mud like a bug. He was even too tired to use his magic. He did not want to use the rings, they could be worse than death if you didn't know how to use them. If only he'd had a chance to inspect them; but that was wishful thinking. He still had a chance if he could apologize for stealing the rings, maybe... Then he saw the shadow of the thing coming through the trees. It was enormous, with a head larger than its body. The closer it got the more the ground shook. Its nose, or actually its snout, went up as if smelling the air, and it slowed down to a walk. It came around the corner and stood, ready to pounce on him, but Rathsmus just stood there looking defeated and ready to die. The Mineotaur walked to within ten paces of Rathsmus and bent down to let the old woman off his shoulders. Rathsmus almost let out a sigh of relief when he realized that the creature was not as big as its shadow had been with the old woman on its back, but then he realized it was still large enough to stomp him into the ground.

"Is this the man who released us from the statue?" the old woman asked the creature. "Yes, this is the one", he growled. "What is your name?" she asked Rathsmus. "My name is Rathsmus", and he quickly added "mistress" when he saw the amulet around her neck, a duplicate of his own magical amulet, and he added a short bow at the same time. "You are quite polite, for a thief!" she said. At that he raised his hands to the rings on the chain around his neck and looked up at the creature. It had raised both of its mighty fists up to waist level and looked ready to tear him into pieces. Rathsmus swallowed hard, removed the rings from the chain, bent down on one knee and handed the rings to the old woman. He said, "I did not

realize the statue belonged to anyone, mistress, it looked very old and there were magic traps set on the statue around the jewels, but none around these rings, so I thought they belonged to no one". At this point, he thought they were mad at him for stealing the rings, he had not heard her original question about him freeing them. "So you are just a simple thief, Mr. Rathsmus? I had hoped for more..." she trailed off in her sentence and he did not hear the rest. "No, mistress, I'm not just a thief, I have traveled from a faraway land at the bidding of four mistresses as yourself on a test of my ability as a sorcerer. I am currently being tested, though I have no idea exactly what they are looking for me to do". She turned quickly and stopped him; "Did you say four mistresses as myself?" "Why, yes, mistress. I had summoned them with an amulet, a twin to that which you wear around your neck." "Did they tell you their names?" "No, mistress, and I don't think they would have even if I had asked, which I didn't." "You say you summoned them with this amulet?" "No, not this amulet, one just like it." "Where is this amulet now?" "It's with the four mistresses who sent me on this test. "Then you must use this amulet to bring us there, sorcerer." "No, I can't. I have to stay here until they bring me back, I think. They didn't tell me." "I'm telling you, you must reunite the twins of the five!" "I don't know what you are talking about. I don't know anything about any twins of the five, five what?" The old woman looked Rathsmus square in the eyes and sighed a deep breath to control her anger. "This amulet, Mr. Rathsmus, is a twin to the amulet that you used to summon the other mistresses. I am the fifth sister. When you reunite us it will fulfill a prophecy that is several hundred years old. The twins and the sisters must be reunited at the same time." Rathsmus looked like he was getting too much information for his brain to digest all at once. "Mr. Rathsmus!" she shouted to shake his mind back to reality, "You must be searching for the secret of the cornerstone? We must be reunited if you wish to know the secret of the cornerstone! This was your test!" She grabbed the rings from his hand. "You must have potential as a sorcerer or my sisters would have destroyed you when they were summoned with the amulet. You were lucky to have found us so soon after your test had begun, and lucky to have released us, although it was an accident on your part, I believe in a short time you would have come back to free us. We were very famous before we were imprisoned in the statue and there are many rumors about us and where we came from. I did magic for the highest bidder and became very popular. No one dared to come after me because of my protector", as she motioned toward the Mineotaur. Rathsmus looked at her then to the Mineotaur and back to the old woman. "If you are a witch, mistress why can't you reunite the twins and the five sisters?" "Because, you fool, I don't know where they are. Only you know where they are. It must be at one of the cornerstones but I don't know which one." Rathsmus looked dumbfounded, "You mean, there's more than one?" The witch looked at Rathsmus considering how much she should say. "You are not as smart as you think. You know nothing of the cornerstones." She started to walk away and turned back to look him in the eyes again. "There are several stones. Some were damaged or knocked down. If you tried to transport yourself to a stone that was destroyed, you would be trapped in between and would eventually die, probably of starvation, considering that there would be no food or drink." She had the rings in her fist and was shaking it at him as she talked. Opening a pouch she had had

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around her neck, she dropped the rings into it. She then pulled the strings tight to close it and put it back around her neck and stuffed it down the front of her clothing. As she did so, she gave Rathsmus a sly look and a grin and cackled with a mirth he had not seen in her sisters.

"First things first, Rathsmus, we must travel back to the beginning of your journey in this land, from there you will transport us to my sisters and then you start your... education". She cackled again, this time it was evil just like her sisters. She turned toward the Mineotaur and he bent down so she could get on his shoulders. "By the way, Rathsmus, this is Korgrathkamalog, he is a Mineotaur, in case you didn't know", she chuckled. "Just call him Korg. It's easier." The Mineotaur gave a silent bow and put out his hand to shake. Rathsmus in turn bowed and shook hands. The Mineotaur's hand engulfed Rathsmus' hand and wrist and Rathsmus thought his elbow would be removed from its socket. Korg laughed a loud, jolly laugh as if he was with a drinking buddy, and he brought Rathsmus up close face to face, "From this point on we are partners, all of us. Do not betray us or the death you face will surpass your wildest nightmares." Rathsmus just swallowed hard and nodded. "Lead the way, partner" Korg bowed again and stepped to the side.

Rathsmus nodded and led the way in the direction of the statue. When they arrived at the statue, there was just a pile of mud and flaked rock. In front of the mud was a pile of clothes and beside that was a pile of bones that didn't look very old, and Rathsmus knew they had not been there before. He looked from the bones to Korg. Korg was just giggling trying to withhold his laughter. The witch slapped Korg softly on the side of his head and said, "Now stop it Korg, we are all friends here, Rathsmus does not have to worry about the same fate." Korg stopped giggling but appeared to be smiling, if a creature with the head of a bull could be said to be smiling.

The witch told Rathsmus to lead on; she wanted to be reunited as soon as possible. Rathsmus led them through the dark forest. Finally he could see the end of the forest. Then they made it to the thick brush and to the stream he had crossed. Here he stopped. He didn't have to wait for Korg; if anything Korg had to hold back for the slower sorcerer. "How did you cross this?" asked the witch. "I pulled down a vine and swung across". "You were smart not to wade across this, you never would have made it to this side." With that, Korg pulled off a branch and threw it into the stream. At first nothing happened, then faint streamers of smoke rose from the branch. More smoke rose until the branch puffed and was engulfed in flames. Within seconds the branch was gone and its ashes were swept downstream. Rathsmus swallowed hard, if he had stepped into the water he would have been burnt to a crisp. So far, he was passing this test by mere luck and not much skill.

Korg came up beside Rathsmus and grabbed him around the waist with a muscular arm. Rathsmus was lifted off the ground. Korg took two steps toward the stream and leaped across the stream with plenty of room to spare. Korg let go of Rathsmus and the sorcerer landed on the ground with a thud. He stood and brushed himself off. The trio walked up the path to the top of the rise. Rathsmus led the way across the top of the rise, faced the empty plain and stopped. "That is where I started from. It will take about an hour to reach the spot." Korg came up to Rathsmus, bent down, and told him to climb on his back. Rathsmus did as he was told. Korg faced

the direction Rathsmus had indicated and started trotting. Before long, Korg had reached top speed and Rathsmus was holding on for all he was worth. For such a large creature Korg was very smooth, even riding a horse was more bouncy than the Minotaur. When the Mineotaur stopped he bent down to let Rathsmus and the witch off his shoulders. It had taken Korg ten minutes to run the distance that it took Rathsmus an hour to walk. Korg had been loaded down with two people and he wasn't even out of breath.

The witch grabbed Rathsmus' arm and said, "Show me the exact spot and which direction you were facing." "This is the spot and I was facing north," he pointed north. The witch pulled out a knife that had a ten-inch blade. Rathsmus didn't even know that she had been carrying one. She bent down and cut the grass in a circle where Rathsmus had indicated. Next she took the knife and cut a line north then south, east and west. She made small points on the lines like arrows. Then she made lines for northeast, northwest, southeast and southwest. She made points on these lines also. Pointing to the ground at the tip of the southern arrow, she told Rathsmus to sit. He sat cross-legged and she handed him the amulet. Both the witch and Korg stood behind him. "Do it now!" she told him, but he just sat there. "What exactly would you like me to do? I don't have my magic book." "Concentrate! Think back to when you summoned my sisters, close your eyes and concentrate!"

Rathsmus closed his eyes and thought back to the night he had summoned the sisters. He felt the stone as he had that night. He felt the stone in his mind. It was here also. It was below him. He knew he had to raise the stone to the proper height. He began the spell he had used to surround the stone with air except this time he surrounded it with dirt. The ground shook as he raised the stone up to the surface. The witch did not understand what was going on. What was this fool doing? He was going to split the earth! He was not concentrating on sending them back. She was yelling at him through the rumbling ground. She was shaking and almost fell over with the violent quake.

Rathsmus could not hear her; he was concentrating very hard on the task at hand. When the stone thrust up through the surface of the ground, dirt and dry grass exploded over the surrounding area. The witch did fall at this point and Korg was trying to keep his own balance and catch the witch at the same time. Korg missed the witch and lost his balance, he fell just missing Rathsmus. The ground stopped shaking and there was a spear of dirt sticking up in the center of the witch's crude compass. Korg helped the witch to her feet and she stared at the thing that the sorcerer had raised. When Rathsmus stopped his spell the dirt around the stone flaked and fell away, there stood another cornerstone.

"Well, well, Rathsmus, you are better than I gave you credit," she said, "How did you know there was a stone here? Even I did not know for sure. I did not know if you had come here by the magic of the cornerstone or some other magic." He simply replied, "I just felt it here." "Continue, Rathsmus", she said as she stared at the stone. Rathsmus closed his eyes and started another spell. A shimmering bubble of air surrounded the group and they were raised into the air. As they were lifted up Korg's head struck an invisible forcefield and he was knocked down to his knees. The bubble of air had struck the dome surrounding a twenty-foot area around

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the stone. The grass smoldered and caught fire. In minutes the dome was an inferno. A swirl of air pulled the smoke and ash into the dome and turned the dome opaque so nothing could be seen outside the dome. As the smoke colored the dome, it got dark inside. The amulet was glowing a sickly pea green. Rathsmus settled the bubble to the ground and it disappeared. He was on a roll and did not want to stop now. As he continued his spell, the amulet rose into the air above the stone and started to spin faster and faster. It was whistling loudly and Korg was holding his ears to block the sound that was too much for his sensitive ears. Fog was bubbling out of the ground around them, before long they could not see one another. The amulet stopped whistling and Rathsmus felt it float back into his hands. It had stopped glowing at the same time that it had stopped whistling. Rathsmus was suddenly very cold. He clipped the amulet on the chain around his neck and untied the bundle of heavy clothes and put them on. He made the air swirl removing the fog from within the dome. Standing in front of him were the four witches and the cornerstone with the amulet, his amulet, sitting on the fixture he had placed it on. Rathsmus turned, behind him were the fifth witch and Korg. He turned back toward the four witches, bowed and stood there looking at them. They were speechless, looking back with their mouths open. Rathsmus stepped aside to let them see each other. Korg walked up beside Rathsmus and put his large hand on the sorcerer's shoulder. In a loud whisper Korg said, "Good job, you have won great favor with the sisters this day."

Rathsmus stood watching as the leader of the four sisters went to the cornerstone and removed the amulet. The fifth sister walked to Rathsmus with her hand held out. Rathsmus took the amulet off the chain and placed it in the sister's hands. She gave a quick bow and a smile, turned and walked back toward the other sisters. The first four sisters were standing in line just as they had been when he had arrived with Korg and the fifth sister. The fifth sister was standing with the amulet held out in front of her. She let go of the amulet and it hung in the air in front of her. The other amulet rose out of the other sister's hands and hung in the air next to it's twin. The five sisters moved into a circle around the amulets but did not touch each other. The first sister bowed, grabbed the front of her clothing, and pulled them off letting them drop to the ground. Each sister in turn did the same. There in front of Rathsmus was five of the ugliest old women standing stark naked in a circle. He thought he would lose his lunch, but he remembered that he had not had any lunch. He continued to watch.

Slowly, the sisters raised their hands to the side to meet with the next sister's hands. When their hands touched, the two amulets also touched. Lightning arced from the amulets and a bright light flashed. The two amulets glowed as one like the noonday sun. Rathsmus could no longer see the sisters. He had to put his hands in front of his face to shield his eyes from the light. The amulets' light diminished but still lit the dome. Now Rathsmus saw five very beautiful women varying in age from twenty-five to thirty-five. They were still naked and it didn't seem to bother them to have a man watching them. They continued to do their rite of reunion as the amulet broke into seven pieces. Each piece was a different color. The five sisters released each other's hands and put them down at their sides. One sister, the eldest, lifted her left hand. On that hand was a gold ring. The darkest

black piece of amulet went to her hand and fused itself to her ring. She put her hand back to her side. The next sister did the same. This time a green piece fused to her ring. The third sister got a purple piece. The fourth got a blue piece. The fifth got a diamond. Two more pieces of amulet floated in the air, a red ruby and a yellow piece that glowed like the sun. The fifth sister bent to her clothes, pulled out a pouch and removed the two gold rings that Rathsmus had removed from the horns of the statue. She dropped the pouch; bent to her old rags that she had dropped off her body as an old lady and lifted a beautiful dress the color of her stone. Each of the other sisters did the same and each had a dress the same color as their stone. They all put on their dresses at the same time and fastened them with a tie at the waist. The dresses were sheer and did not do much to hide their owner's beauty.

They now stood in a line and faced Korg and Rathsmus. The eldest motioned for them to come closer. Rathsmus hesitated and Korg nudged him with the hand that was still on his shoulder. As Rathsmus started walking, Korg removed his hand and walked beside Rathsmus to where the sisters were waiting. They stopped in front of the sisters and Rathsmus couldn't help but stare. Here were five of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. Their beauty was intoxicating, his mind was swimming. He tried not to stare but the dresses did not leave much to the imagination.

The eldest sister looked at Korg and then at Rathsmus. "We have been reunited". The youngest sister handed the two gold rings to the eldest sister. "As a reward, I ask each of you what we may do for you. In my hand I have two gold rings. When fused with one of the gems from the amulets they are very powerful. Korg, what would you like in return for your assistance?" "I would like to stay with the sisters and help protect you." "Very well, hold out your left hand." Korg held out his hand and the sister placed the ring on a finger. Rathsmus watched as the ring, too small to fit on the finger of the giant, enlarged itself and slid onto the finger without a problem. The red stone went to the outstretched hand of Korg and fused itself to the gold ring. The sister stepped back and Korg put his head back as if in pain. Small sparks like lightning flashed from the ring and worked their way up his arm until his whole body was covered with small sparks. He was shaking as if he was being shocked to death. He started to yell. His yell became louder and louder. He dropped to his knees; his body was smoking slightly. Suddenly it was over. When Korg stood he looked different, his horns were very shiny and looked like polished silver, his muscles were larger and more defined, he wore leather armor that was so thick and heavy Rathsmus did not believe he could have even picked it up. Slung on his back was a huge sword. It was a beautiful work of art. The sword was etched with gold and encrusted with diamonds and jewels. It would take a very strong person to swing a sword that big. Korg seemed to swell with pride. He knelt on one knee and bowed his head. When the sister started to speak he looked up at her. "Your sword is magical, it will never need to be sharpened, and should you get in a situation where you need to defend against magical creatures this sword will kill most kinds. There are some it might not, but if you are good enough you should live through any battle you enter." "Thank you, sister, I will do my best to defend your honor and protect you and your sisters," Korg replied, bowed again and stood. Korg turned toward Rathsmus and softly slapped him on the

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back, of course softly for a Mineotaur still made Rathsmus take a step forward. Rathsmus turned toward Korg and smiled. Korg extended his hand. Rathsmus grabbed it and they shook. "I hope you decide to stay with us, you could be a great asset to our little group." Korg turned and walked away from the others drawing his sword and practiced swinging it to get used to the weight. It was perfectly balanced and it wasn't long before he was fighting hoards of imaginary enemies.

4

Decisions

“Now for you, Rathsmus”, the sister started. “Before you decide your reward, you must understand the difference between evil magic and good magic, and the difference between being evil, being angry, being bad, or just getting bad advice or bad teaching.” Rathsmus looked shocked. Was she trying to give him a lecture on magic? Telling him he wasn’t evil enough to be an evil sorcerer? He had already been turned down by the white guild. What if she tells me the same thing? What will I do then? he thought to himself.

“First of all, you are not evil. You are angry. Someone who is angry can be mistaken for being evil; however, an evil sorcerer cannot do certain types of white magic, just as a white sorcerer cannot do certain types of dark magic. If you had been truly evil, you could not have used either of the twin amulets. They would have burnt you to ash where you stood. You are an angry man. You had bad luck with your teacher. The white guild turned you down because of the incompetence of your first instructor. You are very powerful in magic, white magic. Once you have chosen white magic, or in your case, it has chosen you, you cannot change to dark magic like that”, she said snapping her fingers. “Some sorcerers become evil and do evil things with their magic, but cannot change to evil magic or dark magic because it would kill them. I have never seen an evil sorcerer even attempt to do good with their magic, unless they were tricked or had personal reasons to further their own ends. With the right instruction, you will be a very powerful sorcerer. I would like it if you would stay with us and let us teach you. After you have been taught as much as we can, we will teach you the secret of the cornerstones. In your present condition, we could not.”

Rathsmus was confused now, “How did you know of my past with the white guild?” “In the reunion of the twin amulets we are allowed to ask questions and look into the past of people we encounter. We are also allowed to look into their future. We know much about your past. Your future is much more cloudy; much could change with each decision you make. That is why we wish you to make an educated decision of what you want for your reward. The right decision could mean great power and friendships. The wrong decision could bring many enemies and destruction in the end.”

Rathsmus thought about what all of this meant, “You said in my present condition, what do you mean?” “At this point in your life there is too much anger and confusion. You need direction and counseling. Most of all, you need someone willing to un-teach you all of what you know and teach you the right way. As I have said, you are very powerful in your natural ability. You could not have known about the second cornerstone without it. Natural ability combined with the proper teaching... There is no limit to what that person can do.” “Before I can decide if I want to stay with you, I need to know more about you and your sisters”

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“Hundreds of years ago”, she started, “there was a King of a very prosperous land. As much as he tried he could father no male heir to his throne. He loved his first wife very much and would not keep a harem as was expected of him. There were women for visiting nobles, but he himself never visited them. After ten years of marriage, she produced her first offspring, a female. Since no female was allowed to rule, she was not considered an heir to the throne. Even so, he loved his daughter very much. A year later his wife became pregnant again. This was also born a daughter. Two years later was born another daughter. In all five daughters were born. Each about two years apart, all born within a ten year period. With the last, his wife died in labor. The child was saved but not the queen.

For the next year, the King was tormented by his advisor. The kingdom was full of rumors. The worst being that the King was an evil sorcerer, made his wife have five evil witches and then killed her. Of course this was false. He had loved his wife very much and did not even believe in magic. The rumors got worse and, in trying to prove his innocence, the King was attacked by a subject of another kingdom that said he had seen the king do magic. The King died from his injuries. The murderer was, according to the King’s advisor, hanged. Of course no one had witnessed either the hanging or the burial. The advisor proclaimed himself King and the five daughters were sold into slavery.”

“Rumors travel fast, especially ones involving magic or kings, these had both. A very old man who was especially powerful in white magic bought all five sisters and took them home. At this point, the oldest was twelve, the youngest was two. White magic came naturally to all five. As he raised the daughters, he taught them old ways of magic. He was very versed in the ancient ways and in history. He did not like the people that comprised the white guild. He said they were always looking for shortcuts for easier ways. Magic was not supposed to be easy. Through the years, the white guild, as a result of looking for shortcuts, lost the old ways and became weak. They no longer knew how to slow down the aging process, therefore, their strongest in magic would grow old and die and their knowledge was lost with them. None of them would tell all of their secrets or best discoveries. Much was lost due to the guild. The man who raised us was named Amoss. Even he did not know how old he was. He would say, “After the first two hundred years, they just kind of run together.” He taught us all what he knew and we, in turn, became very powerful. Our reputation grew. Amoss warned us not to become too well known. He said people would eventually come after us and destroy us, if possible. We did not listen, thinking we were too powerful and believing we could do more good if people knew of us.

Amoss became angry with us and returned to his hermit life. Although we knew where to find him, he asked us not to, to protect his identity, and to keep him out of danger. We thought he was just becoming old and scared and agreed to his request. Even though he was old, we did not believe anyone could have harmed him. He was still more powerful than any one of us. Two of us would win occasionally, but if three or more of us grouped together, we could always win a contest of strength. Even then, we had to trick him, we knew his strengths and weaknesses, anyone that did not know him, would not.

After he left, we continued doing good deeds for people who needed our help. About two years after Amoss left us; the first one showed up. He was an ugly little man. He was short and dirty and you could smell him from ten feet away. He was evil and we could all sense it. He called himself Sathmond and said he needed our help to dispel some evil magic in his hometown. We had never turned anyone away, but no one evil had ever asked for our help before. We did not expect a direct attack from him, but when we asked him for more details he trapped two of us in a bubble that our magic could not penetrate. Another one of us was being attacked by invisible ants and bees, which kept her mind quite occupied. That left two of us, Sheena, the youngest, and me. Sathmond threw a spell at Sheena, but she was quicker and she disappeared. I thought he had done something to her and I attacked him. While I had his attention, Sheena tossed a spell, not at him but under him. A vine grew under him and twisted around him. While he was focused on the vine I trapped him in a magic spell and we released our sisters from their spells. When we turned our attention to Sathmond, we saw an arrow protruding from between his eyes, he was dead. Someone had been watching to see how strong we were and, when we defeated Sathmond, he was killed to avoid detection of his boss.

If they had sent more that time we would have probably all been captured. We realized that we would have to be more careful and better prepared next time, and we all knew there would be a next time. About two months later, they tried again, this time with a little twist. A neutral messenger had been sent to have us go to a small village. We decided that we should all go together to protect each other. About twenty miles from our residence, we began to sense evil, possibly from three different sources. We had never run from evil, and were not about to start now, but we did need a plan.

Two of us would continue on with three magically created doubles. The two sisters would use a small amount of magic to continue the illusion. The other three would follow hidden in the forest when possible and magically hidden when nothing else was available. We continued on. The two sisters and the three decoys approached a gypsy cart that looked abandoned. It looked as if the owners had been robbed. Clothing and junk had been strewn all around. Serena and Daphney, the two sisters that had been captured by Sathmond, wanted a chance to prove themselves and were by the cart now. Serena went to the cart and when she touched it, it grabbed her and pulled her in. Two horses appeared hooked to the cart and it took off. A man dressed all in black, wearing a black cape attacked Daphney. The decoys were attacked by two more men dressed the same as the first. The man that attacked Daphney grabbed her from behind with a bear hug. She was quick and shocked him with electricity from her hands. As he let go she turned and hit him with a hammer of air and he went down. The decoys disappeared when the attack on them started, which left the attackers bewildered. The attack from us in the forest hit them when they did not expect it, and they were captured in an instant.

Serena was gone with the cart. We questioned the men but they were strong and would not answer. On the way home we were attacked again. We survived but the men were killed. Now we had no way to find Serena and were very upset and depressed about the loss of our sister. Over the next couple of years there were many attempts to capture us. The last was the worst. The attacks on us had

stopped; instead they attacked innocent villages and farms. We were constantly defending other people and were growing tired and careless from the endless onslaught of attacks and requests for help. One day we had four requests for help, each one in a different direction than the others. Each was from people we considered great friends and we wanted to help all of them. Daphney went east to help the town of Odan. Sheena went south, I gave her the second half of the twin amulets, there were farms in the south that she had befriended. Dalna went west to the village of Dennison. I went north to the kingdom of Alnar, where we had been treated very well and were paid handsomely for our help. I kept the first half of the amulet. Rathsmus interrupted her at this point, "You have not told me your name yet, mistress, if you would please." "My name is Crystal," and she bowed to meet Rathsmus' gaze. He bowed in return.

We all left hoping we would be able to save the people, Crystal began again. It was not to be so for most of us. I was captured and trapped in a magic pool. The king had been overthrown by our enemies and I was captured. Anyone who used the pool to bathe would stay young and their age would be transferred to me.

Dalna was also captured, but trapped in a magic mirror. When someone looked upon the mirror, anything that that person did not like was transferred to Dalna, such as old age, wrinkles, warts, scars, and so on.

Daphney was captured and trapped in a wishing well, this also had the effect of aging her prematurely. We were out of our enemies way now, except for Sheena, who had gone south. She had been attacked but not captured. When she ran she found this cornerstone. She used it to escape from her attackers. The attackers were afraid that if they told their leader of the escape he would kill them. They lied and said Sheena had died in the attack. Of course, they were not supposed to kill her either, so in his anger he killed them anyway. He did not know that Sheena was still alive, so he stopped looking for her. Sheena returned and found me first.

By the time she freed me, I had been imprisoned for one hundred years and looked very old. Our captors were most probably dead by now and we had been forgotten except for the well, the mirror, and the pool that I had been in. Now that the pool would not work without me in it, we destroyed it. We returned to our residence and found it destroyed. We then went to find Amoss. He was, to our surprise, still alive. He did not recognize me, now that I looked so old, but he did recognize Sheena.

We told him of what had happened. He said he had heard, after-the-fact, but did not know what had happened to Sheena or where the others had been placed. He had heard rumors of a magic pool but thought them just a rumor. He had also heard of a magic well, a magic mirror, and an oracle that had all come into being at about the same time. However, he had thought them all untrue. Throughout his lifetime, he had heard all sorts of rumors, few of which had ever turned out to be true. At this time, we did not know if our sisters had been trapped in any of the items that Amoss had mentioned, but we were determined to find out. Sheena found Daphney and freed her. I found and freed Dalna. We met again at the cornerstone.

Four of us were together again; we only needed Serena to be complete. I had lost my amulet when I was captured, but Sheena still wore hers. She showed us

how to work the cornerstone. We were all surprised at what it was. We left the cornerstone to find Serena, who we hoped we would find in the oracle.

We traveled far to the north. High in the mountains was a cave, which was said to be that of the oracle. Since Sheena was the youngest, the quickest and had the best eyesight, she stayed at the mouth of the cave to protect us from anything that might try to come in after us, and the rest of us entered to find Serena. We found Serena trapped in the oracle and before we freed her we asked some questions. The most important thing she told us was of the reunion of the twins of the five. Everything was explained about the rite of the reunion. The only thing we did not know was when it would happen and who would reunite us. We now knew Sheena was the last of us to be reunited so we had to have her leave us, we did not know for how long. I went to her and told her that she must leave us and not come back until we sent for her, but she was not to draw any attention to herself. She did not know why but did as she was told. She told me where she would be waiting and how to get there.

After she left we freed Serena from the oracle's spell. She looked very old, we all did. Sheena was the only one of us with her youth intact. We returned to Amoss to await the reunion. Amoss was growing weaker and wanted to finish our schooling. He taught us many things before he died; one was the secret of the cornerstones. Sheena knew how to use the cornerstone, but she didn't even know half of what she should have to even try to use it. We decided to knock down the stone so she could not return here. That is why when you found it, it was lying down.

You were not the first to summon us here. Many failed to even raise the stone to summon us. The ones who failed the stone, died. Many others failed the tests we sent you on. Every decision you made, from the direction to go in, to how to handle each problem you faced, was a test of your ability. You know the rest of the story.

Rathsmus still had some questions that he wanted answered. Where to start? "I killed my instructor, my friend, because he saw that I was evil and would come here to you." "Your instructor was less than an incompetent fool. He knew how to see the future, but not how to interpret what he saw. He saw you here summoning four old hag witches. He did not know who we were, and you did not kill him. When the magic went wrong, it only injured him and sent him to a faraway place. He is with the white guild now and they know of you. You will have to deal with them when the time is right, but not now. You will have worse enemies to face than the white guild soon enough.

Before you ask any more questions, Rathsmus, I would like you to sleep on it for the night. In the morning we will talk again and you can make your decision." She held out her hand and the yellow stone landed in her palm, she placed it in a pouch and put it in a pocket of her dress. The gold ring was hooked on a gold chain and placed around her neck.

Although Rathsmus wanted to continue, he bowed and agreed. He was tired and didn't know how long it had been since he had gotten any sleep, or food for that matter. How long had it been since he had summoned the sisters? Was time the same here as the land where he had found Sheena and Korg? Crystal led her

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sisters toward the north and then stopped. She looked at Rathsmus and then back up to the dome. Rathsmus quickly cast a spell to remove the dome. The sun was on its downward swing. How long had he been in that other world? The shadows were getting longer. This time of year the day would be over in about another three hours.

The sisters continued toward a path that led up the side of the mountain. Korg followed closely behind and Rathsmus not far behind him. The path ended on a flat area with a cave going into the side of the mountain. Crystal walked about five feet into the cave, stepped to the side and turned to face the path. The other sisters continued into the cave. Korg had to duck slightly to enter the cave and had to continue on that way because the cave did not get any taller. Every so often he would have to duck to one side or the other to avoid hitting an outcropping on the cave ceiling with his horns.

Rathsmus stopped beside Crystal and faced the same direction. She held out her hands directly in front of her and splayed her fingers. Closing her eyes, she started a spell in a language that he had never heard before. The flat area outside the cave fell away in a split second. Now there was a sheer cliff out of the cave. Rathsmus looked at Crystal, "Is that so I can't escape?" Crystal looked Rathsmus directly in the eyes and said nothing at first. She looked down and sadly shook her head. "I understand that a lot has happened to you in the last couple of days. I had hoped that you would have trusted me more by now. I thought I had done a good job of explaining things, but I guess I have failed. I did this, not to prevent your escape, but to prevent our discovery by others. You do not realize your worth to us and your threat to our enemies. You may leave whenever you wish. You know enough magic to get yourself down. If you do leave, the magic spell I have placed on this cave will not let you, or anyone else, find it or enter it."

Rathsmus felt really stupid at this point and wanted to say he was sorry, but Crystal turned and followed the others into the cave. The cave was not dark, there seemed to be light coming from somewhere but the source was not like a torch that gave light in the general area and then got dark until the next torch. This light came from everywhere but nowhere. He didn't even have a shadow to say which direction the light came from.

5

Encounters

The cave eventually came to an end. There were three stone steps that ran the width of the cave. At the top step was a large landing and a door that was as tall as the cave. He hadn't noticed that the cave had been getting taller, as he had been thinking of the light. Korg surely would not have to duck here. The door was built with large timbers and was bolted together with huge steel straps and bolts with heads as large as his fist.

Crystal was waiting for him. To her he felt he must look like a small child filled with wonder at seeing a huge city for the first time or seeing some natural wonder the likes of which he had never even dreamed of. He was definitely in awe. The stone steps were so smooth they were actually shiny, as if they had been polished. This was just regular rock, not marble or some such fancy building material. The people who built this had some fantastic knowledge that had been lost to the rest of the world; this was definitely ancient work.

When he reached the top step, Crystal was smiling at him. "Wow!" Rathsmus exclaimed, "Who built this place? It must be oldest structure in the world. I've seen other ancient buildings that were fantastic, but this...I've never..." Rathsmus just looked around. "This cave is indeed old, but it is not the oldest," Crystal said, "We can show you wonders that would make this workmanship pale by comparison. In fact, on the other side of this door is one of our many homes. We move frequently to avoid detection. We have not been here for over seventy-five years. I believe that was the last time we were summoned to the cornerstone."

Crystal turned and pulled on the handle of the door. It opened at the slightest pull. Rathsmus reached to help, but realized his help was not needed with this door. As he entered behind Crystal, the others were busy removing sheets that covered the furniture in their home. Even though there was dust and cobwebs everywhere, the beautiful workmanship stood out. He was standing in a room about fifteen feet wide and ten feet long. On his left there was a long row of coat hooks and under the hooks were rugs for placing dirty boots, Korg and the others had already placed theirs here. Korg's sword and armor were also on hooks.

Crystal walked over to the wall and removed her shoes and stepped into some soft-looking house shoes. She looked at Rathsmus and nodded to the wall. Rathsmus went to the wall and removed his coat and hung it on a hook, and put his shoes on the rug under his coat. Crystal handed him a pair of house shoes and he put them on.

The hustle and bustle of the place was slowing down now, all of the furniture was uncovered and smells of cooking were filling the rooms. His stomach began growling so loud that Crystal laughed. "Follow me and I will show you to your room. Turning to the wall she removed the sheer cloak, hung it on a hook and walked away. It took him a couple of minutes to recover from the sight of Crystal standing that close to him with just the sheer dress on. He could definitely get used

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to having five beautiful women around who were always getting naked in front of him without giving it a second thought. Rathsmus ran and caught up to her by an artistically carved door of leaves and flowers. "This is the wash room", she said as they entered the room. "The water is supplied to the rooms by a central spring. When you wish to take a bath you turn this lever and the tub will fill. The water is very cold and you will need to heat it with magic after it is full. Using your magic is encouraged around here, the more you use it, the quicker you will be when you need it in an emergency."

Crystal turned the lever and the bathtub filled with water. When it was full she turned it off and said, "You must feel weary, a bath would do you good. Your room is the next door up the hall." She led the way to his room where an identical door opened to a large bedroom. There were three large dressers, a large closet, and a bed fit for a king. Everything was ornately carved with leaves, flowers and a few animals. "In the closet are new clean clothes, when you are done with your bath please use these. You may put your belongings in the dressers. Most are full of clothes for you, but the one closest to the bed has some empty drawers in it." She turned and left.

He threw his bag of magic equipment on the bed and walked to the closet, it was full of different styles of clothing, all of it looked like the right size for him. He picked out some clothing from the dressers and went to the wash room. Entering the bathroom, he saw that Sheena was already in the tub taking a bath and Serena was climbing in, both were giggling like schoolgirls. Rathsmus stopped and stared at them. Both of the sisters looked at him, Sheena was sitting and Serena was still standing. "Oh, excuse me, I didn't realize you were in here. I'll come back later", said Rathsmus. "There is plenty of room, Rathsmus, you can join us", said Sheena. "It wouldn't be proper for us to take a bath together." Of course, he thought, the tub was definitely big enough. It could fit all five of the sisters and Rathsmus too. Korg would take up all of the space by himself.

At that moment Daphney and Dalna came in, removed their clothes and climbed in. Rathsmus still just stood there and stared. He definitely wanted to climb in with them, but really didn't think he should. Crystal came in next, "Rathsmus haven't you taken your bath yet?" "I'm afraid the tub is kind of full at the moment", Rathsmus replied. "Nonsense, there is plenty of space as long as Korg doesn't show up. Now take off those dirty rags so I can dispose of them." Crystal stood there with one hand on her hips and the other out stretched to take the clothes.

He set his good clothes down and started to remove his dirty ones. When he was completely naked all five of the women looked at him and made noises of complete surprise. "What?" Rathsmus yelled, as he stood there totally unhidden. Then he noticed where they were looking and he quickly reached for his clothes he had dropped on the floor and covered himself. "Haven't you women ever seen a naked man before?" "Actually, no," said Crystal, "we've only seen drawn pictures of general anatomy, never the real thing. I'm really sorry, we just didn't expect... didn't expect...that."

Rathsmus was quite red in the face from embarrassment, as were the sisters. "Well, give me those and get into the tub, we've got a lot to talk about after a good nights sleep." She walked up to him and grabbed the clothes he was using to

hide behind. With nothing to cover himself, he ran for the tub; at least under the water they would not be able to see him. Of course, once in the tub he realized that he was not any better off.

Now they were closer, and sliding closer to him, looking at him to see what they could see. He covered himself with his hands. "Why do you cover yourself? Are you embarrassed with what the gods have given you?", Serina asked. "No, I just don't like being stared at like a science project about to be dissected by a group of school girls." They all laughed at that and went on about their business. Every now and then they would take a peek at him. It was getting harder to hide himself due to there being four beautiful naked women with him.

After a couple of minutes Crystal came back, removed her clothes and climbed into the tub. They tried to give Rathsmus as much space as they could, but with five women in the tub with him they would slide into him now and then. Then it happened, Sheena started it. She pushed Serena, Serena pushed back, and before he could do anything about it, all five women were splashing each other and pushing each other. It wasn't long before Rathsmus was caught up in the fray and was pushing and splashing and laughing as much as the others. Sheena made the mistake of standing up and was pushed and fell on top of Rathsmus. Hands felt and groped in places they shouldn't have on both of them. Then Serena jumped on him all hands and bodies. All six were wrestling each other. He noticed that the water was getting lower and lower and then there was none.

None of them left the room for a couple of hours. Rathsmus was not walking too spryly, after being with five women he didn't feel that too many men would. In the future, he told himself, he would have to be more careful and not take baths with the sisters, at least not all of them at once. He thought about what had just happened as he lay on his bed and a smile covered his face. The smell of food came to his attention and he opened his eyes to see a platter of food sitting on a table beside his bed. Then he noticed that he was still dressed in the old dirty rags that he had been wearing. Well, he thought to himself, It sure was a great dream. Even though it felt real and he was sore all over as if it had really happened, he knew it had to have been only a dream.

He went to the platter of food and ate his fill, grabbed some clothes and went to the wash room and took a bath without incident. He figured that at this time of night all of the women would be sleeping. He went back to his room and lay down on his bed, refreshed after his bath and quickly fell asleep. The light had gone out as soon as he had closed his eyes. He had a restless night, he kept thinking about the dream he had earlier. At one point, he thought he felt a naked female beside him. That was no dream, he thought as he jumped out of bed and the light came on again. There was Serena in his bed. "I think you should leave now", he told her, but she just stretched and said, "I don't think so", as she patted the bed beside her. Then Sheena was behind him, she was also naked and she started pulling his clothes off from behind him and pushed him onto the bed. It wasn't long before all five sisters were with him again. He knew he would be very sore in the morning but, for now, he was enjoying himself.

When he woke in the morning he was alone except for some cramped muscles. He dressed and raced to the washroom. No one else was here, he said to

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himself, “good!” He closed the door and locked it. He filled the tub and magically heated the water as hot as he could stand it. He had been alone for about a half an hour when he heard one of the sisters at the door and found it locked, “good”, he said again, they wouldn’t catch him off guard again. At that moment, the door opened and all five of the sisters entered.

By the time he left the washroom he had had all of them again. He began wondering, would they be trying to make him stay by offering themselves to him? Like a bribe? He didn’t like the thought. Sex for fun was good, but not to be trapped with. He went to the kitchen for breakfast and everyone was eating, nothing was said during the meal. After they were done, Crystal stood, “We must talk of your future, Rathsmus. Follow us into the library.” She turned and led the way down a long hallway that ended in double doors into the library. Rathsmus brought up the rear of the group, as he looked into the room he saw rows of books that looked old but well taken care of. The others were sitting at a long table waiting for him to sit down. When he entered the room, the doors closed behind him with a bang... and a clatter and a crash.

He was startled by the noise and sat up in bed. In bed? he thought to himself. Dalna was putting some broken pottery and food back on a tray. She looked up at Rathsmus, “I’m sorry. You look much better now. I hope you got enough rest.” “Rest?” Rathsmus yelled, “What happened?” “When Crystal showed you your room and she left you alone, you must have collapsed, she found you on the floor with some of your clothes from of the closet and the dressers on the floor around you.” Then what?” Rathsmus asked. “Crystal had Korg give you a bath and put you to bed. You’ve been sleeping for three days, we’ve been very worried about you.”

Rathsmus fell back in the bed. I’ve been in bed for three days, he said to himself. It was all a dream. He felt relieved and kind of sad; his fantasy with five women had not really happened. It would have been fun, but it was better that it had not really happened, better for everyone. Could you imagine having five women thinking that you were their own property? Then they would start fighting over him. And the jealousy! five women in a relationship was four to many.

“I’ll be back”, Dalna said, “I dropped your meal, you need to build up your strength.” She had a cute smile and was blushing when she said that. She turned to leave the room. He tried to ask her what she meant, but she just ignored him and left the room.

Crystal was the next person to enter the room. She was carrying a tray of food and drink, most of which was steaming. She set the tray down on a stand next to the bed. “Thank you”, Rathsmus said to her. But she said nothing; she stared at him as if she wanted to say something to him, but was too embarrassed to say it. Rathsmus picked up his cup from the tray and drank. It was an herbal tea of some sort. Very good, he thought to himself; he normally did not like tea. Crystal was still looking at him; her hands were in front of her and pulling at each other as if she was really nervous.

“Alright”, Rathsmus said, “what’s wrong? You are staring at me like you want to ask me something, what is it?” She just stared at him, trying to start the words, but she couldn’t. “Come on, let’s have it”; he finished as she was pushed

into starting her side of the conversation. "Well... you see... um... it's just that..." "Come on!" Rathsmus yelled again. This time Crystal jumped slightly, she hadn't expected him to yell at her and she started to get angry. "Very well, Mr. Rathsmus." "Mister", Rathsmus thought, maybe he had gone too far this time, but he was getting tired of these women having all of the control and keeping him in the dark about everything.

"When I found you collapsed on the floor shortly after we arrived here in this mountain, I had Korg give you a bath and put you to bed. He said you were doing a lot of mumbling, saying "no" a lot. I was afraid our enemies had gotten to you through your dreams. I entered your dream to try to protect you and... It turns out that you were in no danger whatsoever, except maybe from exhaustion. People's dreams are their own and others should not know... what a person dreams often is what he or she would really like to happen. It cannot happen! You must control yourself while you stay with us. I have instructed the others to stay away from you while you are bathing and not to remove their clothing in front of you. This should help to avoid any mishaps. I am sorry for invading your dream, I thought you needed help."

"I think, under the circumstances, I should leave you all," Rathsmus said, "I think it would be best for all of you, and also for me." "No", Crystal replied, "you mustn't leave. There is so much to teach you. You are not ready to meet your enemies, besides I have not told you everything yet." "What do you mean, everything?" "When someone dreams strongly enough their dreams can be very real to anyone who invades it. The invader can become trapped and be forced to do things by the will of the dreamer. Not many people have the power to force others to do their will during a dream. A person of this type is called a Dreamer. Fewer still are people who can control magic users in a dream. A person who can do this is called a Dream Master. You have this power, Rathsmus."

"After Korg gave you your bath and put you to bed, we gathered around your bed and sent Sheena and Serena into your dream. They were quickly captured in your will. We, on the outside, felt them be captured, but we did not know what had captured them. Serena and Sheena needed our help so we sent in Daphney and Dalna, who were also quickly captured. I went next, ready for anything except for what I saw, having my four sisters naked in bed with you. Had I been quicker, I could have escaped, however, due to my shock, I was also captured. The next thing I knew we were all in bed together.

We did finally escape your dream. You seemed to be sleeping quite peacefully after we escaped." Crystal stopped and looked at Rathsmus. She sat down in a chair next to his bed; "You are very powerful, Rathsmus, more powerful than even I had thought. You have talents that need to be strengthened to prepare you for your future fights and, believe me, no matter how much you want to avoid these confrontations, you will not be able to. Already our enemies know of you, their informants are very fast. I only hope they do not know of this place."

"What about my dreams and what happened to you? I didn't know I was controlling you. I thought it was of your own free will, I didn't even know it was a dream", Rathsmus stated. "You are not blamed by any of us, Rathsmus. The only concern we have is that if the dream is considered real, could we all become

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pregnant by you because of what happened in a dream?” “You mean, I could have... I could be...become a dad?” Rathsmus put both hands over his face. “...A husband to five women”, he finished lowly. Rathsmus turned and faced Crystal. He put his legs over the side of the bed and sat on the edge. “I will stay, for a while. No promises on how long. At least until we know the results of the dream. Until then you are my teachers. If I feel what you are doing is not helping me, I will leave.” He stood and walked out of the room and down the hall to the washroom. The room was empty; he closed the door and locked it. Slowly he went to the tub and filled it with water and magically heated it. He stripped down and climbed into the tub. The water was very hot but it felt good, soothing. Before long he was sleeping.

6

The Magic

He was standing on a mountain peak. Nothing was higher. He could see for miles. The sun was shining with a few fair weather clouds here and there. He had gray striped robes on that covered his face. The sleeves were long and covered his hands. In his left hand was a long staff with a stone at the top. The wind was blowing his robes around and every now and then you could see sandaled feet or wisps of gray hair on his face and head. In the distance he could sense his enemy. The yellow stone on the staff glowed brightly. A bubble of air shimmered around him and he was invisible to anyone or anything outside the bubble. From inside the bubble he could see everything. Everything looked brighter and clearer.

Then he was flying over the smaller mountains and the trees, over streams and lakes. He was closing on his enemy, fast. If his enemy could also sense him, this would not surprise his enemy as he had hoped it would. Just over the next rise, he could feel him. Over the top and... BANG!

Rathsmus sat bolt upright in the tub. The water was now cold, how long had he been in here? He turned and saw Korg by the broken door. All five sisters were standing behind him. Korg walked to the tub, "Are you alright? You have been in here for three hours and we were getting very worried." "Three hours!" Rathsmus yelled, "that's impossible! I just got in here and then fell asleep. I only had a short dream and..."

Crystal interrupted him, "What did you dream of?" "I was standing on a mountain top and then I flew to where an enemy of mine was." "What happened when you reached your enemy?" "Korg broke down the door and I awoke." "Did you see your enemy?" "No". Crystal turned toward the door and walked back to her sisters, she didn't even realize she had walked into the room. When you are finished in here you must meet us in the library. Please be quick, there is much to talk about."

Rathsmus hurried as best as he could. He seemed quite stiff for only having been in the tub for a little while. He refused to believe he had been sleeping there for three hours. Rathsmus went to his room and dressed, and quickly went to the library. The double doors to the library were closed. He knocked and waited to be told to enter. The doors were opened by Korg. Rathsmus entered and looked around, everything looked the same as it had in his dream, when he had been awakened by one of the sisters with a tray of food. It was impossible! How could a dream be so real? He didn't really believe the nonsense Crystal told him about the sisters and himself in the dream. He figured they had, in fact, invaded his dream and watched his dreams to see what he was thinking. He did believe dreams were a window to a person's thoughts, but to be able to capture someone, especially five magic users, and make them... do things against their will... or bend their will to make them think it is what they want? This was far beyond his ability to believe.

The sisters were sitting at a table with books opened up with bookmarks, or stacked in a pile at one end, or on the floor. Each sister had her nose in a book, every now and then they would write something down in a notebook or say “oh, my” or “wow” or one of several other exclamations.

Korg closed the door and sat down at the table. Rathsmus just stood there and looked at the library. Books and more books everywhere. There were more books than he had ever seen. He had heard that the white guild had a large library, but he had never seen it; he had not believed in its existence. Until now he did not believe there were this many books in the world, definitely not in one place.

“Rathsmus, please sit down at the table. You seem to surprise us more every day. How old are you now?” “Thirty-nine, I’ll be forty in another month. Why?” “Ah,” said Dalna, “a late bloomer, that’s interesting.” The others seemed to agree. Korg just sat and listened while he ate some kind of pastry the sisters had cooked. Rathsmus went to an empty seat, took a pastry and sat down, “what do you mean by a *late bloomer*?”

“There are many types of magic users,” Crystal began, “some can use magic from infancy and become very strong as an adult. They can only use certain types of magic. They can learn new types of magic, other than what they were born with, but there are some things this type of magic user cannot learn no matter how long or hard they try. If it is an ability they were born with, they will learn it very fast.

There is another type who is born with an ability but cannot use it until they learn how too. Most of these people never use magic because they do not know they have the ability and do not know they need to learn it before they can use it. There is another type that is only born with a defensive type of magic. They cannot learn magic, they cannot control magic, but if you try to hurt this person the magic will protect him and this person will not even realize what happened.

Then there is another type. This one is very rare. Even among magic users there are very few and some people try to destroy them because of their potential. You see, this type is born with a very small spark, not much, just enough to be a nuisance to himself or others. No matter how hard he tries, strong magic seems just out of reach. It’s close enough to keep him trying, but far enough away to make other magic users ridicule him. When he can use magic, the things that happen around him make it seem a fluke, a mistake, or just luck. Or, maybe, someone else did the real magic to make it look like he did it.

As this person gets older he is turned down more and more; others treat him like a joke. Depression sets in. He thinks of suicide. Many do not live through this phase of the development, the ones that do become loners or hermits. They do not like being ridiculed by powerful magic users and, therefore, do not like to be around them. However, there is an attraction that always pulls them to other magic users, especially when they are about ready to metamorph.”

Rathsmus just looked at her waiting for her to finish her lecture on magic users. It was quite interesting information, but he was waiting for her to tell him what type of magic user he was. “You see”, Crystal continued, “when the time comes near the simple magic becomes very easy, he can almost do it without focusing directly on the task, which is much different from his past. The harder

spells start to get easier, although not as easy as the simple magic.” She paused again to see if any of this was sinking in.

“The person wants to prove his worth to other magic users and wants to be around them. Sometimes he devises a plan of revenge on past acquaintances that made fun of him or turned him down. New magic comes into his life. Like a magnet, he attracts magic. Most of the time he doesn’t even realize he has extra magic or doesn’t want to believe. But, eventually, he must accept what is happening or the magic will overwhelm him and he will destroy himself by trying to control it too soon.” Again, Crystal stopped and looked at Rathsmus for some recognition that he understood that she was talking about him.

“So, what kind of magic user am I? One that is destined for mediocrity? You keep saying that I am a strong magic user, but I don’t think you know what you’re talking about and I no longer believe your story about my dream. I think you tapped into my dream and watched to see my feelings and my thoughts. You are trying to confuse me with all of this!” Rathsmus was yelling now.

Korg tried to stand but tripped over his chair and landed on his back on the floor. He rolled and stood ready for action. All five sisters were now standing; everyone was looking from Rathsmus to Crystal and back again. Rathsmus was stooped over with his hands holding onto his head as if it was going to explode and he was trying to keep it together. His face was bright red and his veins were showing on his forehead. He was moaning louder and louder. His whole body was starting to glow.

The sisters could feel the magic in the air. Rathsmus was attracting random magic in the air like particles of dust to a comb you’ve just pulled through your hair. Sheena looked at Crystal, “should we stop it? Could it kill him?” “No, we can’t stop it. Even if we wanted to, we couldn’t and, yes, it might kill him if he cannot handle the power. It is the only way for him to understand what is happening to him. I’m sure this is not the first time he has had this happen to him; it will not be the last. As his time gets closer they will happen more frequently and more severely each time. Maybe now he’ll listen to us and let us help him. His chances of surviving without us are not very good.”

Rathsmus was now lying on the floor, unconscious. Korg picked him up and brought him to his bed. Each sister in turn watched Rathsmus until he awoke almost a full day later. None of them dared to enter his dreams regardless of how restless he was or how much he yelled, they knew firsthand the power he possessed in the dreams.

When Rathsmus awoke he sat up straight in bed. His head throbbed with every beat of his heart. Daphney was sitting in the chair beside him. When he sat up, she stood and placed a hand on his back then she jumped back and fell into the chair. Rathsmus was as surprised as Daphney, but not as stunned. She just slumped in the chair with her head lolling on her chest. Rathsmus jumped out of bed and went to her. He started to shake her but decided against it, if he touched her and shocked her again this time it might kill her. At least she was alive now. He could see her chest rise and fall with each breath.

He rushed to the door and out into the hall, “Help! Someone! Daphney has been hurt!” Within seconds the hall was full of running people. Rathsmus ran back

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into the room and stood at the opposite side of the bed from Daphney. Sheena was the first in the room followed closely by the other three sisters. Korg brought up the rear as he bent and turned to enter the room to avoid hitting the doorframe with his horns. The four sisters were standing around Daphney trying to bring her around.

Korg noticed Rathsmus looking very nervous, almost as if he wanted to hide. Korg walked to Rathsmus. When Rathsmus noticed Korg looking at him and walking up to him, he backed away from him. Korg took another step closer, Rathsmus backed away again. "Don't get any closer, Korg, I don't want to hurt you." Korg laughed and put his hand out to grab Rathsmus. A blue spark flashed between them and Korg stumbled back and landed on the floor, unconscious.

Crystal had noticed the exchange between Korg and Rathsmus and had been watching when the blue spark hit Korg. She was astonished when Korg landed on the floor. Rathsmus looked at Crystal and knew she had seen him hurt Korg. "I didn't mean to do it. I told him not to get too close, but he didn't listen. Honestly, I didn't mean to hurt him or Daphney. She touched me when I woke up; I didn't know it was her." Rathsmus was rambling on now. The other sisters were looking at him now too. Daphney began to stir. Serena helped her to her feet; she still seemed weak. Crystal went to Korg who was actually snoring on the floor. She did a quick spell and Korg awoke. Rathsmus had stopped talking now and was sitting on the edge of the bed.

"You are gaining power that you don't even know how to control. You must believe me now about what has been happening to you. Every time you have one of your attacks you gain more magical ability. If you do not learn to control what you gain, eventually you will be overcome by it and die. You are now becoming too dangerous for others to be around you. If you do not let us help you, if you do not trust us, I must ask you to leave, now, for our own safety. If you leave you will probably die before the end of the month, maybe before the end of this week. I know this was not your first attack, but it was probably your worst yet. The next one will be even harder on you. You know that I am telling you the truth."

Rathsmus sat on the bed looking at the floor and shaking his head. "I don't want this! I only want to be normal. I don't want extra ability. I only want to be strong enough to make a living as a sorcerer. I don't want so much power that people are afraid of me; so much that people try to kill me just because of my ability. Can't you stop it? Do something to..." Crystal was shaking her head; "There is nothing any of us can do to stop these changes in you. We can help you survive them and we can help you control your metamorphosis."

Rathsmus looked at her, "That is the second time you have mentioned metamorphosis. What do you mean? I'm going to turn into a bug?" Rathsmus asked with a small chuckle that didn't last long when he realized that no one else was laughing. "Not quite a bug but, yes, you are going to change, if you survive your attacks, that is. You are a type of metamorph. Most common metamorphs can change their appearance to look like anyone or anything they touch. Like right now, since you have touched Korg, you could become a copy of him. Stand up." Rathsmus stood and looked at Crystal.

"First of all, you need to concentrate. Close your eyes and picture yourself becoming Korg." Rathsmus closed his eyes and concentrated. In front of everyone

in the room Rathsmus slowly became Korg. He opened his eyes and knew he had done it just from the look on the sisters' faces. "You are every bit Korg as he is," Crystal began, "You are as strong and as quick. You are Korg." "How do I become myself again?" "Just concentrate on who you are. Any time you wish to become Korg again just concentrate on becoming him. Anyone you touch, ever, you can become them when you wish. You only have to touch them once and you carry their essence with you."

Rathsmus closed his eyes and became Rathsmus once more. Crystal began again, "You, however, are not a common metamorph. Your ability to change is much stronger. Most metamorphs will only look like what they turn into, but will not actually turn into them, like you can. As you get stronger you will attract more and more stray magic. You cannot stop the process, but you can alter it. When the time is right you will metamorphosize, you have no control over that. What you metamorph into can be controlled, with the proper help."

"Can I stay human?" Rathsmus asked. "I don't know, perhaps, if it is not too late already. I had hoped to begin several days ago. Your condition has already accelerated beyond what I had thought when we first entered the cave. At that time I had only suspected what you were." "Well," said Rathsmus, "I don't have any choice but to believe you. I can't say that I want to believe, but I do. What is the next step?" "Follow me," was Crystal's only reply.

7

Enemies

Rathsmus followed Crystal down the hall away from the kitchen and library. He had not been in this part of the cave and did not realize there was this much to the cave. Crystal stopped. The other sisters and Korg walked past and stopped a couple of feet away. Crystal placed both hands on the wall about five feet from the floor. A wall shimmered into existence a couple of feet behind Rathsmus. Another hallway appeared where Crystal was touching the wall. One wall vanished as quickly as the other appeared. Crystal led the way down the hall with Korg bringing up the rear as usual to protect them. It must have been a natural instinct, what did he need to protect them from in here?

Then they came to some stairs, about twenty-five or thirty, going down. The hall was dark here, so Crystal magically made a ball of light that floated slightly in front of her and to the left side of the hallway. It did not light up the hall very far ahead. At the bottom of the first set of steps was a small landing and another set of twenty-five or thirty more steps. After about six sets of steps the hall continued straight ahead, then the hall just ended.

As the group stopped, Crystal walked to the wall. The light she had made went out. Almost immediately four more appeared. Crystal turned; about to yell at her sisters to extinguish their lights, when she noticed that Rathsmus was surrounded by the lights, two in front of him and two behind. They were his. "Rathsmus, you must turn out the lights. If we have intruders in this place we don't want them to see us coming with the hall all lit up." Rathsmus replied, "I didn't do it. It just happened. I mean, I know that I did it, but I didn't try. They just appeared." "Oh," said Crystal, "Well, just concentrate on removing them." The lights dimmed one by one and blinked out. Without the lights, the hall was so dark you could not see your hand in front of your face.

Suddenly there was a faint light up ahead. The wall, or what Rathsmus thought was the end of the hall, had disappeared. The group slowly walked up the hall. It ended in a large room. There were some strange man-like creatures walking around the room. Man-like only in the respect that they walked on two legs, had two arms, two eyes, a nose, a mouth, and ears. Other than that it would be hard to call them a "man". Some had hair all over, some had scales and were lizard-like; others looked like part bird and had feathers. They were ransacking the room looking for something.

Rathsmus noticed there was a barrier of some sort at the end of the hall. Apparently he could see out of the hall but the intruders could not see into the hallway. One of the intruders came up to the hall as if he was looking directly at Rathsmus and the others in the hall. At one point Korg almost charged him but the sisters stopped him and explained that there was a two-way mirror at the end of the hall. The intruders could not see them. Even so, he drew his sword and was ready.

“Hurry up! Tolman wants us out of here. If we can’t find them here, we have a lot of ground to cover before night”, said a brownish creature that looked like an iguana. “Come on, Monk, you’ve been pushing us for three days now. We haven’t seen even a sign of them on this mountain. They’re probably a hundred miles from here”, said another scaled creature, this one looked more like a snake. “Listen, Chicot, I’m in charge and it’s my neck if you guys mess up. I’m only following orders.” Monk turned and walked through a doorway.

The snake man went over to the mirror to look at himself. While he was standing there admiring himself he thought he heard something, his hearing was quite good. His forked tongue slithered out to taste the air. Nothing. Maybe he was just tired, after all, they had been on the march constantly for the last three days with hardly a rest for food and only a couple hours a night of sleep. Then he heard a sound like a sword being drawn slowly from its scabbard and saw a glint of it in the mirror, but there was nothing behind him. That left only one place for it to be. It was a two-way mirror and whoever it was, was hiding behind the mirror.

He looked around the room for others, if he attacked the mirror he wanted to have some backup close by. There were four of his men in the room, two birdmen, a fish and a wolfman. That meant five against an unknown amount, until more entered the room. He took a step backward, as two snakemen entered the room. “To arms!” he yelled, drew his sword and struck the mirror. The mirror shattered. Before the mirror was on the ground, Chicot had a sword sticking out of his chest and the other two snake men had lost their heads by Korg’s sword. That left four more. A birdman let out a screech like a siren that ended in a gurgle as Korg threw a knife in its throat. It fell over backwards. The second started to do the same but a knife ended the attempt.

Rathsmus just watched in amazement as Korg took on one after the other. Then he got an idea. As a second mineotaur stepped from the broken mirror, the two intruders that were left were surprised long enough for Korg to cut them down with his sword. Korg went around the room removing his throwing knives from his victim’s throats, cleaned them on their clothes and resheathed them for later use.

They could hear the pounding of boots coming up the hall toward them. Korg stuck his head out the door to look down the hall; he quickly brought it back in. “You won’t like what I’m about to tell you, but there is a magic user leading the way and lots of troops behind him. Rathsmus returned to himself, then shimmered and disappeared. Korg ran back to the sisters, “Where did Rathsmus go?” he asked. “I don’t know, quick, step inside”, Crystal said. As soon as Korg stepped into the hall a solid wall of rock covered the doorway into the room.

The group of intruders stopped by the door and the magic user stepped into the room. He looked around and saw seven of his warriors, dead, and a broken mirror. The fools saw themselves in the mirror and killed each other, he thought to himself. While he was walking around a couch he tripped and fell out of sight. Another rushed to help but the magic user got to his feet faster than he should have been able to. “Tolman, are you all right?” said the one who had rushed to help. “Yes, I’m fine. Get out of here and start marching to the next camp. I’ll meet you there. Take whatever supplies you have found here and go, now!” The intruders backed out of the room and ran down the hall.

Almost instantly the wall disappeared and the five sisters leapt out of the hall to confront the magic user. But the magic user named Tolman was gone, in his place was Rathsmus. "How did you do that?" several of the sisters said at the same time. "Well, you said that I was a metamorph and could turn into anything I wanted as long as I had touched it. So I turned myself into a flea. When Tolman came into the room I jumped on him, thus touching him. When he walked behind the couch I tripped him and became him and knocked him out. It was quite a lot of fun. He is still there if you want him." Korg walked behind the couch and pulled Tolman up off the floor. "Quickly, bind him so he cannot use his magic", Crystal said to Daphney as she put the wall back up to hide the entrance they had used. Daphney quickly cast a spell to bind him and keep him from doing any magic. "Korg, bring him", said Crystal, as she led the way down the hall toward the invaders. Korg picked the magic user up like a sack of flour and followed.

Several feet down the hall Crystal stopped and faced the wall. When she touched it, a stairway appeared. "Quickly", she said to the others as they raced down the stairs. Crystal jumped into the stairway as the wall solidified and the stairway disappeared. They had no more than entered the stairway when a group of intruders ran back to the place Tolman had last been seen. "Tolman, you have been summoned by the Master!" but the words trailed off by the leader of the group. Tolman was no longer here. They ran back to tell Monk the news.

Once away from the intruders, Crystal removed a small box from her pouch. She raised it up to Tolman's face and Tolman disappeared. She returned the box to her pouch and led the way down the stairs. The group continued down the stairs led by Crystal. The stairs they were on had no landings, they only went down. Once or twice they even had a slight curve, but down and down they went. The further down they went, the older the stairs looked and the more damp the air got. Rathsmus had the four balls of light around him. His security magic had taken over and he could not even concentrate them away, not that he really wanted to anyway. Crystal gave in and her light went out. Rathsmus' lights changed from two in front of him and two behind him, to one about ten feet in front of the group, one by Rathsmus, one by Korg, and one about ten feet behind the group, they had plenty of light.

Water was dripping from the ceiling and was forming puddles on the floor. Finally, the steps had ended and Rathsmus now wished that they continued. The hall was now a narrow path only wide enough for one person at a time. Korg was having a hard time to fit at all, especially his horns, but so far he was okay. The floor had about two inches of water covering it and each step was a splash. Rathsmus hoped they didn't meet any intruders here. "How much further?" Rathsmus asked Crystal. "To where?" "To wherever it is you are taking us", Rathsmus said. He was starting to worry and his security magic kicked in again, all of the water on the floor split apart and made a dry path to walk on. "Nice", said Crystal, eventually you will be able to control the magic and these types of things will happen when you want them to." Now that there was a path through the water the going was much quicker and quieter.

The path would change from five feet wide to barely wide enough for them to squeeze through tight spots. At one point Korg came to a spot he could not make

it through and he told them to continue on without him. Of course that was unacceptable, so they tried to think of a way to get him through. The sisters were waiting for Rathsmus to do something and he was waiting for them. "Well, Rathsmus, have you thought of a way?" Crystal asked. "You are the magical talent around here, I'm just the newcomer. Can't you do something?" replied Rathsmus. "Yes, we could but this is your problem, I want to see if you can solve it."

Rathsmus turned from Crystal and looked at Korg. How could he get Korg through without caving in the whole hall? How could he get such a massive creature through such a small space? Then he wondered, if he could turn himself into a flea, maybe he could turn Korg into a small animal. The big question was how? He searched his mind for the answer. Then there was a large explosion from behind Korg. It was a long way off, but it didn't give them much time. It was their enemies; they had found the stairway and were making a path through to it. They would be here soon. Then another explosion, this one was larger and it shook the ground. Dust and debris fell from the ceiling. Another explosion boomed. Rocks fell as the path closed up completely. Now there was no way any animal would make it through this path.

Rathsmus concentrated. Think, think, he yelled at himself, but he couldn't concentrate, all he could think of was that damned dripping noise. Water dripping everywhere. The sisters were gathering now, trying to come up with a way to save Korg. They could not wait for him any longer; they had to act to save him. Then it hit him, "that's it! Korg!, lay down in the water and don't move." "What! Why?" yelled Korg. "Just do it, I've got an idea." Korg lay down, "I'm ready", he yelled.

As he was lying there he was thinking, this is stupid. I should be fighting the people breaking into the hall, the people that are after us. I am the protector... His mind started to wander, he felt sleepy. His body felt heavy. He couldn't move his hands up and down, only sideways, and even then it felt sluggish and slow. His body felt warm all over. He was enjoying the sensation. It was like being in a hot spring on an early summer morning. Then he was dreaming of going down a river through rapids, only he wasn't on a raft. He was the river. Flowing through canyons, around curves, over falls and into a large lake at the end. The sensation of being in a hot spring returned and then became the sluggish, tired feeling. He was suddenly aware of Rathsmus and the sisters standing around him.

"That was amazing, Rathsmus, I've never seen anything like it", said Crystal. Rathsmus looked down at Korg with a proud look on his face. As Korg moved to stand a sharp pain went through his skull making him lay back down. "How...?", Korg stopped and swallowed hard and held onto his head, "What happened?" Crystal spoke up; "Rathsmus brought you through the cave in. He made you become liquid and you flowed through the cracks." "Oh", was all he said. It explained the dream he had had. Korg stood on the next attempt even though the pain was great. "Something is wrong", said Sheena. "Look at Korg's horns", said Dalna.

Korg's horns were each about a foot short. "Rathsmus, what have you done to me!", Korg yelled with painful anger as he felt his horns. Rathsmus thought. He went to the cave in and knelt with his palms toward the rocks. He closed his eyes and concentrated. Some whitish ooze flowed out of the cracks in the rocks blocking

the passage. He opened his eyes and saw the puddle of ooze in front of him, and pointed toward Korg. The puddle flowed toward Korg's feet and was absorbed into his body. "Aaghh", Korg yelled, as he held his head in pain and bent over almost double. His horns grew to the usual length and the pain was gone.

Korg looked at Rathsmus with angry eyes, "Be more careful in the future." "I'm sorry, I thought you had completely come through the rocks." "Do not blame Rathsmus, Korg", said Crystal, "I told him to do something and I should have helped him more, however, he is very interesting to watch. He comes up with ideas that anyone else would think impossible." She didn't wait for any response from Korg's, but turned and walked away expecting the others to follow, which they did. From this point on the cave widened out and they had no more tight spaces for Korg. The constant dripping of water also stopped.

The cave came to a sudden forty-five degree angle to the left and Crystal stopped. She reached out and touched the wall and a second tunnel opened at a forty-five degree angle to the right. "From this point on you can use no magic. They can trace your magic when they are close enough, and they are definitely close enough. We will travel this way", she pointed to the right, "You will travel that way", she pointed to the left, "Use a lot of your magic power, they will trace it there and then you will have to return here to join us. However, you cannot use your magic again after they have traced it to you there or they will know it and follow you back here. It is very important! You must keep yourself under control, no magic at all, not even your involuntary magic." She looked at the balls of light floating in the air above him. He nodded his head. He understood. Rathsmus walked off into the tunnel. When he was away from them he increased the strength of the lights; it was like daylight at noon in the summer. He ran.

"Can I go with him?", asked Korg. "No, he is becoming dependent on his magic to get himself out of trouble. He must learn that he does not need it, but that it is like any other tool. Sometimes a shovel is too big and you need to use a trowel. He needs to know he has his mind when magic is too dangerous." The wall shimmered into existence leaving Rathsmus in the tunnel by himself.

While Rathsmus was running he thought, if I have to lure them away with magic, why not use it? In an instant he was flying on a sparkling mat of air. He was flying fast, he figured he was probably ten miles away by now. The path continued for who knows how far. Now was as good a place as any to stop. "How am I going to get back by those people once I lure them into the tunnel? Oh, great. I'm talking to myself!"

Then he got an idea. He looked at the wall and made a small cupboard sized hole, then he made a door of rock. He picked up a piece of rock and turned it into a candle and magically lit it. He placed it on the floor. He made another mat of air and flew down the tunnel again. Rathsmus went about a mile this time, he knew that he would be running back to the candle and didn't want to travel very far. He stopped and made a large hole in the floor, as wide as the tunnel and about thirty feet long and twenty feet deep with sharp spikes sticking up. Anyone who fell into this would die very fast. He made a layer of air that would hold about twenty-five hundred pounds of weight before it collapsed. He colored it the same as the rock around it. He took some sand and small rocks and covered the area; it looked good.

Turning out his magic lights he ran back to the candle as fast as he could. There was a small flickering light ahead in the tunnel, it was the candle. He could hear noises up ahead but couldn't see anything there when he got close to the candle. Reaching down, he picked up the candle and went to the hiding place he had made, the he climbed in, closed the door and locked it from the inside. Rathsmus concentrated on controlling the magic so it would not flare up when he blew out the candle. Now he was ready, he blew out the candle and tried to relax as best as he could and waited.

While he waited, he thought about the last few minutes. How had he known how to make the candle? Of course, it was not a wax candle; it was a special candle made of a type of rock that let out a flammable gas when surrounded by another type of rock. But still, he had no idea how he knew how to make it. It seemed as if with the new magic he had acquired he also acquired new knowledge of how to use it. He was doing things that he shouldn't even know how to do. When he was making the candle, he could see molecules and minerals that he knew nothing about and knew how to put them together to make the candle. The thought scared him and excited him at the same time.

It wasn't long before Rathsmus heard the scraping of metal on the rocks. "He was here. I can feel the magic. He did something very powerful here and then went on", said a deep voice. "What did he do here?", said another. "I can't tell for sure. I just know he did something very powerful here but something even more powerful up ahead", said the original voice. "How far up ahead?" asked the other voice again. "About a mile up ahead." "Good, that means we are catching up to him. Let's go, we've got to catch up to him before anyone else does. Our leader will reward us greatly when we deliver this strange magic user to him."

The pounding of boots and clanging of metal were the only sounds he heard as the group ran past him. He waited for a couple minutes before climbing out of the hiding place, which he had made in the wall. Judging by the way the way they were running, it would not be long before they ran onto his trap. With all the metal they were carrying, they would weigh over two hundred and fifty pounds apiece, which means when ten of the intruders were on the trap it would collapse and many more would fall or be pushed in by the ones rushing behind them.

He heard faint yells as the trap collapsed, probably killing half of them. He decided to run. He closed his hiding place door and ran to rejoin his friends. Thinking about it, he realized that he was starting to consider them his friends. They'd had a rough start and it wasn't getting any easier, but they were definitely friends. He smiled as he thought about it and ran.

As Rathsmus reached the curve in the tunnel, he thought about how he was supposed to join them without using magic. He picked up a rock and tapped on the wall where Crystal had made the other tunnel. The tunnel appeared with Korg ready for a fight, just in case their enemies had backtracked and were looking for a secret doorway. Korg reached out and pulled Rathsmus into the group and Crystal made the wall appear again. "Korg, be more careful with Rathsmus. His defensive magic could have thought you were going to hurt him and tried to protect him, which would have alerted our enemies to our location." Korg nodded, "Yes, I'm sorry." Then she looked at Rathsmus; "You seem to have controlled your magic." "I'm

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trying.” Crystal smiled at Rathsmus and said; “You will have to tell us your story about what you did to avoid our enemies when we stop.”

8

Training

About ten minutes later they were standing at the bottom of a set of stairs. Up they went. Rathsmus was getting tired. The others had had a chance to rest while he was running around trying to avoid the people that were following them. The stairs ended on a landing with a huge door. This door was much smaller than the door in the first cave, but other than size they were the same. There were great iron bands holding together huge planks of wood. Crystal went to the door, unlocked it and it opened. This place had the same magical lights that came from nowhere, but lit the room perfectly.

The sisters entered the room; this one looked lived in. None of the furniture was covered. Each sister went to a wall that had a row of hooks and removed their clothing. They returned to the middle of the room and sat in a circle. Rathsmus just watched. These women were very beautiful. The door behind Rathsmus and Korg slammed shut. Rathsmus turned almost as fast as Korg. The door was not there anymore; it was a wall of rock. The women continued to work their magic. Rathsmus had no idea what they were doing. He thought they were probably securing other doors like this one.

When they finished they stood and went to the wall where their clothes were and put them on. "I'm sorry, Rathsmus", Crystal said. "That's ok", Rathsmus replied, "I think I can control myself around you now, with or without clothes." Secretly he was thinking that without clothes would be nicer. Crystal turned to her sisters as they were getting dressed. "No, you don't understand, I'm sorry about closing up this place. You must stay with us now. We cannot let you leave."

The smile left his face, "You mean, I'm a prisoner?" "No, not exactly, we have just decided that you are too valuable to lose. When you are fully trained to the best of our ability, you will take over our quest and destroy our enemies. You will rest after we eat and then your training begins. You could probably break through the wards that we have placed over this residence, but in doing so you would give away your location to the people who want to kill you. The wards we have placed here will keep them from finding you and are primarily for that purpose, they are not meant to keep you a prisoner. However, when you have another attack we are not completely sure how difficult it will be to control you during it. We wanted to have a barrier strong enough to keep you here.

The meal had been a fairly quiet one. Rathsmus had told the story of how he tricked the group in the tunnel. The sisters were quite impressed. He retired to his room and it wasn't long before he was fast asleep. During the night he had another attack. His magic was stronger after each attack, but it made him weak and normally took a couple of days before he recovered completely. This time it hit him harder than any of his previous ones. He had thrashed around in bed so hard his bed broke. No one dared enter his room because objects were flying around. A wash basin flew into the doorframe almost hitting Serena. The sisters could only stand and watch.

Eventually Rathsmus passed out from the attack and the sisters started to clean up his room. Crystal walked over to Rathsmus and watched. She could still feel the magic entering his body but it was much easier. Then it ended. Crystal called to Korg to bring Rathsmus to the washroom and clean him up. The sisters continued to clean the room. Before long Rathsmus was in bed and the room was clean.

Rathsmus awoke to a tray of hot food. He was alone. He felt sore; he must have had another attack. He wondered how many days he had been unconscious this time or what he had done during the attack. He sat up and ate his meal. After his meal, he put on some clothes they had left out for him and went out to find the others. Even though they would not let him leave now, he felt they meant well and it was the best thing for him. They were still his friends.

He found them sitting around the kitchen table and talking. When Rathsmus entered the room Crystal stood. "Please sit, Rathsmus. I noticed something during your last attack that might help you during your next one." "Are you so sure that I'll have one?" "You will." Rathsmus sat down and listened to Crystal explain what she had seen and felt during his attack. "If you put yourself into a trance during your next attack, you should absorb the magic much quicker with less strain on you. We can help with this to keep you in the trance in case things get difficult for you to concentrate." "Couldn't it be dangerous for any of you to be too close to me during an attack?" Crystal looked at the other sisters and they all nodded their head as each was asked a silent question by Crystal. "We have all agreed that it is something we have to do and it should not be too dangerous with all of us together. But then there are no guarantees, anything could happen, and we are willing to take the chance to help you." Rathsmus nodded, "I hope it works, what do we do first?"

Each of the five sisters was strong in the magic arts, but each had strengths in different areas and each would teach that strength. Sheena was chosen first. Her strongest art was air. Any number of things could be done with air. For instance, you could fly, conceal yourself, or you could hold someone and bind them so they could not move. It was very handy and it was everywhere.

Rathsmus followed Sheena to a room with a heavy metal door, not the wooden doors like the rest, but metal. "Why is the door metal?", inquired Rathsmus. "This is our laboratory. We deal with magic and chemicals. It is just safer with a metal door", Sheena said as she entered the room. Rathsmus entered behind her and Sheena closed and locked the door. There was a round rug on the floor. Sheena removed her clothes and sat in the middle of the rug.

Rathsmus walked over to her, "Why do you remove your clothes when you do magic?" "Magic is different for women than it is for men. Men have to control it. Women have to seduce it to them before they can control it. For small magic it is not necessary to remove your clothes. For strong magic it is not necessary either, however, it is easier to control the magic without clothing." "Do you mean that if you were walking in a group of people and someone attacked you, you should remove your clothes to be at your strongest?" "No, magic for protection is not the same. When you do really powerful magic... It's hard to explain. It's like when you want to do magic, if it is powerful you have to concentrate really hard. Well, when a

woman has to concentrate on magic, it makes it easier to remove her clothes. It also distracts your opponent.” And with that she swooped a spell of air under his feet and he landed on the floor.

What she didn’t expect was his involuntary magic to kick in. He never hit the floor. A cushion of air went between him and the floor and protected him from being hurt. When he hit the cushion of air, he bounced up on his feet and a barrier of opaque air flew up between Rathsmus and Sheena. The cushion of air that saved him from hitting the floor carried him to the ceiling, which Sheena did not see. She was starting to get up when she was wrapped up by a spell of air, her hands tied behind her back, and her feet tied together so she could not move. The barrier disappeared and Sheena was astounded that he was gone.

Rathsmus floated down behind her. “You’ve done very well Rathsmus, however, the question is, can you do it without letting your defense magic take over? Had I struck you in a different place you might be dead now. Defense magic is too slow to kick in. Once it has kicked in it is fast, but you can be even faster. You do not want to rely on defense magic to save you in every situation. Today’s lesson is to teach you to control your magic, not to let it control you. If you let me go, we can continue and try again.”

“I don’t think so. You see, I kind of like the feeling of being in control. Especially in control of a beautiful, naked lady.” Rathsmus was just joking, and Sheena could tell from his tone and the way he laughed, but he needed to be taught a lesson and this was as good a time as any. “Rathsmus, don’t do anything you might regret later. You might be able to control me now but...” “No”, Rathsmus interrupted, “I think I can handle the situation without your talk.” A spell of air tied her mouth closed, he didn’t want to hurt her, but he did want to show her she was wrong, that he was in control. He whisked her off her feet so she was laying on a bed of air about waist level to him. He walked around her looking at her. Sheena was starting to worry, how far would he go with this?

She decided not to find out. She closed her eyes and concentrated on pulling all thoughts of retaliation against Rathsmus inside herself. If his defense magic was still in control, which she believed it was, when it sensed she was no longer a threat to him it would loosen its grip on her, maybe even let her go. Defense magic was a great strain on the person using it and if they did not monitor it sufficiently it could leave them completely vulnerable. If it left him, he might be too weak to regain it when she attacked him again.

Rathsmus was still walking around her looking at her. She could sense him. He was toying with her. Then she felt a weakening in her bonds, but she didn’t react. The magic was still holding her and if she tried something now it would just tighten up on her again, and probably would not loosen up again. Suddenly, the bonds were gone. Sheena moved quickly. A club of air hit him in the stomach and another hit him in the head. Rathsmus was down and unconscious before he even knew what happened.

When Rathsmus awoke, his head and stomach hurt badly. He was on the floor in the same room in which Sheena had been instructing him on the use of air magic. He tried to roll over onto his back and found that he could not. A force was holding him to the floor. “Sheena, are you here?” “So, the dead returns to the living.

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I was beginning to worry that I might have hit you too hard. But then, you deserved worse for what you were doing to me.” “I wouldn’t have hurt you, honest, I was just teasing you. I wanted to show you how strong I was.” “Well you showed me, didn’t you? Maybe you’ll listen to us when we tell you that your defense magic is strong, but it has weaknesses, and if you concentrate on holding back your defense magic, you will be much quicker and stronger than you are now.” “I can’t control it. It just does what it wants.”

“You can control it when you want. Remember in the cave? You made your lights go out when you concentrated.” “But that was just simple magic, it was not that hard to control it.” Sheena sat down cross-legged in front of Rathsmus so he could see her. She had gotten dressed now but he still thought she was beautiful. “If you can control simple magic, you can control all magic. When we came to this room I told you we would only use air magic, nothing else. When we battled, your defense magic only used air magic against me. You did control your defense magic. Now you need to practice controlling all of it, not just parts of it. You can do it. You must learn to or you will not survive the metamorph stage of your development.”

Sheena released Rathsmus from his bindings and he sat up. “How do I control what I metamorph into?”, he asked. “It is similar to the magic you use when you shape shift, but you have a long way to go before we can teach you that.” Rathsmus started to ask another question but Sheena stopped him. “Enough questions for now, we’ve got to continue your instruction.” “Ok, but just one more question.” Sheena nodded slowly. “How do you know so much about the metamorphosis that I will be going through?”

“Our father, not our real father, but the man we grew up to know as our father, was a metamorph. He had gone through every stage of his development before he took us into his home and treated us as his own, except the final metamorphosis. He fought it off for a long time but eventually, there was no putting it off any longer and it happened. He had fought it for so long that he was weak and tired. He turned into a very ugly creature; however, he was very powerful in both physical strength and in magic. He could shape shift, like you, and did not have to stay in his metamorph shape, but you cannot stay in shape shift forever either. Most of his life from that point on was spent in his metamorph shape.

Crystal thinks he is dead now. I think he is still alive. We are not allowed to go into his caves, we promised him we would not. He wanted to be left alone.” Rathsmus asked no more questions for the rest of the morning although he was forming many more in his mind for later. The rest of the morning was spent trying to control his magic and only use it when he wanted to.

When they broke for lunch Rathsmus was quite exhausted. It felt like a physical workout, not a magical one. Sheena told him he had improved much in just the course of a couple of hours. Before going to eat, Rathsmus went to his room for clean clothes and then to the washroom to freshen up. When he got to the table everyone else was already seated. Rathsmus took a seat at the table where there was already a plate of food waiting for him. “Sheena says you have improved quite a lot in just a couple of hours”, Crystal said, “That’s good. I fear your time is close. She also told us of your conversation about our teacher. I am not pleased about that, but it is too late to worry about. As you now know, it is possible to hold off the

metamorphosis for awhile, but it cannot be stopped. The longer you hold it off, the weaker you become to fight it. You must be strong during the metamorphosis so that you can control your eventual shape. I do not want what happened to our teacher to happen to you. After he became the creature he wanted nothing to do with anyone. You are needed, Rathsmus. The world needs you to wipe out the evil that has created a stronghold here. When we were young there were many history stories of what the world was like. Now the evil is stronger than it was then.”

Crystal looked at her sisters and each one nodded in turn. She looked at her hands folded on the table in front of her. Rathsmus had been listening but still wasn’t sure what she was trying to say. “I don’t under...”, he started to say. “Please”, Crystal interrupted, “We have kept a lot of information from you. Mostly to be sure you were the person we were looking for. If you knew everything then you might fake some of the things we are looking for to prove your identity. We were looking for signs that the oracle said would come. First of all, a person would bring one of the twins to us. You were not the first person. But you did reunite the five sisters and the twins, which was another sign. We were foretold of your coming, not like a prophecy, but through the oracle. Prophecy can be vague, misleading. Depending on the person reading the prophecy you can get different meanings, but with the oracle we were the only ones who knew what to look for.

The only thing anyone else knew was that we were looking for the amulet. Anyone who found it brought it to us and was either tested or was not worthy and left us the amulet. No one ever passed the test, until you. Even for you we held no hope, for there had been so many before you that we had lost all hope and only went through the motions. When you passed, we believed you were the one spoken of in the oracle. Another thing that the oracle said was that we would find a metamorph after the reunion that would bring us new allies in the war against evil. We had believed you would bring us to our old teacher or he would come to us because of you. We were, apparently, mistaken in that you are the metamorph the oracle was talking about and the reunion has brought you to us. The oracle does not say that you will save the world or eliminate all evil, but it does say that you would bring us new allies in the fight against evil. If we can teach you properly and allow you to metamorph at your strongest time, you will be a potentially powerful weapon against our enemies.”

9

Gifts

Rathsmus looked like the weight of the world had just been set on his shoulders. “How much time before my next attack?”, he asked. “By my calculations, you should have about one hour before your next attack. If we help to guide the magic into you, you will not be so worn out after it is over. It is your decision whether or not you want us to help you through your attack. If we help you now, it will be easier for us to help you through future attacks and in the final metamorphosis also.” Rathsmus just nodded his head.

“First, we must eat quickly and build our strength. This will be taxing for us all. When finished here we will go the lab and set up for the attack. Rathsmus, eat as much as you can comfortably hold, have no more than two glasses of wine, you must be able to keep your wits about you.”

Rathsmus entered the lab, the same room where Sheena had instructed him on the use of air magic earlier this morning. There was a table in the center of the floor with five chairs placed evenly around it. On the floor between each chair, was a magical symbol. Rathsmus had no idea what it meant. Each sister was standing behind a chair. Crystal was at the head of the table, or he thought it was the head of the table since there was a pillow at that end. He was beginning not to like this idea, but at least they were all dressed.

Crystal motioned for him to lie on the table as he approached them. He noticed a ring had been drawn on the floor that encompassed the whole group. Korg was nowhere to be seen. As Rathsmus entered the circle, each sister unbuttoned their clothing and dropped them to the floor. He stopped walking and closed his eyes. He did not need another distraction and five beautiful, naked women were more than a distraction. He opened his eyes and continued to the table, climbed on to it and lay down. Looking at the ceiling at least made it so he couldn’t see the sisters. He heard some noises close by the table, as all five women moved directly beside him belting his arms and body to the table. Their breasts were hanging over him as they reached to secure the belts. He closed his eyes again, he needed to concentrate. First, both hands were belted down, then both feet, then one over his chest, one over his forehead, and one just above the knees. “These are to keep you safe. You might thrash around and fall off the table injuring yourself”, said one of the women. He did his best to nod, and then they were gone from his sight. He figured they had gone to their chairs. Then Rathsmus felt it. It was the same feeling he got each time an attack started. His eyes rolled up into his head, then his lids shut, and his face turned red. He was fighting it. Then calmness came over him and he accepted his gifts, as if he had a choice.

The sisters were having a hard time. The magic was coming too fast to channel it smoothly into him. Fortunately, Rathsmus was not fighting it now; that was why things had backed up anyway. He fought it for about five minutes before Crystal got him to accept the flow. It took her about ten minutes to return from his

mind even after the flow was beginning to smooth out. It seemed as though it was coming to him slower. Then a wave of magic came like a flood hitting a dam that was already overflowing. As they strained to smooth it out, sweat glistened on each of their bodies, from the effort of channeling the magic into Rathsmus.

Another wave came; it was more than Daphney could take and she collapsed. Now the other sisters had to take up what Daphney could not. They could do nothing about their unconscious sister because they had their hands full from the magic flows. Daphney was now thrashing on the floor, as the flows of magic seemed to be hitting Rathsmus the hardest. As the magic flows smoothed out Daphney seemed to thrash less and less and then seemed to be enjoying herself as she was smiling and making low moaning sounds. The flows became trickles and then stopped altogether. It was over for now. Daphney's moans were louder now and were getting more aggressive, but it did not seem as if pain was the problem.

"The last wave must have knocked her into his mind. We must wake them before it is too late", said Crystal. But it was already too late; Daphney's moans were subsiding and Rathsmus had let out a couple of grunts. Daphney was still unconscious, but she had a smile on her face. Rathsmus was beginning to wake. Serena called for Korg to bring Daphney to her room while the others unfastened the belts that held Rathsmus to the table. He sat up and put his feet over the edge. "Wow, am I sore", he said. Crystal had an angry look on her face. "Is something wrong?", he asked. "Did you dream at all?" Crystal asked in fake pleasantness. "I don't remember. Well, I remember dreaming of you in a field by a stream and then a flood came and washed you away. I don't remember anything else." "Very well, you should go to the wash room and freshen up before you retire to your room. We'll see you in the morning." "Okay, but what happened to Daphney?" "She was knocked unconscious by a flow of magic. She will be fine in the morning."

Rathsmus left the room. As he was walking down the hall, he realized that the sisters were still naked and it didn't even bother him. He must be getting used to it. Normally he would have to concentrate on not thinking about their bodies, so close to him he could smell them, see the sweat glistening on their soft skin... Stop it! stop it!, stop it!, he said to himself. Maybe he still was not in total control when it came to the sisters.

The next morning at breakfast, Daphney was not there. The others were eating as if nothing was wrong. "Good, your up", Crystal said, "by my calculations, you should have another attack in forty-eight hours from now. That will give Daphney plenty of time to recover and give the rest of us time to get ready as well. Today you will practice fire magic with Dalna when you are done breakfast. After lunch you can practice water magic with Serena." With that Crystal stood and left the room. She seemed cold to him and he didn't know why. Women, he thought to himself. Maybe she wished the flood hadn't washed her away in his dream. She must have been there because she didn't seem surprised he said he saw her there. Why she would want that, especially after the talks they had had after the first dreams the sisters had been caught in. It was more than he could figure out, but then women were not normal. Being around five of them was going to drive him nuts. He just knew it would.

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The next day Daphney was up and around. She kept looking at Rathsmus and smiling. Maybe these women were like a warrior-type, he thought to himself and the one who gets beat up in a battle is proud of what they have done. Who knew with women?

The following day he was scheduled with Crystal in the morning and would prepare for his attack in the afternoon. It didn't sound like a lot of fun. Crystal was in the lab when he got there. She was going to show him some illusions to help escape his enemies. Making a double of yourself can help out sometimes, she told him. Everything she told him was interesting, but she still seemed to be mad at him. "Is there something wrong? Did I do something to upset you?" he asked. "No, I am just preoccupied with making sure you survive the metamorphosis and that you don't turn into a monster in the process either." The session continued, Crystal was less preoccupied than she had been, but she was still not the same as before his last attack. He had asked everyone what had happened but no one would tell him anything.

After his session with Crystal was over, Rathsmus was told to go eat; he would need his strength. The sisters had gathered in the lab to prepare for his next attack. After his meal he started for the lab. He walked slowly down the hall to the lab door. He still had about an hour, by Crystal's calculations, before his attack. But he was feeling sort of strange now. He hoped they were ready in the lab, it was time now. He opened the door and yelled, "It's time! Hurry!" then he fell to his hands and knees.

The sisters ran to him and helped him to his feet. They brought him to the table and strapped him down. He was fighting it already. They would be behind the flow again. They stayed standing around the table and dropped their clothes to the floor. Wind was swirling around in the room. They would not be fighting a flood this time; they would be fighting a windstorm. Crystal grabbed his head with both hands and entered his mind. Almost instantly, he stopped thrashing and fighting. The other sisters were trying to help the flow of wind that brought the magic to Rathsmus. It was moving to fast for them and Crystal had not returned yet. They would need her help.

Serena yelled for Crystal then she opened her eyes and realized the others were all looking at her. Suddenly the storm struck. Crystal was knocked back into her chair. The others slowly moved back to their chairs and sat. The flow of air was turning into a funnel shape over Rathsmus' body. The sisters were fighting to keep it steady and over him. It was growing stronger by the minute and harder to control. Sheena's control was slipping and she tried to control the bottom of the funnel. It seemed to help to keep it in place, but the top of the funnel got harder to control; it expanded and twisted in their grip. The funnel began bending to one side and then to the other. Then, almost as if it realized who had it by the bottom, it reached out like a club and swung at Sheena. It missed, but in trying to avoid it, she lost her grip on the bottom of the funnel. The others were trying frantically to keep a hold on it.

Sheena reached out again to grab it. The funnel twisted and she missed. She tried again and missed again. This time, however, when the funnel twisted and she missed, it swung around and knocked her out of her chair. Then it hovered over her trying to pull her into the top of the funnel. Sheena just lay on the floor

unconscious. The other sisters could do nothing but watch and wait. Their hands were full trying to control the funnel. It was fighting harder now and, with one less sister to fight, the others would tire more quickly. Suddenly the funnel straitened; it still fought them but it didn't twist and bend. The flow was speeding up, turning faster. The sisters' hair was flowing around faster as the funnel spun faster. The whole room was blowing; papers from the far end of the room were being pulled into the flow and were spinning in the funnel over Rathsmus' body. Crystal took a look in Sheena's direction; she had a big smile on her face. She couldn't see Rathsmus but she was sure he had a smile also. She started to let go of the funnel and it started to twist away from them. She grabbed it and it steadied again. There was nothing she could do for Sheena. Moans were escaping from between Sheena's lips and she was moving around. The other sisters noticed Crystal looking at Sheena and they also looked at her lying on the floor in the throes of passion. Her moans were getting louder as her hips bucked and gyrated. Rathsmus let out a loud groan and Sheena just lay on the floor smiling.

The flow of air settled, slowed and suddenly was gone. Another attack was done and another sister... "Korg!" yelled Crystal. Korg entered the room and was instructed to take Sheena to her room. Daphney looked at Crystal, "What happened to Sheena?" "She was pulled into Rathsmus' subconscious and was trapped there." "Did the same thing happen to me on his last attack?" Daphney looked very upset. No one had told her. "Yes, but no one must tell him. If he knew, he might fight the attacks and not let us help him. Besides, I do believe you enjoyed yourself as much as Sheena did." Crystal turned and left the room in a hurry. Rathsmus started to stir. The three remaining sisters unbelted Rathsmus and he retired to his room, unaware of what had happened.

The next morning when Rathsmus arrived at the breakfast table, everyone else including Sheena was already there. "So, how did everything go last night?" he asked Crystal. "Fine, I think we helped you a lot. You are gaining strength very rapidly. According to my calculations, you will have another attack tomorrow morning just before lunchtime. The frequency of your attacks is speeding up as you get stronger. Today you will work with Korg. He will teach you fighting techniques that do not require magic. Sometimes you cannot use magic without attracting undue attention." Rathsmus nodded. He sat down and ate a hearty breakfast. "I'm glad to see no one was hurt during my attack last night", Rathsmus said. Everyone agreed, laughing and smiling, and the subject of conversation was quickly changed and steered away from during the rest of breakfast.

The morning of his next attack went much the same. Rathsmus ate a hearty breakfast and everyone laughed and joked, then returned to the lab to prepare for his attack. This time Crystal entered his mind before the magic came, hoping that they would not fall behind like they had before. She was standing in a field of tall grass and wild flowers. There was a cool summer breeze, which blew most of the heat away. Now there was a blanket laid out under her feet that had not been there before, then a basket of food appeared. She tried to hold onto reality, to bring herself back to the lab. She remembered her sisters standing next to her; all of them ready to help Rathsmus. The next thing she knew she was standing on the blanket

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totally naked, just as she knew she was in the lab. She tried to bring her clothes back but it was too late, they would not return.

Rathsmus appeared, lying on his back on the blanket, dressed as he was in the lab, then his clothes disappeared and he was totally naked. But at least he was sleeping. Crystal wanted to go to him, but she knew she had to fight the feeling. She did not want what happened to Daphney and Sheena to happen to her, at least, she didn't think she did, did she? She wasn't sure now exactly what she did want. She took a step closer to him. Her hair was blowing in her face and she lifted a hand to keep it out. As she lifted her hand another hand grabbed hers and she was shocked back to the lab.

The wind was blowing, but not the same as during his last attack. It was not a tornado this time; this one was bigger. This was a hurricane. The big problem with hurricanes was that sometimes they spawned tornadoes. The wind speed was increasing as it blew from Rathsmus' left to his right. They were all working the flows into him and it seemed to be going pretty well. They had kept ahead of the flows and he wasn't fighting them.

Suddenly, a crash came from the left side of the room behind Serena. As she stood and turned to see what it was, a small tornado whipped her chair away and flung it to the wall in a heap of splinters. A second later it picked up Serena and she spun around inside the funnel. This tornado was much smaller than the one that had hit Sheena and, as it picked up Serena, it lost most of its energy causing her to the floor. Daphney started to reach for Serena but Crystal stopped her; her strength was needed to help the flows entering Rathsmus. Already Serena was moaning and her hips were gyrating in ecstasy.

The wind stopped instantly. The sisters had not expected it to just stop. They just watched their sister lying on the floor, as Rathsmus groaned and Serena just lay content and sleeping. "Korg!" yelled Crystal. As Korg entered the lab he was instructed to remove Serena. He had no more than left the room when the wind struck again, this time blowing from right to left. It hit as suddenly as it had stopped. No one had expected it as Dalna almost fell on top of Rathsmus when the wind struck at her from behind. They began directing the flows back into Rathsmus again. Then there was a crash from the right of the room as another tornado struck a small table behind Dalna. It picked up a small glass flask, throwing it across the room, striking Dalna in the back of the head. She fell to the floor unconscious.

The wind seemed stronger this time, but there were two less sisters this time too. Suddenly, directing the flow of magic into Rathsmus was easier. Rathsmus was moaning as much as Dalna, both were moving around as if they were physically together. The magical flows were entering Rathsmus so fast that the sisters could not keep up with it. Rathsmus was moving so much that one of the straps holding him to the table broke. Rathsmus and Dalna let out a final groan in unison and it was over. The flows had stopped.

Crystal began thinking; every attack of Rathsmus' ended in a sister being brought into his mind. Each time the flows entered him easier when he was with one of them. This time, however, he had been with two sisters. During the second episode they had not even had to help with the flows, they had entered him faster than they had even with the sisters' help. Was it possible that in order for them to

help him, they needed to enter his mind so he could have his way with them? She would have to call a meeting to discuss this situation with the others. Dalna was taken to her room by Korg and Rathsmus also needed Korg's help to get to his own room. Rathsmus felt great, tired, but great. These women were right, he felt better after each attack now and he wasn't being too obvious about looking at them when they were in the lab, at least he didn't think so.

The next morning at the breakfast table only Korg was there. "Where are the sisters?" asked Rathsmus. "They are in the library, talking about you, very secret. Even I could not go in and they told me to keep you out also." "What's the problem? I thought everything was going as planned." Korg just shrugged.

In the library Crystal was addressing her sisters. Dalna was holding an ice pack to the back of her head. Serena just looked tired. The others just sat and listened. "We have a problem. I think I have discovered how to help Rathsmus the most during his attacks." "That's good", said Sheena. "Yes", said Daphney, "Anything we can do to help him." Serena and Dalna just nodded agreement. "Unfortunately, I agree with you. Every time he has an attack, one of us gets pulled into his mind by the flows and he has his way with that person. When his mind is occupied in that area the magic enters him faster. During his last attack two sisters were pulled into his mind. When his mind was busy with the second sister, the magic entered him so fast we could do nothing but watch. We did not have to help direct it at all."

Dalna stood, "Are you suggesting we purposely enter his mind and let him do as he wishes?" "As I told you last night, you did not seem to mind when you were with him." "That's not fair. I had no choice in the matter. Besides, you are the only one who has not been with him. I suppose you will make us take turns with him while you stand by and watch." "No, we will all take our turns. I don't like the idea any more than you, and I'm sorry for what I said, you're right you did not have any choice. We all must do as we must. If this is the only way to help him than so be it. We will draw straws for the order of rotation. There will be two sisters with him for each attack. Since I have not had my turn yet, as Dalna put it, I will go first. I have not had a chance to see him since his last attack, so I'm not sure when his next one will be but I think it will be this morning. We should prepare for it."

The sisters agreed that they would do what ever was necessary to get Rathsmus through the attacks to the final phase of his metamorphosis. No one looked forward to the idea of entering his mind during an attack, at least not verbally. Some, however, were sort of looking forward to the experience to one extent or another.

After the meeting, Crystal checked out Rathsmus to see if she could predict the next attack. She decided that later in the morning he would have another attack so she went to the lab to prepare the room. Everyone else went about their own business.

When Korg finally found Rathsmus, he was in the library. "I've been looking for you for nearly half an hour. I didn't expect to find you here", said Korg. "I was just looking over some of these books, they're amazing." Rathsmus stopped and looked at Korg, "Why were you looking for me?" "The sisters are prepared for you in the lab. They sent me to find you." "I didn't know they wanted me there."

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Crystal didn't tell me another attack was expected this morning." Rathsmus looked unsure. Lately the attacks had given a sort of lift to his spirits. Even though he was sore after an attack, he still thought it was a good sore. Like you feel after a good hard day of work and you can see what you have accomplished. The problem was in this case he couldn't see what he had accomplished. He had nothing to show for his hard work. He just hoped when this job was through he was still alive.

When Rathsmus got to the lab he saw the sisters sitting around the table. This time they were already naked and they were working some sort of a spell, what? He did not know. He walked to the table and lay down. Almost instantly he went into a deep sleep. When he fell asleep the sisters rose and fastened the belts that held him to the table. A small trickle of magic approached Rathsmus. The sisters could feel it work its way to him. When it found him it slowly entered his being. The flow slowly increased, and as it increased the sisters directed it into him faster and faster. When it was as much as they could handle, Crystal entered his dream. Just as there was almost too much magic for them and they were about to be overcome, the flows entered Rathsmus faster than they had with the sisters' help. Now they just stood by and watched. Crystal was slumped in her chair. It wasn't long before soft, whispering moans escaped her lips. Then she started moving around and her moans got louder. The flows of magic were moving so fast they could hardly keep track of them. Crystal's head shot back and she arched her back as she let out a couple of loud moans. Rathsmus groaned along with Crystal and then it was done. The flows of magic stopped.

Sheena went to Crystal to see if she was ok. Her body was covered with sweat and her cheeks were flushed. Her eyes opened and she smiled. "How did everything go?" Crystal asked. "Well, you seemed to enjoy yourself", said Dalna with a smile as she came up beside Sheena. Crystal stood and wrapped her arms around Dalna, "I'm sorry for what I said to you the other day. It wasn't fair." "It's ok. The flows entered him so fast once you entered his mind that we only stood by and watched. You put on quite a show." Crystal's face turned red with embarrassment. "Did anyone else enter his mind after me?" "No, you handled him all by yourself", Serena said as she picked up Crystal's robe and Crystal put it on. Rathsmus started to wake. "How did things go?" he asked. "Very well", Crystal said, "very well."

At lunch the women were whispering and teeheeing like little schoolgirls. When Rathsmus sat down they stopped. Things were really getting strange around here. "I think we should prepare for another attack", Crystal said, "They are getting closer every day. You are gaining your strength faster than I had anticipated. I believe that in three days time you will start your metamorphosis."

Rathsmus felt sick. The thought of turning into some strange creature scared him. He wanted to run away, but he knew if he did he would probably die. No, he had put his life in the hands of five beautiful women. He would not let them down. He would see this thing through and, with any luck, he would keep his human form. "After we are done here we should go back to the lab and prepare for your next attack", Crystal said, interrupting his thoughts. "You mean, this soon?" "Yes, I believe it will happen within the hour. Before you are done you will have an almost continuous attack. That is when you will metamorph. We must be ready

when the time comes to keep you from turning into a creature as our teacher did. I believe that we can do it.”

Back at the lab again, Rathsmus was lying on the table; the sisters were all around him. He was falling into a deep sleep. The sisters fastened the belts to hold him to the table. They waited. About half an hour later it hit with full force, like a tidal wave hitting a small village. Sheena was ready and entered Rathsmus’ mind as fast as she could. The other sisters fought the wave and directed as much as they could into Rathsmus. The flow subsided like a wave going back to sea, then another one hit. More of it entered him than the first one. Sheena was already moaning softly. As the wave subsided, another one hit. Each wave was larger than the one before it. Wave after wave pounded them. Sheena was bucking and moaning wildly. “Serena, join her, he is still fighting the waves”, Crystal yelled above the noise. Serena did as she was told. The next wave was larger than all of the others. Sheena was finished and now it was Serena’s turn to start moaning. When the big wave hit, Dalna was knocked over and Daphney was pushed out of her chair. This time the wave entered Rathsmus completely. Dalna and Daphney returned to their chairs. The next wave hit them as hard, but it entered him without much help. Serena was moaning loudly now and her hips were gyrating uncontrollably. Each wave that hit entered Rathsmus without any help from the sisters. As the last wave hit and disappeared into Rathsmus, Sheena was waking and Rathsmus woke with a start. “Quick, let me up!” he yelled. Daphney started undoing his bindings. Rathsmus sat up and looked around. Crystal was standing over Serena and Dalna was helping Sheena stand. “What’s going on? I just had a dream about Sheena and Serena. Is that why they are having trouble now? Because of me? Has this happened during each attack? Answer me!” He jumped off the table and went to Crystal, “Is it!” he yelled at her, which made her jump. She only said, “It had to be done. We will talk of this in the library. Go there now and wait.” Rathsmus was very angry and started to argue. “Now!” Crystal said again in a stern voice that seemed louder than it really was. Rathsmus turned and left for the library.

If what I think just happened really did happen, and has been happening each time I’ve had an attack, Rathsmus thought to himself, the chances getting the sisters pregnant increases each time I have an attack. Crystal had told him it would not be allowed to happen again. When had plans changed and why hadn’t they told him? He was not ready for a wife and, definitely, not five of them. His sense of honor meant that he would have to take care of all of them if he was the reason for them having children. He would do what he had to, but maybe it wasn’t too late to stop this. He could only hope they were not pregnant yet.

Rathsmus was in the library, looking at the books of magic that the sisters had accumulated over their many years when Crystal opened the door and held it for the other sisters to enter. They all sat down on one side of a long table with him sitting alone on the opposite side. Ok, he thought, it’s them against me. He went to the table and just stood there. “Please sit”, said Crystal. “No, that’s ok, I think I’ll stand. I think I’ve been laying down too much lately”, he said with a smile. “I said sit!” Crystal said as a chair slid up behind him and hit him behind the knees hard enough to make him sit. “I think I will sit after all”, he said with a sour look on his face.

"You are going to have another attack tonight, according to my calculations, and it will be a particularly strong one. If you fight the next attacks you will weaken yourself to the point that you will not be able to control your metamorphosis. You need us to help you accept the magic as it enters you." "I will not let you help me like you have been. I do not want five pregnant women bossing me around for the rest of my life." "I am afraid it is too late for that, at least for me, I am already pregnant with your child. As for the others", Crystal looked at them. Daphney nodded her head to say that she was also pregnant. Dalna nodded next. Serena and Sheena also nodded. Rathsmus shook his head. It was already too late. All five of them were going to have his children.

"You see, it does not matter now. It is already too late to stop what has begun. You must let us help you. You cannot do this on your own." "Very well, it looks like I am stuck. I have no choice anymore. It will not do any good to not let you help me. I thought that maybe I could stop you from getting pregnant." "We got pregnant after your first night with us before we even knew of your dreams. There was nothing any of us could have done after that. I do not want the father of my child to be a monster. You will do what you have to do, and so will we."

Rathsmus was lying on the table again. At least he remembered the last encounter with Sheena and Serena. He was actually looking forward to his next attack. They were "taking turns" was how they put it to him, so no one would be stuck with him all of the time, was implied, but when the time came none of them missed their turn. He had already had a few attacks since they told him what was happening. He wished he remembered all of their turns, but sometimes he didn't. And things were not going quite the way Crystal had expected. His attacks had actually gotten easier, not stronger as she had predicted. She was even having a hard time predicting when they would happen. One time she predicted when he would have an attack and they put him in a sleeping state. Crystal had entered a little early to help stop any backups, as had happened during some attacks, and the encounter between them continued but the attack never happened. The other sisters had quite a laugh about that, at Crystal's expense, but while they were laughing the attack hit and it took three other sisters to enter his sleep together before the magic entered him easily. The attacks went on for a week, sometimes there were three attacks in one day. The sisters seemed to be weakening from the strain. The attacks seemed to do the opposite to Rathsmus; they actually made him stronger.

10

Metamorphosis

One night, in the middle of the night, at about two o'clock in the morning, Rathsmus awoke with a strange feeling all over his body. It felt like his leg or arm had fallen asleep and the blood was rushing back into the limb, except that the feeling was everywhere. Every inch of his skin felt like it was crawling and twitching. He let out a scream that sounded strangled as if his tongue had grown too long for his mouth. He threw back the covers and leapt out of the bed. When his feet hit the floor there was no strength or feeling in them and he landed spread eagle on the floor. The door flew open as Korg entered with his sword drawn and sparkling in the candlelight of the room. Crystal was the next one into the room and the candlelight flared and lit up the room. "It's happening, quick get him to the lab", Crystal motioned to Korg. She turned and barked orders to the other sisters like she was the head of the king's guard.

Korg placed Rathsmus on the table and strapped him in. Rathsmus' body was contorting and shifting like some creature was inside him and was trying to get out. The sisters were standing around the table with their arms held out to the sisters at their sides. Korg left the room. Sheena started a spell of air to flow around the room to keep it cool. Another sister had placed candles around the room and now they flared with a spell of fire. The ground shook and then lifted the table, with Rathsmus on it, four feet above the floor so he was above everyone's head. The table was made of wood and a spell of life made the table grow leaves, branches and vines. Next, a spell of water made the room fill up to their knees with water. The table was turning into a tree and the roots extended into the water. Crystal took a step forward, her hands undid the robe she was wearing and it fell into the water. The robe spread out on the surface of the water and she sat down on it. Daphney was next as she did the same as Crystal. Then Dalna followed by Serena and, finally, Sheena. They all lay down at the same time. Even with the air circulating in the room, the temperature was increasing and the humidity from the water made it worse. The sisters were wet with sweat and steam from the water.

Rathsmus could not be seen anymore, the table was now the tree. They could hear moans and screams from inside the tree. Suddenly, Crystal was in a field of grass. The summer sun beat down on the field and humidity rose up and with it came the smell of fresh grass. There was a slight breeze but it did nothing for the heat and humidity. She was on her back with her feet pointing at a huge old oak tree that was gnarled and twisted with the age of a hundred years. The sky could be seen here and there through the branches of the tree. It was a cloudless blue sky.

As she stood, so did her sisters. The five of them stood around the old oak tree. From inside the tree trunk came the sounds of someone in extreme pain. The trunk of the tree split and a lump of mud and slime fell out. The lump moved around and moans came from the thing, though where its mouth was remained a mystery. "Rathsmus", yelled Crystal. "Rathsmus", she yelled again. The lump stopped

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moving as if it was listening. "Do not fight it, Rathsmus, let the magic inside yourself, let it become you, then you and the magic will become one."

A long tentacle flew from the lump and grabbed Crystal around the ankle. The feel of the thing made her want to wretch. "I want you", the lump said in a hoarse mumble. "I want you also, Rathsmus, but not in your current form. I will only let you have me if you are in human form, and only then." The tentacle around her ankle became a hand and the lump became the naked human body of a man. The face, however, seemed to have a little more difficulty to choosing a form. The form was slowly becoming Rathsmus. Beside Crystal was a stream that had not been there earlier. She stared at it for a minute before she lifted the water to splash over his body to wash the slime and mud from him. He was having difficulty keeping his human form. At one point he grew a tail of a large lizard with scaly feet to match. "Rathsmus, it must be you completely or the answer is no." The scales and tail disappeared. Sheena walked up beside Crystal and Rathsmus turned into Korg. "No, Rathsmus, I don't want Korg, I want you, only you." Rathsmus stood before them again. Each sister in turn walked up beside Crystal and stood before Rathsmus. Each time he would turn into another creature. A centaur; half-man, half-horse, another creature without a name, that was half-man, half-snake. In each case it was his face but an animal's body starting at the waist. "Rathsmus, we all want you. Your face, your chest, your body, nothing else", Crystal said. "But I can be so much more than I was, see", with that his muscles bulged like the world's strongest man in a circus. "No, we don't want that, can't you see? Don't you understand? We want you, Rathsmus", Sheena said. "But the man named Rathsmus could not keep five beautiful women happy", said a particularly ugly creature with a large sex organ. "That is not what we want", said Dalna as she pointed to the object, "We want Rathsmus. If he does not want us then maybe we should leave." She turned her back on the creature. Daphney did the same. The last three turned at the same time. "Very well, if you will only have him." Crystal turned to look and there was Rathsmus. She walked up to him and put her arms around his neck. She stood on her toes and gave him a very passionate kiss on the lips. He grabbed her around the waist and lifted her off the ground. Her feet came up and she wrapped her legs around him. He slowly laid her down in the soft grass and they made love. Each sister in turn lay down with him until he was exhausted.

He lay down on his back and looked at the sky. Small wispy clouds lazily floated across a blue background. He thought about nonsense things that you would think about on a summer day. The smell of summer was everywhere. The smell of grass, the smell of a multitude of flowers. He could hear the buzz of bees. The crickets and the harvest bugs were making their noises. He wanted to doze off in the feeling of summer. As he dozed off, a thought flittered off in the distance, "How can you sleep in a dream?" But he was dreaming now and the thought disappeared.

He was standing on the top of a mountain, but it wasn't him. It was an old man with long hair that had white and gray streaks running through it. He had a mustache that ran into and mixed with a long fluffy beard that was the same color as the rest of his hair. He had a gray striped robe and a long wooden staff that was carved into a two-headed serpent. The heads of the serpents looked as if they were in a perpetual kiss because their lips were connected. The necks made a loop where

they intertwined on the staff and then separated and reconnected in the heads kissing. In the middle of the loop hung a large yellow stone. The stone looked familiar, but he could not remember where he had seen it.

The man was standing, looking off in the distance. He could sense his enemy there. He was too far away to see, but he was there. The yellow stone on his staff glowed brightly. A bubble of air shimmered around him and he was invisible to anyone or anything outside the bubble. From inside the bubble he could see everything. Everything looked brighter and clearer. Then, he was flying over mountains, trees, streams and lakes. He was closing in on his enemy, fast. If his enemy could sense him the same way he could sense his enemy, this would not surprise his enemy the way he hoped it would. Just over the next rise, he could feel him. Over the top and...

"Rathsmus, you must wake up!" said a voice close to him. He opened his eyes to look at her. "You must wake up", she said again. He closed his eyes and opened them again. He thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. "You must wake up", she said again. Her mouth did not move, she just smiled. "Rathsmus, wake up", she said and shook him. He yelled back, "I am awake", as he partially sat up. He looked around. He was once again in the lab. Korg was carrying one of the sisters out of the room. "What happened? Is everyone all right? Is it over? Am I still me, I mean..." "Yes, yes, everything is fine", Sheena said. "A couple of the sisters are in need of rest, but the others are in the kitchen making supper. You seem to be fine also, although I did have a hard time waking you. We'll explain everything that happened after we eat." Sheena turned and went out the door. Rathsmus stood and followed.

Not much was said at supper. It was late and everyone was tired. After the meal was finished they decided to retire for the night. This last attack had continued throughout the night and the day and now it was time for bed.

The next morning Rathsmus awoke with a start. The sounds packing and moving came from the hall. He dressed quickly and went into the hall. There he saw five small packs, one medium pack and one very large pack, setting on the floor. Korg was walking toward Rathsmus. "Quick, go the kitchen and eat, there is not much time. Our enemies have found us." Rathsmus rushed to the kitchen and ate. Before long they were on the move again. They traveled through caves and passages similar to the ones they had gone through before. With a secret door here, a secret door there, turns and stairs and climbs. Suddenly, the cave stopped. Crystal turned and said, "We have traveled far and are probably many miles from the ones who are looking for us. This is a path to the surface. If they know we are here we could be in great danger. When I open the door, be ready for anything." She placed her hands on the wall and it shimmered and disappeared. In front of them stood large boulders with a small path working its way between the giants. "It looks like there might have been an avalanche since I was here last", Crystal said, "Be careful, the rocks might still be loose." Korg walked in front of Crystal; "I'll take the lead, just in case." Crystal thanked him and waited for him to give the "ok" for the rest of the group to follow. Korg followed the path as best as he could and then he came to a place where the avalanche blocked the path completely. The only way to pass it was to go over it. He climbed up on the large rocks and when he got to the top he looked

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around. Behind him was a large mountain range, the one they had just come out of. The mountains continued off to both sides of him as far as the eye could see. In front of him was a large field of dead grass and a few dead trees. Past the field were a few straggly trees, but not much else. Then, he noticed in the distance what might possibly be the roof of a building, mixed within the trees. It was a long way off and he could be wrong. He climbed down and returned to the others. He told them of the blocked path and possible house. They were looking forward to seeing other people. It had been months since Rathsmus had summoned them and many months before that since they had any outside contact.

Crystal replaced the door to the cave and they followed Korg to the blocked portion of the path. "We will have to climb over the blockage", said Korg. Rathsmus thought about the dream he had had during his last attack. He made a bubble of air surround the group and they were lifted from the path to the edge of the field and the bubble disappeared. "You have done very well, Rathsmus," said Crystal, "I did not know you were strong enough to do that. We will have to test your strength soon." "Wait." Rathsmus stopped Crystal, as she was about to turn around and walk away. "I need to know what happened yesterday. Did I metamorph or not?" "I don't know for sure. I didn't have time to give you a checkup, we had to leave too soon." "I need to know if I have gone through the metamorph stage or if it is still to come." Crystal thought a moment, "Okay, lay down here and I'll give you a quick checkup." Rathsmus lay down and closed his eyes. He could feel the sun on his face. He could smell the flowers and the grass. He could hear the bugs making their noises. "To the best of my ability, at this point I do believe you have gone through the metamorphosis and the magic you carry with you is very powerful, more powerful than that of our instructor. You need only to learn how to use it. That will take you a while, you don't even know your own capabilities yet. You don't want to set preconceived limitations on your ability." Rathsmus looked relieved, "You mean, I didn't change? I didn't turn into some strange monster?"

When he said the word "monster", a ripple of pain shot from his feet to his head. His stomach turned and he felt sick. The look on his face was a combination of surprise, helplessness and pain. He held his hands in front of himself as he looked upon them. His hands swelled and the skin split. He thought, as he watched it happen, how little blood there was. His fingers fell off one by one as huge lobster-like claws emerged from the stumps of what used to be his hands. Three smaller arms and claws now emerged from both sides of his ribs just below his larger arms. He now had eight arms. His legs became reptilian-like with large-scale plates covering the muscle and bone. A large lobster tail flopped behind him. Rathsmus' eyes glazed over and his mouth hung open as his head fell to the ground with a wet splat. Two large feelers sprung out from where the head had been sitting on his shoulders. A bug-like head popped out of the neck cavity and stared at them. "What happened?" asked Rathsmus.

Korg came forward and drew his sword. Rathsmus grabbed him with bindings of air and held him still. Rathsmus took a couple of steps closer. The sisters were still in a state of shock and couldn't move. Rathsmus looked at himself in the reflection of Korg's sword. The reflection he saw repulsed him. He stepped back and covered his eyes as best as he could with his new hands.

"I want to be myself again!" Rathsmus yelled as loud as he could. He looked down at what had been his head. It was a puddle of slime now; there was nothing left that even closely resembled a part of a head. He got a sudden pain that ran from his feet to his head. His whole body shook with pain. The six extra arms fell to the ground. The tail and scales of his legs fell off also. The scales of the body split and fell away. The arms and claws split up the sides and, as they split wider and wider, his real arms and hands emerged as the slimy covering fell to the ground. In front of Korg stood a totally naked man with the head of a bug. The creature was yelling in pain as the human body escaped its confines. The bug head looked to the sky and let out a hellatious squeal, like the sound of a bug being stepped on amplified a thousand times. His hands went to the top of his head and at first they seemed to be pushing in the sides of the head. Then the fingertips seemed to dig into the top of the head and started pulling it apart. The head was shaking madly as it started to split between its eyes. Ooze spilt down the face and chest. Finally the head gave way and Rathsmus' head was there. The bug head was now on the ground and was turning into ooze and slime that drained down into the dry dirt.

Rathsmus was totally covered with slime from the strange creature. "What happened?" Rathsmus asked as he looked at Crystal. "I'm not sure", she said, somewhat confused by what she had seen. "I think that you are still going through the metamorphic stage of your development. You are going to have to control your thoughts. It's possible that you might turn into anything you think of. Please try to think only of who you are not what you could be. You could be in a lot of danger if you turn into the wrong thing at the wrong time." Crystal could see by the look on his face that he was thinking of different scenarios of what could be bad. "I told you to only think of who you are! Nothing else." Rathsmus bent over with his hands on his stomach, he was changing again. "Stop it! Control your thoughts! You are Rathsmus!" She was yelling in his ear and hitting him on his back as hard as she could. The pain in his stomach stopped and he stood. "Thank you", he said, "I think I should clean up and get dressed before someone sees us." He started to walk away when he noticed Korg was standing still with his sword held up in front of him. "I'm sorry, Korg"; he said and released Korg from the bindings he had put on him. Korg resheathed his sword and watched Rathsmus remove a towel from a pack and wipe himself off. When Rathsmus was dressed they walked toward the house Korg had seen.

The house was further than they had expected and Korg kept looking behind them to see if the disturbance with Rathsmus had attracted any unwanted attention. There was no path to follow; nothing to indicate anyone or anything ever went this way. When they finally arrived at the house, it was quite evident nothing lived here. The house itself was probably no more than ten years old, but the windows and doors were all boarded up. They stopped about twenty feet from the front porch and just looked it over. Korg lifted his nose to the sky and sniffed. "No one has been here for a long time." Korg started to walk toward the house. "Stop!" Rathsmus yelled to Korg. "I remember what happened the first time I saw you. This might be a trap." Korg remembered the statue also. He backed up and waited for Rathsmus. Rathsmus walked about five feet in front of the group and sat on the

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grass. At the time he thought it was funny for there to be short green grass at a house that had not been lived in for years.

He started a spell to check for traps. It was a simple spell, but he had a lot of power behind it. He should be able to find even the most complex traps. "There", he said as he pointed to the front steps. It was not a very complex trap, but something in his mind told him he should find one that was more devious. There were more on each window that could be reached from the ground. Something was strange about all of them. Almost as if they were tied together. Then he found it. A spell that tied each trap to one another then to the ground. "The grass! Get off the grass! Quickly!" Rathsmus stood and ran to the others. "What is it?" Crystal asked. "A trap to capture anyone who tries to enter the house and anyone with them, at least anyone on the grass. If Korg had gone onto the steps we would have all been trapped." "How did you learn to check for traps?" Korg asked. "My first master was very untrusting and put traps on all of his possessions. He taught me how to check for them because he thought everyone else did also. He used to have me steal things he wanted from other magicians so I needed to know how to check for traps, disarm them and then reset them so that after I was done they would not know I had been there. It has come in handy many times." "You'll have to teach us how to check for traps", said Crystal. Rathsmus nodded agreement. "Do you know how to get around them?" she added. "I would not suggest it in this case. There might be some inside that you would not see until it was too late. We should leave here." "Can we at least destroy it so no one else gets trapped?" "Not without bringing whoever set the traps on top of us, possibly without any warning. We should just leave."

The group decided Rathsmus was right and walked toward the southern range of mountains. When they reached the mountain Crystal had indicated, they followed a path that led up the side and disappeared behind rocks and small bushes. Korg led the way with his sword drawn. Rathsmus followed the rest of the group. About half way up the path Crystal stopped, "Here", she said and touched a section of rock. A dark hall worked into the belly of the mountain. Crystal motioned for everyone to enter the hall.

Rathsmus looked back toward the house that almost trapped them. It was starting to get dark now and he could barely see the roof. He raised his hand in front of him, palm up. A ball of air shimmered into existence. Inside the ball another ball appeared, this one was a ball of fire. Rathsmus looked at Crystal. "I could easily destroy that building from here", he said, he knew she wanted it gone. "If you do, it would bring whomever made it, also it would let the ones who are after us know where we are. It would not be a good idea." "Could we escape through this doorway?" "Possibly. Could they tell which way it came from?" "No", was all he answered. Crystal looked at the building. It was so far away. Could anyone know where they were? Would they know who it was? "Do it", she said and walked into the cave. The ball lifted up from Rathsmus' hand. Crystal was surprised, she thought he would have thrown it. The ball slowly floated through the air. When it stopped, it was hovering over the building. Rathsmus turned and walked into the hall. Korg walked up beside Rathsmus. "What would happen if you set that ball on the ground and sprung the trap at a window?" Korg asked. Rathsmus stopped and wondered. "We would be setting a trap for the ones who set that trap. When the trap

was sprung, the ball would explode. If this trap goes to the people who set the trap, it would destroy them there. If it brings them here, it would destroy whoever comes.” He looked at Korg, “Good idea. You are very devious. In the future don’t hesitate to give your ideas.” Korg smiled and nodded.

Rathsmus concentrated on changing the ball of fire to explode when it sensed a physical presence close to it, he then duplicated the ball five times. Each one was tied to one another so that when one exploded the others would also. He placed four of them evenly around the building. The fifth one was made to hover over the first step. Gently he let the ball settle down on the step and waited to see what would happen. The house disappeared. “I think we’re safe for now, but we shouldn’t wait.” Crystal agreed and the door closed them in the cave.

11

The Hongar

“Quick! Quick! The trap has been sprung. There are five slaves, one on the steps and four more around the house.” A group of short men were scrambling around the compound of tents. One man, standing no more than a head taller than the rest, held a rusty and dented sword over his head. A group of ten in leather armor and swords, in the same condition as the one belonging to the man giving orders, broke out of the commotion and stood in front of the taller man. “Lets go”, he yelled and led the way through a grove of trees. In the middle of the grove was a clearing with a ghostly semblance of a house. It was not really there but it could be seen. “Quickly, to your places. Do not kill them unless you have to, we need them alive”, the leader yelled. The leader and two men went to the steps where a small light shown on the ground where the slave-to-be would be when the building was brought here completely. Small lights also marked where the others would be also and two men were standing by each light. The leader drew his sword high and each of his men drew their swords and pointed them at the lights. The leader dropped his sword to his side as a signal to bring the house here. Slowly, the ghost house appeared and became solid. At the same time the balls of fire also appeared. By the time the leader realized what was happening it was too late. The whole place exploded, destroying the house, the ten soldiers and their leader. The explosion was so great that it destroyed the grove of trees and half of the tent compound.

A man crawled out of the largest tent. It had been at the farthest end of the compound from the house. The tent had been knocked down, but at least it was whole, and so was the man that had been inside. He stood and tried to get someone to answer his questions about what had happened, but there was so much chaos in the compound no one would stop for him. Then, he saw a man of rank, a sergeant. “Sergeant”, he yelled. The sergeant stopped, looked to see who had yelled to him and was prepared to let his anger show, until he realized who had yelled at him. He went right to attention and ran to the man. “Yes, General Zandir”, the sergeant yelled back over the confusion of the compound. “What in the hell is going on, Sergeant. Where is Captain Roak?” “Dead, I believe, Sir. There was a trap set on the house and, when it appeared, it exploded. It leveled everything for half a mile and killed everyone within a quarter of a mile. I was off duty at the time, and according to the reports that I have heard, the Captain was at the house. We haven’t been able to find any bodies, but then I don’t expect to find any either.” The General looked dumbfounded, but the look didn’t stay with him long. “Sergeant, round up all of the men that are still alive. Anyone of higher rank than you, you send them to me. Send first ten men here to set up my tent, we need a command post. We have a lot of men to bury and a lot of explaining to do to Faldor and Baldor.”

Rathsmus followed the group. He was feeling better now. He hoped the surprise he sent to the owners of the house enjoyed it. He knew it was an evil house, Crystal had felt the evil also, that was why she had agreed to have it destroyed. He

chuckled to himself as he thought about what would happen. One fireball would have destroyed the house; five would destroy a whole village.

He knew this from experiments he had done while his first master was away at guild meetings and he would be left alone to read the ancient books. One such occasion he had gone on a day trip of the surrounding territory to the place he called home. He found a small abandoned village that had been the sight of a plaque breakout. The whole village was considered evil and no one ever went there. Most wanted to burn it down but were too afraid to do it themselves so it never got done. Eventually, the place had been forgotten. Rathsmus had found it by mistake. After his initial exploration of the village, he realized there was nothing of any value there. While reading one of the ancient magic books, he found a section on magic weapons. He decided to use the village for target practice.

By the time he was done learning about different weapons of magic, the village was trashed. What was still standing had so many holes in it that you could see through them. The last weapon in the book was a fireball. It was a ball in a ball. The inner ball was a unique type of explosive fireball. The outer ball was a type of accelerator that, when the ball was broken, the resulting explosion would take out anything within a radius of about two hundred feet. The first building he tried it on was leveled in seconds. Any adjacent buildings caught fire from the heat. In the book it told about procedures for destroying whole towns of enemies. He followed the procedure and set five of the fireballs around the village, then he went to a mountain range half a mile away that overlooked the village.

When the fireballs were activated, the entire village was turned into a crater about twenty feet deep and charred the ground for a quarter of a mile. Even though he was about half a mile away, he felt the concussion from the explosion as small trees and bushes flew past him. That had been the last time he had used more than one at a time and, even when he used one, they were small ones that would light up the sky at night like a lightning storm. They were used just for fun now because the thought of totally destroying that village had really scared him. But he remembered the procedure because you never know when you might need a good weapon.

They seemed to be going in a straight line. If the path curved off in one direction, Crystal would open a doorway that would keep them going directly south. Finally she stopped. "This is it", she said, "Hopefully, we have gone far enough away from them that they will not look for us here." She opened a door that entered into a set of rooms similar to the last ones they had been in. They set up housekeeping, ate, found rooms for the night and slept till morning.

General Zandir was pacing in his tent. Things had not gone well at all. Faldor and Baldor were expected this morning and they would not be happy when he told them the bad news. They had set up the trap for some people they were after. They said that it wouldn't fail. They had given their guarantee. Now they would blame him and his army for incompetence. Of course not much was left of his army now anyway. Half of his army remained ready to march, which meant he had about two hundred foot soldiers and one hundred horse soldiers, or at least they would have been horse soldiers if all of the horses had not been killed. He had personally ordered that all of the horses be kept as far from his tent as possible. Except for his

horse, that is. His horse was still alive because he always wanted it close by if the need to escape arose. This might be one of those times. But he knew the two lords would find him. They always found the ones who tried to get away. A knock at his tent made him jump from his thoughts. "What is it?" the General barked. "Sir, the lords have arrived and they are on their way here." "Very well", the General sighed. They had arrived early, no doubt to pick up their captives. "Show them to my tent. Have some wine and cheese brought as well." "Yes sir", the voice at the door answered and could be heard walking off.

Zandir paced back and forth, wringing his hands in front of him. A knock at the door brought a tray of cheese and fruit and a carafe of wine. Shortly after, a second knock came and Zandir straightened and faced the door. "Yes", he said. "Sir, Lords Faldor and Baldor." "Enter", was that all he could think of to say? He knew this was not going to be a good day. The first to enter was a tall blond man, his hair about shoulder length. He wore leather armor and had a sword strapped over his left shoulder. The second man to enter was totally identical in size and features. The only difference was that his sword was strapped over his right shoulder. The only way to tell them apart was that Faldor was right handed and his sword was over his left shoulder and Baldor was left handed and his sword was over his right shoulder. They looked like a pair of bookends. Neither of them looked happy.

"What in the hell is going on here?" said Faldor. "This place looks like it was trampled by an army of giants", said Baldor. General Zandir stuttered for a couple of seconds and then the army training kicked in. He took a deep breath and stood as tall as he could, which was about two feet shorter than Faldor and Baldor. "Your trap backfired on us. The trap you said was foolproof and was guaranteed to work DIDN'T! Whoever you tried to trap, found your trap and placed bombs around it. When we were ready and the building materialized, the bombs went off killing my best commander and ten of my best warriors at the scene and the blast took out half of my forces to boot. Do not try to blame this on my men or me", Zandir interrupted Faldor when he started to say something. He was angry and looked at both of the Lords in front of him. "You promised me great rewards for doing this for you. All you have given me is destruction. Even though your target got away I will require compensation for the damage your trap cost me."

Now it was the Lord's turn to think. How could anyone have found the traps they had set on the house? It was impossible. These imbeciles had to have messed up; it was the only explanation. "I think you are lying to cover your own blunder, General Zandir; there is no way they could have detected the traps we set", said Faldor. "Maybe you would like to take a walk to your house and see for yourself", said General Zandir. "Very well, General, but if I even suspect that you are hiding anything, I will kill you myself", said Baldor. The General nodded and swallowed hard. He led the way to the site of the explosion. The tent compound was being set up again. It looked like a colony of ants trying to fix an anthill that had been trampled by a herd of horses. As Zandir brought them closer to the site, he wanted to make sure they saw the worst of things. He made sure they saw all of the dead soldiers and dead horses. He made sure they saw the makeshift hospital with its wounded. But these things did not seem to bother either of the Lords; they just

followed Zandir looking straight ahead. When they got to the grove of trees, they looked around. All of the trees were lying down; knocked down by the force of the explosion.

As they worked their way through the jumble of dead trees and stumps, the two

Lords were mumbling to each other. Zandir could not hear what they were saying, but he could see confusion on their faces. When they reached the center of the grove, they just stared. Where the house had stood was now a crater with five spots a little deeper than the surrounding area. All of the trees were pointing directly away from the center of the grove to prove that there was an explosion where the house had been.

“What could have done so much damage?” Faldor said to his twin. “I’m not sure, but looking at the damage, it must have been very powerful”, said Baldor in reply. “Well?” General Zandir asked the Lords. “I am sorry for doubting you, General Zandir”, Faldor said snidely, “Apparently, we misjudged the ability of the ones we are looking for. You will be paid well for your services. How soon can you and your Hongar warriors be ready to travel?” “Well”, said the General happily, when he realized he was out of trouble, “Once I get paid it will take three days to replenish the horses and supplies and another day to pack everything and be ready to travel.”

Baldor stepped up to Zandir and towered over him. He looked at the General with a sour expression. “I’ll give you two days. Be ready when we return.” He pulled out a bag of gold and dropped it at Zandir’s feet. “Be ready!” Baldor said again as he and Faldor turned and walked away. “Yes, yes, two days, we’ll be ready”, Zandir yelled to them as they were walking away. The Sergeant was walking toward him and he quickly picked up the bag and hid it in his shirt. “Sergeant, ready the men, we’ve got to procure horses and supplies.” “Very well, sir”, the Sergeant stopped and nodded, then turned back toward the compound. The Sergeant had seen the General pick up the bag and he guessed there was gold in it. Even so, he knew that when the General said to “procure” the supplies and horses, he meant to steal everything and keep the gold for himself. He also knew he would get his share, one way or another.

“I’m not feeling very well”, Rathsmus said to Crystal as he came into the kitchen. She looked up and almost fainted. His face was melting. It was actually dripping into his hands that were cupped under his chin. She went to help him and when she put her arm around him, her arm went right into his body like a pile of soft clay. She tried to remove her arm, but it was stuck. Without thinking, she tried to push with her other hand and it went into his body as well. Now both hands were stuck. The body of Rathsmus was no more. It was now a two-legged, two-armed pile of mud with a face. As it turned to face her, her arms which had been sticking out of its side now stuck out of its chest. It had a gaping hole for a mouth and its breath smelled like a twenty-year old grave. It just laughed at her. Suddenly, her arms were being pulled into the body. She tried to resist but it was no use.

Her leg touched part of the thing and was pulled inside the body, followed by her hips and then her other leg. The only thing left was her head and shoulders and they were slowly going as well. “Rathsmus, stop! Rathsmus, control your

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thoughts, become Rathsmus again.” She was up to her neck now. “Rathsmus!” One last pull and her head was gone. Once inside, she couldn’t move, she couldn’t breathe. She was suffocating. She was dying... She tried to scream. She could hear her own scream as if it echoed as if in a cave. She opened her eyes as she sat up in bed. The door flew open and Korg was standing there with his sword drawn ready to defend the sister.

The lights got brighter as Sheena came up behind him and added power to the magic lighting. Crystal was covered in sweat. “Oh, um, I guess I was having a bad dream. I’m sorry”, Crystal said as she got up from her bed and put on a heavy robe. The sweat was making her cold now that she was up. “That was quite a dream you had, you let out one heck of a scream”, Sheena said as she went up to Crystal. When she touched her, Crystal jumped slightly. “What’s wrong?” Sheena asked. “Just the dream, I haven’t totally woken up, I guess. Where is Rathsmus? Has anyone checked on him?” “Yes, he’s fine, he’s eating breakfast.” “Good, it may be just the dream I had, but I don’t think his metamorphosis is complete. We need to have a meeting about him and decide the best course of action.” Sheena agreed and went off to gather the other sisters. Crystal sat on the edge of the bed and thought about the dream. She could only hope it was nothing more than a dream.

12

Additions

When Crystal got to the library almost everyone else was already there. Dalna told her that Korg and Rathsmus had decided to practice with swords and would be there shortly. Sheena had told them to wait in the kitchen when they were through because the sisters needed some time to talk alone. Crystal agreed. She went to her chair and stood in front of it while the others sat in theirs. She looked at Dalna and asked, "Do you have anything to say before we get started?" Dalna just looked at the table and slowly shook her head. "Daphney?" Daphney looked at Dalna, then at Crystal and then at the table and slowly shook her head. "Serena?" Serena did not look pleased when she looked at Dalna and Daphney. She stood and said, "Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. In case you didn't know for sure, Dalna and Daphney are having morning sickness each morning. Sheena and I have not, but we are definitely, pregnant." There was a little pause before she said "pregnant". "I am sure you are also. We must decide if we are going to keep them or if we are going to stop the pregnancies while it is still possible to do so."

Sheena was in total agreement while Dalna and Daphney looked ashamed to even admit their predicament. "You are right", Crystal said, "We must decide what is best. Is it best for each of us to raise a child or to stop the pregnancy? I, myself, have thought about this quite a bit since our first encounter with Rathsmus in the dream, and want to have the baby." Daphney gasped, Dalna smiled, and Sheena and Serena looked like a bee had just stung them. "Before you start to argue with me, let me explain. We have the opportunity to raise five magic users and train them as we were trained. I believe they will be magic users, the chances are very good. To stop the pregnancies could be a big mistake. No one would expect us to have offspring and, therefore, our kind would die out of existence except for the occasional freak. It is also possible that at least one might be a metamorph, considering who the father is."

"Well, if we did end up having a metamorph we couldn't help it the way we helped Rathsmus. What could we do to help?" asked Daphney. "We would cross that bridge when we got to it, but it is possible, with enough training before hand, that kind of help might not be necessary." "How will we decide?" asked Dalna, "You made a good argument for having the babies." Dalna looked at Daphney as if they'd had a similar argument earlier. "We could vote", Crystal suggested, "Or we could leave it up to the individual. I do not intend to stop the pregnancy so I think it is best to let each of us make up our own mind. I do recommend however, that each of us have the baby. It could be our only hope for survival."

Dalna stood. "I vote to keep the baby." "I vote to end the pregnancy", said Daphney. Sheena and Serena looked at each other and whispered together, then both stood. Sheena looked at the table; Serena looked at Crystal, "We have decided to keep the babies for the good of our kind, and therefore vote to keep them." Sheena nodded her agreement. Daphney flushed red with anger. "You may do as you wish,

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Daphney. As I said, this should not be a vote to make you do something you do not agree with.” Daphney looked at Crystal with a tear in her eye; “I will do as the rest of you, for the good of our kind.” “Very well, I believe you all have made the right decision. The next question is, do we tell Rathsmus?” “Tell Rathsmus what?” Said a voice from the door. It was Rathsmus; he had entered without knocking. “You were told to wait in the kitchen”, Crystal said. “Well, it looks like it’s a good thing I didn’t. I don’t like secrets, especially when they are kept from me”, he said. Rathsmus walked over to the table and sat in a chair. Korg entered the room and sat in his chair. Crystal looked at the others, asking a silent question. Each nodded yes. “We are all pregnant with your children and have decided to proceed with the pregnancies and have the babies.”

Rathsmus turned white as a sheet and then red. “You have no say in the matter. It has been decided”, Crystal added before he could say anything else. Rathsmus stood with such force his chair skittered across the floor and hit the wall. His face was red with anger. He couldn’t think straight. A pain hit him in the stomach and spread to his arms and legs. His hand balled into a fist. He raised it into the air. It came down with such force that the table splintered into about four pieces. His hand had swelled to about twice its normal size and was turning green. His face was also turning green. His ears shrunk into his head and left just small dimples where his ears used to be. The green color started to make little circular shapes, some light green, some darker. His nose flattened to his face and a small red tongue slithered through the slit that was now his mouth. Korg almost fell out of his chair but quickly regained his balance and was ready to defend the sisters if need be. “Rathsmus”, Crystal shouted. “You must stay in your true shape. You are to be the father of five children who will need you and your guidance very much. You must decide in what form you could serve them best.”

Rathsmus looked at her and his face started to change color to a flesh tone, but something was wrong. He held his hands in front of his face and looked at them with a sad expression. His hands were melting. They were dripping and streams were running down his arms. His face was melting. He was beginning to look like a mound of soft clay. Crystal gasped as she started to go to him, but then she remembered her dream. “Stay away from him! Don’t touch him or you will be trapped and sucked into his body.” The others backed away from him. He looked at Crystal. Her face a mix of expressions. He was shrinking into the puddle of mud on the floor. The only thing you could make out was his eyes.

“Rathsmus, concentrate on who you are.” Crystal took a step closer, and then another, it was getting harder to see for some reason. She couldn’t stop walking toward the puddle of mud with two eyes that just stared at her. She knelt down beside the thing that used to be Rathsmus. An overwhelming sadness came over her and she covered her eyes with her hands. Her face was wet, she realized she was crying. The tears came faster now. Great sobs racked her body as she cried. She looked at the eyes of Rathsmus and realized that he had not changed any further. It was still looking at her as she cried. “Rathsmus, please come back to us.” She stopped and looked up to her sisters and Korg. She shook her head. “No, Rathsmus”, she sniffed and tried to dry the tears on her face. “Come back to me, I love you.”

The last was said low, so low that she wasn't sure whether she had even said it or just thought it. She knew it was true, had known it for some time now. She had even before his attacks where she had given him her sisters, partially to prove to herself that she did not care about him. That had been proven wrong when she snapped at the others about being with him. She also knew, at the time, that she had had no choice in the matter, if he was to have survived. And now this, to have sacrificed so much of herself and her sisters only to have him turn into a slimy puddle of mud. She covered her eyes again and started to cry once more. She felt something brush her hair and she removed her hands from her face. Rathsmus was kneeling in front of her. He placed one hand on her shoulder and the other on the side of her head as he brushed her hair with his hand.

Crystal jumped into his arms and hugged him as tightly as she could. "Don't you ever do that to me again", she said in a half laugh half-teary cry. "I won't, never again", he replied as he hugged her back. They hugged for what seemed an eternity and then they decided they should get up. They gently pushed away from each other. "Rathsmus, your clothing", Crystal said to him. He had been kneeling on the floor, in front of everyone, without a stitch of clothing on. His face turned red with embarrassment. Korg grabbed a towel from the kitchen and tossed it to him. He covered himself as best as he could and looked back to Crystal. Her sisters were giggling at Rathsmus' embarrassment. Quickly all of the sisters gathered and hugged, saying how happy they were for Crystal. Crystal looked at Rathsmus when her sisters had finished. "I'm afraid that I cannot keep him for myself. Each of us needs him. There is not one of us who needs or maybe even wants him, more than the others. I do love him, very much so, but we need to know his feelings on this matter and also how each of you feels about him. My first thought was to not share in my fortune of love, but I now know that would not be fair. Each of us must decide how they feel and how this situation could be settled to the agreement of all."

Crystal looked at the table that Rathsmus had smashed. She placed a hand on the table; her sisters did the same. The table pulled itself back together as if nothing had ever happened to it. Each of the sisters took a seat around the now whole table, as did Rathsmus. "First", Crystal said, "We must find out each others feelings. I need to know how each of you feels about Rathsmus, and how he feels about each of us. My feelings toward him should not make any of you try to hide your feelings. To make sure it does not, I want each of us to invoke the truth spell over this room. I also ask that Korg leave the room." Korg nodded and quickly left, closing the door on the way out. Each of the sisters stood and removed their clothing and then sat down again. The clothing was folded and placed in the middle of the table. "You must do the same", Crystal told Rathsmus. He slowly removed the towel and folded it and placed it on the table. He did not stand to remove the towel. He was having a hard time concentrating on anything due to the fact that, because the sisters were naked now, their breasts hung just above the table. Each of the sisters was almost identical in build and size. The biggest differences were their faces and hair. With their breasts showing, standing did not seem like a good idea.

"Repeat after me", Crystal said, as she started the spell to make everyone in the room speak only the truth. When the spell was complete, Crystal looked at

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everyone sitting around the table. "First, I will speak", said Crystal, "Since you already know how I feel, for the most part, it will be easier for me to get this started. I love Rathsmus. I do not want to share him; however, I am willing to share him to be fair. Dalna was next. "I also have feelings for Rathsmus, I am not sure if it is love or just lust, but I am also willing to share him with the others." Daphney was next. "I do not love him, but I do like him. I like him in a physical way. I would not look forward to never being able to share his bed again. I am also willing to share him." Serena was next. "I love him also, but he scares me too. For that reason I could not have him for myself, but I am willing to share him." Sheena was next. "I love him too, however I am not as infatuated with him as the rest of you seem to be. Unlike you, he was not my first lover. I do not need another lover. I do not wish to share him at all. I want him to be mine and mine alone. If I cannot have him that way, I do not want him. I will not share him with anyone."

Crystal nodded and looked at Rathsmus. "It is your turn." Rathsmus looked at each of the sisters, and thought. They all wanted him in one way or another. They all loved him to one extent or another, except for Daphney, who only wanted him for a sexual diversion. The worst part is that he actually did love all of them, a lot. How do you choose between five beautiful women that you really love? "Um, well, I don't know where to start. When Crystal told me she loved me earlier, it brought me back. To think even one of you could love me was more than I could have hoped for. I love you all, even you Daphney, not just physically but emotionally also. To know that three out of five of you love me in return is unbelievable. If I didn't actually love you all and have true feelings for you, just the fact that you are willing to share my bed would have made me the happiest man in the world. But, I could not love one of you and be loved in return, and then make love to the others. I cannot share myself with all of you. I can only love one of you as a wife, the others I could love as sisters, but nothing more. If only one of you had wanted me in return, I would have loved that one like no other. However, now I must decide which one I love the most and which of you truly loves me for me, not just for the physical bonds between us all. I still want to be considered the father of your children, but I only want one wife."

Daphney sat back in her chair, she knew she was not the one for him, she did not love him. Dalna thought about what had been said and she sat back also, her feelings were not that strong for him. Serena looked at Rathsmus and then at the table. He scared her more than her love could ever come. She sat back in her chair. Crystal stood and looked between Rathsmus and Sheena. Sheena stood also. Due to the fact that Rathsmus was naked, he remained seated. He did not want to put himself on "display" for them by standing. The youngest and the oldest, but the oldest was far from being old. They were both beautiful. How could he choose one without hurting the other? He loved them both even though they were both so different.

Crystal was the oldest of all of the sisters. She was strong of mind and will, a leader. She was older than he was; technically, they were all older than he was by a couple hundred years. The age she showed was older, but not by a lot; he was 28 and she was 35. And then there was Sheena. Youngest of the sisters, youngest in age, youngest in spirit, youngest in maturity of mind. She might be the prettiest of

them all; not by much, but maybe so. She was the most fun to be with. She liked to fool around and joke. He liked to be around her for her youth. She made him feel young; which, at times, he felt the age of the world was his, and he liked feeling young. Her biggest fault was her maturity. Sometimes you had to be serious, and she hated to be. But, when push came to shove, she knew when it was time to be serious and to stop joking. The problem was that she usually waited till the last minute to be serious and, sometimes, that could be very annoying. Crystal could never be considered annoying; she was just never exciting enough to get to the point of being annoying. He knew he had to make a decision and he was leaning toward Sheena as his choice, but he wanted to be sure. "I ask that the three sisters that have remained seated, please leave the room." As they left the room he was forming his next statement. When he was alone with Sheena and Crystal he looked at each of them in turn, "I have a few personal questions that I need to ask of you Sheena, how long has it been since you had a lover and who was he?"

"It has been a long time since I had a lover, before the time that I was imprisoned within the statue with Korg. As far as whom, that is none of your business since he is long since dead. He saved me from some local villagers once who wanted to blame me for some bad crops one year. Some people will blame anyone or anything to save themselves from being blamed. We escaped the village and during our escape he was hurt. We made love in an abandoned barn that night. He died from his wounds before the second night. Apparently, one of the villagers had been a wizard of sorts and poisoned him. I did not recognize what had happened in time to save him. When I did realize he had been poisoned, it was too late; the poison had entered his brain and killed him. The following day I returned to the village and destroyed it. I was so struck with grief that I was not thinking clearly. The villagers didn't have a chance. Some of them died, the ones that tried to fight me, but most lived to start their lives over in another village. The way I left that village, no one would ever be able to return."

Rathsmus and Crystal watched her tell her story with awe. No one could have ever believed such a story if it had come from anyone else but her. They were both shocked. When her story was done they remained silent, not knowing what to say. "Well, I guess after that story you wouldn't want anything to do with me, but I think you deserve to know what you would be getting messed up with; a person who is no better than the evil monsters she spends her life fighting." "That's not true", Crystal rushed to say and went to her side to place her arm around her sister. "You were just fighting back against unjust people who had killed your lover. You are not evil. It was just a momentary loss of good judgement. It's not like you killed everyone, which someone who was truly evil would have done." Crystal hugged Sheena and started weeping tears of sadness for what her sister had done and felt.

When they had both stopped crying and had regained their composure, Rathsmus started again. "How much do you love me? If I am to choose between the two of you I need to know." "All I can tell you is that I do love you and I have never loved anyone as much. I don't know how to measure love. If you expect me to fight my sister for you, I will not. If you want me as a possession, she can have you. I want you as an equal, not as a master. You will one day be the strongest man in the world. You are one of the strongest now, but if you try to conquer me with power I

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would fight you to my last breath.” He looked at her and remembered one of the lessons she taught him about binding with air. He had wanted her then. Maybe he would have talked himself into taking her if she hadn’t escaped. He liked her then and his feelings for her were stronger now.

He looked toward Crystal. “How much do you love me?” “I love you very much, but I must share my love with the others in the group just as I was willing to share you with my sisters. I am the leader of this group and you would have to understand that what I say goes. Just because you were with me, I would not give you preferential treatment. If anything, you would have a responsibility to be better than the rest.” Rathsmus thought for a minute. He wanted to find a diplomatic way to explain his choice. “I love you both very much. Making a decision between the two of you has to be the hardest thing I have ever done. Crystal, you are strong in both your leadership and in your courage. Sheena, you are fun loving and full of life. Any man would be happy to have either of you to give him love in return for his love. At this point in my life, I’m afraid that I don’t want to share my love any more than I want to share my body. Before I met any of you I would have rejoiced in the fates that I could share five women, or even two, but now I have matured and one woman is all I need or want. And in return I want her to be only mine. I do not want her loyalty to the group to effect her loyalty or love for me. I know this is not true for you, Crystal, so I cannot choose you. However, I now ask Sheena if she can accept this and be my wife.”

Crystal bowed to Rathsmus and sat down. Sheena considered what Rathsmus had said. “Yes, I believe I can do as you ask of me and I would be pleased to be your wife.” A smile beamed over her face as she said those words. She was going to be his “wife”. She did not think that she could be happier. Rathsmus quickly grabbed the towel from the table and covered himself. He rushed to Sheena and they embraced each other.

Plans for their wedding were made and they were married within the week. Sheena insisted on sending a summons to Amos to give him a chance to be there but he did not respond. This made her sad for a while but the happiness of their marriage soon took over. She still hoped that Amos was alive. Crystal presided over the ceremony. Korg was the best man, of course, he was the only man available, but Rathsmus assured him that it would not have made any difference. Dalna was the maid of honor. Crystal made the dress for Sheena at the request of Rathsmus. It turns out that they would normally have gotten married clothesless and Rathsmus did not like the idea at all. Crystal agreed, for his sake, and the marriage went off without a hitch. Little did any of them know that they had a visitor that quietly watched the proceedings from a dark corner. When the ceremony was done, the visitor departed for places unknown. That night was the first time Rathsmus actually physically shared his bed with Sheena. The other times were dream connections. He hoped that he would be as good in reality as he had been in the dreams. Judging from the noises that came from the room that night, Sheena had no complaints about her new husband.

Over the next couple of months the training of Rathsmus took up most of everyone’s time. The women were beginning to show the fact that they were pregnant, but it didn’t slow anyone down. The time seemed to fly by. Three months,

six months, then the time came for the women to ready themselves for the births of their children. They could only hope that they wouldn't all go into labor at the same time. The first to go into labor was Daphney. Within an hour she had a newborn daughter; she named her Rayleen. The next day Dalna and Serena both went into labor at the same time. Luckily, Dalna was in labor a little longer than Serena. With Daphney still recovering from her childbirth, that left only Sheena and Crystal to deliver the babies. Everything went fine; Dalna had a daughter and she named her Misty. Serena also had a daughter; she was named Katrina. That left only Sheena and Crystal to give birth. It seemed that it was a contest of strength. The last one to go into labor would be the winner. A week had gone by since Dalna and Serena had given birth when Sheena could not hold out any longer and her labor started.

She was having a particularly painful labor, so much so that Crystal decided she needed to shield Sheena from the pain. At first Sheena would not let her but, after four hours of hard labor, she agreed. Crystal cast a spell to partially shield her from the pain. Only partially because they wanted Sheena to know when the contractions were and if anything was wrong they would be able to tell. After a total of nine hours labor Sheena gave birth to a son. She was so happy for Rathsmus because they had talked about when this day would come and, even though he said it did not matter whether it was a boy or a girl, she knew he really wanted a son. Rathsmus did not disappoint her with his expression. When he was allowed to see her, he was ecstatic about having a son. They decided to name him Victor-Amoss. Victor was his father's name, Amoss for Sheena's father. Though he wasn't her real father, he was the one she considered her true father, the one who treated her as a daughter.

About two weeks after the birth of Victor-Amoss, Crystal had still not started any contractions. Dalna had suggested over a week earlier that they should make the labor start because she was definitely ready. Crystal had refused, saying that she would know when it was time. Now Dalna knew they could not wait any longer. Crystal still refused to have her labor induced. Dalna talked to Rathsmus and explained the situation. She expected him to bind her with his magic and let them induce labor. He did not like the idea but decided something should be done, of course, having four women standing over him helped him make the decision.

Rathsmus went into Crystal's room; she had not been able to get out of bed for four days now. "Your sisters say that your labor should be started because you are way overdue", he said when she acknowledged his presence. "So, have they sent you in to talk me into letting them induce labor or to bind me up so I can't fight them?" "Ha ha", Rathsmus laughed, "Even in your condition, you would be hard to bind if you were expecting it. No, I only came to talk to you." Rathsmus walked up beside her bed and sat in the chair that was there. "Why does everyone think they know what is best for me more than I do?" Crystal asked. Rathsmus looked at her with sad eyes. She looked weak. One thing he never expected her to be was weak. "I guess an even better question would be why you are doing this? Why won't you let someone help you? It is not a sign of weakness to let someone else help you or even to ask for help. It is not a sign of strength, but stubbornness, that you will not let others help you when you need it." "I don't care anymore. My leadership of this group made me lose you. I thought I could overcome losing you by keeping a hold

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on the group, but it did not work. You hurt me greatly by choosing Sheena over me. I know you did not mean to hurt me and, no matter what, someone was going to get hurt; it doesn't matter now, the choice has been made." Slowly Crystal's head pushed into her pillow. Rathsmus had worked into her subconscious and made her feel sleepy. The sleepier she got the easier it was to make her actually fall asleep. "I am sorry", He said as he stood. He knew things would never be the same. She would never forgive him for doing this to her; she would never forgive him for choosing Sheena as a wife instead of her.

Crystal had a baby girl. The birth went fine. It was decided to keep her asleep through the event. No one knew how she would react to what they had done and they did not want to complicate things. Crystal slept for twelve hours after giving birth and, when she awoke, it took her a couple minutes to figure out what had happened. All of the babies had been put in a room that had been set aside as a nursery. Crystal got out of bed and raced down the hall to the nursery. When she got to the room, Daphney was caring for the newborns while their mothers were either doing chores, studying, helping Rathsmus with his magic. Crystal looked around at the babies in their cradles. There were five cradles. One had a blue blanket, which was Victor. The other four had pink blankets; that meant that she had had a girl. Daphney was folding blankets and other clothes for the babies. She looked up at Crystal, not sure how to greet her or what to expect from her. Crystal looked mad enough to explode.

"What right did you have to force me into having this child. You had no right!" Crystal broke into tears. Daphney went to her and hugged her to try to comfort her. "Rathsmus should have chosen me, not her. I love him more than she does. If he doesn't want me, I don't want his child." Daphney looked Crystal in the eye. "It was his right to choose his wife. You gave him the chance to make his own choice in that meeting. If you wanted him, you should not have given him the option. The rest of us would have gone along with your decision. You are the leader and we all need your wisdom, especially Rathsmus, if he is to survive to help this world. Now that his metamorphosis is complete, his enemies will try even harder to find him before he completes his education. Besides, it is not his baby, it is yours." Daphney produced a large smile as she backed away, turned and picked up a baby in a pink blanket. Crystal's anger melted away as she looked upon the face framed in a pink blanket.

"She's beautiful", Crystal whispered. "She takes after her mother", Daphney chirped with a smile. Crystal looked at Daphney and smiled back. She was beginning to feel like a fool over the problem with Rathsmus. Daphney carefully handed Crystal her daughter. You could see the love that was in Crystal emerging again for her daughter. "Have you decided on a name?" Daphney asked. "Actually no. I hadn't really thought about it. How about Chantell?" "I think it is a beautiful name", Daphney said, hoping Crystal was back for good.

Crystal did her best to avoid everyone over the next couple of days. She used the excuse of giving birth to stay in her room and only came out to see Chantell. She did not turn away any visitors when they came to her room, but she did not go looking for anyone either. Each sister took turns visiting Crystal; they did not want to tax her too much. When it was Sheena's turn, she was a bit

apprehensive. Rathsmus had told her about the conversation with Crystal. Sheena knew that she had to go sooner or later and talk to Crystal about the situation with Rathsmus and she wanted things to get back to normal as soon as possible.

Sheena came to Crystal's door and looked in. Crystal was lying in bed staring at the ceiling. Sheena knocked on the door, "Want some company?" "Sure, come in, I've been expecting you and kind of dreading it at the same time. I feel like I've made such a fool of myself." Sheena came into the room and sat down in the chair by the bed. "No, you have done no such thing. I don't know if I would have done anything different if...well, you know." "Yes, I know. I'm sorry for my actions. I've taken my failure to lure him to me out on everyone. It was not fair for me to blame you and Rathsmus. It was even worse for me to hate the child that I was carrying. But in seeing my baby, the hate left me and was replaced by love. I have been a fool and I only hope both you and Rathsmus can forgive me." "I cannot speak for Rathsmus, although I am sure he feels the same as me; there is nothing to forgive. I'm just glad that the old Crystal is back. And, as far as you being a failure, you could not be more wrong. If it were not for you, Rathsmus would be either dead or a pile of mud on the floor. Your fast thinking has saved us all more than once. We need you, all of us."

"Thank you" Crystal said as tears came to her eyes. They hugged and talked about everything and nothing as if they hadn't seen each other in months. Before Sheena left, Crystal asked that Rathsmus be sent to her. He was the last person she needed to apologize to. Nothing would be the same until it was done.

13

Weakness

When Rathsmus arrived at Crystal's room, the door was closed. He knocked and waited for Crystal to let him in. When she opened the door she was dressed in a beautiful evening gown with a low cut front. "Rathsmus, thank you for coming. We have a lot to talk about." She stepped back out of the doorway and motioned Rathsmus to enter. He was a little skeptical due to what she had on, but he went into the room anyway. "What do you think of my dress?" "It is very pretty." "Thank you, I made it a long time ago. I only wanted to see if it still fit, after having a baby and all. One likes to know if they still have their girlish figure." Rathsmus could tell she had been crying. Her eyes were red and watery and she kept sniffling as if she were going to start again. "You still have your figure, you're beautiful." "Thank you." Crystal walked over to a full-length mirror and looked at her reflection. She turned and looked at herself on one side and then the other and then stared directly at it from the front view. "You know, I think I'm getting too old for such a low neckline."

Rathsmus didn't say anything, he just watched her. Crystal looked at him out of the corner of her eye. "I thought of trying to seduce you when you came; to let you watch me in this dress, and then to slowly push off a shoulder." As she said it, she pushed the dress off one shoulder baring her soft skin. "And then push off the other shoulder." She did as she said and bared the other shoulder. Rathsmus just stared. The dress started to slowly slide to the floor, but before her breasts were exposed she stopped it, turned and went behind a dressing wall. The dress was thrown over the wall to hang half on one side and half on the other.

Rathsmus could hear her sobs from the other side but knew better than to try to comfort her there, considering that she was most likely naked. He would wait for her to get dressed and return to this side of the portable wall. Slowly, Crystal walked around the wall wearing a bathrobe that totally covered her body. Not even a hint of curves could be detected. "I am sorry for that, it was not fair to you. I still love you, and would do almost anything to get you, but I will not hurt my sister in doing so. That is why I changed my mind about seducing you. I'm quite sure that I could have succeeded in my seduction of you; when it comes to women, you have no self-control. That will be your downfall, if you are not careful. What do you think? Do you have enough control to turn me down?"

Rathsmus looked at the floor. "Just a test to see if you can, that's all. Well?" She untied her robe. She didn't take it off but it opened down the front. Rathsmus' imagination filled in what his eyes could not see. "Please don't", he said as Crystal came closer. Sheena came to the door as Crystal moved around him. Crystal saw Sheena and placed a finger on her lips as a signal not to say anything. Rathsmus had his back to the door so he did not see Sheena. "You are weak, Rathsmus, your lust for female flesh is stronger than your love for any one woman." Rathsmus closed his eyes trying to gain the strength to turn her down. If he ran, he

would be proving her point. That he could not look upon a naked female without succumbing to his urge to grab it and love it. He opened his eyes as he felt Crystal moving around him to the front. She still had her robe on but she was dancing around and the front of it opened further and further. He could feel his will slipping, as he wanted her more and more. The robe fell completely to the floor as she danced in front of him. He tried to fight the feeling but he wanted her body. He knew he would feel guilty after and Sheena would be hurt, but the lust for this body was too strong to deny. It was not Crystal that he wanted, any beautiful body would do for what he wanted now. He took a step closer toward her, but she stopped him. She danced around him again. When she got behind him, she motioned for Sheena to come into the room and take off her clothing. Sheena did as she was instructed, she still trusted Crystal as her leader. Crystal had Sheena dance in front of Rathsmus. When he saw his wife naked in front of him he grabbed her to him and hugged her. "I'm sorry, I am a weak man and I do not deserve you. Can you forgive me for what I was about to do?" "Yes, Rathsmus, I forgive you. Everyone has a weakness. You are a strong man and one day you will be the strongest sorcerer in the world. This weakness just shows itself more than it would on a weaker man. We need to find a way to make you stronger when it comes to women." Sheena looked at Crystal, who still had not put her robe back on. "How are we going to help him overcome his weakness?", she asked Crystal. "There are several ways we could help him. One way would be to make him a eunuch." Crystal laughed at Rathsmus. The look on his face said that he didn't like the idea at all, neither did Sheena. "I was only kidding, besides it might effect his ability to do magic. We could force him to have sex with us until he couldn't do it anymore." Sheena didn't like that idea. If it was the only choice she would have gone along with it, but she knew there had to be other options. "We could all go without clothes like we used to before Rathsmus was with us." Crystal was serious now. "We could place a spell on him; if his lust for us got the best of him, it would give him a mild electrical shock. Of course, we would have to take it easy on him for a while, but, eventually, we would have to try to make him lose control. We have to know he can keep his wits about him when the time comes." Sheena thought about it. "I agree, except for one thing. Since I am his wife, he should be able to have those kinds of thoughts about me." "Yes, at first anyway. Being able to use you as a release for his lust might make it easier for him. Eventually, he would not be able to have even that."

Sheena agreed. Rathsmus just stood there looking at his wife and Crystal, wondering what he was getting himself into. They decided to start the project the next morning and to have a meeting of the sisters to set up ground rules. For the first week they would not be allowed to try to seduce him in any way. If he did ok, on the next week they would be able to be a little more provocative. Each week they could get closer to him, dance in front of him and, eventually, try to seduce him. Each week the electrical shock would get stronger as well.

Everyone agreed to help Rathsmus through his "weakness". Rathsmus figured that they had just found a way to tease him unmercifully and they all seemed happier than a pig in shit about it. Part of the deal was that Rathsmus was not allowed to use any type of magic on himself to either block the pain from the shocks or to insensitize himself to the women's advances. That night he gave

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Sheena one hell of a workout in hopes that he could avoid any shocks in the morning; he could only hope. Sheena was very pleased by his attempt to tire himself out.

In the morning when he awoke, Sheena was gone. Judging from the way he was waking up, he knew his workout last night would not help him at all. If there had still been a woman in his bed right now, he would be ready for her, (if you know what I mean). He got out of bed and raced into the bathroom. He hoped a cold shower might relieve him of his condition. Unfortunately for him, all five of the sisters were waiting for him, totally naked. Of course he had left his room so fast he forgot to grab any clothes for himself, so his condition was quite apparent to the sisters. "Well, it looks like there is only one option left to us", Crystal said as she took out a long thin bladed knife. "Even Sheena cannot dampen his lust and, by the sounds coming from their room last night, she gave it her best shot." Suddenly, he was trapped in a binding of air. He couldn't move. Crystal walked up to him and whispered in his ear, "You should have chosen me, I could have satisfied you." She backed off a step and looked into Rathsmus' terror stricken face. "This was my first choice anyway, to make you a eunuch." She put the blade to his privates, kept her eyes looking deeply into Rathsmus', and pulled the blade.

Rathsmus sat up in bed with a start. His body was covered with sweat and his heart was pounding in his chest. He felt his crotch and found everything in its proper place. He fell back to his pillow. "It was just a dream", he said to himself. Sheena was gone, probably down to breakfast. He got out of bed and put on a robe. He walked down the hall to the bathroom to take a bath. When he entered the room he stopped in his tracks and his heart dropped into his stomach. All five women were waiting for him. At least this time they were dressed. "Are you ready to begin?", asked Crystal. "I would like to take a bath first and then eat before you cast your spell on me." "Very well, we'll be waiting for you in the library, when you are done eating, meet us there." Rathsmus nodded and the sisters went into the hall. Sheena gave him a kiss and a hug before she left him alone.

After his bath and his breakfast, which he considered his last meal, he went into the library. He knocked on the door and waited for them to open it. Sheena opened the door and motioned toward a chair in the middle of the room. It was facing five empty chairs in a row. He went and sat down in the single chair. The lights were low in the room, but his chair seemed to be lit up more than anything else. He turned back to Sheena and she was gone. He waited for what seemed like twenty minutes but was probably only half that. Then he saw some movement in the far away shadows of the room. At first, he thought it was his mind playing tricks on him, but his security magic kicked in and he got special eyesight to see in the dark. He doubted if any of the sisters could sense his magic but since he knew it was only them, he let the magic go and they disappeared into the shadows again.

He knew that they had split up and were merging back together around him. He assumed it was to startle him. When they appeared out of the shadows, he stayed calm; he did not want them to think they had surprised him. He could sense their disappointment at having failed to scare him. Each sister sat in a chair and faced him. They were all dressed in black hooded robes that touched the ground around their feet. Every part of their body was covered including their hands. The

hood had such a long facial opening he could only see shadows, no features were where their faces should be.

“Rathsmus, please stand”, said a voice too loud and distorted by magic. He could not identify the figure that was speaking. The sound came from all around him. “Before we begin, you must understand the reason behind it. For you to be strong, you must have control spiritually, emotionally and physically. Each in turn has an effect on the other. If one is weak emotionally it will effect his control physically. If one is weak physically it will effect him spiritually. If one is weak spiritually it will effect him both physically and emotionally. One always touches another and one weakness always makes you weaker in other areas. You are weak emotionally. You need control over your need for the flesh. In turn, it effects you spiritually and weakens you there. In turn, it weakens you physically. If you follow what I am saying, it becomes a circle that does not end once it is started. The only way to end it is to break the cycle. You must be made strong to break the circle. One look into the nursery will prove my point about your weakness.” Rathsmus nodded agreement as he looked to the floor. He had to agree with the point that had been made. “First, an explanation of what we are going to do. A spell will be placed on you that will sense your arousal emotionally and physically. It will know the source of your arousal and, if it is necessary it will give you a mild electrical shock to warn you of the situation and you must try to control yourself. During the first week there will be no shock, just a beeping that only you can hear. The second week you will be upgraded to a light shock. If the source of your arousal is your wife, you will not get the shock. On the third week we will try to subtly arouse you. On the fourth week the shock will get stronger. On the fifth week stronger still. Each week we will try harder to arouse you. At the end of each week we will gather to discuss your progress. The progress you make will determine the next week’s guidelines. Do you have any questions?”

Rathsmus just shook his head. “Very well, we will begin the process.” Rathsmus could feel the spell being placed on him. He had to concentrate very hard to keep his security magic from fighting back. “It is done”, said the voice, “Remember this, Rathsmus, we do this to make you the strongest person you can be. We are all behind you. We know you can do it.” All of the sisters stood and in single file, went back into the shadows. When they were gone the lights returned to normal. He was alone.

The rest of the day went by quickly. He never heard the beeping noise and he suspected his security magic might have disabled the spell already, but then, he had not really had any opportunities to test it, and he didn’t really want any. The next morning when he awoke Sheena was sleeping beside him. He just lay there and looked at her. She was so pretty. He really was lucky to have such a beautiful, loving wife. It was a good thing the spell did not do anything when he was aroused by her or he would be hearing the beeping now. By the end of the week he was feeling pretty good about himself. He had only had heard the beep a couple of times and had controlled himself quickly. He didn’t think there would be any problems. The sisters decided to jump a step and, not only give him a mild shock but to also to try a little to get him aroused. During the first week they had decided to wear

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clothing, except when training him in the magical arts. From this point on, they would go naked all of the time.

Sheena did most of the training with Rathsmus, but she let the other sisters help her. As the project went on the other sisters would be doing more of the training. On one such morning Crystal was to help Rathsmus in a training session. Crystal was already in the lab when Rathsmus arrived. He got a small shock but controlled himself quickly. Before the end of the session he had been shocked several times, once for about half a minute before he could control himself. The session had to be cut short to give Rathsmus a chance to recover from the shocks. Crystal told him not to worry, that it was a small setback. He was only just beginning. But Rathsmus was angry with himself for losing control. He would have to try harder.

The next day Crystal, Dalna and Serena were scheduled in the lab. They had picked a particularly useless bit of magic to do, but it was a very showy magic with a lot of dancing and movements, that Crystal thought would really test Rathsmus' control. They still would not be able to touch him in any way, but they would be so close he would have a hard time thinking about anything but their naked bodies. The lab was set up when he arrived. There was a chair for him to sit in to watch the sisters do their magic. He was to sit and watch only. He would do no magic at all. His job, as Crystal told him, would be to keep control of himself during the whole ceremony. During the ceremony Rathsmus would be able to use his magic to stop any shocks from actually hurting him. He could not undo the spell they had on him; he could only divert the shocks from hurting him. This was to show Rathsmus how hard and important it could be to control his thoughts. If he was involved with a spell and let his thoughts wander to the women dancing in front of him, and the spell on him was dangerous, would he be able to protect himself from the danger?

Rathsmus got a big grin on his face and sat in the chair. This, he thought to himself, was going to be so easy. He didn't have to control his thoughts now, he only had to divert the shocks and sit back and enjoy the show. The major part of the spell would last about forty-five minutes then two secondary parts would last about five minutes each. The complete spell would last just over an hour with the set-up and meditation between the major and secondary parts of the spell.

The sisters set up the spell and drew some symbols on the floor. They started off slowly, in a sitting position on the floor. He was already beginning to feel his thoughts about the naked women in front of him. He got a small shock because he had forgotten about the spell on him, but he diverted the shock quickly and only received a small part of it. The sisters were completely naked and they were not trying to hide any part of their bodies. Another small shock told him he had to concentrate a little harder. Now Crystal was standing and dancing around the other two sisters sitting on the floor. Serena lay down and spread her legs and arms to the four corners of the room. Rathsmus was sitting below her and was getting a view of her body that only a doctor should have seen. Another shock and he knew this would not be as easy as he had thought. He still had another twenty minutes before the first part of the spell would be over. He knew he was in trouble.

Now Dalna was standing over the body of Serena and bent down with her butt in the air facing Rathsmus. Control, he thought, control, but he had none. He had already been thinking thoughts of the women that he should not have been thinking and it was too late to regain control. The next thing he knew, he was getting shocked again, about ten seconds worth. Still, a small shock but he knew they would be getting worse. Every couple of minutes he would get a shock and then he would gain control for a short while. The sisters were all standing now and dancing around him. He could smell their perfume and their bodies. Another shock. He wanted to touch them. Another shock. Ten minutes to go. Another shock, this one worse than any previous shocks. Their dance was now more frenzied and uncontrolled. Another shock. Five minutes. Their hair hit him as they gyrated around him. Another shock. Two minutes. Another shock. One minute. Another shock, and then it was over. The sisters were sitting in the same positions they had started in, sitting in front of him.

The light changed in the room and a chill filled the air. The sisters stood again and danced around him, slowly at first, but gaining speed. Rathsmus had about a minute to try to regain control of his thoughts before this part of the ceremony had started. He could only hope it was enough. Three minutes to go and he noticed something he shouldn't have and he got shocked. He was losing control again, two minutes and another shock. The light seemed to shine on their whole bodies; nothing was hidden, another shock. One minute to go and another shock. Half a minute and another shock, this one lasted about twenty seconds. He regained control just as the second part of the ceremony ended. Concentrate; concentrate, he told himself; if he let himself go, he would be shocked through the complete third part. He did not want to be shocked for five minutes. Now the sisters were lying down as Serena had during the first part, but they were around him. Serena was in front of him; Crystal was on one side of him with one of her feet touching one of Serena's. Dalna was on the other side of him with one of her feet touching Serena's other foot. He only assumed that Dalna and Crystal were touching their other feet, making a crude triangle of sorts.

As the last part of the ceremony started, the sisters rose off the floor, still lying down. Then they started to circle him so each of the sisters was taking turns in front of him. He got another shock. Now the sisters' legs were bending so that their feet were flat and their butts were touching the heels of their feet. Another shock. Three minutes to go and another shock. Now the sisters were raising and lowering their butts, up and down, up and down. Another shock. Faster and faster they circled. Faster and faster they raised and lowered their butts. Another shock. Another shock. One minute to go, another shock. The last shock lasted one full minute until the ceremony was over. The shock was so bad that Rathsmus fell out of the chair and could not regain a sitting position in the chair for several minutes after the shock ended.

When the sisters were done, Crystal went to Rathsmus and said; "Now you see what your weakness can do to hurt your magic. You could not even divert a small electrical charge from hurting you. Even your security magic was disabled due to your thoughts. You must be able to control your thoughts. You cannot be powerful until you do. The sisters left him alone to think about what had happened.

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Shortly, Korg came into the lab to assist Rathsmus to his own room to rest. Rathsmus was so angry with himself for losing control of his thoughts that he made a promise to himself that he would never lose control again, ever!

Later that day, Rathsmus went to the kitchen for a bite to eat and he noticed that no one was around. He looked around in several of the rooms but he was alone. He figured they wanted to give him a break. He decided to go to the lab and study his old magic books. It had been a long time since he had looked over the books and he found that he understood the books that, a long time ago, had been written in a language he couldn't begin to comprehend. Now they seemed as if they'd been written for a child to understand. He was so engrossed in the books that he didn't realize the time was going by so fast. He didn't stop reading until he had read the book cover to cover. When he returned to his room he found Sheena in bed. It was late now, around three in the morning. He had read right through dinner and through the night. He slowly climbed into bed and went to sleep.

The next day another session was arranged, this time with Daphney. She did not try as hard as Crystal had, and Rathsmus was not shocked even once. Through the rest of the week Rathsmus had kept total control. The sisters had decided to skip a couple more levels and really try to make him loose control, but it did not work. Through the following week Rathsmus kept total control. Again, the sisters decided to skip a couple of levels, this time even Sheena would not be allowed to be a release for Rathsmus, and all of the sisters would actually try to seduce him. But Rathsmus kept total control, even during one of his baths when three of the sisters joined him; it made no difference. He had made a promise to himself that he would not lose control again. And he did not.

The project was considered a total success and the spell was removed. From this point, his strength grew by leaps and bounds. He had the concentration he needed to control his magic and himself. One thing Rathsmus had not told anyone was that when he had returned to the lab and read the old magic book. It was not a book of magic, as he had originally thought, but it was a book for the learning magic user to gain the strength of mind and concentration to do powerful magic. After that, he had taken out the other books he had brought with him and read them as well. The magic in the books was so old that he had never heard of doing magic even close to what the book taught. None of the books were above his reading level and he read them all.

Over the next year and a half the sisters were relentless on his studies. They taught him everything that was in their heads and in their library. Finally, they could teach him no more. He was as ready as they could make him for his enemies outside the cave.

14

Armies

Meanwhile, during the last year, the Hongar, led by General Zandir, had been patrolling the mountains per orders of the twin lords Faldor and Baldor. Not a sign of the magician and the five witches had been seen. Word of the disappearance of Lord Tolman had been all but forgotten now. The Hongar had set up camp for the night halfway between the house that Lords Faldor and Baldor had set as a trap and the mountains. The Hongar did not like these mountains. Stories of a giant mineotaur had been spread around. The beast would come out of his hidden cave at night and eat stranded victims on the mountain. The Hongar, being so small, would barely make a snack for a giant mineotaur. The reason the stories were believed by General Zandir is that, when they did stay in the mountains overnight, his armies would be reduced by fifteen to twenty soldiers per night. Very little remained of the missing men, only bloody rags and bones. When Faldor and Baldor heard of this, they were very interested. They would set a trap for the beast. But, whenever a trap was set the beast would show up somewhere completely different and Zandir would still lose some men. It had taken the Lords a year to pinpoint the highest concentration of dead soldiers to this place. Now there would be an all out assault on the mountain in three days. The many armies of the evil Lords were converging to this valley as the Hongar waited.

“Rathsmus, Sisters,” yelled Korg as he ran in from the hidden entrance to the cave. “Armies are traveling to the valley outside our stronghold. They should all be here in about two days and ready to fight the next day. We must leave before we are trapped.” “How many are here now?” asked Crystal. “About two hundred to two hundred fifty Hongar, but there will be twice that many by midnight tonight and five times that by dawn tomorrow. The ones that are on the way are trained warriors, not like the Hongar that are here now. If the Hongar were all we had to worry about it wouldn’t bother me. But the ones that are on the way are like the ones we met at the other cave.”

“Well, there is no chance of escape to the valley. That means we will have to go to the caves again. Everyone, collect your things. By dawn tomorrow we must be on our way.” The sisters dispersed to their rooms. Korg also left for his room. Crystal stopped to talk to Rathsmus. “You have completed your training. You are very strong, but even now you could not defend against those numbers. We will retreat, and return to fight another day. When we do we will be ready”, said Crystal. Rathsmus nodded. “Where will the caves take us?” “A place we said we would never return to, to Amoss’ residence. He is no longer alive so I suppose it will make no difference. I would like you to do something though. When we leave here I want you to block our escape route so they cannot follow us.” “I’ve got an idea,” said Rathsmus, “that will take care of that and the army when it comes in.” Crystal nodded and left for her room. Their journey would be much slower now that they

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had five children along, but no one was complaining. Rathsmus had an idea that would take care of that problem also.

Everyone gathered at the entrance with the things that they wanted to bring with them. Rathsmus was the last one to the entrance to the caves. "Are you set?" Crystal asked. "No", he replied. "I've got to set the bombs around the rooms, then I want to seal this entrance off. The problem is that I have to do all of it from this side of the entrance or they will be able to tell that it was blocked. We will have to split up for awhile." Crystal did not like the idea at all and neither did Sheena. "Are you going to destroy the whole place?" Dalna asked. "What if we need to return here?" asked Daphney. "No, I'm not going to destroy all of it, just some of it. I want to block off the library to keep it intact and I want to block off this entrance also. The rest will be damaged, but not totally destroyed. We could fix it if we decide to return." "Exactly how do you think you are going to meet up with us after you block this entrance? You don't know the way. Even if you did, you would never find the outside entrance to the other side of the cave", Crystal said with anger in her voice.

"Look, I know what I'm doing. I've found a way to change molecular structures with magic", he said with an excited smile. "I don't know what you're talking about", returned Crystal. "I found an old section of books in your library. They are the oldest books that I have ever seen. They don't say anything about magic though, they are science books, and I read them all. They were fascinating. They explained that everything is made up of molecules; the rocks, the trees, even the air we breathe, even us." Crystal was looking at Rathsmus very peculiarly.

"You don't understand, you can't see them but they are there. Anyway, by experimenting with the molecules I can change things." "Rathsmus, I think you have studied too much and you need a rest. Come with us and we will take care of the entrance", Crystal said as she motioned for Korg to help her. But before he could move, Rathsmus started changing the air around them into water. Water fell around them as if it was raining.

"What did you do?" asked Crystal. There are chemicals in the air, and those chemicals are made up of molecules. By adding some and changing others you can make things. For example, the air we breathe is basically a chemical called oxygen. There are other chemicals also but another is called hydrogen. If I take two hydrogen molecules and one oxygen molecule and make them stick together, it makes water." He made the rain stop. "So, how is this going to make you able to catch up to us?" she asked. Rathsmus took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He didn't really have enough time to go over this with her. "Very well, I guess I just have to show you."

He held out his hands and cupped them like he was holding a large ball. The air in front of him shimmered into a ball of air. Inside the ball the air sparkled like little flecks of sand floating in the wind. Slowly the flecks collected and made a ball. The ball of air disappeared and a ball of rock dropped into his hands. It was a ball about one and a half inches in diameter and weighed about five pounds. It was a mixture of chemicals, some gold and silver, which added to the weight. He handed it to Crystal. "So?", she said. "This is how I will find you. It is a homing beacon just for me. Watch." He then made a ball of air surround him and he sat cross-legged as he floated to the center of the ball. The ball floated to the rock wall of the cave. The

ball touched the rock and, slowly at first, was swallowed by the rock. The wall was just as smooth where he had entered the wall, as it was anywhere else. Suddenly a bulge in the floor rose up and burped the ball of air out with Rathsmus in it. The ball of air disappeared and Rathsmus stood looking at Crystal. "Any questions now?", he asked.

She shook her head. "I only have one thing to say. Be quick with your preparation and do not engage the enemy now. You do not know enough about them. Please." Rathsmus nodded. "I will do as you ask." With that they turned and walked into the entrance of the cave. "Oh yeah, I forgot", he said. Rathsmus pointed to the ground under the group. A small platform appeared under each of them. The platforms raised a couple of inches above the ground and they floated down the cave and out of sight. He looked down the cave and a section of it changed to a section of rock, solid rock. The rock built solidly to the entrance, and matched the wall in the room perfectly. No one would be able to tell that the entrance had ever been there.

Rathsmus turned and ran to the library. He started to do the same to the entrance to the library but then remembered that there was also a back entrance into the library. At first he couldn't find it, he went to where he had been sitting when the sisters had placed the spell on him. He remembered where they had entered the room and went to that spot. It took a couple of minutes to find the door, but he finally did. He forced the door open; it was made to open from the other side. The door was short, only about three feet tall. Rathsmus bent down and looked through the opening to the other side. The door opened into a small hallway. The hall was short also, but not as short as the door, it was about five feet tall and three feet wide. The hall went to the left about ten feet and stopped. It went about ten feet to the right and turned. He went into the hall and let the door close behind him. He checked the hall to the left and found nothing, it was just a dead end. He followed it to the right and, after a couple of turns; it ended in Crystal's bedroom. He closed off the hall and filled it with solid rock all the way back to the library, and then he ran to the library's main entrance and closed it off to look like just another wall.

Next, was to set the traps throughout the complex of rooms. He didn't want to destroy the place so he changed his mind and decided against using any bombs. Instead, he got a wonderful idea for a spell that no one would see, until it was too late. He set the spell and produced a large bubble of air around himself and he floated through the rock that used to be the hall, to see his friends.

Faldor and Baldor were getting very anxious. They knew the ones they looked for were trapped. One of their soldiers had found the opening to the cave and now that everyone had arrived, the siege of the cave would begin at dawn. That was only a couple of minutes away now. Suddenly a horn blew, then another, and then several more. It was a signal to the different armies to start the march up the mountain to the cave. Within minutes the army was flowing into the cave and into the inner complex of rooms, but Faldor could sense no conflict of any type. His soldiers should be fighting the enemies living in the cave. He signaled Baldor and they went into the cave together. They entered the first room so fast and with so much surprise that they did not sense the trap that Rathsmus had set.

Rathsmus knew that there would be a major magic user with the army and, eventually, he would come into the rooms. When a magic user stepped into the first room it would set up a series of spells. The first spell would change the floor to a soft clay type of molten rock, and seconds later it would harden fast enough to capture all of the people in the rooms. Finally, to have the rock creep slowly into whoever was caught in the rock and change them permanently into statues.

As the two Lords stepped into the first room, the floor changed and everyone was ankle deep in mud. Then it changed to rock. No one had enough time to realize what had happened. Before the floor changed to rock Baldor had slipped and fallen on his rear and, in turn, had knocked Faldor off his feet onto his hands and knees. When the rock hardened, both of the magic user's hands were trapped in the rock as well as their feet. The only thing they could do was yell for help; of course, that was what everyone else was doing too. Faldor regained his composure and looked over to Baldor, who was on his back. "Can you do anything, Baldor?" "No, I can't move my hands. Wait! Something is happening. My hands and my body are tingling", said Baldor. "Mine also, but I can't feel them anymore, and the tingling is moving up my arms and legs," said Faldor. "Mine too," Baldor said back to his companion. As he said this he looked down at his arms and noticed that they were turning a dark gray that matched the floor. "We're turning to stone!" he yelled. The pain was beginning now as vital organs were beginning to harden. The cave was filling with screams of agony and then, suddenly, there was total silence. The rooms were filled with statues in various poses with a rictus of agony carved on their faces. It would take a person with a strong stomach to enter this cave from now on, most would never go further than the first room.

The Hongar had not gone into the cave. Being the smallest in stature, they were not wanted in the cave. The "big people" wanted all of the glory and the prizes for themselves. In return all they got was a surprise; an eternity as a statue. One Hongar was sent into the cave after the screaming had stopped. He had not gone any further than the statues of Faldor and Baldor before he turned and ran back to the General. When he was finished with his account of what he had seen, the General ordered a hasty retreat to their homelands with the hopes of never being involved with these people ever again.

15

An Old Friend

It didn't take Rathsmus long to catch up to the others. With his special mode of transportation he was very fast. Once he was through the initial rock he had formed in the entrance to the hallway, he could literally fly down the hall toward his friends and his wife. He felt as if he had been away from her for days when, actually, it had only been hours.

Crystal looked up at him and said, "I'm glad you made it, Rathsmus, we were just about ready to turn off this main cave." "Where does this main cave go?" he asked. "It continues down the mountain range. Eventually it just stops, as does the range. There are many side halls, I'd bet I don't even know about some of them," she finished.

She hadn't anymore than completed her sentence, when a large section of wall opened up and a large creature poked its ugly head out. With lightning speed it spit out a string like a spider web that caught Dalna around the waist and began hauling her toward its lair. She tried to turn and fire a magic missile at it, but when she did, it just pulled harder, causing her to fall, striking her head on the stone floor, and being knocked unconscious. Daphney jumped to one side and tried a ball of fire, but when she stopped to throw it, another web came from the opening in the wall. This one did not lasso her as the first one did to Dalna. This one opened up just before striking her and pinned her to the wall like a net. The net had a drugging effect on her and Daphney nodded off to sleep almost immediately.

Korg drew his sword and threw it at the first creature. It struck it in the head, cutting the web that had caught Dalna. As he bent down to help Dalna, two more strings caught him and started pulling him in. He began to get sleepy as the webs pulled at his bare skin. Rathsmus was the furthest from the lair of the creatures. He put up a barrier of air between the creatures and the group, severing the web that was pulling Korg away. More webs flew from the creatures' lair, but they all struck the barrier that Rathsmus had thrown up to save himself and his friends. He went to Korg and touched his head. Korg awoke with a start. "Quickly, get Dalna and Daphney to safety," Rathsmus told the others. Korg ran to Daphney and cut her down with a small knife. Sheena and Serena picked up Dalna and went into the opening that Crystal had made. "My sword!" Korg yelled to Rathsmus, as he carried Daphney toward Crystal. Rathsmus pushed the barrier of air toward the creatures. When the barrier was in front of the creature Korg had killed, the barrier opened up enough for Rathsmus to grab the sword and pull it out of the creature's head. The sword was covered with a dark purplish lumpy slime. He assumed it was the creature's blood and brains, but who could be sure. He didn't dare to clean it off in case it was poisonous. He started to turn away when he got an idea. He turned back to the creatures and cast a spell. The lair of the creatures slowly filled up with solid rock. Within minutes, the creatures were encased in solid rock.

Rathsmus turned to Korg and handed the sword to him. Korg looked at Crystal and said, "I've never seen that type of creature before." "Off hand, I would say that it is a creation of evil. The further south you go the stronger hold evil has on this world. Don't touch the gore on the sword. It should be cleaned with magic only. It is possible that the sword cannot be cleaned and is ruined." Crystal closed her eyes and concentrated. She dropped the robe from her shoulders. The sword rose out of Korg's hands and hung in the air in front of him. The gore that covered the blade dripped from its tip. Each drop sizzled as it hit the stone floor. The gore dripped faster and faster, but it fought to stay on the blade. Slowly, the slime left the blade, but where it had been the blade was darker. It was stained. When the gore was half off the blade, it looked strange; it was pitted and rotten. The tip of the blade fell off and struck the floor with a dull clang.

"The blade must be destroyed. It is now evil. Another blade will be forged for you, but for now you will have to go without." Crystal threw the blade to the floor and struck the thing with a bolt of lightning and it melted into a puddle of silver. Rathsmus opened a hole in the rock floor and the metal flowed into it. He then covered over the hole, burying the blade for good.

The group traveled for a couple days, stopping only long enough to eat or get a couple of hours sleep. This path seemed old and unused. Small tracks like those of a rat's were in the dirt floor. Spider webs covered the walls and ceiling. Rathsmus was in the lead and was constantly knocking down webs that crossed the path. The path ended with no doors off it. Crystal walked up to the end and touched the wall. A wooden door appeared. It was old and rotting. The hinges were rusty, as was the lock. She unlocked the door but couldn't open it. The wood had swelled enough to seal the doorway tight. Korg came up to the door, pulled on the handle and it broke off in his hand. "Maybe I can do it," said Rathsmus. He stared at the door. It started shaking and then it was flung open. The hinges creaked and squealed like a pig that had its back legs grabbed in a greased pig contest. The hinges crumbled when the door was half-open and the door fell to the floor with a crash. As the door struck the floor, it broke into pieces from the rot that had destroyed the door.

"Well its open", said Rathsmus with a smile. "Let's hope no one is home to hear it", said Crystal. They entered through the doorway. The room inside was clean and uncluttered. No spider webs in here. Someone was keeping this place clean. "I don't like this", said Korg. Rathsmus looked around wearily and agreed. "Maybe Amoss is still alive", said Sheena hopefully. "I don't think so", said Crystal, "He would have let us know, I'm sure." But she wasn't totally sure. Rathsmus felt a tingling up his back and he shielded the group with a barrier of air. No one else seemed to notice, but he didn't care either way, someone or something was here watching them. Maybe even magically, why else would he feel it so clearly. He was trying to pinpoint the source of the feeling. It was strong, maybe even stronger than he was. If he was going to attack it, he had to be sneaky about it. He didn't want to wait to see if it would attack him first. He was sure it could sense his power like he could sense the power in it. The sisters were behind himself and Korg. He needed to get them out of the way in case things went bad. He split the shield in two and told the sisters to go into the other rooms and look around. They knew something was

odd about the place, but they didn't know exactly what. When the sisters came into the first room and moved into the second room, Rathsmus could feel a change in the thing that was there. He could feel a sadness and a happiness enter its being, then he pinpointed where it was. Without even thinking, he grabbed the thing with air and bound it tight, then he pulled it out into the open.

There stood an ugly creature. Covered in scales and large plates of armor. Then suddenly, it was gone. The bindings of air fell to the floor and disappeared. An old man stood where the creature had been. The sisters had stopped when the creature had been pulled from its hiding place. They had just stood there looking at it with their mouths hung open. Sheena had stayed out in the hall with the children so she didn't know what was happening. When the old man appeared Crystal yelled, "Amoss!" Rathsmus was about ready to try another spell when she yelled. He looked at her in surprise. Crystal ran to the old man and threw her arms around him. He hugged her back. Each of the sisters took turns hugging him.

Then it was Rathsmus' turn to stand there with his mouth agape. "Amoss, this is Rathsmus," Crystal said to him. "You are a very strong young man, stronger than me, when I was your age, but you still have much to learn." Rathsmus shook hands with him but didn't say anything. "This is Korg," Crystal motioned Amoss toward the mineotaur. "Did you know that there is a tribe of mineotaur about a hundred miles from here?" Amoss asked Korg. "No sir, I did not. I would like to visit them, if time permits." "I think that can be arranged", said Amoss, "Where is Sheena." "Oh, yes, we have quite a surprise for you", Crystal said. "I know, she is married to Rathsmus", said Amoss. "How did you know? You didn't come to the wedding, or so we thought..." "I did show up. I couldn't miss my youngest getting married, you know."

"Well, we still have a surprise for you", she started. Just then a baby started crying, though not really a baby because they were all over a year old now, but still they cried like one now and again. "A baby?" asked Amoss. "Not just one, I'm afraid, come on and I'll show you." Crystal led the way into the hall where Sheena and the children were waiting. Sheena looked up from the crying child and saw Amoss. A smile sprang to her face and she ran to hug him. "So, I hear you have some children now," Amoss said.

"Oh, yes, well only one is mine," she said and walked over to her son. "This is Victor-Amoss, my son," she said with a smile that showed how proud she was. "Victor, this is your grandfather." Amoss stood tall and proud when he was called "grandfather". "If Victor is your only child, then who do these other children belong to," he asked. Crystal stepped up to the children and pointed. "This is Chantell, she is mine. This is Rayleen, she is Daphney's. This is Misty; she is Dalna's. And this one is Katrina; she is Serena's. Rathsmus fathered all of the children," she finished. Amoss' smile changed to a scowl. "I don't understand. How could you let such a thing happen?" "It is a long story, could we go inside? I would like to explain everything." Amoss just nodded.

When Amoss passed Rathsmus he gave him a dirty look. If looks could have killed, Rathsmus would have been reduced to a puddle of slime. He swallowed hard and followed the others into the rooms of Amoss' home. After everyone was

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inside, Rathsmus sealed off the doorway and removed the rotting debris from the hall, just in case they had been followed.

Amoss fixed a small meal for the group and everyone sat down to eat. Not much was said during the meal. Rathsmus kept getting dirty looks from Amoss. He even got a few from some of the sisters. Things weren't going very well. After the meal was through, Crystal started the story of how Rathsmus had summoned them and how he had reunited them with Sheena, the attacks that led to the sisters becoming pregnant, and everything up to where they were now. Amoss understood about the attacks; he had gone through similar ones. He had to admit, to himself, he couldn't think of a better way to survive the attacks than the way Rathsmus had. He just would have liked it more if it hadn't been his daughters that had helped him. Even so, they had helped him that way of their own free will and the children were awful cute. It was nice to know that he was a grandfather five times over now. He figured he would like Rathsmus, eventually, after the image of him being with all five of his daughters had faded.

16

The Dream

He wanted to know what knowledge Rathsmus had that he didn't. It would be nice having a fellow metamorph around. "Very well, I guess I can forgive him for doing what he did. Another metamorph in the world is not a bad thing. I only want to know one thing..." He looked directly at Rathsmus. "I want to see your true shape, so I will know you always." "This is my true shape. The sisters kept me from becoming something else. I kept my original form." "No!", Amoss yelled and stood up, knocking over his chair. "It is impossible for a metamorph to keep his original form. I have read it in an old textbook. It said it was impossible. It has never been done and cannot be done. You are hiding it from your friends. I can feel something. You are keeping your new form from yourself. You must let it come. Your transformation will not be complete until you let down your guard and become what you are!"

Crystal stood and looked at the two metamorphs. "Are you telling me Rathsmus has not completed his metamorphosis?" "Yes, by sheer strength of will, he will not let the transformation complete itself." "Rathsmus, you must let the metamorphosis finish the process", said Crystal, "You cannot hold out forever. You must let go. You will die if you don't." "I cannot", Rathsmus said lowly, "I promised you the night you confessed your love for me that I would never let the other shape take over. This is my permanent shape!" Crystal sat down. "I am sorry, Rathsmus, I didn't know you were holding off your transformation for me. It was not fair for me to make you promise something than you cannot do. I release you from that promise and ask you to become who you really are."

Rathsmus looked at Crystal and then to his wife, whom he loved so much and the one he could lose if his shape was ugly or disgusting. She looked deep into his eyes and nodded her agreement with Crystal. He looked to Amoss. "You must do it while you have the strength in you to survive. Do not do what I did." Rathsmus stepped back away from the table. He closed his eyes and concentrated on a shape that he could live with, but he couldn't keep an image in his mind; they would shift and blend with others. Then he remembered his dream. Rathsmus' face had started to change color and then he was back. His eyes opened. "You must listen, my son!", said Amoss, "You must do this." "Yes I know, but I will do it where I have the most control; in my sleep."

Amoss didn't understand, but the others did. Sheena quickly made a bed of air for Rathsmus to lay down on and then bound him to it. Crystal quickly made him fall asleep and got out of his mind as fast as she could. The others stood in a circle around them. When Rathsmus was sleeping, Crystal joined the circle. The rings of power were glowing and Crystal remembered Rathsmus' ring. She had never given it to him. She took the ring out of the pouch she kept around her neck and placed it on his finger. Now all they could do was watch. "Remember, at no time is anyone to touch him. If he does as he did the last time, you would be trapped and pulled into

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his body.” Amoss looked at her oddly as if he didn’t believe her, then looked back to watch Rathsmus.

Rathsmus was in a deep sleep. The feeling of his magic power filled him, waiting to be used. He tried to remember his dream, the one where he was standing on a mountaintop, but it wasn’t him; it was an older looking man with graying hair and a beard. Slowly, the man came into view. His hair was brown with gray and white streaks, his long mustache and beard were the same color as his hair. The man’s face was covered by the gray striped robes, but he needed to see the face. If this was him, which he knew it was, he needed to see this man’s face. He had to gain control of this dream and remove the hood from this man’s head. He concentrated. The wind gusted and blew at the robes. Occasionally he could see sandalled feet and the hand that held the serpent staff with the yellow stone. The yellow stone! He could feel it now, but he didn’t know why. He knew he didn’t have it. Yet, he was touching it. The power of the stone was helping him. Another gust blew the hood off of the man’s head and he saw the face. It was his face. Not the face of an old man as he had thought, but it was his face. He had grown a beard and mustache and his hair had grayed, but it was him.

The man on the mountain grabbed the hood and covered his head again. He could sense his enemy there, in the distance. Too far away to see, but there. The yellow stone glowed brightly and a bubble of air shimmered around him. He was invisible to anyone or anything around him. From inside he could see everything. Everything looked brighter and clearer. Then he was flying over mountains, trees, over streams and lakes. He was closing in on his enemy, fast. If his enemy could sense him as he could sense his enemy, this would not surprise his enemy as he hoped it would. Just over the next rise, he could feel him. Over the top and...Pain! Sharp pain over his entire body. He lost the dream. He fought to regain the dream, but he could not. He tried to remember the face, his face.

He was standing on a mountaintop. It was not another man this time, it was him. In his hand he felt the serpent staff with the yellow stone. Something about that stone bugged him. He knew it was the yellow stone on the ring, but it could not be the same stone. This stone was larger. It was slightly larger than his fist. You could not put that stone on a ring. But it was the same stone, he could feel it. He looked off in the distance, over mountains and valleys. The air was crisp and clean. He breathed in deep. The air gave him strength. There was a small breeze up here. It was a beautiful day, but he knew he had been up here too long. He could put it off no longer. He could feel his enemy in the distance. The yellow stone glowed brightly as he commanded it to create a bubble of air around him and make him invisible to all outside the bubble. The bubble enhanced everything. Everything looked brighter, clearer. Then he commanded the bubble to fly in the direction of his enemy. Over the next rise he could feel him. He could only hope his enemy could not sense him coming. This would not be much of a surprise if he could. Over the top and there he was, waiting for him, a tall man with black robes, black as the night. By a tree he could see a black horse, tied up, waiting for its master. The man looked at him, even though he couldn’t see him; he knew where he was. In the man’s hand was a metal staff that was twisted and bent. On the top of the staff was a solitary black stone. No facets sparkled; it was all smooth and polished. It looked

like an egg. "Come closer and show yourself, if you dare", the man in black yelled to him with an evil smile that showed most of his teeth. The ball lowered itself to the ground and he let himself become visible. When the bubble was about a foot off the ground, a big black root shot out of the ground and wrapped itself around the bubble. It grew so fast that within seconds the bubble was completely engulfed in the root. Then the root pulled the bubble underground. The man in black laughed as the bubble was sucked below the surface.

Inside the bubble Rathsmus kept his cool. He had to think of something, quick. The root was squeezing the bubble tighter and tighter. It wouldn't be long before it crushed the bubble and him with it. Then, for some reason, he thought to the past. When he was a young boy a bug had bored into his leg and laid eggs in him. Luckily, it had been caught early or he would have lost the leg, or worse, his life. Perfect! He thought to himself. He turned himself into the parasite, bored into the ground and around the root, underground to where the man in black stood laughing. The man assumed the root was eating Rathsmus, but the root, being used to bugs, did not bother with one more. It wanted the tasty morsel in the bubble.

Rathsmus came to the surface just behind the man in black and crawled up his boot, over the top and down into the boot to find soft flesh. He found the soft skin between the man's toes and slowly injected his poison into the skin to numb any sensation of pain. Then, he slowly burrowed deeper and deeper into the foot. He laid a few eggs here, then went deeper and laid a few more and then deeper still. It wasn't long before over a thousand eggs were laid and he decided he should leave this host. The eggs that had been laid were magically enhanced and when laid would grow one hundred times faster than normal. Rathsmus burrowed underground and waited.

The man in black stopped laughing. His foot felt funny. He stomped it as if to wake it up. Then he fell to one knee. His other leg was feeling strange now also. He pulled up the robe to look at his leg. When he did, he got sick. His leg was infested with tiny worms. They were eating him alive. He tried to pull off his boot, but when he did his foot stayed in the boot and a stump of his leg was all there was. The tingling feeling was now in his arms as tiny worms were falling out of the sleeves of his robe. Blood dripped from his nose, ears and mouth as tiny worms burrowed into his head. When they reached his brain, he fell dead. The parasite that was Rathsmus crawled back to the surface and killed all of the tiny worms. It would not be good to have a parasite that dangerous loose in the world. Once started, it would be unstoppable. Once more he became a man and magically pulled all of the debris into a pile and incinerated it to destroy all of the evidence. Nothing was left. No magician, no worms, just a metal staff with black egg-shaped rock mounted on it. When the man in black died, so did the magic black root. The bubble surfaced and, as Rathsmus picked up the black staff, the bubble engulfed him and he returned home.

Rathsmus awoke on the table of air. The sisters were in a circle around him and Amoss was standing beside Crystal. "Amazing", was all Amoss could say.

Rathsmus sat up on the bed. He had on a gray robe and in one hand he held a carved serpent staff with a yellow stone mounted on it. In the other hand he held a twisted metal staff with a black egg-shaped stone on it. "How did you come by this,

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my son", Amoss said as he lifted the metal staff. "I found it in a dream." "Not without finding the dragon master holding onto it", Amoss said. "Well, there was a man with it but he was dead when I took it from him." "You did not find him, he found you. When you went into your dream state he brought you to him." "It is the dream that I had before, only I was never able to see the end. It always stopped before I could confront him, but this time it continued." "He could not take you until your transformation was complete. He was only the first to try for you. Now that your metamorphosis is done, you are a target for the evil lords. How did you kill the dragon master?"

"I infected him with a parasite that eats you from the inside out, by the time he realized what had been done, it was too late. I destroyed all of the evidence and returned with his staff." Amoss just nodded at the possibility of the story Rathsmus had told. "Why did you call him the dragon master?" Rathsmus asked. "Because, with this staff he controls all of the dragons, or at least he did. Now you do." "I've never seen a dragon in my life, there is no such thing", Rathsmus stated this as fact. "Oh, you don't think dragons exist? Here, remove the egg from the staff", Amoss told him. "You mean this stone?" "That is no stone. It is a dragon's egg."

Rathsmus removed the egg from the staff. The egg slowly changed color from black to silver. "Ah, just as I thought. It was a silver dragon's egg, very powerful", Amoss stated with a smile. Rathsmus just looked at him. Amoss took the egg from Rathsmus and said, "follow me and I will show you a dragon." They went down a hall to a large metal door. "Please, pull on the chain", Amoss asked Rathsmus as he pointed to a loop of chain that came out of the ceiling. Rathsmus grabbed one side of the loop, but he couldn't budge it. "Try the other side", Amoss said. Rathsmus grabbed the other side and it pulled easily. As he pulled on one side, the other side went up into the ceiling. Suddenly, the door started to open. When the door was completely open, Amoss motioned for Rathsmus to stop. The sun was shining into the opening. This door went outside! "I didn't realize we were this close to the surface", Rathsmus said. "This is a crater in the middle of the mountain range. It used to be a volcano, but it erupted a few thousand years ago and you can only find it from the air, or if you fall into it, which doesn't happen very often."

Amoss led the group out into the crater. The sun felt warm. There was a small altar made of rock in front of them and Amoss set the egg on it. A high pitched squeal came from the altar and then another. "Hand me the metal staff", Amoss told Rathsmus. "I left it in the other room." "Well, go get it and hurry up." Rathsmus ran to get the staff. First he grabbed just the metal staff and then decided to take the serpent staff as well, and then ran back to Amoss. A shadow blotted out the sun as an object of immense proportions dropped from above. When it landed, the ground shook.

"Who are you?" said a very large silver dragon that stood behind the altar. "I am Amoss. This is Rathsmus, destroyer of the evil dragon master." "Do you have proof?" asked the dragon. "Only the egg on the altar and the staff that it was mounted on." Amoss lifted up Rathsmus' arm that held the metal staff. "You, destroyer of the evil dragon master, bring forth the twisted staff." Rathsmus looked at Amoss who nodded for him to do as instructed. Rathsmus held the staff

horizontally in front of him, bowed and held the staff out as far as he could for the dragon to inspect.

The dragon grabbed the staff from Rathsmus in its large mouth as if to taste it. It bent the staff and twisted it into a useless piece of junk. "That was indeed the staff of the evil dragon master. I have felt the wrath and pain inflicted by it on more than one occasion. I also felt the death of the one who used to own it. It was a gloriously painful death", the dragon said showing it's teeth in an almost smile. "Dragonkind is forever in your debt for killing our tormentor."

The dragon reached out and touched Rathsmus on his chest with its front claw. His chest felt hot and then it cooled. Rathsmus opened the front of his robe and saw a tattoo of a silver dragon. "We are forever connected now. You only need to think of me and we will be able to communicate. My help is always at your disposal. You have taken a rough path by killing the man in black. You have made many an enemy, very powerful enemies. But, you have made many powerful friends as well. I must go and pass the good news on to others of my kind. In ten days there will be a celebration in your honor. You must be there to accept the dragon leader's thanks. I will come here to bring you and your friends. Be ready." The dragon lifted the silver dragon egg from the altar and leapt into the sky. In seconds it was gone.

Amoss went to the now junk staff and returned to his home. The rest of the group followed him inside. Rathsmus pulled the chain that closed the door. "We have a lot of work to do in ten days. We must prepare Rathsmus for the meeting with the dragons", Amoss said. "What do you mean?" Rathsmus asked. Amoss motioned to a table, "Please sit down, all of you. I'll be right back." Amoss left them and went down a hallway. About twenty minutes later he returned with a large, leather bound book. "This is a book of etiquette when dealing with dragons. You did well on your first meeting with a dragon. Your next meeting will be with many types of dragons and you cannot afford to insult any of them." "How many types of dragons are there?" asked Rathsmus. "Many", replied Amoss. "Each dragon has a certain characteristic that makes it easy to tell its type. For instance, a silver dragon is silver, and so on. There are also gold, black, white, red, blue, green, gray, orange, yellow, and brown dragons. These are easy to tell. Then, there are others that are a little more difficult. Crystal dragons have scales of diamond crystal. Most of them were hunted for their monetary value. Then, there are wood dragons. They are multi-colored and can blend into a forest making it difficult to see them until you get within ten feet of it. There are snow dragons, they are similar to white dragons, but they have blue streaks which allows them to blend into snowy landscapes. They also have large feet to help them walk in the snow. The sand dragons live in the desert and have scales that look like sand. Then there are water dragons. They live in the water. Their scales are much smaller and look more like a fish's scales."

Rathsmus listened intently and took it all in. They talked of dragons the rest of the day. Explaining how to talk, when to bow and when to disagree, which was always done politely. The sisters made the evening meal and went to bed after more talk of dragons. Rathsmus, Korg and Amoss kept talking into the early hours of the morning. Finally, Amoss stopped and said it was time for bed.

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In the morning Amoss was bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Running from room to room humming a strange little tune to himself. Korg stopped him in between his humming. "You said that you knew of a tribe of Mineotaur that was not far from here. If it's possible, I would like to visit them." Amoss put his hand to his chin as if in thought. "Yes, I think that would be a very good idea. In fact, if we leave now we could be there before the evening meal." "Actually, we could get there before noon, if you don't mind flying a dragon", Rathsmus said. "No! I don't think you should ask the dragons to fly you around so soon after meeting them, you don't want to make them angry", gasped Amoss. "Don't worry. I wasn't going to ask them to fly us around. I was going to do it", Rathsmus replied.

The sisters were asked to stay behind. Mineotaur can get rowdy around beautiful women; five would definitely cause problems. Besides, someone had to watch the children. The sisters agreed because of the first reason, not the second. Men could take care of children just as well as women. The three men left through the door into the crater. Rathsmus transformed into a giant silver dragon. Amoss and Korg climbed onto his back and the trio flew away following Amoss' directions. Within minutes, they were flying over the lands of the Mineotaur.

Rathsmus landed and let his passengers slide off, then transformed to his original form. Amoss still couldn't believe he had kept his original form through the metamorphosis. It was supposed to be impossible. Except for the gray hair and facial hair, he was the same man. "Which way now?" asked Rathsmus. Amoss pointed in the direction he wanted them to go and jumped into the lead. After about a thousand feet, Korg's ears perked up. You could see that he was listening and getting more tense by the minute. Suddenly, eight large Mineotaur surrounded them. Not as large as Korg, but still larger than either Amoss or Rathsmus. "Hello!" yelled Amoss, "I was wondering how close we would get before you stopped us."

"Amoss", said one of the Mineotaur, "I didn't realize it was you. We saw a silver dragon and assumed that it was the evil dragon master." "Well, you don't have to worry about him again. My friend here", Amoss pointed over his shoulder with his thumb, "killed him yesterday and freed the dragons from his evil work." The Mineotaur looked past Rathsmus to Korg. "There will be great rejoicing that a Mineotaur killed the evil dragon master." Korg shook his head and pointed toward Rathsmus. "Oh, well, then the friend of a Mineotaur. If you killed the dragon master you are a friend of ours too. Come, we'll bring you to our camp. By the way, where is the dragon?" Rathsmus started to say that he was the dragon when Amoss told them that it had left after dropping them off. The Mineotaur nodded and then led them toward the camp with the other Mineotaur following behind.

"By the way", Amoss said to the lead Mineotaur, "This is Korg and he is Rathsmus." The Mineotaur nodded to them. "This is Talrond, we met a few years back during a land skirmish between his people and a group called the Reotan; he tells me that they were delicious. What was left of the Reotan ran away. They tried to eat me but they found out that I was too old and tough. After that we became friends and we visit each other from time to time." "I'll bet there's more to that story than you just told", Rathsmus said.

They walked through the woods for a couple of minutes until they came to a clearing. In the middle of the clearing was a small campfire. Hanging over the fire

was a small animal on a spit. “Where is your village? I thought we were going to it?” asked Amoss. “Our village was destroyed three months ago by the dragon master. It was leveled. We were lucky that we were notified by some friends of the impending attack, so no one died but the village cannot be rebuilt on that land again, at least not for a long time. They attacked at night so we could see the fires from a long ways off.”

“Now, I am sorry for what I must do, because we were great friends. But desperate times call for desperate measures.” “What do you mean?” asked Amoss. But Rathsmus had a feeling that something was wrong. Quick as a wink, he surrounded the three of them with a shield of air. The Mineotaur pointed their sharp weapons at them, but the shield protected them. “You should have believed me, Talrond. I am your friend. Rathsmus, show him your tattoo.” Rathsmus bared his chest and showed the silver dragon tattoo to Talrond. “This was given to him by a silver dragon for his actions in destroying the dragon master.” The Mineotaur just looked at it. “I am sorry that you do not believe me. I will not hold this against you; I do understand your position. I am sorry for your village, but we must leave now before the situation escalates and someone gets hurt. Rathsmus?”

Rathsmus nodded his agreement. The shield around them widened to accommodate a dragon. Rathsmus transformed himself into a dragon. Korg and Amoss climbed onto his back and Rathsmus leapt into the air and was gone. The shield dissipated as they got out of range of the Mineotaur on the ground, who just stood in disbelief that a man turned into a dragon in front of their eyes.

Over the next few days Rathsmus studied about the dragons. How to act around them, their past lore, and some magic abilities they have. He wondered if he turned himself into a dragon, if he would have their same powers; he assumed that he would. Crystal came to him during one of his study sessions. “We need to forge a new sword for Korg. Between you and Amoss we should have enough magical power to make quite a sword, even better than his first sword.” Rathsmus agreed to help.

They went into a deep cavern under the main rooms. Amoss was already there. A big blow furnace had been built in the cavern. “We need some intense heat in the furnace to melt the metal,” said Amoss. Rathsmus transformed into the silver dragon. He blew hot flames into the furnace. Within minutes the metal was combining in a molten mix. “Now we need to let it cool off so it will set,” said Amoss. Rathsmus looked at the metal and blew a mixture of body chemicals that cooled the metal into a solid chunk. “Well, maybe we don’t have to wait,” Amoss said as Rathsmus finished cooling it off. Rathsmus returned to his human form, as the job now was to hammer the metal into a blade. Day and night the three men took turns pounding the blade, heating it and cooling it for strength, polishing it, and finally honing it to razor sharpness. Of course, during it all they were adding magic to the blade. The blade would never dull, never break, and if used on a creature like his last blade had been used it would not be damaged. It was an excellent blade. Korg was very proud to carry it. Then it was Rathsmus’ turn to ask questions of Amoss’ magical ability. It had been eating at him as to how Amoss had escaped the bindings of air that first day they had come here. Amoss had explained much about magic and how he had sensed it in Rathsmus. When he first saw that he was dealing

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with a magic user, he made a magic shell around himself and when the bindings of air had been placed around him they were actually around the shell. When the shell had been dispersed the bindings of air fell away with it. "The trick doesn't usually work more than once in a battle with an experienced sorcerer, but it can give you the upper hand when he least expects it. I would have hurt you big time if I hadn't seen my daughters and lost concentration. I never thought that I would see them again. I have been a fool in the past. I thought that my safety was more important than my family. I was wrong and I have you to thank for bringing them back to me. I have seen how this world has become more evil because no one will stand up to the evil doers. My daughters would not have been captured, if I had helped them instead of running away", Amoss said sadly. "That's not necessarily true", said Rathsmus. "They told me the story of how they were captured and I don't think anything could have been done to change that. Besides, it has fulfilled the Oracle's reading of the future; they have been reunited to fight again. This time they have two metamorphs to protect them." Amoss agreed with a smile.

Then came the tenth day, a knock on the crater wall signaled the return of the silver dragon. Rathsmus opened the door with the chain and they all went for a meeting with the dragons. At first two of the sisters were going to stay behind with the children, but the dragon insisted on bringing them along. Dragons love to have children around, and you don't want to insult a dragon. So everyone went, children and all. A couple of other dragons had come along to help bring Rathsmus' friends and family.

"I did not introduce myself the last time I was here, Rathsmus. I was quite flustered with the news you told." Rathsmus just smiled and nodded. "My name is Krondok. I am the keeper of the seals for the silver dragon King and Queen." Krondok introduced five other dragons as well. There was Shindok of the red dragons, Fildorn of the blue dragons, Chantir of the crystal dragons, Blanktar of the wood dragons, and Gontor of the gold dragons. After the introductions were made, Rathsmus was shown the gondolas that the dragons would carry with him and his friends inside. One by one, a dragon would leap into the air, grab the handle that ran over the gondola and flyaway. The gondolas looked like a stagecoach with a heavy bar over them, but there were no wheels; they were very comfortable.

After a few minutes of sitting and waiting for their trip to be over, Rathsmus felt a sort of mental tugging at his mind. He concentrated on the source of the tugging and realized he could hear the dragon trying to talk to him. It was not an audible type of hearing, but a mental hearing that no one else in the gondola could hear. "So, you can hear me Rathsmus, I was about to give up on you," said Krondok. "Well, it took me awhile to realize that you were trying. Is there anything I can do for you?" "Not really, I just wanted to let you know that it will be about half an hour before we reach the doorway and about another half hour after that before we get to the meeting place." "What doorway? If you don't mind me asking, that is." "Oh, it's ok, if you killed the dragon master you will be required to know of it anyway. And, if you didn't, you could be in very grave danger tonight. You will have to prove yourself. Many of the dragons do not believe you. They think it is a trick of the dragon master to lure more of the dragons into his reach. When they are on the other side of the doorway he cannot control them. Once they are on the same

side, he can take control of them and make them return to his side anytime he wants them to do his bidding. The doorway separates your world from mine and other worlds also. Rathsmus was surprised for a minute. "Does the doorway have anything to do with the cornerstones?"

The mind link with Krondok was cut off immediately when he asked about the cornerstone. It was cut off so fast that it actually hurt Rathsmus. "What's wrong, Rathsmus? Asked Amoss. "Apparently, I asked the wrong question of Krondok." "What do you mean? You weren't talking to anyone." "Krondok made a mind link with me and we were talking to each other." "Krondok must like you. Dragons do not mind link with humans unless they like them. What did you ask him?" "He was telling me of the doorway that separates the dragon world from this one and others. I asked him if it had anything to do with the cornerstones and he cut me off from the mind link." Amoss gasped and sat back away from Rathsmus. "What do you know of the cornerstones?" Amoss insisted. "Not much, only what I found in an old magic book that a previous instructor of mine had. That was how I summoned the sisters and found Sheena and Korg. They promised to teach me the secret of the cornerstones, but every time I brought it up they said that I wasn't ready."

"That's because they don't know the secret to teach you. Sheena was fighting one of the evil lords and was sent to another world by the cornerstone; she didn't use it on purpose. Even the evil lord didn't know what it was or how it was used. I went into hiding as did the sisters. I didn't know they had been reunited until you and Sheena were married. By then, I thought it was best if they believed that I was still dead. They need you to destroy the evil lords and free this world and the others. They think you are mentioned in some oracle prophecy, which might be true, but I don't necessarily believe in prophecy. Although, if I believed in a prophecy, seeing what you have done, I would have to believe in theirs." Rathsmus thought about what Amoss had said. "Why was Krondok so upset when I asked about the cornerstone?" "On occasion, the doorway will open by itself and occupants of the other worlds can come into this world. It makes the evil ones very angry that they cannot control it to conquer the other worlds, as well as this one. The occupants of the other worlds seem to be more easily controlled by the evil ones, so they really want to know the secret to controlling the cornerstones. The dragons, apparently, know how to control them whenever they want and would be very suspicious of anyone who asked too many questions about them. You should be more cautious of the questions you ask." Rathsmus agreed. He tried a couple of times to contact Krondok but the dragon would not answer. Rathsmus could feel him listening, but he just would not answer.

The gondolas came to a thud as the dragons landed. Rathsmus opened the door and took a step out onto the ground. Standing in front of him was a cornerstone. From the looks of the surrounding area, it was not the same one he had used to summon the sisters. Krondok moved slowly in front of Rathsmus, as if studying his prey, waiting to see if it had any surprises before he killed it. "What do you know of the cornerstones?" asked Krondok. "Only that they can be used to transport you to other worlds. I have used them before." "Ha! You are human, you could not even begin to understand how to use them, much less actually possess enough magical ability to use one without burning yourself to ash. Never! You are a

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liar! I should have known. You are probably lying about killing the dragon master as well. I have lost much credibility with the other dragons in my world because of you, but I will gain much back when I deliver your dead carcass to the meeting.”

Rathsmus tried several times to stop Krondok during his tirade, but Krondok just ignored his attempts. Rathsmus was trying to control his anger, he concentrated on becoming a dragon again and, within seconds, Krondok was looking at a duplicate of himself. Krondok’s words stopped suddenly as he gasped at what was staring back at him. “I am a metamorph, not just a sorcerer. I used the cornerstone to find Sheena and Korg and bring them back to this world. I not only have destroyed the one you call the dragon master, but I have freed the dragon egg that was part of the magic staff and brought you the remains of that staff. I have destroyed other evil lords whose names I don’t even know, any more than I knew who the dragon master was. If you do not believe me, there is nothing I can do to prove myself further. Let me and my friends return to our home or I will prove my power to you personally!”

Krondok bowed his head. “I am sorry for doubting you, but you must realize the surprise we all feel and the fear that this is a trap. The dragon master has tried ploys such as this before. Once, it almost worked. I would not like it if I was the one that it did work on, and I was to blame for turning all dragon kind over to the evil lords.” Rathsmus returned to his human form. “If you still wish to bring us to the meeting, I am willing to go with you. If you still do not believe me, I would be grateful if you would bring us home. It is your choice.” Rathsmus bowed, turned and walked back to his gondola. Amoss followed him. No one else had left their gondola, but they could hear the conversation. When the door closed on the gondola, Krondok leapt into the air, grabbed the gondola, activated the cornerstone and flew into the doorway to his world. The other dragons followed. When the last dragon entered the doorway, it closed. Rathsmus could feel the magic of the cornerstone and knew they were going to the world of the dragons.

17

Four More

“Why are we here?” one man said to the other. The second man just shrugged his shoulders. “I’ve never been summoned here before. My orders always came by messenger. Now, here I am”, the first man said again. The second man looked at him, “Well, we’ll find out soon enough.” A third and fourth man entered the dark cave. They walked up to the first two men and introduced themselves. “I am Sherdin, this is Dorkon. He doesn’t speak much, but when he does, listen”, he said with a wide grin that showed dirty teeth and a few spaces where teeth should have been. He was a dirty, sweaty man. “I am Cronar”, said the first man. “I am Grindal”, said the second man. Cronar was a tall, thin man, not very muscular. Grindal was of medium height and was more muscular than he looked. Dorkon and Grindal were of similar build but Dorkon was less muscular. Dorkon was as dirty as Sherdin.

Grindal calmed down his nerves immediately when the two new arrivals showed up. Now Dorkon was looking around nervously. “Do you know why we were summoned?” asked Sherdin. Cronar just shook his head and looked around the cave. There was only one entrance into this cave. The cave wasn’t very big, but there was more room than the four of them needed, unless they were staying for a while. It was a dark, dirty cave, one that Cronar was sure Sherdin and his friend would feel very comfortable in.

Grindal was the only other lord that Cronar had ever met, at least, as far as he knew. His master tried to keep them apart as much as possible, until now. To bring four of them together now could mean a serious threat to the cause, or maybe the cause was doing so good they were needed only to help on minor details. He knew that he was not one of the best lords his master had. He was not any good at leading armies. He was best at setting traps and scheming revenge. Grindal had been called upon a couple of times to serve, once in a minor skirmish and another time to kill some witches. He wouldn’t talk about it, only that it had happened. The dirty ones looked more like hound dogs than leaders, who knew?

The ground shook and the sound of rock rubbing on rock filled the cave. An opening at the back of the cave was now there. A reddish-orange glow came from the opening. The four men walked through the opening to see why they had been summoned. They followed a path that wound down deeper and deeper under the ground. Red-hot rock and lava poured from holes in the side of the cave and made rivers that gathered into a lake of molten rock. The path led out to the middle of the lake to a small island. They continued to follow the path to the island; occasionally, they would have to dodge pieces of red-hot rock that would be spit up from the lake of lava as it bubbled. They made it to the island in time to see the path they had just crossed get swallowed by the lake.

“So much for changing my mind and going home” said Cronar with a weak smile. The others just grunted agreement and followed the path to the other

side of the island where it came to an abrupt end. They stood there and looked out at the molten lake. "What now?" asked Sherdin. "That," said Grindal, as he pointed out to the lake.

A large boat was being paddled by a row of oars on each side of the large hull. The boat was made of wood and the lava was charring the sides, but it was not burning. On the highest part of the deck stood a red dragon. In front of him was a large kettledrum and in each hand was a large bone. The dragon kept time by pounding on the drum with the bones. The dragon was as much a prisoner as the humans that rowed the large boat. A big black collar was hooked to a chain to keep the dragon from escaping.

One of the humans fell off his bench and disrupted the rowing. The dragon was yelling for him to get up, but the man was too tired and old to get back on the bench. The dragon scooped his long tail under the body of the man and flipped him into the air. As he landed in the lava, screams of agony escaped his mouth. The body sizzled and caught fire almost immediately and slowly sunk out of sight. The smell of burnt flesh and hair seemed to hang in the air around the boat. The dragon laughed merrily as he watched the body burn. The stench almost made Cronar puke, but he held on to his stomach. When the boat got to shore, the dragon yelled to the four men. "Get on and don't disturb anything. The master is waiting for you." The dragon sneered at them with an evil laugh as they climbed aboard.

The heat was almost unbearable as the lava lake radiated heat at them from all around. Within minutes the island was gone from view and they were entering a tunnel. The dragon just kept beating the pace for the rowers on the drum. About fifteen minutes later, the boat pulled over to one side where a set of stairs rose out of the lava onto a landing. "Get out now and follow the path marked with blood, or you will die," said the dragon. When they had gotten out of the boat the dragon beat the drum and the boat worked its way down the tunnel. The dragon was laughing as if he had gone mad, which he probably had.

"I don't like this," said Grindal. "Well, I don't like it either," said Cronar, "but we don't have a lot of choice. Let's go." Sherdin spoke up, "Let me lead the way. The dragon said to follow the path marked with blood." The others eagerly let him lead the way because they didn't want to be in the lead if they walked onto some strange and deadly creature. At the top of the stairs was a large landing, larger than it looked from the boat. There were ten paths that opened off from the landing, not including the stairway that led them here. Of the ten paths, six had doors. The four without doors looked as if, at one time, they had had them.

"Which way do we go?" asked Cronar. "The path marked with blood, is what the dragon said. We look for the one marked by blood," replied Sherdin. They checked each path, first the ones without doors; no one wanted to see what was behind the doors, unless they didn't have any choice. The paths without doors were clear, no marks of blood. Two were full of spider webs; no one had gone down those paths in a long time. They tried each door, one at a time. Most were clear except for spider webs. Three doors fell off their hinges when they pulled on them and one was stuck solid. One had an old skeleton with a sword and shield. "We should break down the door that is stuck" suggested Cronar, "That has to be the correct path. None of the other paths had any blood marks." Sherdin didn't

completely agree with that line of thinking but decided that it wouldn't hurt to break the door down and see what was there.

"Dorkon, break the door down," said Sherdin. Dorkon nodded, drew his battleaxe and started to chop at the door. When a hole was made in the door, a stench came through that would have curdled fresh milk in seconds. Everyone had to hold their nose and back away from the door. "You might as well stop chopping at that door," said Cronar, "I wouldn't go down in that hole if it was full of fresh blood marks." "That's it!" yelled Sherdin. "The dragon said to go down the path that was marked with blood. He didn't say fresh blood. If someone was killed in battle and the body was left there you could say it was marked with blood."

Just then they heard something at the door that Dorkon had been trying to break down. A slimy nose was breathing at the hole in the door. It was sniffing to see what had made the hole. "Let's go!" yelled Cronar, as he ran for the path with the skeleton. The others quickly followed when a claw started scratching at the hole and a growling noise came from the other side. Every now and then they would come to a split in the path. A skeleton was always on one side of the path or the other and they would follow that path. At one point way up the path they had just come from, they heard a tremendous crash and a howl. They only hoped the creature that just broke loose would not come after them. From that point on every noise they heard made them pick up their pace a little more. If they heard a howl, they would run for a distance.

Suddenly, the path came to a dead end. Several skeletons were scattered around. They were running because they had heard a howl that was particularly close. They ran right into the wall at the path's end. As they hit the wall, they bounced off it and into each other and then onto the floor. When they hit the floor, they hit it with such force that the floor gave way and they fell through the floor and were knocked unconscious when they hit the bottom.

The Dragon Council

Rathsmus awoke as the gondola landed. Amoss was awake now also, who knows if he had fallen asleep as Rathsmus had. Rathsmus reached for the door handle and felt a barrier. Someone didn't want them out just yet. Outside the gondolas, the dragons that had carried them were talking to two other dragons. The two new dragons would look at the gondolas, then turn to the other dragons and talk, then look back at the gondolas again. Finally, all of the dragons nodded agreement about whatever they had been talking about. Krondok leapt into the air and flew off. The others just stood around talking and watching the gondolas. Gontor, of the gold dragons was off by himself watching the gondolas and thinking far off thoughts, which is something he did a lot of, when he noticed off in the distance a dot in the sky that seemed to be getting larger. Then he recognized the shape. "Kragdar! Kragdar is coming!" he yelled. That got the attention of all of the dragons. They leapt onto a gondola and lurched into the sky to try to outrun the flying black menace.

Kragdar was a black dragon. No one said it to his face, for fear of death, but black dragons were considered to be evil. Kragdar was the largest black dragon known in this world, and only two or three other dragons of any type were as large as he was, but Kragdar was mean. He was probably the meanest dragon around and, with his size, he was a very formidable opponent. Even the council of dragons disliked Kragdar, although they would not say it aloud for fear of him hearing.

The dragons flew as fast as they could, but carrying the gondolas slowed them down too much. Even without the gondolas they would have had a hard time out flying the large black dragon. As Kragdar got closer, his cronies were seen flying in formation behind him. With his large body leading the way, they could fly directly behind him at the same speed with only half the effort. As they closed in on the gondolas, the black dragons broke ranks and charged them. They did not attack the dragons carrying the gondolas because there were laws about attacking defenseless dragons, and carrying gondolas definitely made them defenseless. Within minutes the gondolas were on fire from the black dragons' attack. With no other choice, the dragons dropped the gondolas and retreated. They knew that if they stayed to fight, Kragdar would kill them as easily as squishing a bug under their foot. The black dragons let them escape, for they didn't want them, they wanted what was in the gondolas.

Rathsmus heard the dragons' thoughts and knew he and his friends were in great danger. If this dragon was evil, then perhaps, he would recognize the dragon master and give him a chance to let his friends escape. "Stay here, out of sight," he told Amoss. Amoss didn't understand why at first, but when the gondola struck the ground he knew there was trouble. Amoss was almost knocked unconscious. The biggest problem was Korg. If he broke out of his gondola, he would try to fight. He would not last long. Quickly, Rathsmus transformed into the man in black, the

dragon master. He broke loose from the gondola and quickly sealed up the other gondolas to keep the sisters and Korg safe. When the black dragons saw the dragon master, gasps and “OH’s” came from their mouths. Then, he felt a presence behind him; he knew Kragdar was behind him. Without even thinking he became a flea, and just in time because Kragdar slammed the ground where the dragon master had been standing. Then, the dragon scorched the ground with his breath of fire until the surface of the ground had melted into a pool of lava. Kragdar laughed, thinking he had destroyed another enemy. He didn’t like the dragon master any more than any other dragon, but he liked using the power the dragon master gave him over the other dragons. He no longer needed him.

A sharp pain struck the black dragon in his foot. Then it radiated up his leg to his chest. The dragon clutched his chest with both front claws and yelled as loud as he could, with its head pointing straight up to the sky, breathing fire. He fell over on his side with a ground shaking crash, dead. Shortly after, the dragon master appeared. “I will not tolerate disloyalty from any of my assistants. You will leave this place now. I will contact you when you are needed. Do as you are told or end up as Kragdar.”

Without hesitation, the dragons leapt into the air and disappeared over the horizon. Rathsmus returned to his normal shape and went back to the gondola to see if Amoss was all right. Amoss climbed out before Rathsmus got close. “You are very powerful indeed, my son.” Rathsmus just smiled and went to the other gondolas. As he removed the seal on the gondolas, Korg came crashing out of one as another exploded with Crystal and Dalna standing back-to-back ready to attack anything that looked dangerous. Between them were two baskets with their children in them. When Korg realized that they were in no danger, he put his sword back in its sheath and walked toward Rathsmus and Amoss. The other three gondolas opened as Daphney, Sheena, and Serena looked out to see what danger existed. They brought out their babies and walked to Rathsmus who was trying to explain to Crystal what had happened, and about the very large, dead dragon next to them.

Within minutes, the sky was filled with dragons of all colors, except black, searching the sky for the black dragons and Kragdar. A large silver dragon landed in front of Rathsmus; it was Krondok. “I see you have met Kragdar,” he said. “Only for a minute. He didn’t have much to say,” said Rathsmus with a smile. “You are lucky”, said Krondok, “He was very boring to talk to.” Rathsmus laughed. “You have done us another great service, Rathsmus. The death of Kragdar was second in want of the Council of Dragons only to the death of the dragon master. Now with both of them dead, the Council can breath much easier. Although they would not say it out loud, it is the truth. How did you kill Kragdar?” “Let’s just say that he didn’t have the heart to finish the battle.” Krondok accepted his answer with a questioning look, however, he didn’t think the Council would.

“We will bring you to the Council now. They are eagerly awaiting your arrival.” “If you don’t mind, I think we would prefer a different mode of transportation than the gondolas,” Rathsmus stated. Krondok looked at him questioningly. Rathsmus gathered his group together, the air shimmered around them as a ball of air surrounded them and lifted off the ground. “Lead the way,”

Rathsmus said as he motioned to the dragon and bowed. The dragon leapt into the air and led the way to the gathering of the Council of Dragons.

Cronar was the first to awaken. He had fallen on top of Sherdin and was not hurt too badly. Sherdin, on the other hand, was not feeling well at all. He did not believe anything was broken, however, his bones and muscles hurt. Dorkon was hurt worst of all; there was a gash over his forehead and he couldn't move his left arm, it was probably broken. Grindal was limping on his right leg, but it wasn't broken, just sprained. They all looked as if they had been cleaning a chimney. They were covered in black and gray ash. They had fallen through an old volcano vent shaft that had plugged with ash during an eruption of this volcano, but that was many years ago and the vent shaft had never been unplugged, until now. Hot air hit them as the now unplugged vent gave a new escape route for the heat of the semi-dormant volcano. They followed the direction that the heat was coming from and hoped it was the right direction. It wasn't long before they came to an open cavern. It was so hot; their clothing was steaming from the sweat that had soaked them up to this point. Suddenly, they could feel no more heat. It was as if someone had thrown water on a small fire to put it out and the heat was gone.

"So, you finally came to me," said a voice that came from inside their heads. "I'm sorry," said Cronar, "But we got lost in the cave." "Yes, I know. You are fools. I know everything that you have done to get here. You have freed a very dangerous creature that, very probably, will kill many of my servants before it can be captured again. You were told to follow the third door from the right and you did not. You opened every door and freed the Manchain. "Sir," cut in Grindal, "We were told by the dragon to follow the path marked by blood." "What!" yelled the voice in their heads. "I will take care of the dragon, but right now, I have a job for all of you to do.

I have many assistants in this world. My most powerful assistants did not check in with me when I summoned them and a few are reported to be dead. My most powerful assistant is Lord Tolman. He was in the North Mountains with a large army and he just disappeared. I can still sense his life force, but I cannot tell where he is. The twins, Faldor and Baldor, I believe were killed in the South Horn Mountain Range. I need you to go see for sure. And the dragon master is missing. As you have seen firsthand the dragons are becoming less reliable, which is an indication that he is either dead or in big trouble. I was going to send you each individually on a separate task for me, but seeing you in action, I'm sure you would all fail. So, I will send you as a group. First, you will travel to the Northern Mountains to look for Tolman. Before you go, you will talk to the last man that saw him. Next, you will go to the Hongar and talk to General Zandir. He will tell you how to find the twins, Faldor and Baldor. Then I want you to find the dragon master. And, finally, you will search for the five witches. They have a new male apprentice whom I believe to be the cause of the disappearance of my assistants. You have two weeks to accomplish these tasks."

Cronar went white, Sherdin almost fell over and Grindal sat down on a rock and quickly stood up again, the rock was very hot. Dorkon just stood there, he wasn't really paying any attention to what was being said. "Two weeks is barely enough time to complete even one of those tasks; we could never complete all four

tasks,” said Cronar. “No, we couldn’t,” agreed Sherdin and Grindal. “As I said, I was going to send you individually, but since I cannot depend on you individually, I must send you as a group. You will complete these tasks or you will be punished; however I am not unreasonable. I know, in your present condition, you could never hope to do what I ask.” “In our present condition?” asked Cronar. “Of course. To complete these tasks you would need the strength of a horse, the speed of a bird and the brains of a human. Well, in your case you need something better than what you have, the surefootedness of a great cat.”

Suddenly Dorkon bent over in pain. He fell to the floor and lay on his side in the fetal position trembling and drooling. His butt started getting larger, as if it was swelling. His pants gave out as he got too big for them. His legs changed; they grew hair. His feet changed to that of a giant cat with enormous claws. The bump that grew out of his butt became the body of a horse and the legs were the legs of a horse. The screams during this process were unbearable to Sherdin. Watching his friend turn into some strange creature was almost more than he could take. He looked around to see who was doing this to his friend. He wanted revenge against this person. Wings started to develop on the back of the horse’s body. Finally, it was done. Dorkon was now part bird, part horse, part great cat and part human. Dorkon’s body remained from his head to his waist. From there, the creature’s body continued. He was similar to a centurion, but with wings and front legs of a cat. Dorkon just lay there trying to recover from his ordeal. Sherdin was just about to say something when he heard someone laughing. It was his master. Now, he realized that the laughter had been there during the process of turning Dorkon into this creature, but Dorkon’s screams had masked the sound. He looked around and saw Cronar and Grindal grab their stomachs and fall to the floor. Then, he realized that he was also in pain and was on the floor watching the others change shape.

As Rathsmus followed Krondok, he started to feel a little uneasy about meeting the Council of Dragons. What if they didn’t believe him and decided to kill the whole group? Could he protect his friends from the dragons? They started up a small mountain and, Rathsmus noticed that just over the other side the sky was lit up as if the sun was just going down over the horizon. He knew that wasn’t so. The sun had been gone for over half an hour and it was dark. That had to be the Council of Dragons. As they got to the top of the mountain, he could see that the valley below was littered with groups of dragons, each one with their own personal bonfire.

At the head of all of the groups was another group, with the largest bonfire. That had to be the Council itself. Krondok led him directly in front of the Council. The bonfire was behind the Council. Rathsmus was between the Council and the groups of other dragons. Being between all of those dragons did not exactly make him feel safe. Krondok went to the council and said a few words before returning to his own group. The dragons that had gone to save him and his family from the black dragons were now just returning to their own groups.

A large red dragon, a close second in size to the black dragon, Kragdar, spoke first. “Will the human, Rathsmus, step forward.” Rathsmus reluctantly released the bubble that had carried him and his family here. He walked about ten feet toward the Council and stopped. He then bowed to each dragon on the Council

individually, as Amoss had instructed him to do, trying hard to give the same exact bow to each. If any of the dragons felt he had not been bowed to as long or as deep as another he could be insulted and that could be dangerous. There was a representative of each type of dragon on the Council, even a black dragon. "I am Rathsmus, destroyer of the dragon master, destroyer of Kragdar, the evil black dragon."

The black dragon on the Council sucked in a deep breath that sounded like a windstorm and stood on its back feet. "Kolder!" Yelled the red dragon. "Let him speak. Everyone here knew Kragdar was evil, it's just that no one ever dared to say it out loud for fear of Kragdar's vengeance." The black dragon returned to its original position of lying down, and let out the deep breath that it had taken, dark smoke spilled from its nostrils as it slowly let out its deadly weapon. Rathsmus had no doubt that if the red dragon had not stopped it, he would be a pile of ash right now.

Each dragon, so it was said, had its own type of weapon. Some breathed fire, some ice, some acid, and some a combination. No matter which they breathed on you, you were sure to die.

"I am Belchar, head of the Council of Dragons, King of the red dragons." Rathsmus bowed again. "You have been asked here because you destroyed the dragon master." "Supposedly destroyed!" yelled Kolder. Belchar looked over at the black dragon. He did not like being interrupted, especially by Kolder. "I feel it is quite certain as many of the dragons, long thought to be dead, are returning. They say they no longer felt the need to stay where they were. The dragon master's control over them is no more." "If that is so, where is your son, Krunchar?" asked Kolder. "I can only hope he will return soon."

A silver dragon stood up. It was probably half the size of Belchar, but similar in size to Kolder. "I must agree with Belchar. The silver dragon egg that was stolen from us twenty years ago was returned to us by Krondok, Keeper of the Seals of the silver dragons. He said Rathsmus gave the egg to him and showed him the twisted staff that the dragon master always carried. Everyone here knows that the staff could not have been taken from the dragon master if he was still alive." "Maybe he stole it from the dragon master while he was sleeping", said Kolder. "Then what happened to Kragdar?" asked Belchar. "He was getting old; maybe he got a cramp in a wing and fell and broke his neck", suggested Kolder. "Krondok has informed me that an investigation into Kragdar's death is currently underway. We will be notified immediately when the reason has been established, but for now I must believe Rathsmus", said Belchar.

"I would like a demonstration of his powers; proof that he even has the ability to do what he says he did. Is that too much to ask?" asked Kolder. The dragons of the Council were quiet. They were talking to each other through their mind link. Belchar stood on his hind legs. "It has been decided by the Council, although not necessarily unanimously, that you provide us proof that you are capable of doing what you claim to have done, and therefore, that you give us a demonstration of your magical ability", Belchar laid back down to watch.

Amoss ran up to Rathsmus, "Be careful what you show them of your ability." "Krondok already knows I can turn myself into him. Trying to hide that

ability from the rest will not prove to them that I trust them.” “Very well, just be careful”, Amoss said as he walked back to the sisters and Korg. Rathsmus turned toward the Council. “I am a metamorph”, he stated to the Council. Gasps escaped the mouths of some of the dragons and noises of disbelief escaped others. “My friends”, he said as he pointed back to his group, “and I have been battling the evil of our world for a long time. I am the newest member to fight with them. Amoss is the oldest and has been fighting for many hundreds of years. The dragon master is only one of several evil lords of my world that I have destroyed. I destroyed a whole army. If you wish proof of that, send your fastest dragon into the cave in the mountains, you will find proof there.”

Rathsmus sent an image of where to find the cave by mind link to Belchar. Belchar motioned to a group of small dragons approximately the size of Korg. A group of five dragons leapt into the air and were gone. “It will take the snapdragons about ten to fifteen minutes to get to the cave and the same to return. You may continue with your demonstration”, finished Belchar.

As I have said, I am a metamorph. I can become other people or creatures.” Rathsmus concentrated and became Korg. The Dragon Council responded pleasantly to his show. Next, he became the dragon master. Due to the reaction he got, he changed to something else very quickly. He did a couple of small animals and then, as a final form, he wanted something spectacular; he became Kragdar. Kolder, the black dragon on the Council, stood on its hind legs, tripped, and fell over backwards. The red dragon prepared to leap on him and the other dragons sucked in great breaths prepared to attack with their deadly weapons. Rathsmus became himself again and bowed to the red dragon. “You definitely have extraordinary powers. But how are we to know you are not the dragon master pretending to be Rathsmus, not Rathsmus pretending to be the dragon master?” asked Kolder. “Did anyone ever see the dragon master show that type of magical ability before? I know that if I was the dragon master and possessed that ability and I wished to enter your world, I would have used it many years ago. I surely would not have waited this long”, Rathsmus said. The dragons were talking this over when Kolder interrupted them. “Maybe he was just waiting for the right time and did not want to show his strength too soon.” “Do you actually think that ten or twenty years ago he couldn’t have turned himself into a flea, jumped onto a dragon and let it bring him here and then control the whole lot of you? I could think of a much easier way to get here than the way I did and, I sure as hell, wouldn’t have brought my family with me for you to use as a shield.” Rathsmus was yelling at them now. Such stupid ideas they had, and most of them came from Kolder, the black dragon. Rathsmus didn’t trust him at all. “Perhaps, the dragon master just developed these new abilities and used them when he became proficient with them”, Kolder suggested to the Council.

“Maybe I could shed some light as to why that could not have been the case,” said Amoss, walking up beside Rathsmus. “When a human has the magical ability born in him, a true master of magic can sense that ability in him immediately. Although he will not know the exact abilities the baby will have as an adult, he will have a pretty good idea of how strong he will be. If you have the ability to be a metamorph, you are born without any magical ability and only

mediocre ability will ever be sensed in you. As a teen, this person will use magic, but no matter how hard he tries, he will only prove to everyone that he is a fool and a complete baffoon. Minor successes will keep him interested in magic in the hopes that some day he will be good. However, that day never seems to come; he occasionally becomes a teacher in magic, usually a good one. Then one day, early in middle age, the magic comes to him. It enters him in ways that you could not imagine. It attacks him. Very few metamorphs live through this; but the ones that do are very strong.”

Kolder spoke up again, “How would you know so much about it, old man?” “Because I too am a metamorph and my natural shape is not the one you see before you. I am a snapdragon.” And, with that, he became his normal shape. After seeing the snapdragons, Rathsmus did not think Amoss was as ugly as he had originally thought back in the cave when they had first met. Two snapdragons flew to Amoss and were yelling happily, “Amoss it is you. We looked for you many times, but could never find you.” “STOP!” yelled the red dragon. Everyone was shocked into silence as they looked to Belchar. “Snapdragons, back to your post!” and they did as they were told. Belchar was standing now, looking directly at Amoss. “I have seen you before, here, in this world, haven’t I?” Amoss just nodded. “In fact, I have seen you fight against Kragdar and his group before.” Amoss looked up to Belchar and nodded again. “You told me then that snapdragons were messengers, not fighters, but that I was very courageous and a good fighter too,” Amoss stated. “Yes, in fact, that changed the way we think about the snapdragons. They are very good fighters, their speed and size helps them avoid their enemies. Many snapdragons have since been awarded honors for bravery in battle and moved up in the ranks in our society. We even have a member of the snapdragons on the Council, which we never would have done many years ago. Amoss, it has been a long time. You and your friends are welcome to stay with us as long as you wish. As for Rathsmus, if Amoss will stand beside you, you must be a good man.”

The snapdragons that had been sent to the cave were now returning. One stopped in front of Belchar. “What do you have to report?” he asked, now wishing that he had waited to say Rathsmus was a good man. “We arrived at the cave to find no living humans”, said the snapdragon. “During our examination of the cave, we found many carved statues throughout, all carved directly from the stone, or so we thought at first. Albon was checking out a couple of the statues in the first room when the faces of two of them startled him. The statues were identical carvings of the twin lords Faldor and Baldor. Albon had seen them once with the Dragon Master.” “What is so special about statues?” asked Belchar. “There were over two hundred statues in the rooms of the cave; an army. They were not carvings though. They were humans that had been turned to stone, including the twin lords Faldor and Baldor.” Belchar looked to Rathsmus. “You changed them to stone?” “Yes,” was all that Rathsmus said.

The search for Tolman was fruitless. They had talked to the last soldier who had seen him and still got no good leads. The next place to go was to the Hongar. They were useless, except that they told where to find Faldor and Baldor. When they arrived at the cave, some strange creatures were coming out and flew

away. They were going to follow the creatures, but they flew away too fast and were out of sight in seconds.

They were getting used to their new bodies. Catching food was no problem and flying was fun, but there was no way they would be able to catch up to those creatures. After the creatures flew off, they went inside the cave and saw the statues just as the Hongar had said they would. It was creepy seeing the faces in pain as they had turned to stone, frozen in time that way, forever. The four Lords left the cave and waited to be contacted by their master.

Their master had not been pleased the last time when they found nothing of Tolman. He was angry this time when he was told of the creatures that came from the cave, snapdragons he called them. He just about blew a gasket when he was told about the twin Lords Faldor and Baldor. He was sure to get angry when they could not find the Dragon Master and the four Lords knew they would never find him. "You will go to the Dragon Master's home. There you will search for him. Do not fail me again or you will remain in your current form for the rest of your miserable lives," the evil master told the Lords. A flash in their minds told them where to go to find the Dragon Master's home. They wasted no time in departing.

"Snapdragons, you have done an excellent job, as usual. Rathsmus and family, I do believe we owe you an apology. You have done us many great favors, and in return, we treat you like a criminal. I only hope you understand why we had to be so cautious of what you said." Rathsmus nodded and bowed to Belchar. "Belchar, there is one more thing", said the lead snapdragon. Belchar nodded for him to continue. "While we were at the cave, four creatures, the likes of which I have never seen, saw us as we were leaving. They were part-bird, horse, cat and human. Albon circled around and watched them. They contacted the Evil One and spoke of us and the Dragon Master. They were being sent to the Dragon Master's home to search for him."

"They will not find a single trace of him anywhere", interrupted Rathsmus. "How can you be so sure?" asked Belchar. "Because I destroyed him totally. After he was dead I purposely destroyed the body completely. However, I was never in his home; there could be something there that could harm you. It might not be a bad idea to send a group of dragons there, before the creatures the snapdragons saw at the cave get there and destroy everything." Belchar thought it over for a couple of minutes, nodding his head as he was contemplating what he should do. Belchar stood up and said, "I agree. Amoss, it would be a great honor if you would lead the snapdragons as scout and reconnaissance." Amoss agreed with a bow. "Shindok, I want a group of your fastest and strongest warriors ready to go in ten minutes. Amoss, you may assemble your group and leave as soon as possible." Every dragon around was moving, trying to ready themselves or someone else. A group of fifteen snapdragons, led by Amoss, leapt into the air and was gone. Shindok brought a group of seven dragons to Belchar. Rathsmus had never met these dragons before. "The snapdragons have left. You should receive signals from them before you have gone very far. You will bring Rathsmus with you. Before you destroy the place, he will check for anything of value to our society. You will kill the creatures the snapdragons have indicated as creations of the Evil One.

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“Rathsmus”, Belchar said, “Do you think that you could become Kragdar once again and fly on your own?” “Sure, but the others will have to open the doorway for me.” “That won’t be a problem”, said Shindok. During the meeting, Rathsmus got close enough to touch several of the dragons, including a couple of the snapdragons. He had touched Belchar as well. At this point, he still did not know whom to trust and he didn’t want to put trust in any one dragon, including Belchar. This type of journey would be a good opportunity to get rid of an enemy. Rathsmus transformed into Kragdar. He heard a few gasps from the surrounding dragons and his group was off with Rathsmus bringing up the rear. Rathsmus was the largest and strongest dragon in the group. He was keeping up the pace with very little effort. The Dragons were communicating with each other. Rathsmus broke in to listen. They had been flying as fast as they could to wear out Rathsmus, but in return it was they who were becoming tired.

“Would you like me to take the lead and let you ride my currents?” he asked. There was silence for a while and then they agreed that it would do them no good to become tired before they reached their destination. They arrived at the doorway and Rathsmus led the way after they were through it. It was day on this side of the cornerstone, somewhere around noon, he guessed. Apparently, there was a big time difference from one world to another. The snapdragons were sending signals now, giving directions and warnings of possible hazards along the way. The snapdragons were just arriving at the Dragon Master’s compound. The creatures they had seen at the cave were nowhere to be seen. Amoss had sent some of the scouts into the surrounding area to let them know of anyone approaching. With Rathmus in the lead, they were making good time and his group was practically gliding in his wake. They would be well rested for any danger at the compound.

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The Compound

There were five buildings, a couple of storage barns, the main house and a couple of building that had no obvious use. Rathsmus did not like the idea of the snapdragons being there without better protection, so he hurried up the pace. He communicated to Amoss to wait for his group. They were only five minutes away, but it was too late. The scouts saw the evil creatures approaching, but only two of them. “Warning! Two creat...”, came a warning from a scout, but his message was cut short. All communication to Rathsmus’ group ceased. Rathsmus went faster.

“You shouldn’t have killed it,” said Cronar to Sherdin. “Bah! We didn’t need any warning of our coming. Look around, there are probably more around.” “There!” said Cronar, pointing to one about ten feet away watching Grindal and Dorkon. “Go around the compound that way”, Sherdin pointed. “I’ll kill that one, then I’ll go around this way. When Grindal and Dorkon reach the compound, that should bring out the other two and then we’ll jump em.” “What makes you so sure that there are only four of them?” “It is the same group that we saw at the cave. They didn’t have enough time to meet up with any others; we were right behind them. Now move!” Cronar did as he was told. Sherdin was becoming their leader, which was okay with him. It gave him someone to blame when things went wrong. Sherdin jumped the second snapdragon and killed it. It was not a weak creature, but because he was taking it by surprise, it was an easy kill. This was what he lived for, killing. Suddenly the sky was full of them. As one flew at him from the front, another hit him in the back and the world went black. Cronar had seen the group coming and hid until they passed.

Grindal and Dorkon were attacked by the main group. It was like swatting at bees, you might hit a couple of them, but they were sure to get you eventually. Two more snapdragons died in the fight and two others were wounded, but Grindal and Dorkon were captured. Rathsmus flew over the compound, “Spread out and find the creatures and the snapdragons,” he said to the others. After the snapdragons had passed, Cronar leapt into the air and flew for the compound. Cronar expected to be attacked from behind and didn’t see the large shadow that flew over him. Suddenly, it was on him and hit him so hard that it broke his neck, killing him. The dragon that hit him grabbed the dead creature and flew to find the snapdragons.

Rathsmus received a signal from Amoss again telling him where he was. In a matter of seconds, he was flying over the group of snapdragons and three captured creatures. Rathsmus’ group was instructed to pick up the creatures and bring them to the compound of the Dragon Master. The two wounded and four dead snapdragons were returned to the dragon home world. Five snapdragons remained with Amoss. Once at the compound, Rathsmus returned to his human form, Amoss did the same. The dragons were instructed to remain outside of the actual compound, but to stay close by in case they were needed. The four creatures were

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dropped in the middle of the compound. The three that were still alive were unconscious, tied and gagged.

Rathsmus sat crossed legged on the ground and concentrated on his trap-finding spell. Several minor traps had been laid but, apparently, the Dragon Master was either way over confident or not very good at setting traps. He didn't believe the latter. There was one spell that he didn't like the looks of. It was on one of the smaller outbuildings that you couldn't determine its use by looking at it. If the Dragon Master had set this trap, Rathsmus figured he would have to take a second look at the other traps. This one was very intricate, where the others were very crude. Rathsmus went to one of the crude traps and looked at it again. This time he noticed a second trap under the first. The crude trap would set off the second trap, but the victims guard would be down because he would be thinking that it was placed by someone who did not know how to set them. Rathsmus went back to where Amoss was sitting and explained the situation. It was decided to spring one of the traps and see what happened. The dragons were readied in case there was a problem.

Rathsmus floated a small rock to one of the traps and dropped it. The crude trap sprung the second trap; a black root sprouted from the ground looking for the culprit that had sprung the trap. It grabbed anything it could reach, including the stone that Rathsmus had used, and returned underground. The trap, having been sprung, no longer existed. Rathsmus took a second rock and floated it to the trap and nothing happened. There had been six traps in all, one on each building and one in the middle of the compound, not too far from the creatures. Rathsmus sprung each trap as he had the first. Each time, the black root would grab whatever it could and return underground. When he sprung the trap in the middle of the compound, the root reached farther than he had expected. It grabbed the creatures and pulled them underground. "Oh well, I guess we don't have to worry about them anymore," he said to Amoss.

What Rathsmus and the others didn't know was that they were being watched. The being that had sent the four evil lords sensed them at the compound of the Dragon Master and waited to instruct them so they didn't botch the job this time, but it was too late. The four creatures he had created out of the lords were now tied and gagged in the middle of the Dragon Master's compound. One was dead. He could feel death as easily as a doctor can feel life in a patient's pulse. He was death. He watched the sorcerer spring each trap, one at a time, and then the final trap that took his creations. He could have saved them, but they had been stupid. They deserved to die. He felt their death as the black root pulled them underground and squeezed the breath out of them. He watched the sorcerer and his companion search the main building. He wanted to know what the Dragon Master kept in these buildings. Each time he had tried to send a spy, it would be killed before he could learn anything. This time it would be different. He wanted to get closer. Then flames flashed in his eyes and he was in his cave again. His spy had been killed.

After Rathsmus had sprung the last trap, Amoss followed him to the main building to look around. The dragons remained hidden as best as they could. A young silver dragon named Candalor, was watching Rathsmus and Amoss intently. He was closest to them and didn't want them to be harmed because he wasn't ready.

Off to his left he noticed a big black crow sitting on a branch watching Rathsmus and Amoss with as much interest as he was. There was something strange about the bird that he couldn't quite figure out, but he knew that it wasn't right. He slowly moved closer to the bird. It was watching the compound so closely that it never noticed his approach. As Candolor got closer, he noticed what was wrong with the crow; its legs were ash gray and so was its beak and eyes. Its breathing was very labored and a slight trembling was noticeable. This bird was being controlled by the evil one. The crow started to flap its wings to take off and get closer to the compound. Candolor spit flames at the bird and it exploded in flames with a boom.

The explosion got the attention of the other dragons. Candolor had been hurt by the explosion of bird and tree. A piece of branch had been shot like an arrow into his neck. He was not dead, but he soon would be if he were not helped. Rathsmus and Amoss came running when the dragons yelled to them. The branch had entered the neck close to the jawbone and went along the neck toward his body. The branch was about an inch in diameter on the end that was sticking out of his neck and was sticking out of the neck about a foot with at least that much in the neck. Luckily the branch missed any major arteries, but it was cutting off circulation due to the swelling tissue around it.

"We're going to have to pull the branch out or he'll die" said Rathsmus. "Shouldn't we wait for help?" asked Gindolor, an even younger gold dragon, probably the youngest dragon here. "If we wait, the branch will choke his air off and stop the blood flow to his brain. He'll die if we wait." "Go ahead," said Krintar, a blue dragon with many scars from fights he had been involved in, "I've had worse wounds than that, but it should be removed as Rathsmus says or he will definitely die." The other dragons agreed.

Rathsmus grabbed the branch, but couldn't pull it out. The muscle was swelling and, in effect, holding onto the branch. Rathsmus transformed into Korg and tried to pull again, but still couldn't budge it. Rathsmus thought about the strongest creatures he had seen. Dragons were strong, but their hands were not great when it came to dexterity on small things. He didn't want to grab the branch with a dragon's mouth for fear that he might break it off and have nothing to grab. The creatures they had captured would have been strong but he, personally, had not touched one of them. Then he remembered the slug-type creatures he had fought in the cave. During the fight he had touched one of the creatures as he pulled Korg's sword from its head. With the creature's web he might possibly be able to pull the branch out. He asked everyone to stay back so he would have enough room.

As he transformed into the slug creature, he noticed he had to concentrate on what he was doing. Stray thoughts, that were not his own, told him to kill the creature and eat it, not save it. He spit out a strand of web, these creatures were very accurate, and he hit the branch exactly where he wanted. He spit out a couple more strands for strength and magically weaved them together. Slowly, the branch was pulled from the neck of Candolor. When it was completely removed, Rathsmus returned to his normal shape and healed the wound in Candolor's neck. The sisters had taught him well in the power of magic. In no time, Candolor was up and as good as new.

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“What happened Candalar?” asked Rathsmus. “I saw a big crow watching you and Amoss in the compound. When I got closer, I realized that it was being controlled by the evil one. It started to take off when I got close enough to see it, so I tried to kill it with flames. It exploded when the flames engulfed it.” “So, the Evil One knows that we have killed its creatures and its spy, and that we are in the compound of the Dragon Master. We should hurry and get out of here,” said Krintar. The Snapdragons should deploy themselves in a large circle around the compound. The rest should stay here outside of the compound. If anything comes, the Snapdragons will let us know. I want to search this place before we go,” said Rathsmus. Rathsmus and Amoss turned and ran back to the main building without waiting to see if the dragons would follow his orders.

As they entered the building, the first room was a small hallway with a closet. It was empty. There were four doorways off the hallway; the one they had entered the building by, one to the left, one to the right, and one straight ahead. The one straight ahead was the only one without a door. Rathsmus took a quick look through the open doorway. This led to the kitchen. A table and chairs, a few cabinets, a sink, an icebox (probably magic), a wood stove. Rathsmus motioned to Amoss to check the door to the left. It was locked. Rathsmus checked it for traps and found nothing. Amoss picked the lock and opened the door. It opened into a small study. Dust covered everything. This room hadn’t been used for probably fifteen or twenty years. Old school books and pages of writings littered a small table. A couple of chairs and a small cabinet were the only other furniture. Amoss opened the cabinet and found a wooden box of antique scrolls. He didn’t dare to open one for fear that it would crumble. He brought the box into the hall by the door that went outside. He returned to the study to see if he could find anything else of value.

As Amoss had been checking out the study, Rathsmus was checking out the kitchen. There didn’t seem to be anything special here just plates, cups, cooking utensils and pots. The icebox had some rotten food but nothing worthy of notice. The Dragon Master had been dead for quite a while now, it was no wonder the food was spoiled. There was some miscellaneous junk in one drawer and some dirty dishes in the sink, but all in all, there was nothing in this room. He went back to the hall and met Amoss coming out of the study. Rathsmus opened the door to the right and looked in. It was a larger room than the study. There was a couch along one wall with tables and lamps on each end. A coffee table was in front of the couch with books laid out as if for company to read, which wasn’t likely. A fireplace and mantle piece was on another wall. A few comfortable chairs were scattered around the room and there was a cabinet that covered half a wall, the same wall that they had entered the room by. A couple of windows let in some light so they could see. Amoss went over to the fireplace for a closer look. Rathsmus went to the cabinet. Over the mantle was a painting or, should I say, a frame for a painting. The painting had been ripped out with the frame still hanging. Ribbons of the painting still hung from the frame in places. The fireplace was made with rock and mortar, whoever had built it, had been a good craftsman. Everything seemed solid. On each side of the fireplace was a square stone with the head of a gargoyle carved out of it. In the teeth of the carving was a brass ring. Amoss pulled on the ring of the gargoyle on

the left of the fireplace; it was attached to a cable. When he had pulled out the cable about six inches it clicked behind the stones. He pulled it out another inch and it clicked again.

"Rathsmus, quick," Amoss said. Rathsmus had been looking in the cabinet. There were several boxes of jewels on one shelf that would have made a normal man very rich. He decided that these might have more than monetary value and he took them. He had placed them out in the hall where Amoss had placed his box of scrolls and was just coming in through the doorway when Amoss called to him. "What is it?" Rathsmus asked, as he saw what Amoss was doing. "I don't know. I pulled the ring and it has clicked twice to this point." "What do you want me to do? This isn't a magical trap, if it's a trap at all. This is a mechanical device." "Go to the other gargoyle and slowly pull the cable till it clicks twice." Rathsmus went to the gargoyle and tried to pull on the ring but it wouldn't budge. "It won't move", said Rathsmus. "It has to! Keep trying." Rathsmus pulled with all of his strength. Something started to move. "It's moving", he said. Something moved but it was not the ring on a cable. The gargoyle stone was moving. When it gave way Rathsmus lost his balance and fell into a chair that was behind him. The stone was about five inches in a cube shape with the gargoyle head on one side. "You broke it!" yelled Amoss. "I didn't break it, there was no cable on it", Rathsmus yelled back, "What makes you think that there has to be a second one anyway." "Just call it intuition. Is there anything in the hole?" Rathsmus stood and looked into the hole. He magically made a light so he could see; he reached in and pulled out an amulet. The amulet was in the shape of a dragon and was encrusted with gems of every color.

"Put it on and go around through the kitchen to the other side of this fireplace. There should be another one of these. Rathsmus did as he was told; he put the amulet on and went through the kitchen and down a small hallway. There was no door to get into the room on the other side of the fireplace. He started pounding on the wall but the wall was too strong to break through, it was probably magic. Rathsmus wondered if there were any outside windows into that room. Suddenly, he could see the outside of the house as if he was standing in the bushes where the dragons were. He figured that the dragons must have some connection to him and were following their progress by telepathy. There were no windows to that room and the vision was gone. Rathsmus went back to Amoss.

"There is no way into the room behind this fireplace." "There must be some secret passage. You'll have to find it. If I let go of this cable there's no telling what will happen." Rathsmus looked around the room to find a secret passage that might get him into the room behind the fireplace; there was nothing. He looked at the cabinet he had left open. On the back wall of the cabinet was a drawing of a dragon in the same shape as that on the amulet. He was sure that it hadn't been there before, but he figured that he had just been too busy looking for other things to notice the drawing. He wondered if there was something behind the cabinet. Another vision... now he was looking at a dimly lit stairway. Small oil torches lit the cellar and the stairway. The stairway ended in a wall. The vision was gone. "What are you looking at?" yelled Amoss. "There is a secret panel behind the cabinet." Rathsmus noticed some scratch marks on the floor by the cabinet. He pushed the cabinet and it slid to one side exposing a set of stairs to the cellar.

He created a ball of light and started down the stairs. When he reached the bottom, he saw a big dragon in a stall like a cow in a barn. The smell was overwhelming. This place had not been cleaned for a long time. Rathsmus went up to the dragon. It was sick and weak and could barely keep its head up. He touched the forehead of the dragon and tried to heal its sickness. He did his best and the dragon felt better but it was not completely healed. "My name is Rathsmus and I'm here to help you." The dragon nodded, "Water please", it whispered hoarsely. Rathsmus looked around and found a bucket and a water pump. He filled the bucket with water and gave it to the dragon. "Drink slowly", Rathsmus told him.

"Thank you, sir, but you must leave here quickly. Your help is appreciated, but you are in grave danger. The master of this building will kill you if he catches you." "That will be kind of difficult, since the Dragon Master is dead, and since I have an army of dragons outside guarding us." The dragon just looked at him. "Are there any other dragons here?" asked Rathsmus. "Yes, ten I believe, but I'm not sure." "Ten!" Rathsmus said, "Where? There are only a couple of buildings here. You could never fit ten dragons in them." "I can only tell you what I believe. In my years here I have seen more than ten different dragons here. In the last year, I have only seen ten. They might not all be here or there might be more. When they bring me to a dragon they come down the stairs and go into that door. The ground shakes, then they open those big doors and bring me outside to the other buildings where they keep the other dragons. The last time I saw five in one of the other buildings and three in the mating building."

"Mating building?" Rathsmus interrupted. "Yes, this is a breeding station for the Dragon Master. I heard him talking one day. He said that this was the only way he could get enough dragons for the Evil One. But this place has been mostly unsuccessful as far as I can tell; they keep trying though."

"Rathsmus, hurry up. I can't hold on forever," came a voice from up the stairs. Rathsmus went through the door that the dragon had mentioned and up a set of stairs. The stairs ended in a room that was unfurnished. There was a fireplace that looked exactly like the one that was in the other room. He inspected the gargoyles; one had a cable, the other did not. He pulled the one with a cable until it clicked twice as Amoss had told him. "Ok", yelled Rathsmus, "I've pulled the cable to two clicks." "You don't have to yell", came a voice from the chimney, "I can hear you fine. Now, together, pull the cable one click at a time." Rathsmus pulled until he heard a click. He heard a click from the other side. He pulled until it clicked and he heard another click from the other side again. The cable was getting harder to pull. Another click, this one louder than before, then a clang from the other side. The ground started shaking. Rathsmus ran down the stairs, through the cellar, and up the stairs to where Amoss was looking out the windows.

Other buildings that had been underground were now raising the whole compound. The new buildings looked like prison cells. "Follow me", Rathsmus said to Amoss, as he led the way to the dragon in the cellar. When Amoss saw the dragon he stopped and stared with his mouth open. "Rontal? Is that you?" Amoss said. The dragon looked up, confused. No one had called him by that name in over two hundred years. He did not recognize the being standing there. "Who are you that calls me by that name?" Amoss changed into a snapdragon. "Amoss! I haven't

seen you...well, since before the Dragon Master captured us. That young fella over there says the Dragon Master is dead. Is that true?" Amoss nodded and changed back into human form. "Rathsmus killed him", Amoss said. "What about the dragon keepers?" "Who?" "The dragon keepers. The ones who helped the Dragon Master capture us. I have not seen them in a long time, but I'm sure that they are still around."

Rathsmus had gone to the big door that led outside. When he found the latch, the door swung wide and let the summer sun in. Amoss unhooked the chains that imprisoned Rontal and together they went outside.

The dragons that were outside were getting worried. They hadn't heard anything from inside the house for awhile. Amoss yelled something, then, shortly, Rathsmus yelled something back. Then silence. A flock of birds that had been in the compound eating bugs and seeds on the ground suddenly took off as if they could sense danger. Danger signals were flashing from dragon to dragon, but not from the snapdragons. Had something gotten past the snapdragons or, perhaps killed them all before a warning could be sent. The ground started shaking violently. Then they could see the cause; the buildings were being raised. Pushed up from beneath by other buildings. The dragons watched and waited to see what would happen next. The main building that Rathsmus and Amoss had entered was watched with anticipation. A large door, on what was now the ground floor, opened and Rathsmus could be seen standing there looking outside. He turned and went back in. Then Amoss and a big orange dragon emerged from the doorway. When the dragon was clear of the building it stretched its legs and wings. Amoss motioned to a couple of dragons to come into the compound. Caldorn, a red dragon, and Bintor, a wood dragon, quickly went to Amoss. "This is Rontal, he says these buildings house imprisoned dragons. You will be needed to help break them free. They might need help getting out of the cells also.

Rathsmus had gone back into the house to get the box of scrolls and gems. When he bent down to pick up the box, he remembered the amulet around his neck. He looked to the fireplace, at the hole he had found it in. He picked up the box and ran to the other side of the fireplace. He stood for a minute looking at the two gargoyle heads. One with a cable hanging from its mouth, the other a brass ring. Over the fireplace was a mantle piece similar to the one on the other side. No painting or frame hung from the wall. Sitting on the mantle piece was a wooden cigar box. It was latched and a small lock secured the latch. He placed the cigar box into the box of scrolls being careful not to damage any of the scrolls. He set the box of scrolls down and checked the gargoyle. There was no magical trap that he could find, but that did not mean there was not a mechanical trap. It was quite evident that this place did not use magic only. He decided to take a chance and remove the gargoyle stone. He pulled and pulled. This time when it gave way, he did not lose his balance and did not fall. There was a hole behind this stone also. He lit up the hole and found another amulet, this one was as black as coal. Even the gems that encrusted it were black. There was one diamond for the fang tooth and a red ruby for an eye. This amulet was also a dragon, but it was evil. He placed the amulet in the box and returned to Amoss and Rontal.

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Amoss was just finishing talking to Caldorn and Bintor when Rathsmus came up to him. Amoss noticed the boxes, "What do you have?" "The box of scrolls, a box of jewels, a cigar box and a black dragon amulet." As he said it he pulled the black dragon amulet from the box. Rontal reared up and hissed. The other dragons jumped back also. Amoss took the amulet from Rathsmus and looked at it. "This is a very powerful evil amulet. If a dragon wears this, he will do unspeakable evil if asked by anyone who knows the secret words. All dragons are told of this evil jewelry when they are very young to avoid it and hate it." Rathsmus took it and placed it in the box, "Then we must bring it back to the Council to decide its destruction." Amoss nodded, "What's in the cigar box. "I don't know, it's locked."

Amoss took the cigar box, placed it on the ground and took a couple of steps back. Rathsmus and the dragons followed his lead. Amoss magically picked the lock and unhooked the latch. Slowly the box opened. Inside the box were two cigars, a gold chain and a medallion, and a piece of paper. Amoss walked up to the box, and Rathsmus followed. Amoss took the cigars, gave one to Rathsmus and bit the end off of the one that he kept. Then he lit it and waited for Rathsmus to do the same. Next Amoss picked up the piece of paper. It was old, but sturdy enough not to fall apart while he unfolded it. He read it to himself, folded it up again, put it back into the cigar box and carefully placed it back into the box of scrolls. "The medallion is something for the Council also. Let's set these prisoners free. Caldorn, come with Rontal and me. Bintor, go with Rathsmus."

Rathsmus and Bintor started with the building on one end of the compound, while Amoss and the two dragons slowly walked and talked toward the building on the far end. The first building was one of the small out buildings, which was no longer small. Rathsmus told Bintor to break down the large door that went into the cells. Rathsmus lit the way into the building, but Bintor would not go in. Rathsmus told him to stay out; he'd be all right. As Rathsmus walked in, he saw a line of large stalls along both walls. There were five stalls on each wall and a dragon in each stall. That made ten dragons in this building alone. None moved with much more energy than Rontal had.

He went to the first stall and met a large blue dragon named Alonta. He unhooked her from the chains and led the way outside. The next one he brought out was a large green dragon named Frondar. The next was a red by the name of Naldar, then a brown, a yellow, a gold, a gray, a silver a white and an orange. He couldn't keep up with the names and just kept bringing them out. When the building was empty of dragons he went back inside. He found a set of stairs that went up. He followed the stairs into a room that was cluttered with junk. He found old farm tools, a broken toy sled, old baskets and wooden boxes that would be used on a farm during harvest and an old trunk with women's dresses in it. The whole place was just filled with old junk. There was only one room, so he went down the stairs again.

The next building was similar to the first. Bintor broke open the door and Rathsmus went in. More dragons! This time he brought out two crystal dragons, two wood dragons, three snow dragons and two sand dragons. The last stall had a skeleton in it. He found a set of stairs and went up to the next floor. There were shelves around the perimeter of the building from floor to ceiling and rows of

shelves in the middle of the building as well. It looked like the room of any public library, except that the shelves did not have books on them, they had boxes. Each box had a stripe of color, red, or blue, or green, or some other color, a date and a name. He opened a box; it was filled with straw. He moved the straw to one side to reveal an egg shaped stone. Then he realized this was not a stone but a dragon egg. This was a storage and cataloging of all of the dragon's eggs from this facility. Rathsmus returned the box to the shelf and magically secured the boxes so they would not fall. He went outside and summoned the two largest dragons here.

When they arrived, he had already secured the building and removed it from the foundation. He had also added two large handles like the ones on the gondolas he had ridden in. "You must return this building to the Dragon Council immediately. I have secured it so it cannot be opened by anyone but me. Tell them to wait for me before even trying to open it. Also, the dragons that we have rescued should be brought back, if you think you can manage this building and them."

The big blue named Krintar said, "It should not be a problem." The gold named Gindalor agreed. Rathsmus got the attention of the dragons they had rescued, all nineteen of them. "Krintar and Gindalor are returning home with this building. I would like you all to follow them. Once there, you will be safe and can heal your wounds more completely." Rathsmus remembered the box of scrolls, "Hold on a minute, I want you to bring something else too", he said to Krintar. Rathsmus returned with the box of scrolls and placed it in the building where the eggs were stored. He resecured the building and the dragons were off. Rathsmus had healed most of the dragons; a couple were strong enough to make it home without being healed. It wasn't long before they were out of sight.

Amoss and Rontal went to the building furthest from the main building. This was the building used for breeding. There were some empty stalls and some frames with chains and bindings. "This was where he would force us to breed like cattle. The females would be shoved into that framework and bound in place. Then I would be led in to breed with her. It was the same thing everyday until she was no longer ready to breed. Then she would be brought to another building until she laid her egg. Another female would be brought in and I would breed with her. I tried to fight them at first, but they would punish me. Then they showed me the evil dragon amulet. They knew that no dragon would even want to touch it. The females knew they had it too. I don't think they blamed me for what I did, I hope they did not. We never had enough time to talk. I always said that I was sorry..." Rontal was very sad, thinking of what he had been forced to do. Amoss looked around the building. Nothing of importance was here. On the far side of the building was a door. Amoss opened it and found a set of stairs that led to the storage building that they thought was one of the main buildings, until they raised the whole compound. He followed the stairs to a room filled with shelves all around the perimeter of the building. In the center of the room was a table with sharp instruments in trays and a pile of white cloths ready to be used. Used? Used for what? He thought to himself. It looked like some sort of operating room, but considering the fact that they only had dragons here, this room was way too small. Then he looked at the shelves. The shelves were stacked high with small boxes. Each box had printing on it. He pulled one down. It said red, it had a date, and a name. When he opened the box it had a dragon egg in

it. He closed the box and looked around. On the opposite side of the building he noticed a big "X" on the front of each box. He pulled down a box and looked at the writing. It had a color, a date, and a name, and a big "X" going from corner to corner. He brought the box to the table and opened it. The egg had been dissected to see why it had not hatched. They must have been getting desperate to have one hatch and willing to destroy an egg to find an excuse; many eggs, by the looks of it. Amoss closed the box and returned it to the shelves.

He went back to Rontal and Caldorn as they waited outside. It was Amoss' turn to look sad. So many dragons killed before they could live. "What's wrong?" asked Rontal. "The upstairs is a laboratory. They have been dissecting dragon eggs, lots of them." "Bastards!" yelled Rontal. Of course he felt anger, they were his offspring. "Some are still untouched, we can still save them" Amoss insisted. Rontal just nodded. Amoss saw a big shadow in the sky. There were two dragons carrying a building and a group of dragons were following them. Rontal looked up to where Amoss was looking with his mouth agape. "I think your friend found the females," Rontal said. "There must be about twenty of them", Amoss said astonished at the sight, "I wonder what is in the building?" Rontal and Caldorn just kept looking until they were out of sight.

"Let's go to the next building", said Caldorn. Amoss and Rontal started walking toward the last building. Rathsmus met them in front of the building. "What did you find?" asked Amoss. Nineteen female dragons and a storehouse of dragon eggs. You?" "A breeding facility and a lab used to dissect the eggs." "Any eggs left?" "Yea, some." "We'll make sure they get brought back also. Rontal, do you know what this building is used for?" asked Rathsmus. He just shook his head. There was only a small door and no windows. Rathsmus and Amoss went in. Rathsmus lit the way. There was a shadow in the far corner of the building. Rathsmus floated the ball of light high into the ceiling. There was no ceiling in this building. The building above and this one were one. No floor separated them as in the other buildings. As Rathsmus was marveling at the fact, Amoss was hitting him in the shoulder.

"Rathsmus!" he yelled. "What", Rathsmus started, but as he looked in the direction Amoss was pointing, the words stopped dead. There was another dragon slowly lifting its head to look up at the intruders of its sleep. Then a second head looked up. Wow, two dragons he thought. Then a third head and then a fourth looked up. Each head was a different color. Then he realized what looked wrong, four heads and only one body, a red, a blue, a gold, and a silver with a black body. About that time, Rathsmus also realized that there was no stall or chains to bind this dragon in place. Rathsmus could feel his security magic trying to break free and destroy this abomination. "This must be what the lab was for", said Amoss.

This dragon was as large in body as Kragdar and, with the four heads, it was even larger. "Who are you? I told the Dragon Master that I would kill anyone he sent to try and break me. I will not do his evil work for him. So, prepare yourself for death", said the gold head. "Wait, please, I am here to free you. The Dragon Master is dead and already the other dragons that were here have been freed." "You are trying to trick me. You want me to let down my guard. It will not work", said the blue head. "There are no other dragons here. I am the only one", said the silver

head. "My name is Rathsmus. This is Amoss, and I can prove that there are other dragons here if you will let me." "How could you prove it other than by trickery, there are no others!" said the red head.

The dragon was up on all four legs, trying to move closer. Its legs and feet were massive; they had to be, to hold up the weight of four heads and necks. The tail was large also; it is the counter balance for the necks. "Who told you that there were no other dragons here?" asked Rathsmus. "The Dragon Master and his crew have always told me that I am the only one here." "And you believe he told you the truth about everything?" asked Rathsmus. The dragon stopped and thought about that. He knew the Dragon Master was evil and had lied several times. He could trick them into exposing each other's lies. Could they have lied to him about other dragons as well?

"If you are trying to trick me, I will make you suffer a horrible death, Mr. Rathsmus. Before I even begin to believe, you must answer some questions about yourself and your companion. Do you agree to answer them truthfully?" Rathsmus agreed. "First", said the blue head, "Are you magic and what powers do you have?" "Yes, I am magic, or at least, I have magical powers. There is a slight difference. I am a metamorph. I can change into different things." "Is that your only power?" "No, I have varied powers. Some I have not even learned that I have. I am still learning." "You are kind of old to be starting out in magic." "Yes, but that is a characteristic of a metamorph." "And your friend?" "I am also a metamorph, although not as strong as Rathsmus." "Ok, Rathsmus turn into me." "In order for me to transform myself into another animal, I must have touched that animal in the past. You must let me touch you."

"I knew it! You are trying to trick me. Now you will die." The red head breathed in and spit out flames. Within seconds Rathsmus and Amoss were engulfed in a wild fire so hot it would have challenged the heat of the sun. When the flames stopped, they were still standing there. The blue head breathed in and spit out an acid that would eat away the strongest metal. It did not effect them. Next the silver head breathed in and spit out a mist that would freeze water in seconds. It did not effect them. The gold head watched the two bodies as the frozen mist melted from around them. There was a barrier between the dragon and the two metamorphs. There was nothing that could be spit at them that could touch them. "You are a worthy adversary, Mr. Rathsmus", said the gold head. Rathsmus just nodded. "You have shown us that we could not hurt you. Perhaps you could try to capture us? If you are strong enough, that is", said the blue head. Rathsmus thought a minute and then just shook his head. "Are you scared of us perhaps?" said the silver head.

"No," said Rathsmus, "I do not wish to fight you. I would like for us to be friends. You are a prisoner in this building, I am not. I can leave whenever I choose, you cannot. If you are my enemy, I would rather that you spend eternity here than to see you set free and always to have to watch out for you. You are a powerful dragon. I would prefer to have you as a friend, not as an enemy. If you still wish me to fight you, it will be to the death." Rathsmus looked up at the gold dragon's head.

"Very well then", said the red head. The dragon started to turn away and Rathsmus let out a deep breath. He started to push away the barrier that the security

magic had placed around him and Amoss. The magic still held strong. Something in his senses still felt danger. The gold head turned quick and spit out a green slime. The slime covered the barrier completely. Rathsmus could not see the dragon or what it was doing. He concentrated and made the barrier stronger. Suddenly the whole world shook. The dragon had stomped on them. Luckily, he had made the barrier strong enough, but he could sense it weakening from the green slime. Again, he strengthened the barrier. "We've got to get out of this before it collapses", Rathsmus said to Amoss. "Any ideas?" replied Amoss. "Actually, I have an idea that should just about scare the shit out of this juvenile dragon." Rathsmus explained his plan to Amoss. He agreed it might work, but he didn't have a better plan. Rathsmus expanded the barrier slightly so as to have more room to maneuver. Amoss got on his hands and knees and Rathsmus stood over him. "Protect yourself", Rathsmus said. Amoss generated a barrier around himself and then transformed into a snapdragon. With Amoss' increase in size Rathsmus was now sitting on Amoss' back like he was riding a horse. "Here we go."

The four-headed dragon had stomped on the barrier and still it did not break. The green slime should be breaking down the molecular components of the barrier and making it weak. But it was not being weakened. The barrier even expanded a couple of times and he backed away from it. Slowly the green slime covered barrier expanded into odd shapes that would move and change. Then it exploded. Green slime flew and splattered everywhere; even the four-headed dragon got hit. The shock of what he saw made him lose all thought of what was on him as the green slime started to eat away at the scales covering his body. There, standing in front of him, was a huge black dragon, wings extended, and teeth barred, ready to attack. The four-headed dragon was stunned into inaction by the sight. This dragon was frightening. His feet felt as heavy as rock, his belly was turning faster than anything and he was about to lose his bowel control. All four heads looked up, "I am sorry for doubting you, sir dragon, I surrender to you." That was when Amoss finished his spell and the dragon fell over, fast asleep.

Heat was all the dragon could feel. He must have turned down my surrender and I am now burning. The red head lifted and saw a great fire in front of him. Five fires to be exact. Great billows of black smoke rose into the sky to cloud out the sun. Small creatures were flying around keeping the fires from expanding into the forest. Two men were standing in the middle of the compound watching and pointing. When they pointed, a flying creature would go where they pointed and put out a tree or a bush fire. The building fires would start to go out then explode into flames again. That was when he saw a dragon. Not the big black dragon, but a silver dragon. Then there was a huge orange one over there. Somewhere else there was a red one. He decided he was dreaming and laid his head down to sleep again.

"Wake up, sleepy head," said a voice. "You really zapped him with that spell," it said again. "I didn't know how strong to make it. A dragon with four heads is not an everyday occurrence. Besides, he should have awoken an hour ago", said another voice. The red head lifted and his eyes opened. The buildings were gone, nothing but ash remained. "It's time to go home now. What is your name anyway?" asked Rathsmus. "The Dragon Master's crew called me different names; some called me Goldie, one called me Red, because he only would talk to my red head,

but the Dragon Master would just call me Tig. He never told me why exactly, he just said it was a short name. Out of all the names they used, I guess I like Tig the best.” “Ok, Tig, are you ready to go home?” asked Rathsmus. “This is the only home that I have ever known. I do not like it here. I am ready to go”, said Tig.

Rathsmus had sent most of the dragons home already with the lab building. Only Rontal, Caldorn, and Candolor remained with Rathsmus. Amoss had the snapdragons remain as lookouts on the way home. Rathsmus transformed into Kragdar again and Amoss into a snapdragon. Rontal followed Caldorn, then Tig lifted off and Candolor followed him. Amoss and the snapdragons spread out among the group and Rathsmus brought up the rear. They were not flying as fast as they could go this time so they did not need to have Rathsmus in the lead. Tig was doing a good job, considering he had never flown before; his captors had never let him. It wasn't long before they were through the cornerstone doorway and flying over the last hill to the Dragon's Council. They had been gone for most of the night and it was now morning here. If they used the doorways very often, it would be hard to get used to the time difference.

Truth and Honor

When Rathsmus and Amoss landed, they returned to their human form. The council did not even notice the big black dragon that normally would have scared them, if it had been the real thing. However, they were looking at a black dragon with four heads. Each head was looking in a different direction. Tig had never seen so many dragons or even believed that so many existed.

Rathsmus walked up to Tig, looked at Belchar and bowed to the Council leader. "I am quite impressed, Rathsmus. You have returned to us nineteen female dragons that were lost a long time ago. I also noticed you have an orange male named Rontal with you?" Rathsmus nodded agreement. "There are very few orange dragons still in existence and we have none on the Council. I would like to ask Rontal to become part of the Council of Dragons and to represent your kind once again." Rontal bowed and took a place on the Council. "In case you didn't know, Rathsmus, an orange dragon is considered good luck. All dragons are magical beings, but not all dragons are able to do magic. Orange dragons are able to do great magic." Rathsmus looked at Rontal, "If that is so, why didn't you escape and destroy the Dragon Master?" Rontal looked at the ground, thinking about the answer. "Being held captive is a horrible ordeal. Had I been the only captive, I would have gladly done as you have said and escaped. As for destroying the Dragon Master he was very powerful. I don't believe I could have destroyed him. As it was, there were several female dragons also. In order to help all of the dragons I remained to care for them. When a female was brought before me I would sense a physical or emotional ailment and I would magically heal the problem. The emotional problems were the hardest to heal. The conditions in the compound were not very good. I also magically turned any egg into stone so the Dragon Master would not have any hatchlings to corrupt. The Dragon Master did not know I was able to do magic, but he started to suspect something was wrong when none of the dragon eggs hatched. He had never seen a dragon egg before so he did not know how they were supposed to look. It seemed natural to him that they would look like stone. One day he coupled me with a silver dragon and stood over us to watch. He cast a spell to keep the egg from turning to stone. A silver egg was laid later and, knowing some dragon lore, he placed the egg on a black iron staff. I was more careful in the future to be quicker in casting my spell to turn the eggs to stone. However, he was now more powerful and my spell was weaker due to my years in captivity. The eggs were being laid half-stone. I did not know that they were conducting experiments on the eggs. Apparently, Tig is proof of their work. I have no idea if there are any others like him; I had no knowledge of him. I firmly believe that, if I had escaped, they would have either moved the compound or killed all of the remaining prisoners before I could have returned with an army to free them." Rontal lowered his head with a look of sadness.

Kolder looked on Rontal with disgust, "You have told us a nice story, Rontal, but I believe that is all it was. Orange dragons, when they were more plentiful than today, were well known for their storytelling. You cannot prove of any of your story. The females could not even begin to corroborate it. When you left them, you and the Dragon Master could have had a great laugh together."

"Excuse me, but I guess that is where I can help", Rathsmus walked over to the first building and removed the spell on it so he could enter. When he came out, he was carrying a box. The dragon council had a long table in front of them and he placed the box in front of Belchar. "During our search of the compound a few items were found that I believe you will be interested in. First, he removed the box that he and Amoss had taken the cigars from. He set it aside and then removed the black dragon amulet. When the members of the Council saw the amulet they all stepped back with gasps, except for Rontal who had already known that Rathsmus had it. Rathsmus placed it on the table in front of Belchar. "You may do with this as you wish", Rathsmus said. Belchar looked at it; "The Council will have to discuss what to do with it. It is a dangerous amulet for all dragons. In the wrong hands, it could mean our destruction. Apparently the Dragon Master did not know its full power." "I also found another amulet that I believe is its twin." From around his neck, Rathsmus removed the gold dragon amulet. "You are correct that this amulet is the twin to the amulet on the table", Belchar paused in thought. "We have many stories of dragon kind from the beginning of time. Stories are passed on from generation to generation and are kept secret from any outsiders, only dragons can hear dragon lore. Before I can tell you of these two amulets, I need permission from the Dragon Council for it is one of our more strictly adhered to laws."

Belchar looked to the Council. Each dragon on the Council is allowed to voice any opinion and discuss the subject. After the discussion, is the vote. Each member has two marbles, one black and one white. The marbles are placed in a jar by the members and then counted. If more marbles are white, the vote is yes; if more are black, the vote is no.

Kolder was the first to speak. "Dragon lore is for dragons only. I think it should stay that way. No human should be allowed to know of our past. Especially this one! I do not trust him or his companions. I have not seen enough proof that he has killed the Dragon Master, or Kragdar, or that he killed the army in the cave that the snapdragons investigated. Maybe he just found them that way and took the credit for killing them. He says that he is a strong sorcerer and a metamorph. Everything that he has shown us could just be the illusions of a magician." A couple of other dragons on the Council quietly agreed with nods or low grunts.

Rontal spoke up. "I am new to this Council; however, I believe this has to be said. Rathsmus did not ask to be brought here to our world. He was brought here by order of this Council. He has proven himself to be trustworthy and honest. He destroyed the Dragon Master. He killed the evil dragon Kragdar. He was placed in charge of a group of dragons to search and destroy the Dragon Master's compound. He returned lost dragons home and has given you a new breed of dragon", he motioned to Tig. "And best yet are the things he has not even mentioned that he has returned. Even he does not know the significance of his actions, but he soon will. He has earned the right to know."

Not much was said by the other dragons on the Council. Most looked at each other to see if there was anyone who agreed with the orange dragon. The dragons that had backed up Kolder were snickering at Rontal. They knew there was no one with enough backbone to stand up for the human sorcerer. Belchar saw what was happening and got angry. "I agree with Rontal", he yelled. "If no one has anything else to say, the vote will begin." Total silence was the reply from the Council. Rontal and Belchar stared down Kolder to keep him silent. An opaque vase was brought before the Council. Each Council member went to the vase and dropped a marble into the mouth of it. One by one, the Council members voted. One after the other, the marbles bounced around in the bottom of the vase. Finally the vote was done. The vote was secret and no one would ever know which way any of the particular dragons had voted. The vase was dumped over and the marbles rolled into a basin for counting. There was not much to count. In a sea of white marbles, four black ones stood out. "The vote is final!" yelled Belchar; "Rathsmus has earned the right to know of our dragon lore."

"Before Rathsmus hears the dragon lore, may I suggest we see the other items that have been returned to us and that everyone has a chance to rest. It has been a busy day for all", said Rontal. Belchar agreed. From the box Rathsmus had placed on the table, he removed some scrolls and handed them to Belchar. "The prophecy scrolls!" yelled Belchar, "These were stolen many years ago. How did the Dragon Master get his hands on them?" Rontal spoke up; "The black dragon, named Kragdar, brought them to him one day for safe keeping. Kragdar probably forgot about them, he didn't have much of a memory." "How did you know about Kragdar stealing the scrolls?" asked Kolder. "I didn't say I knew he had stolen them. I said he delivered them to the Dragon Master. How did you know he stole them?" Kolder became suddenly silent and started to back away from the table. He saw the dragon amulets a few feet away and decided to grab them and run. The Evil One would reward him handsomely for these prizes.

Rathsmus saw the look in Kolder's eyes. It was the look of a cornered animal ready to break loose, and then the look at the amulets. Rathsmus quickly placed a barrier of air between Kolder and the amulets. Then, he put some fakes above the barrier so if Kolder tried to grab the amulets, he would only be getting the fakes. Rathsmus was getting fast with his magic, now in less than a minute it was complete. Kolder leapt toward the amulets. A flash of light blinded the black dragon for a moment as he grabbed for the amulets. His claws surrounded the amulets and he bounced into the air. "After him!" yelled Belchar, "He's got the amulets." Belchar noticed the amulets still lying on the table. He looked up toward Kolder and noticed something shiny in his claws. An unsure feeling surrounded Belchar. Which amulets were real and which were his imaginations? Rathsmus removed the barrier that Belchar was trying to feel the amulets through. When the barrier was gone and the amulets were in his hands, he looked toward Rathsmus, who had a grin from ear to ear. "Watch this", said Rathsmus as he pointed toward Kolder who was trying to out-fly a group of young dragons. A beam of light left Rathsmus' fingers, headed straight for Kolder and struck the amulets in his claws. The amulets exploded in a small poof of smoke and sparks. The young dragons swerved around Kolder when the amulets exploded and then regained the chase. One by one, the young dragons

stopped chasing and watched from a distance. Kolder was slowing down. He looked shiny, but Belchar thought it was just the distance making his vision fuzzy.

Then Kolder was falling from the sky; his wings were still flapping, but they were not keeping him up any more. Now he was flying back toward the Council. About one hundred feet from the ground, the wings stopped and Kolder just dropped. When he hit the ground, dirt flew up and masked the view from the Council's vantagepoint. The dust settled and a small breeze helped clear the air. On the ground was a gold dragon statue. Not really a "gold dragon" statue, but a dragon statue made of gold. It glinted in the sun here and there where the dirt did not cover it completely.

Belchar motioned to a group of adult males to retrieve the statue. Rathsmus watched as the group delivered the statue to the council. "What have you done to me?" said a voice from inside the statue. "Kolder!" said Belchar, "You are hereby relieved of your position on the Council for high treason against your constituents and this Council." "No!" said the voice. "You cannot take away my position on the Council without a unanimous vote by the Council." "Wrong, for treason I have the power to, not only remove you from the Council, but also to have you put to death. But, before you are put to death, do you have any confessions that you would like to make?" Silence came from the statue, then a few sobs of sadness. "Yes, in return I ask that my soul be absolved of all crimes." "In your case, I would like to say that's impossible. However, I have no choice by Dragon Council law, but to grant your request", finished Belchar.

When Kolder was finished with his long list of treasonous acts against his people, he was absolved of his crimes and his soul was free to join those of his loved ones long dead. He was then removed from the Council by order of Belchar. When the gavel struck the table, Kolder was overcome by the statue spell. He was no longer a living being, but was solid gold all the way to the core. The statue was placed on a platform for all to see and remember the fate of the traitorous Kolder. Although his soul was free of the crimes he had committed in life, his memory would not be. The statue was a target for objects to be thrown at, to be spit upon or worse. Some dragons used it for target practice for their weaponry, especially the dragons that could breathe fire. Within a week the statue was a melted mass of gold. You could barely make out that it used to be a dragon, and by the end of two weeks, you could not at all.

Rathsmus and his group were given a shelter to live in until it could be decided exactly what to do. The box of items Rathsmus had placed on the table were now put back in the small building until the Council reconvened. He had, in all reality, killed a member of the Dragon Council. Albeit a traitor. The laws concerning these types of matters were quite clear. Death. No exceptions. No excuses. The only thing that saved Rathsmus, up to this point, was that Kolder had not died until he had been removed from the Council. A Council meeting was underway right now. Rontal was arguing for Rathsmus, with Belchar agreeing with him. Three other dragons that were friends of Kolder, the same ones who had voted with him on the matter of Rathsmus being able to know dragon lore, were arguing against him. Rathsmus was not allowed to be at the proceedings until the matter had been resolved. A new vote was to be done concerning whether he was to live or die.

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If the vote was for him to die, he hoped that they would let his family and friends return home before they tried to kill him. He was not scared for himself; he just didn't want the dragons to use his family as hostages to force him to let them kill him. He would not resist the dragons if it meant harm to his family.

The vote was finished and Rathsmus was brought before the Council. It was a nice sunny day. A few fair weather clouds were here and there in the sky. The sun had been up for a couple of hours. It would be a good day to die.

"Before we count the vote, is there anything you would like to say? Asked Belchar. "I only have one request. Should the vote be that I am to die, could you please bring my family back to my world before you kill me? I do not want them to see"; he said and then bowed his head. "That seems like a reasonable request. If the events lead us to that situation, your request will be granted." Belchar motioned to the vase with the marbles. A young dragon brought the vase and dumped the marbles into a basin for counting. All of the marbles were black, except one, and then that one was also black. Rathsmus looked at the council, "What's this, marbles that turn black before your eyes?"

"Bring the basin to me!" yelled Belchar. The Council started to break up and move off. "All Council members are to remain in their places until we get to the bottom of this!" he yelled again. The Council members were not sure what to do. This was the first time Belchar had been so angry and they really did not want to be caught in a fight between him and another dragon. They decided to return to their places and hope for the best. "There are twenty-two members on this Council, because Kolder is no longer here. There are twenty-two marbles in the basin. Each of us in turn will call back our own marble. One of these marbles is a fake. The fake will remain in the basin, and the dragon that remains with only one marble is the culprit." Belchar placed a black marble in front of himself. He had voted to save Rathsmus, so a black marble was what he had kept. A black marble popped out of the basin and rolled up to the black marble that Belchar had placed on the table. Slowly, the marble that came out of the basin turned white. One by one the members of the council placed a marble on the table in front of themselves and waited for another marble to come out of the basin and return to them. Surprisingly, to Rathsmus, most of the Council still held a black marble. The gray dragon, Pondor, had voted with a black marble. The rock dragon, Fonddek, had also voted with a black marble. Only five dragons were left to recall their marbles: the wood dragon, Marek; the cave dragon, Condar; the brown dragon, Biktron; the yellow dragon, Salfar; and the purple dragon, Stellbek. Stellbek called his marble to him, then Salfar, and Biktron. Condar placed his marble down and waited. Nothing happened. Quickly, Marek placed his marble down and a marble popped out of the basin and rolled up to him. Marek picked up his marbles and backed away from the table. Condar watched as the wood dragon backed away. Biktron recovered from his shock and backed away also.

"Condar, were you the one who placed this marble into the vase and fouled the vote?" asked Belchar. "I was", was all Condar said. "You have been a member of this Council for a long time. I hope you had a good reason to destroy such a reputation as the one you have built these many years." Condar said nothing; he just looked at the ground. "Very well", said Belchar, "by order of the Council you are

removed from the Council.” Condar gave a look at Rathsmus that would have bored a hole through solid rock. Condar slowly took in a big breath of air and held it for a minute. “Don’t even think of it”, said Belchar. Condar backed away from the table and said, “We will meet again, sorcerer, and when we do you will pay dearly for this”, he leapt into the air and flew away. “The actual vote by the Council members was three black marbles to nineteen white. That means Rathsmus is not guilty of killing a Council member. Who will second this conclusion?” asked Belchar. Rontal quickly seconded the statement. “All in favor?” said Belchar. A chorus of “Ayes” sounded. “All against?” said Belchar. No one spoke. The gavel struck the table, “So be it”, Belchar said quickly.

Belchar looked at Rathsmus, “The Council is losing members faster than I can replace them and I can’t help but put some of the blame on you. In a roundabout way you are changing our culture. We have only had one dragon ever be removed from the Council in the past and that was Kragdar. He had also cheated during a vote. Now I have had to remove two dragons from the Council who, apparently, have some connection with disliking you.” Belchar walked around the table and addressed the Council. We now have two openings on the council, one for a black dragon, the other for a cave dragon. I do not know what possessed either of these two dragons to do what they did, but they were definitely connected with the Evil One. If anyone on this Council knows the reasons behind the deeds that caused the removal of Kolder and Condar, speak now.” Pondor and Fondok gave quick glances to each other, but said nothing. No one else even made a motion. “Very well. If anyone on this Council is involved in these matters you will also be removed. I am ordering the Shandak-Ral.” “That’s ridiculous”, said Pondor, “The Shandak-Ral has not been done in one hundred years. You probably can’t even find the spell.”

“Actually”, said Belchar, “during the Council break, I just happened to look at the scrolls that Rathsmus brought back. I found that spell and some others that always bound the Council to truth and honor. Kragdar stole the scrolls, probably with Kolder’s help, so he could fill openings on the Council with his own crew. It is now time to re-awaken the power of the Dragon Council and take our place on the side of truth and honor, as we were in the beginning, and to raise ourselves up as a power to fight evil, not just to watch it grow out of control. The more we watch the evil grow and do nothing, the deeper in the mud we sink. Eventually, we will be powerless to fight it. Currently, we only have one magic dragon in our midst. That one is Rontal. Magic dragons were plentiful in the beginning. We have been so busy acting like dragons, instead of being dragons, that we have slipped into another minor race of beings. I will not let us slip further!”

A roar of applause and cheers filled the air, but not from the Council. It came from behind Belchar, from the dragons that the Council was supposed to represent. Belchar had spoken with such ferocity and feeling that his voice carried to the rest of the dragons and they came closer to hear him speak. Belchar almost fainted when the applause started. He had not expected the dragons to hear him and support his views, but with their backing he could force the Dragon Council to do what he said. The Dragon Council would lead dragon kind into a new and better life.

“There are a few more things Rathsmus has to show you”, said Rontal. Rontal motioned toward the small buildings that Rathsmus had brought back from the Dragon Master’s compound. “Give the medallion to Belchar, it is rightfully his.” Rathsmus went to the building, removed the barrier and went inside. He brought out the cigar box that Amoss had taken the cigars out of and smoked. Rathsmus opened the box and removed a round medallion on a heavy chain. It was too big and heavy to be worn by a human. He didn’t remember it being so heavy in the box either. It was probably a magic box. There were some magical symbols on the medallion that Rathsmus couldn’t read, but Belchar knew them instantly. “The fourth seal of the Dragon Council! Krondok, quickly bring the other seals.” Belchar looked at Rontal. “You knew what this was. Why did you let us wait to know?” “You needed to take control of the Council first. Now you can lead the way you were meant to.”

Krondok brought a box that looked like a display case. It was made of a fine dark wood, polished to a mirror shine. It was about one foot by one and a half feet tall and about five inches thick. Krondok removed the cover. The inside of the box was lined with soft red velvet. Three gold amulets were set in molded places within the velvet. A fourth place was empty, waiting for its occupant to return. Belchar held up the amulet for all to see and slowly lowered it into its home. As he lowered the amulet he was speaking a sort of chant low enough so only he could hear. When the amulet was seated in its space the case lit up. A fifth amulet appeared around Belchar’s neck. It was a gold cube and a duplicate of each of the original seals was on a separate face of the amulet. Each of Belchar’s claws became gold as did his horns on his head and wings. If he was big before, he was huge now. The muscle tone on his body showed now, where before he looked old and fat. He now looked like a true dragon leader.

The light from the case went out and Krondok replaced the cover. “Rathsmus, this Council owes you such a debt of gratitude as we could never repay. The power you have restored to this Council is more than you could imagine. Do you see the amulet around my neck? Only a true Dragon King can wear this. If an imposter wore this it would turn him to ash in seconds. A Council leader must be honest, trustworthy, strong and brave. The amulet will make me physically strong, but I also have to be strong of heart and will. If any of these characteristics cannot be found in me, I cannot become Council leader. If any evil is found in me, I would die instantly. The Council leader has the power to pick Council members. If a dragon wishes to fill a vacant position on the Council, he must petition the Council. Such as this.” Belchar went to Rontal. Rontal bowed his head. “I am Rontal. I wish to become a member of the Dragon Council.” Belchar placed a hand on Rontal’s head. The amulet that was around Belchar’s neck began to glow. A gold amulet appeared around Rontal’s neck. His body muscles expanded and toned. His claws and horns turned gold. Belchar bowed to Rontal and turned to Rathsmus. “Rontal is now the Advisor to the Council leader, second in command of the Council. He used to be on the Council before the fourth seal was stolen. We have not had a true Council since then.

Belchar addressed the Council members, “Any Council members who wish to step down for one reason or another may do so now without any question of your reason. Be aware, if you decide to stay on the Council, you must go through the

same experience as Rontal and myself. If any evil is found in you, you will be burnt to ash by the amulet. You must be true of heart and mind.” None left the Council. Belchar went to an empty space; the one Kolder had vacated. “Is there anyone who would like to fill the position as the black dragon Council member”, he asked aloud to the assembled dragons. Rathsmus looked to Tig and motioned him forward. Tig just stood there looking at the Council. “Excuse me”, Rathsmus said, “I don’t know if this is allowed, but I would like to nominate Tig as an applicant for the vacant position.”

Belchar turned to Rathsmus and started to say that it was not allowed, then looked at Tig. He thought about it for a second and then said, “I don’t know why it’s not possible to nominate someone, do you Rontal?” “As far as I know there is nothing saying that you cannot nominate someone. However, it is the applicant’s decision if he wishes to follow through with it.” “Very well, I’ll second the nomination”, said Belchar. “Do you accept the nomination to become part of the dragon council?” Tig still just stood there with his four mouths hanging open. Rathsmus ran to Tig. “Come on Tig. This is your chance to become part of this community.” “I’m afraid. What if I am part evil? Evil made me. I would rather live in silence with these beings than to die an evil creature in their eyes.” Search your feelings. If you were evil, you would know it. Besides, there is no way you could be unnoticed or silent if you continue to live among them.” Tig’s four heads looked at Belchar and said, “I accept.”

Rathsmus patted Tig on the leg; (it was the highest part of the dragon he could reach). Tig walked over to the vacant position and bowed his four heads side by side. Belchar placed a hand on the red head first. The amulet glowed brightly. After awhile Belchar moved his hand to the silver head, then the blue head and, finally, the gold head. Tig’s body started to glow. Rathsmus was watching and saw Tig’s body glowing. No! He thought to himself, had he made a mistake talking Tig into becoming part of the Dragon Council? Finally the light went out. The glow had been so bright that it had burnt a ghost on his retinas. He blinked his eyes to remove the ghost and he saw a big black pile in front of Belchar. He blinked his eyes again and again, now to remove tears that were blurring his vision. Then he saw movement. Four heads lifted up. It wasn’t a pile of ash. It was just his black body, but something was different about him.

He was larger, for one thing, and he had become more muscular as had Belchar and Rontal. But his scales were a different shape than they had been, they were larger and thicker. There was a serrated edge around the lower part of the scale that hung over the scale below. Each scale had a sort of conical point in the middle and an elongated octagonal overall shape. Not just the black scales had changed, but all of the scales had changed in the same manner. The colors had deepened, and they looked as though you could put your arm in up to your elbow before you touched bottom. Set in this chest was a gold medallion. Not a necklace, but a medallion set right in his chest, unremoveable. The scene on the medallion was a dragon in battle. Tig looked at Rathsmus, “Thank you, my friend. Had you not instructed me to try, I would not have become what I am now. The knowledge I have gained is unbelievable. War is a second language to me now.” “You are the War Master”, said Belchar, “We have not had a War Master for longer than I can

remember. Probably even before Rontal's time. It's great to have you on the Council Tig. You are third in command of the Council, first in command of any dragon army." Belchar looked at the rest of the council. "Who will be next?" The crystal dragon, Zrondon, walked up to Belchar. "My name is Zrondon. I wish to become a member of the Dragon Council." As Zrondon bowed his head, Belchar placed his hand on the crystal dragon's head. In a matter of moments it was over. Zrondon had gotten larger, but not as large as the previous dragons. A small gold amulet hung from his neck. He was a member of the Council, nothing more. The other dragons went to Belchar one at a time and only became Council members. Only four dragons were left: Biktron the brown dragon; Pondor the gray dragon; Fondek, the rock dragon; and Sethusda, the mountain dragon.

Sethusda went to Belchar and said, "I am Sethusda. I would like to become a member of the Dragon Council." Belchar placed his hand on Sethusda's head. Sethusda's muscles toned and grew, his claws and horns turned a shiny silver. Imbedded in his chest was a silver medallion. Now, one thing I had not mentioned about dragons is that they are very particular about appearances and only certain types of dragons are allowed to hold high offices. Mountain dragons are considered to be at the bottom of the dragon ladder because of their appearance; they have no wings. Old stories say how mountain dragons were fierce warriors with special magic powers, but they were believed to be just that, stories. Belchar looked at the medallion embedded in the dragon's chest. As Council leader he knew what it was. "Sethusda, congratulations. You are the second in command of the army, Champion of the Dragon Council." Sethusda would train recruits in the army on hand-to-hand fighting skills, but his most important roll was that as champion. If an enemy challenged the Council, it would be Sethusda who would fight the battle. In the recent past there was no Champion so a challenge was never accepted. That was one of the reasons for the dragons' fall from being a super power. Now that a Champion was part of the Council, challenges to past grievances were sure to come. Unlike Rathsmus who had to learn his magic abilities, Sethusda knew his abilities. It was part of becoming a Council member and Champion. However, he also became aware of something else. He had not been without magical ability even before he had become champion. In fact, he now knew that all of the dragons had some magical ability. It's just that it was hidden and they would have to learn how to find it. Now that he was Champion he knew where to find his and what to do with it. Sethusda bowed and took his place next to Tig.

Biktron was next. When Belchar placed his hand on his head, Biktron became stronger as the other Council members had; however, when the amulet appeared around his neck it was not an ordinary amulet. "Biktron is the Keeper of Lore", said Belchar. Biktron had always loved history. The magic had given him true knowledge of all dragon lore. What he knew was the truth, not something made up to save face. Sometimes the dragons had made mistakes and covered up those mistakes. He was shocked at his new knowledge. There had not been a "Keeper of Lore" for a long time. Nobody thought it was necessary. Most dragons knew dragon lore from stories they were told as they were growing up. The few differences in stories did not seem to be that big of a matter as long as the basic idea was the same. However, each generation changed the story a little bit here and a little bit there and,

after a few generations, the story was not the same as its original version. It would be Biktron's job to bring back the truth to the dragon lore. Biktron bowed and took his place on the Council.

Now only two dragons were left; Pondor and Fonddek. Neither dragon seemed overly anxious to come forward. Fonddek looked to Pondor and the gray dragon motioned for him to go. Fonddek went to Belchar and bowed his head. Belchar placed his hand on Fonddek's head, and he felt a small tingle in his hand so he knew the magic was working, but that was all that happened. The magic had rejected Fonddek as a Council member. "I am sorry, Fonddek. You may not become part of the Dragon Council", said Belchar, "The Dragon Council now has an opening for a rock dragon. Any dragon wishing to become a member may do so at any meeting of the Council." Fonddek looked to Pondor as if he expected him to do something. Pondor looked away and Fonddek slowly walked away from the Council.

Pondor was the only one left. He went to Belchar and bowed his head. Belchar placed his hand on Pondor's head. First there was a slight tingle and then a stronger one. Nothing happened. Belchar started to remove his hand and realized that he could not; the magic was not quite through with Pondor. He felt the amulet around his neck; it was ice cold and then it was hot. Belchar felt the magic flow through his hand into Pondor's head. Fire and ice at the same time. The magic hated evil and, apparently, Pondor was evil. Belchar's hand came free as Pondor's body froze solid and ice formed over it. Then a glow emanated from the ice-covered body. So bright was the glow that everyone covered their eyes. Then the glow was gone and a shell of ice was all that remained, and it was melting fast. Biktron looked at Rathsmus. "Quick, Rathsmus go to the ice and touch it with your hands." Rathsmus looked at him with confusion. "Quickly, before it is lost!" Rathsmus did as he was told. When he touched the ice, it melted a hole in the shell and his hands pushed through it. An electrical shock ran through Rathsmus' body and, when it finished, Rathsmus fell to the ground.

Rathsmus awoke on the ground with his wife standing over him. "What happened?" he asked her. "I don't know. They came and got me to help you." Sheena helped Rathsmus stand. Rathsmus looked to Biktron, "What happened?" "All dragons have an inner magic. When they die it is released. Dragon magic by itself is not good or evil so it does not seek out one or the other when it is released. It must be absorbed by someone who is able to absorb it and it must be done immediately or it will float away and finally disburse and be no more.

"Magic is too precious to lose so I had you absorb it." "Why me?" "I know of no other who could, except Amoss, and you were closer." "What exactly did I absorb?" "Dragon magic. You are now, by all legal rights, a dragon at heart. No one can remove it from you and, in the future, other dragon magic will seek you out and be absorbed by you, if you are close enough that is. Dragon magic is very powerful. If you were in a battle and dragons were fighting; if a dragon were killed, the magic that was released would go to you and make you stronger. Dragon magic is different than other magic. When you acquire dragon magic, you also acquire wisdom and knowledge. If you search deep enough you should know the type of magic Pondor gave to you, even though he did not know what he had." Belchar looked at Biktron, "Do you mean all of us have magical ability and we just need to learn how to use

it?" "No", said Sethusda, "You only need to learn to find it. Once you find it, you will know how to use it." Biktron agreed with a nod of his head. "Well", sighed Belchar, "That is good news." Belchar paused for a moment. "We now have an opening on the council for a gray dragon. Those who wish can apply at any Council meeting."

There were now three openings on the Council; cave dragon, gray dragon and rock dragon. The black dragon position was occupied by Tig. Since his body was black, he could be considered a black dragon. Belchar was pleased with that because he hadn't trusted a black dragon since Kragdar, but he did trust Tig. A rock dragon came up to Belchar. "My name is Granite. I would like to become a member of the Dragon Council." Belchar turned and looked. This was a young dragon to be asking to become part of the Council. He was about the same age as the dragons that had accompanied Rathsmus to the Dragon Master's compound. Most dragons didn't try for the Council until they were at least three hundred years old. Rontal was probably more than twice that. Granite was only about one hundred and fifty years old. That's like a teenager for humans.

Belchar looked to Biktron, "Is there anything in the lore denying a Council position to a young dragon?" Biktron shook his head; "There are no age limitations." Belchar knew Granite. He was young and somewhat impulsive, but he had a good head on his shoulders. Belchar motioned for Granite to bow his head and placed his hand on Granite's head. There was a slight tingle and then nothing. Belchar let a small sigh escape his lips and tried to lift his hand, but he could not. The magic was not done with Granite. Another tingle was felt in Belchar's hand and still he couldn't take his hand off Granite's head. Then a massive flow of magic went into Granite. His body muscles strengthened and toned. A small medallion hung around Granite's neck. He was a Council member! Belchar removed his hand and spoke aloud; "Granite has been accepted as the rock dragon representative of the Dragon Council." Belchar looked at the medallion around Granite's neck. "Rontal, look, the medallion is blank. What does it mean?" "It means he is a Council member, but he is too young to hold a high office. When he has proven himself, the medallion will raise him to the correct office." Biktron agreed with Rontal, "Yes, there have been others in the past that were worthy of an office, but for one reason or another were not yet ready. The medallion will know when the time is right." "But for now, you can take your place as a Council member," finished Belchar. Granite went to his place and waited to see what would happen next.

Rathsmus looked to the dragons that had become the audience for the Council since Belchar's speech. No other dragons approached to become a member. Belchar returned to his space on the Council and said, "Rathsmus, much has happened since your arrival here. Rontal says you still have more", he said, half-statement half-question. "Yes. If you could have the buildings brought closer I will show you." Belchar motioned for the dragons that had brought the buildings from the Dragon Master's compound to bring the buildings closer. When that was done Rathsmus went into the first building and took two boxes from the shelves, one said red, the other said silver. He placed them on the table in front of Belchar. He turned, went to the second building and returned with two more boxes and placed them

beside the other two boxes. Belchar looked at the four boxes side by side on the table then at Rathsmus with a confused expression. Rathsmus opened the box that said red and removed a stone shaped like an egg. "Oh! It's a dragon's egg! And a red one at that", said Belchar, he was very excited. "How many eggs did you return to us?" "I don't know for sure, a couple hundred at a quick guess. Some of the eggs in the second building have been dissected, but there are still some that haven't been touched."

The female dragons that Rathsmus had rescued came to the front of the crowd. "Excuse me, Council members, Belchar and Rathsmus", said a blue dragon named Alonta. She was the first female Rathsmus had taken from the buildings. "I would like to make a request on behalf of the nineteen female dragons that were held captive by the Dragon Master." Belchar nodded for her to continue. "I would like the eggs to be placed in our care. Since we are the actual parents, it would only seem fair." Belchar thought for a minute and then said, "We must do what is best for the dragon community as a whole, not just for a few. There is no way nineteen dragons could care for over one hundred eggs." Alonta started to interrupt but Belchar cut her off. "This is a matter for the Council to decide. We don't even know for sure if we can save the eggs. I think you should have a say in the care of them if anything can be done, but for now we need to move the eggs to a safer place and then we will decide what our options are."

Belchar pushed the boxes toward Rathsmus. "Please return these to the building." Rathsmus did as he was asked. Belchar motioned for the dragons that had brought the buildings to the Council. "Bring these buildings to the cave in Dragon Mountain." Then he looked at Tig, "Gather a guard sufficient enough to protect them from all enemies." Tig nodded and immediately gathered his group together. When they were ready, Tig led the group to Dragon Mountain. "The Council will reconvene at Dragon Mountain at noon tomorrow." Everything was happening so fast that Rathsmus couldn't keep up with it. The members of the Council were gone, including Belchar and Rontal. Sethusda disappeared, literally. He had found his magic and knew how to use it. He would probably be at Dragon Mountain before Tig. Rathsmus returned to the cabin that the dragons had provided for him and his family. He had not seen much of his family over the last couple of days, but when he got to the cabin the whole group was there including Amoss.

21

Past Indiscretions

Sheena went to Rathsmus and gave him a big hug. Everyone was sitting in the living room looking like a group of prisoners waiting for sentencing, except for Korg who looked ready to fight at a moment's notice. "Well, Rathsmus, what did you make of that?" asked Amoss. "I don't know. They just packed up and left like a group of kids afraid another group of kids wants to take their game away." "What do we do?" asked Crystal. "I think we should leave as soon as we can", said Daphney. "Me to", said Dalna. "We don't even know if we can leave without the dragons to help us leave", said Serena. "Well, I can see that you have all been giving this some thought. I wouldn't mind leaving now too, but I don't want to leave a group of enemies behind, especially ones as powerful as these dragons", said Rathsmus. "They're not that strong. Only a few of them have any magical ability", said Dalna. "That might have been true once, but they have found their past and with it their magic. Before long they will all have magical ability. I would rather leave them with their blessing", said Rathsmus. "How do we get that if they don't want us to leave?" asked Amoss. Rathsmus just shrugged his shoulders.

After a fitful night's sleep, Rathsmus awoke with a backache and a headache. The smells of breakfast cooking gave him a reason to escape the covers that had twisted around him to bind him in place. The sun was shining in the window and making his eyes hurt. Sheena met him in the kitchen with a hug and a kiss. Their son was sitting at the table watching and giggling. Victor was now three years old and had been tested several times for magical ability. He had no outright ability, but his security magic was the strongest they had ever felt in one so young. Considering that Rathsmus was a metamorph, it was the consensus of the group that Victor would be one when he grew up also. With the right teaching early in his life, he would be very strong as an adult.

The girl children varied in their abilities. Chantell seemed to test the strongest all around, except for security magic. She would be the easiest to teach magic, but the easiest for the other children to sneak up on when they played their games. Katrina was the biggest puzzle. Her security magic was almost as strong as Victor's when tested, but since a female metamorph was thought to be an impossibility; they didn't know what to think.

"I thought the smell of breakfast would wake you", said Sheena. "Smells great", replied Rathsmus. Amoss and Korg had gone out early, before sunrise, and gathered some fruit and nuts. Korg had found some bird eggs and killed a small pig type creature and prepared it for the meal. Amoss had used his magic to smoke the bacon and cure the hams. It was a meal fit for a king.

After the meal was over Crystal spoke up, "Rathsmus, while you were sleeping the rest of us were talking about Katrina. I would like to hear your thoughts as to whether she could be a metamorph." "Well, I've done a lot of reading on the subject. I've found a few books about metamorphs and it seems that, in certain

circumstances, a female metamorph could be born. It's just that it's not very likely, especially in this case. You see, according to the books, a female metamorph has to have had a metamorph on both the father's side and the mother's side of the family. That theory would work here except that Amoss is not your biological father, and I don't think the king or his wife were metamorphs." Crystal had been hoping through Rathsmus' speech until the part of both sides having to have had a metamorph in their past. "Well, maybe there is a chance that the king's father or someone in his lineage had been a metamorph and didn't know it. You said it was possible for someone to live through the metamorph process and not know it", said Daphney. Crystal was shaking her head, "I don't think anyone could go through what Rathsmus did, seeing it first hand, and not know what was happening or actually surviving it to the end if they didn't." "Crystal is right", said Amoss. "Even I knew what was happening before the end of my metamorphosis. The magic gives you the knowledge when it enters you. Even Rathsmus knew, even though he chose not to believe it. He would not have made it to the end otherwise." "We're back to square one", said Serena, "Why is she testing the same as Victor if she is not a metamorph?"

Amoss was looking off in a dark corner while the others were discussing other possibilities, but he wasn't listening. His mind was far away in the past. A smile crossed his features as he was remembering something pleasant. One by one the others at the table noticed a change in Amoss. His eyes were glazed, his face was blushing and the smile he had was brighter than the sun.

Suddenly Amoss noticed everyone watching him and shook himself from the daydream he was having. Crystal reached across the table with both hands and touched Amoss' hands that were folded on the table. "What is it?" she asked with a smile. He stumbled with his words looking for the right way to start.

Amoss stood up again and paced the length of the table. He started to say something a couple of times but stopped before anything came out. He looked at each of his daughters sitting at the table and a tingle rolled up his back at the thought of how proud he was of them. "I don't know how to start this. I'm not even sure if I should. But, under the circumstances, I think you need to know." He hesitated again and looked at the questioning faces around the table. "Many years ago, just as I was beginning the final stages of metamorphosis, I was employed by a sorcerer named Orin. He had taught me many things because he believed in me, even though my magical successes were limited. On occasion, I would astound him with my ability. He tested me often so he knew I had ability and that my ability was growing stronger. I just had to remove some damn block that was keeping me from my true ability, or so he thought. He never gave up on me."

Amoss looked down at the ground with such a look of sadness that a couple of the sisters started to get up to comfort him. Crystal stopped them with a look and a motion from her hand. It seemed like an eternity before Amoss continued on with his story. The sisters looked confused about the story, but Rathsmus started to get a funny feeling that he knew where the story was going. He sat back in his chair, folded his arms across his chest and waited to see if he was right.

"One day an emissary from a local kingdom was sent to us, secretly, from the King and Queen themselves. It was quite an honor for Orin. Because of the

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increase in my magical abilities in recent months, Orin decided to send me as a trial to see if I could solve the Kingdom's problem. Then, I was to send for him right away and not to do anything until he arrived. I agreed to do as he said."

"When I arrived at the castle, I was in awe. It was a beautiful palace surrounded by battalions of soldiers in gold and silver refinements. The castle walls had banners showing the King's colors hanging from them. Outside the castle was the usual hustle and bustle of merchants selling their wares. The whole place seemed to be filled with joy. As I entered the castle, at the very center was the palace. Gold covered every rooftop and flags flew from every peak. It was gorgeous. I had seen other kingdoms and most were very impressive, but this one was like no other. The people loved this king with all of their heart. You could tell just by watching and listening to the conversations as you passed by. I made my way to the palace gate and I asked for the emissary that had contacted us.

I was quickly whisked away from the palace gate and around the back of the palace so that no one would see me enter by the main gate. A hidden rear entrance was opened and the emissary and I were brought inside. We were rushed through passages barely large enough for us, but we eventually made it to a large room the likes of which I had never seen before. The furniture was carved by the best artisans; the cloth was gilded in gold and silver. There were portraits that would have covered one of these walls completely", he said as he pointed to a wall. "But then, this whole building would have fit in that one room with space left over. A room that size you would have thought would echo, but it was quiet and homey. There were oil lamps made of crystal with diamonds and gems hanging around them to catch the light and sparkle along the walls.

They had me sit in a chair in front of a large dark oak desk. On the other side were two high back chairs fit for a king, because they actually were. I was left alone in that room for several minutes waiting to see why everything was so secretive. This King had used sorcerers and magic users before, most kingdoms did. It was nothing to try and hide. Suddenly, the big double doors at the end of the room burst open and five soldiers entered with swords drawn. I thought I was dead. As soon as they entered and saw only me sitting in the chair they re-sheathed their swords and stepped aside to let the King and Queen enter the room. They were in their mid to late thirties, the picture of happiness and prosperity and very handsome too. With a wave of the King's hand the soldiers left and closed the doors. The King and Queen made their way to the desk and silently sat in their perspective chairs."

Amoss had been pacing back and fourth with an occasional look at the people at the table. Now he sat down, with his elbows on the table and his hands covering his face. He took a deep breath, folded his arms in front of him on the table and prepared himself to continue.

"The King and Queen looked at each other and then the Queen put her hand on the King's arm and nodded. With a gruff voice, the King cleared his throat and proceeded to tell me their problem. It seems that the King was sterile. Although rumor had it that the Queen was the problem, it was actually the King that had the problem. No one wanted the general public to know that the King could not father an heir, so they passed on the rumor about the Queen. After several years, the people of that Kingdom were pressuring him to dispose of the Queen, even though

she was loved by most; they wanted to have an heir to the throne, someone they could base their future on.”

“Enter me. The King and Queen had talked it over and decided to try magic to make her pregnant. I told them that it might not work right away, but that I would try my best. I sent for Orin and told him the situation. He returned a message that he could not make it due to a big workload and for me to continue with the problem. If I had any questions, I was to notify him right away. Over the next month, I tried many spells both on the King and Queen. Sometimes separately, sometimes they were together. I became quite close to the Queen. She was very lovely, and she in turn started to fall in love with me. I did not mean for things to turn out the way they did, but one day I told her that I had found a new spell that I wanted to try. The King was gone and would not be back until nightfall. I told her that she would need to remove her clothing and get into bed. I had expected her to wait for me to leave the room before she readied herself, but she removed her clothing right in front of me and I, being a young and foolish man, succumbed to her offer and lay down with her.”

“Oh my God!” said Crystal; “You’re talking about my parents.” Amoss nodded with a tired look on his face. “After what I had done, I felt very ashamed and left the palace while she was still sleeping. I returned to Orin and told him of the spells I had tried. I did not tell him of my transgression with the Queen. Orin said that I had done fine and there really was nothing left to do. He said that he could have done nothing better. In two months’ time since I had returned to Orin, a man in beggar clothing came to us. He was not a beggar, but the same emissary of the King. Apparently, the last spell I used on the Queen had worked and we were awarded a handsome sized bag of gold. The beggar in disguise disappeared after the delivery of gold.”

“In about a years time we were contacted again to come back to the castle. Orin sent me again at the request of the King. The Queen had been blessed with a beautiful daughter, but the Kingdom needed an heir. I was expected to work the same miracle as I had the first time, especially by the Queen. Again the King was away, this time sent away by the Queen, and I was seduced by her loveliness and we went to bed together. I couldn’t help myself; I had fallen completely in love with her. Our year away from each other only made me miss her more and my mind had worked overtime thinking of her. I worked my “spell” on her daily for two months. The King was beginning to get suspicious, so I left while I still had my head. Within a month, a beggar messenger delivered a bag of gold. I figured that I would never see the Queen again.

Time passed by and, again, a beggar was at Orin’s door asking for me to personally come to the castle. Apparently, the Queen had had another daughter. There was about two years difference between the daughters and the King was very proud that he had sired them. The Kingdom, however, wanted an heir. So, again I was asked to work my magic to create an heir. I warned the King that there was no guarantee that there would be a male heir, but I would do my best. The youngest was about one year old now and cute as a button. The eldest was now almost three and was a handful for the Queen’s maids. The Queen and I spent as much time together as possible. I was having strong magic attacks by now. I had not

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metamorphed, but I knew what I was by now and my magic was very powerful, close to the point that Rathsmus was at when he met you, although I was quite a bit older thanks to my magic training. Again, I returned home and shortly after, a bag of gold was delivered. Orin was very pleased with the contract with the King. He was becoming a rich man. I was given a percentage of the gold, but Orin kept most of it. Over the years, I was called back two more times. Each time, a daughter was born. The last time, the Queen died in labor. I believe she was murdered by the maid attending her when she found out it was another daughter. The King was expected to re-marry and produce an heir, which he never did. The Kingdom fell into ruin and the King was deposed. The daughters were put up for sale as slaves. Luckily, I had saved up enough gold throughout the years to buy you all. You are my daughters, albeit illegitimately. So, it is actually possible that Katrina could be a female metamorph.”

Crystal was stunned at the confession of Amoss. The other sisters were surprised. Sheena jumped up and hugged Amoss saying, “I love you Dad.” Being the youngest, Amoss was the only real father she could remember. “Well,” said Crystal, “I don’t know what to say, except that I’m surprised... and pleased,” she added as an afterthought. “I didn’t think you would ever need to know. I didn’t want to ruin your mother’s reputation.” “I understand,” Crystal said, still somewhat shocked. Dalna and Daphney were hugging Amoss now and Serena was waiting her turn. Rathsmus was nodding his head, somehow he knew; had known all along, but how he wasn’t sure. Korg was standing by the door with his usual look of defense and readiness.

Crystal finally stood and went to Amoss, “I’m glad you are my real father. I loved the King and I loved my mother, but I think I have always been closer to you. I love you,” and she hugged him. Tears of joy leaked from Amoss’ eyes and he hugged her back.

22

Dragon Mountain

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door, more of a door and building jarring pound. Korg was at the window in an instant. "It is Sethusda," said Korg, and he opened the door. "Greetings to Rathsmus and family. You are all requested to attend the meeting of the Dragon Council at Dragon Mountain." "All?" asked Korg. "Yes, it is requested that everyone in this party attend. I will give you fifteen minutes to ready yourselves so that I may transport you to the Council." The sisters, overhearing the conversation with Sethusda and Korg, quickly ran around picking up things they would need in the cave and then each went to their children and brought them outside. They were not about to be left out of another Council meeting. Korg, Rathsmus and Amoss just watched as they went about their business. Korg quickly went outside when he saw where they were headed. Rathsmus and Amoss looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders and followed the rest of them.

It had taken them about ten minutes to gather outside by Sethusda. The dragon was pleased that they had moved quickly. Rathsmus went up to him to congratulate him on becoming champion of the Dragon Council. Rathsmus patted the dragon on his massive shoulder and Sethusda thanked him and bowed. Shaking hands seemed like a little on the dangerous side for Rathsmus, especially with the new claws the champion had. But, Rathsmus definitely wanted to touch the dragon in case his particular talents were needed. Being able to transport yourself and others to where you wanted could be a great advantage in a battle or to escape danger.

"Everyone ready?" asked Sethusda. The sisters held onto their children and nodded and everything went white. It was like being shut in a closet, you couldn't even see your hand in front of your face, except that instead of being totally black it was white, almost to the point that it hurt your eyes and you wanted to close them. Then everything went black. Rathsmus could feel the dampness in the air so he knew they were in the cave, but because of the difference in light, it took awhile for his eyes to adjust. This would not be a good way to transport into the middle of a battle because it would take you several minutes before you could see who you were fighting.

"Stand close and don't move until you can see, you don't want to trip and hurt yourself," said Amoss to the women and children. Korg was already moving around the perimeter of the group in case there was something unwanted in the area. It wasn't long before the group could see in the cave and they were following Sethusda into a large cavern. It was amazing. On the same level as the cave they were coming out of was an open expanse of floor with a large podium facing a section of bleacher type holes for the Dragon Council to be addressed. Across from the Council section was a mind blowing sight. Every dragon in this world had a space to sit and watch Council meetings. It was like looking across a canyon, you

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can see the other side and you feel like you could just reach out and touch it because your mind can't comprehend the enormous size of it. Beside the podium were the two buildings that housed the eggs and the squad of dragons meant to protect them.

Sethusda led the group up to the podium and addressed the Council. "Council members, Rathsmus, Amoss and family, as requested by Belchar, leader of the Dragon Council." "Thank you, Sethusda," said Belchar, "Thank you Rathsmus, Amoss, ladies." Belchar nodded in turn to each and they bowed back. Korg stayed behind the group ready for anything, not that he expected anything to happen, but he was ready. "It has been many years since we have had visitors in this cave. The fact that you are here is somewhat of a testament to the changes we are going through. I, personally, along with Rontal and Tig, believe you to be an ally to us; however, some of us are more set in our ways than others.

During your stay with us I have asked Council members what could be done to satisfy them of your truth and honor toward us. The destruction of the Dragon Master or Kragdar was not enough for most because they did not see it. The death of Kolder, although by vote, was not deemed your fault, but in some member's eyes, it actually set you back a little. You destroyed him with such ease that some fear you. The mission to the Dragon Master's compound was a great leap forward and we are still feeling the benefits. Dragons thought long gone are now returning home. Sethusda has been helping us find our magic and more than half of the Council can now do great things that we never thought possible. The Council now has a true leader by the seals, an advisor, a war master, a champion, and more. But, to truly make the Council comfortable in accepting you and your family, I was asked to do something that I didn't feel good about." Belchar looked to a couple of the Council members and nodded. "One of them was to spy on you at the cabin you stayed in."

A crystal dragon, named Zrondon, backed out of his place and walked along a back hallway to come into the cavern beside the Council member section. He walked up to the podium and looked toward Rathsmus sadly. "I would like to say first to Rathsmus and family that I only did this because I was ordered to by the Council. I am sorry." Rathsmus bowed his acceptance to the dragon.

"During the stay of the group in question, I have been keeping constant surveillance and I am happy to report that at no time was any magic used by them to hide their conversations. Their talk always involved fighting evil and becoming friends with us. Since my magical awakening, I have become much better at surveillance." His ability was to turn truly invisible. "This morning they were talking about Amoss' past and his relationship to the ladies. It seems that Amoss is the actual father of them. They are all magic users. The children are also magic users, although too young to use much of it. The boy, Victor, and one of the girls, Katrina, are expected to become metamorphs like Amoss and Rathsmus. Although interesting information, nothing overheard could be used to prove their disloyalty to us, but just the opposite."

"Last night when the Council meeting ended and Rathsmus went to his cabin, they had a conversation on what to do." Zrondon chuckled a little about what he was about to say. "We ended the meeting so fast, Rathsmus said we "Packed up and left like a group of kids afraid another group of kids wants to take their game

away.” Zrondon was still chuckling about it, but when he noticed that he was the only one laughing, he quickly smothered the impulse to laugh more. “A couple of the ladies wanted to leave right away. They weren’t sure if they would be able to without our help. Rathsmus said that he would like to leave too, but he didn’t want to leave a group of enemies behind; he would rather leave with our blessing.” There was some discussion between Council members and nodding heads. When things quieted down Zrondon began again. “The second part of my job was to investigate the past of the group. To do this I had to employ the talents of Rontal. A group of snapdragons were given some magic potions that would turn them into humans for short periods of time. Each of them was to look into the past of one of these people and return here with their findings. Rontal was asked not to divulge his part in this until it was done. We know of Amoss and he was not the focus of our investigation. It took longer than we had expected. Most of the snapdragons returned a week ago. Last night the last of them returned. The ladies, or the sisters, as they are known to some, or the witches as they are known to others, were not too difficult to find out about.”

“Since the beginning of our investigation, they have only been known to fight evil. There was an extreme amount of time where they disappeared from all history. There were rumors of sightings, but none could be substantiated. Rathsmus, on the other hand, has been an interesting subject. His parents died when he was young. He and his sister were separated; he was sold to a magician, and she was sold to a slave trader and purchased from him by a wealthy merchant. They were wed and have several children, none of which, as far as we could tell, have any magical ability. They don’t know anything about Rathsmus now.”

“The first person he was sold to is no longer doing anything with magic. He did, however, reluctantly tell us where to find his next owner. Apparently, the second owner, named Roman, literally burnt all magical ability from the first. It seems that after that Rathsmus burnt all magical ability from Roman during an experiment they were working on. Roman had a strong feeling that there was dark magic behind it all. The White Guild, who also had some dealings with Rathsmus, concurs with his feelings. But, then we all know that the White Guild thinks anything they either don’t know or don’t understand is dark magic.”

“Rathsmus kept to himself for a couple of years, only taking enough work to eat and do some experiments. He disappeared one day and was not heard of since, at least not until he met up with the sisters. My conclusion to the investigation is indefinite. I believe the sisters to be users of good or white magic and that; along with Amoss and Korg, they are to be trusted. Rathsmus has used dark magic in the past, according to a previous owner and the White Guild. I do not believe the White Guild, but since we are talking of an unknown...” He paused and looked at Rathsmus, “My recommendation to the Council is to not trust Rathsmus without something more substantial to prove who he is and what he stands for.” The dragon backed away from the podium and walked back to his space on the Council.

“Thank you, Zrondon,” said Belchar. “Well, that wasn’t the report I expected, but I must, for the good of all dragons, follow the recommendations of Zrondon. Under the circumstances, we must revoke the vote to let you know our dragon lore. You will be returned to the cabin for tonight and in the morning you

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and your party will be returned to your world.” Sethusda was motioned toward Rathsmus. The noise from both the Council and the public was overwhelming. Some cheering, they didn’t like the changes Rathsmus was bringing and would be glad to see him gone, some were angry with the Council because they were dismissing such a strong magic user to, possibly, one day become a great enemy. Besides that, most liked the changes that were happening to the Council and believed Rathsmus to be the cause, one way or another.

“Wait!” yelled Biktron, keeper of the dragon lore, “I have an idea. Somewhat unorthodox, but it might cure the problem.” Belchar was pounding the gavel trying to get the noise down so he could hear what Biktron was saying. The dragons that were watching the Council were making so much noise you could barely hear Belchar striking the table unmercifully. Finally, the gavel could take no more abuse and the head of the gavel careened off the table and almost struck Rathsmus. Suddenly, there was total silence as the spectators saw the gavel head go bouncing across the stone floor to come to a final rest not too far from the group of children. Victor ran and picked it up looking at where the handle had once been connected to the head. Victor ran to Rathsmus and held up his hands to signal that he wanted to be picked up. Rathsmus quickly lifted Victor into his arms and gave him a big hug. Victor handed the gavel head to Rathsmus and he, in turn, handed it to Sethusda. Sethusda ambled over to Belchar and placed the head on the table next to the handle that Belchar had laid down in frustration.

Belchar, somewhat annoyed at the gavel and the reason for it breaking, cleared his throat with a deep grumble. “I would appreciate the general public’s cooperation in keeping the noise level down.” He picked up the head and handle of the gavel. He had found his magic, with the help of Sethusda. Life magic, most called it. He could control plants, make them grow in certain ways or speed up or slow down their growth. This was not his only magic, but it was the one he liked to use the most. He placed the head of the gavel on the handle. Slowly, a little sprout grew out of the handle about an inch from the head, then another. They grew around the head to tie it to the handle. The handle grew up through the head and on the top a mushroom growth secured everything together. He laid the gavel on the table hoping that he wouldn’t need it to keep the crowd quiet again. “Biktron, you have something to say?”

“Yes. What I am about to suggest is somewhat unorthodox, but it has been done before under certain circumstances. Because Rathsmus has absorbed the magic of the gray dragon, Pondor, he has, by all rights under dragon law, to become a member of the council as a gray dragon.”

An uproar filled the cavern as both Council and public cried out in disbelief. Belchar again lifted the gavel and pounded on the table for quiet. “Silence! If the public cannot contain itself we will have to make this a closed meeting.” The public quieted down. It took a little longer for the Council, but they too eventually became quiet with a little more prompting from the gavel. “Biktron, you say that this has happened before?” “Yes, three times to be exact. In all cases it was a magic user that had absorbed a dragon’s magic and then petitioned the Council to become a member. The first time was several thousand years ago when a human was an ally to the Council and fought in a war beside dragon kind. To

reward his bravery, he was given a seat on the Council. The second time, a human petitioned the Council after the death of a dragon stating that he had tried to help the dragon. When the dragon died, he absorbed its magic.”

“Most on the Council did not believe the human and a vote was given to deny the petition. By law, this could not be done and the vote was overturned by the keeper of lore and the Council leader. When the human was allowed to petition the leader again, the magic found evil in his heart and destroyed the human.”

“The last time was about one thousand years ago. He was a strong magic user and, again, had absorbed a dragon’s magic without the benefit of witnesses. Several dragons had mysteriously died around this human and he did not immediately petition the Council because there were no openings. At this time in our history, Council openings were filled very quickly. There was always a waiting list of applicants. The human was very friendly and always seemed to be around when a dragon died. None of the dragons were believed to have been killed, all were thought to be accidental deaths, or so they were said to be. An opening on the Council provided the human with his chance and he petitioned the Council. Over thirteen months time fifteen dragons died and he had always been close enough to absorb their magic. The Council leader had been, over time, coerced by this human to give a fake performance at the time of petitioning. The magic user would use his magic to create a fake medallion to wear. The ploy worked and the human became a member of the Council. Not a true member, but no one knew that except the human and the leader. The human then, one by one, weakened the minds of the Council members so that he could control them. One by one they became walking drones at the mercy of this human. The only thing that saved dragon kind from this human was a young dragon named Rontal.”

Gasps came from everywhere as everyone looked at Rontal. “Are you the same Rontal that Biktron is talking about?” asked Belchar. “Yes, the very same,” he said sadly. “But how? That would mean you are over one thousand years old. Even for a dragon that is impossible.”

“Apparently not,” said Amoss, “I am well over five hundred years old, my daughters are over three hundred. There is magic in the world that has been lost, just as your lore had been lost until Biktron. You thought you knew everything, but it is quite clear that you did not. Magic is the same. If magic is not taught to someone, it eventually dies out. In Rontal’s time it was nothing to live well over one thousand years. Most of you can probably barely remember Rontal as a Council member. Your memories have become shorter than your lives. I remember when the Dragon Master captured Rontal and several of your females. That was one hundred and fifty years ago. Even the Dragon Master could slow down his aging only slightly. You were so weak when Rontal disappeared that you barely looked for him. Council members were added to the Council without any ceremony to prove their worth. That is how dragons like Kragdar, Kolder, and Pondor became Council members. You forgot!” “You are right,” said Belchar, “But that has changed. Biktron, if you would continue.”

“When Rontal petitioned the Council, Kragdar was already a member, albeit not for much longer. He had become a member toward the end of the human’s rein as a Council member. In fact it was Kragdar that had the human removed from

the Council. Kragdar later ate the human, thus absorbing the power of all of the dragons the human had killed. Kragdar was removed shortly after for cheating on a Council vote. He left with a dire warning for all on the Council. He would kill them all. Kragdar knew what the seals were and so did Rontal. Rontal had tried to revive the use of the seals while Kragdar was on the Council, but the black dragon was too strong, he too was magic. Magic had been forgotten over the years by most dragons. Rontal did not hide his ability and it became the belief that only orange dragons had magic. Kragdar hid his ability and only used it in private. After Kolder was raised to Council member, Rontal tried again to bring forth change using the seals. He almost succeeded once, but at that time Pondor and Fondok had also been raised to members. With their help, Kolder kept enough uncertainty going in the Council that nothing Rontal wanted came to be. Rontal was the only magic dragon on the Council and none of the other members had been raised by the seals. Rontal was on an outing with a group of dragons to the world that Rathsmus comes from. The Dragon Master captured him, along with a group of females. Kolder never did anything to try and save them. Shortly after that, Kolder and Kragdar stole the fourth seal. Council members changed from time to time, but Kolder, Pondor and Fondok were always on the Council. Belchar eventually became leader due to his strength and size, but by this time it was too late for the Council. It would take great changes to overcome the evil that had penetrated the Council.”

“I remember Rontal as a Council member and when he was lost. I wanted to do something for him, but I was one of the few. When I became Council leader I tried to lead as Rontal would have.” Rontal nodded to Belchar. “There is only one way to tell if Rathsmus is an ally of good or evil. He must be allowed to petition for the gray dragon Council seat,” said Biktron. Salfar, the yellow dragon Council member spoke up, “You said that in the past a powerful magic user coerced the Council using his magic to allow him to become a member. What would stop this from happening?” “Belchar would have to renew his leadership every time a new Council member is raised, and then he would have to order the shandahk-ral to keep all honest and truthful. The shandahk-ral used to be used at the beginning of every Council meeting. That was the beginning of our decline when we stopped using our magic to keep the Council honest,” said Rontal.

“Rathsmus,” said Belchar, “You have heard the dragon lore of our decline. You have seen what can happen to an evil being that tries to become a Council member. Do you wish to become a Council member?” “Can I have a moment to talk this over with my family?” Belchar looked to Rontal who nodded his agreement. “Yes, you may.”

Rathsmus went to the sisters and Amoss with a worried look on his face. “What’s wrong?” asked Crystal. “Is this such a good idea? We could leave now and fight the battle against evil on our own, without the dragons.” “Why? This is a perfect opportunity to prove yourself to them. We could use the strengths of these dragons to help us fight the evil in all of the worlds.” Crystal looked at the uncertainty in Rathsmus’ face. “What’s wrong? I don’t understand why you don’t want to do this.” Rathsmus looked at the ground, pushing around a small rock with the toe of his boot. “I just...I mean I...” “What is it, Rathsmus?” interrupted Sheena. “How sure are you that I’m not evil at all? I killed the Dragon Master and

Kragdar to protect myself. I killed Kolder because he was against me and what we needed. Until I met you, I always believed I was evil and that was what most magic users told me. It was easy to believe. What makes you so sure that I am not evil and that I am just acting good, just as you believed that I was acting bad because of my surroundings before.”

“I have always believed you to be good. I have never felt otherwise. When you summoned us at the cornerstone you believed us to be evil because of our appearance. At that time, if you remember, I told you that if you were evil you could not have used the amulet, or at least, you would have to use white magic, not dark magic. Rathsmus nodded. “Well, after the amulet was broken up, each of us was given a piece attached to a ring. None of us could have survived having the ring put on our finger if we were evil. The ring becomes a part of us and it does not like evil. You did not receive your part until you finished your metamorphosis. It would have killed you then if you had any evil in you.” Rathsmus breathed in a deep sigh and looked at Belchar who was renewing his own vow as Council leader under the supervision of Rontal and Biktron. Amoss patted him on the shoulder and nodded with a smile. Sheena hugged him, said she loved him and pushed him toward the reconfirmed Dragon Council leader. Rathsmus stopped in front of Belchar and looked back at his family. He looked down at the ground, took a deep breath and looked up at the big red dragon.

“My name is Rathsmus. I would like to become a member of the dragon Council.” Belchar nodded and started a low chant. Rontal followed along on the second verse and the rest of the Council followed along on the third. By the end of the fifth verse, Rathsmus could feel his body tingling and the hairs on the back of his neck and on his arms were trying to stand at attention. He started to feel faint and then he felt like he was dreaming. Everything was going slow. The voices were garbled and stretched out. He wanted to lie down, but his muscles wouldn’t move the way he wanted them to. Instead, he took three steps closer to Belchar and laid his serpent staff on the table beside the gavel. Belchar was no longer saying anything, but Rathsmus could still hear the chant continuing. Belchar picked up the staff and motioned for Biktron, Tig, Rontal and Sethusda to come to him. They talked about the staff and a lot of nodding was going on. Biktron and Sethusda did most of the talking. The dragons returned to their places and the chant stopped when Belchar placed the staff back onto the table. When the chant stopped Rathsmus felt normal again.

“The shandahk-ral has been performed and all involved are free from coercion, magical or otherwise. Bow your head and become a member of the Council, if you are worthy.” Rathsmus stepped forward and bowed his head. Belchar raised his hand and looked to the Council and to Rontal. Rontal nodded as the rest of the Council just looked on. Belchar knew that no matter what happened, things would be different from this point on. He placed his hand on the sorcerer’s head and waited for the magic to do its thing.

Meanwhile, back in Rathsmus’ world, things were happening. The Evil One, Master of Darkness, or many other names that he was called, was preparing for the return of this magic user that was screwing up his plans for the take over of all of the worlds. He had reduced dragons to a wimpy race of second class beings,

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and now they were regaining their power by leaps and bounds. He still had spies in the dragon world, but his power there was gone. All of his dragons on the Council had been either kicked off or killed. This Rathsmus, as he was known to everyone, would pay dearly and the witches that were with him would be destroyed once and for all. They had been a pain in the ass for way too long. When they returned, he would be ready. He had already summoned his most powerful lords and they were due any minute.

Certain types of beings are able to go through the cornerstones more easily than others. Dragons are able to go anywhere they want to go, into any of the worlds. Humans are hit or miss. Some can go only to certain worlds; others can't use them at all. A few can go anywhere. The problem with the humans is that you don't know which is which until you try them. Most are useless when it comes to using the cornerstones. The Evil One knows how to use the cornerstones to enter certain other worlds. In fact, this world was not the original world of this being. Most call it a he, but to be sure, the aspect of male or female in its world would be a lost concept. In its own world, the Evil One is just considered another creature, albeit a very strong one, it is not the strongest in its world.

It is an eat or be eaten type world. Hide well when stronger creatures are around or die. Most of the stronger creatures don't bother with the cornerstones. They know of them and how to use them, but are too bored with the creatures of the other worlds. They always seem to have strange ways to hurt you before you can eat them. Their loud high-pitched noises as you pick them up hurts the sensitive ears. Or they throw things at you that stick in your skin. Nothing bad enough to kill you, just enough to make you hurt for a while. Not worth the trouble when they can eat the creatures of their own world just by picking them up and eating them. No noises, no sharp things to hurt you, just juicy, good tasting eating.

The Evil One was different than the other creatures of his world. He had wants that surpassed mere eating. He liked to play with his food, similar to a cat playing with a mouse until it gets bored with it and eats it. That was how he looked at most of the creatures of this world, except that a few of them were more fun to play with than others. He was not afraid of this sorcerer named Rathsmus, or the witches he hung around with, or even the dragons for that matter. The longer he stayed in this world the more he wanted a challenge. The Evil One thought quite highly of himself. Strength, intelligence and cunning were all traits he believed he possessed in great quantity. The creatures from this world could not even come close to the Evil One.

He was getting tired of being called "the Evil One". He was not even totally sure what it meant. He had been in this world just over a thousand years. Most creatures could barely remember when he started playing with them, but then most of them were dead now anyway. When he dealt with these creatures again he would make sure they knew his real name, not that they would be able to pronounce it correctly, but at least it would be better than "the Evil One". Galaxxion would be a name that would strike fear in his enemy's hearts.

This Rathsmus was different than any he had dealt with before. Luck was a term his subordinates used a lot regarding the sorcerer. Galaxxion had never heard of the term before. Luck was an added curiosity to this game; it should be fun.

At first Rathsmus felt nothing, then a slight tingle where Belchar's hand was. A slight chill ran down his spine and he got the urge to shake it out of his body, but he couldn't move. Slowly, a warmth crept around his skull trying to find an entrance to his brain. It felt like fingers were trying to lift off the top of his head, but they couldn't quite get a good grip. The fingers of heat gave up on his head as the coldness in his brain crept to its core and fought off the advancing heat, which was trying to make its way down his spine. He almost wanted the heat to continue down his back and melt away the chill, but when the heat took over inch by inch he felt as if he was burning. He could almost smell the hair and skin singeing underneath a flame. It seemed as if the heat and cold fought for an hour battling back and fourth. First heat would advance a couple of inches and then the cold would push back and take more than what the heat had gained on its advance. Then another feeling entered his head. Like little electrical currents tingling over the edge of his skin, over his shoulders and down to the tips of his fingers. His stomach contracted and he spit its contents on the ground at Belchar's feet. The electric currents continued south to his legs and down to his toes. When it hit his toes, it went into his interior to his bones, muscles and tendons. His feet and legs spasmed as the muscles contracted from the electricity. It went to his middle again and his stomach contracted again, there was nothing left inside. Then his ribcage crushed with the spasming muscles contracting, threatening to expel all of the air in his lungs. Just as he was about to black out for lack of air, his ribs expanded to suck in a new volume of oxygen. When the electricity made it to his throat, the cold and heat raced to escape through the top of his head and the electricity followed and was gone.

Rathsmus fell over as Belchar removed his hand. He didn't know what to do. The work out of mind and body he had just been through had wasted his energy. Sheena came running as the silent question to Belchar was answered with a nod. Amoss was right behind her to help Rathsmus to his feet. "Wow," said Rathsmus, "That was an experience. How come it didn't take that long for the dragons?" "What do you mean?" said Amoss; "He only had his hand on you for about a minute. I thought it would take a lot longer than that." Rathsmus didn't bother to question Amoss. He just shook his head in disbelief. Rathsmus looked at his arms and legs as he became able to stand by himself. He muscles had toned and his body was leaner. As he stood straight Belchar gasped. Set in Rathsmus' chest was a gold medallion. "Biktron! Come quickly!" he said. As the keeper of lore came closer, Sheena noticed what they were looking at. She looked at the table and lifted the serpent staff. Rathsmus, Amoss and the two dragons just stared at the staff and then at the medallion in his chest. The top part of the staff was still smoldering where the serpents and the yellow stone had been burnt off. The part of the staff that was missing was set in the medallion, although much smaller. The medallion was about three inches in diameter. It was smaller than the ones the dragons had, but still big enough for a human. "What does it mean?" asked Belchar. "I'm not totally sure," replied Biktron, staring at the medallion.

Galaxxion's lords had finally arrived. "Did you do as I instructed?" "Yess, my Master," said a bug type creature named Qular. It looked like a giant beetle with armor plate around its head and limbs and a large shell covering its back. The one

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next to it was a weird looking creature named Ceries. Its body below the waist was that of a goat and from the waist up it was a man. The whole body was covered with long white and brown fur. In some worlds his ancestors had been called Pan. It didn't know why and it really didn't care. Although it used to like the stories of the ones called Pan, it never really wanted to be one. It liked doing things for its Master, Galaxxion.

"We have gathered many to fight for you with the promise of much to eat or money, depending on their wants, once the war is won. They are waiting to be summoned through the cornerstone," said Qular." "Good. I will notify you when the time is right. Be ready when I call for you. I don't want to have to wait." Qular and Ceries left with many bows and nods as they backed away from their Master and were gone. Now he had one more to summon. He had not been able to locate Tolmon and he didn't know why. He needed someone in this world to push the armies forward that it had collected. Without Tolman, he needed another one. Torcyclenese, or Tor as most called him, would be in charge of the Hongar and the mutant armies. Tor was good, but not as good as Tolman. Galaxxion could only hope that Tolman would be found by the spies that had been sent out many months ago.

23

Liberation

The place was deserted. It hadn't seen the dragons or the humans for well over an hour. He raced over the wide expanse of packed dirt and dust to the place the humans had been kept by the dragons. It was a small rodent-like creature, much like a rat, only smarter. It searched around the building to find a way in. Usually it would not even think of coming this close to a dragon-owned property, but he was told to do so by his superior. The humans had things that belonged to someone else. It was his job to find them and return the items to their proper owner.

There was a small crack between the rock of the foundation. With a little squeeze he could make it in, then he would search the building. There was nothing in the cellar. It was totally empty. You couldn't even really call it a cellar; it was more of a crawl space, which was better for him. It found a small hole that went up to the interior of the building and as it made its way up, it found a room where the humans ate. A table with chairs around it, some cabinets with dishes, utensils and dry food. The rat creature walked around and found nothing of interest. The next room had some big chairs; a couple of small tables, some reading lamps and books, but nothing it was looking for. It was looking for items that were of a more personal nature. Then it found what it was looking for. A room with a bed and some bags of clothes lying around, but nothing else. The next room also had a bed in it, but nothing more than the other room had. The next room had two beds in it, but did not have any bags of clothes. The next room had a bed and some clothes, but it also had a small desk. The creature went through the bag of clothes and found nothing. It went to the desk and found some personal items and a small leather pouch. The pouch was tied shut, so it chewed the strap until it broke open and it pulled out a small wooden box with some writing on it. This was the item it was looking for. It didn't know how it knew, but this was it. It could feel a presence inside the box that the Great Master had instilled in it to help it find what it was looking for.

It took the box and ran from the building as fast as it could. When the rat creature made it back to its land, the place where the dragons had set aside land for them to live, the rat creatures celebrated. This would be a great thing for them, to be noticed by the Great Master. After this, maybe the Great Master would make them master over the dragons; then things would change. The dragons and the rat creatures had been enemies for as long as anyone could remember. The rat creatures always stole things belonging to the dragons and, finally, the dragons had all they could take of the creatures and stuck them on this land with strict warnings as to what would happen to them if they ever entered dragon-owned land. The dragons had not been stingy with their pick of land. It was well suited to the rat creatures. There was more than enough land too. It just wasn't good, as far as the rat creatures were concerned, to be ordered to this land by someone else without any choice.

The rat creatures made a plan to get the box to the cornerstone and, from there, to the Great Master. The rat creatures had minimal ability with the

cornerstone. They could open up a porthole large enough for two or three rat creatures at a time, but not big enough for even a human, and not for very long. The biggest problem would be the dragons. If they were spotted, they would die at the hands of the dragons without any questions. The good news was that the dragons had not been spotted for over half a day. If their luck held, they would make it to the cornerstone without any problem.

Back at the cave in Dragon Mountain, the commotion the dragons were making over Rathsmus was filling the cavern. "Quiet!" Belchar yelled as he was pounding the gavel. The noise level subsided, and finally everything was quiet. "In the past, when a human petitioned the Council, none ever received a real medallion. The last petitioner was a fake and he never petitioned the Council legitimately. This is the first time a non-dragon ever received a medallion during the ritual of becoming a Council member. As far as what the medallion means..." Biktron hesitated a few minutes to collect his thoughts. "Rathsmus is a metamorph. The staff and yellow stone are symbols of his magic. His magic symbolizes change. He will lead dragon kind into tremendous changes, the likes of which we could never imagine. He is our ally; otherwise, the magic would have destroyed him. We have to join his fight against evil in his world or it will be a matter of time before it enters ours, if it has not already done so."

Belchar was nodding, "If there is any here who disagrees with the keeper of lore, let them speak now, for now is the time for debate. Later will be too late. Now is the time to decide our fate." Rontal spoke up; "I have helped Amoss and Rathsmus at the Dragon Master's compound. I agree with Biktron. We must follow Rathsmus in his fight against evil." Tig spoke up next, "As war master, I have used my sources and my magic to seek out evil in this world, it has, in fact, come here. If we do not consolidate our resources with those of the other worlds, the fight against evil will fail. The creature we call the Evil One, is really nothing more than a creature called a Bick." It comes from a no name world where it is far from the most powerful creature, but it is not the weakest either. Compared to humans, it is very strong, present company excluded," he said nodding to Rathsmus and family. "It has magic powers that would surpass any in the White Guild. Due to its strange nature, it is considered evil here and has found many allies from all creatures, including dragons. It has been around for about a thousand years and is the cause of the decline of dragon kind. It is an insatiable carnivore and eats other creatures. It finds pleasure in "playing" with them before it eats them. It is not afraid of any one of us, and it is possible that we cannot kill it. The best we might be able to accomplish is to push it back to its own world where, possibly, a more powerful creature will kill it. In its own world that is all they do, eat and hide from more powerful creatures. It will fight us with everything it can bring together, but we must do this." Sethusda was nodding his head, "Tig is right. We must fight while we are strong. If we do not fight it now, we will become weak again and we might not be lucky enough to have one like Rathsmus to pull us back from the brink of destruction."

Granite came out of his place on the Council stands and walked to the podium. "I have been talking to the dragons that went with Rathsmus to the compound of the Dragon Master. They have seen what became of the dragons that

were too weak of mind to fight the Evil One. They have sworn an oath to me, a member of the Dragon Council, that if this Council does not vote to stand with Rathsmus, that they will leave this world with him and fight and die by his side, rather than to be captured and used as breeding stock for another evil being.”

When he was done, a large group of young dragons, led by Shindok and several others that had gone to the Dragon Masters compound, went up beside Granite to show support for the new Council member. Belchar was surprised that the young dragons had become a group of fighters and were being led by Granite. He knew that, because Granite did not have a full medallion, this might be what was required to make it complete. Tig and Sethusda moved beside Granite and several older dragons moved beside the younger dragons. Little by little, the dragons gathered behind the three Council members that would lead them into battle and possible glory or possible death. But all felt one thing in common; death or freedom from evil was better than what they had become before Rathsmus had entered their lives.

Belchar struck the gavel and there was silence. “I think a vote is in order and this will be an open vote. All in favor of joining Rathsmus and family in his battle against evil?” All of the dragons on the Council said “I”. “All opposed?” asked Belchar. None of the members said anything. “The vote is unanimous. I leave the time schedule up to the war master. We should prepare for war!” He struck the gavel. “This meeting of the Dragon Council is hereby closed. The Dragon Council will meet in five days on the Council field to speak with the war master to determine our readiness.” The gavel struck again and the Council members departed the cave. Sethusda went up to Rathsmus, “Everyone gather around.” Suddenly, they were outside the small cabin.

The sun was getting low in the sky, in half an hour it would be down below the horizon. “Tomorrow will be a big day”, said Sethusda, “We will need to coordinate the components of our army and any other allies we have. Plus, we need to determine the strengths and weaknesses of our enemies.” “I’ll be ready to meet with you in the morning,” said Rathsmus. “In the morning then,” said Amoss. Sethusda nodded to them and was gone. The sisters were the first into the cabin and almost immediately felt something strange had been here.

“Rathsmus! Amoss! Korg! Come quickly!” Crystal yelled to the men. Korg was the first into the building almost breaking down the door. Rathsmus was next, with Amoss walking slowly into the building. Amoss knew from experience that sometimes its best not to rush into a situation, besides he could tell nothing serious was going on because there was no noise. “Check the house, something was here.” Everyone scattered; Amoss went to the kitchen. Something had gotten into the food and left small footprints in the flour that had been dumped over. Each room had signs of some type or another that something had been here. “Oh no!” yelled Crystal from her room. When Rathsmus got to her room the other sisters and Korg were already there. “The box with the magic user we captured is gone. The strap on the pouch has been cut and the box is gone!” “It wasn’t cut, it was chewed,” said Amoss as he came up behind Rathsmus. “The kitchen was rummaged through as if someone or something was looking for a particular item. The footprints are those of a race of rat-like creatures that the dragons pushed onto an area of land and told

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them to stay off this land. Apparently, this item you had was enough to bring them off their land. When the dragons hear of this I fear those creatures will be destroyed.”

The rat creatures were on their way to the cornerstone, about another hour’s travel and they would be there. If only their luck would hold out. It would be dark when they reached the cornerstone, which was just as well. They would be able to hide better.

It was dark by the time Sethusda came and left. Rathsmus had mind linked with him. He was not happy about the rat creatures. It wasn’t long before he saw snapdragons flying around to find the thieves. Then larger dragons filled the sky. Through the mind link he knew the snapdragons had found a large group of rat creatures already at the cornerstone. Rathsmus became Kragdar and raced toward the cornerstone. Amoss followed as a snapdragon.

When they reached the cornerstone, the rat creatures were surrounded by dragons and they were not allowed near the cornerstone. The dragons were very angry. Tig was talking to the leader of the rat creatures. He saw Rathsmus and Amoss come into the clearing around the cornerstone. They both changed to their human form and the rat creatures gasped in awe. They did not know the dragons had become so powerful that they were able to change shape so quickly, or at all, for that matter. “The cornerstone has been used. The leader will not tell us where they went. He won’t even admit that they used it, but a snapdragon saw a group of them go through a small porthole. Rathsmus walked up to the lead rat creature; “Do you know what you took from us?” “I took nothing from anyone. The only thing I will admit to is breaking a dragon law that we don’t even agree with. We should not be expected to stay on land with no access to the cornerstone. From this day on, we denounce the dragon law!” The rat creatures behind the leader cheered for him.

A large group of black dragons appeared in the sky and circled the clearing. One by one, they landed in a line on one side of the clearing and the rat creatures ran behind them. The rat creatures knew the black dragons were their only hope of protection from the four-headed dragon and his companions. A black dragon, that was smaller than Kragdar had been, took a couple of steps forward from the line. “My name is Tridex. These creatures are under my protection. If you do not wish to die, leave now!” Tig started to laugh at the black dragon, which started the other dragons laughing also. That made Tridex a little uneasy. The Council had always been scared of the black dragon gang led by Kragdar.

Tig stopped laughing and silence froze the clearing. The moon had risen and shadows dotted the ground. The wind blew slight gusts causing the leaves on the distant trees to rustle. Crickets were chirping their songs despite the threat to anything unlucky enough to be in the clearing. The rat creatures had enough and ran into the forest. “You don’t know how big of a mistake you just made. Threatening the Dragon Council’s war master.” War master? thought Tridex, “What the hell is a war master?” he finished out loud. Sethusda, who had been beside Rathsmus, vanished, only to reappear behind the line of black dragons. “He is the leader of the dragon army, which you just happen to be addressing.” The black dragons were startled by Sethusda and quickly turned to see the mountain dragon standing behind them. They still did not think much of mountain dragons and they started to snicker.

Any army that used a mountain dragon as a spokesman could not be much to worry about. Then he vanished again and reappeared between Tig and the line of black dragons. A root grew up and entwined the black dragons' feet and bodies. This was not the black root like the Dragon Master had used; this was made of light and air. It glowed brightly and lit up the clearing.

The black dragons tried to wiggle free, but the root had them tight. There was no escape. The root continued up and encased their wings in a net of light and wrapped around their mouths to keep them from spitting out their biological weapons. These black dragons were not magic, as the Council Dragons had become. They finally stopped struggling and bowed their heads in defeat.

"These dragons will be brought before the Dragon Council for trial," said Tig. "Sethusda, have a contingent of snapdragons search the area around the cornerstone in Rathsmus' world for the rat creatures. Whatever he stole was important enough to make them stand up to us." Rathsmus cleared his throat; "They took a magic box. Inside the box was a very powerful magic user that works for the Evil One. We captured him a long time ago." "He couldn't be too powerful if you captured him," said Albon, a snapdragon that had known Amoss from along time ago, and hung around with him as much as possible now. "We surprised him. He never knew what hit him." "Why didn't you tell us that you had such an item?" said Sethusda, "We could have protected it better or even destroyed it." "We didn't want it destroyed, and up until a couple of hours ago, we weren't totally trusting friends. We were not totally sure what to do with it ourselves. Now the Evil One has a new ally."

The rat creatures did not waste any time after getting to the world the Evil One lives in and to contact him and let him know they had the item he wanted. In moments a vision of Galaxxion appeared in front of the rat creatures. "What do you mean, you found what I wanted? I wanted a human, not a wooden box! I should fry you all right now for being so incompetent," yelled Galaxxion. "But Master," said the rat creature that stole the box, "I used your magic to tell me how to find it. It led me to the box."

Galaxxion stared at them for awhile. "Show me the box." The rat creature pulled the box out of a pouch they had been dragging with them. It was a small wooden box, nothing spectacular. It had some writing in a language the creature didn't know. "Open it!" The rat creature tried to open it, but it would not open. "Try harder!" This time four rat creatures pulled at it while a fifth one tried to pry open the lid. A flash of light struck the fifth creature between the eyes and knocked him to the ground about five feet away. Another one went to his rescue and saw a normal body, but its head was just a burnt out skull. "Back away from it!" yelled Galaxxion. A flash of light shot out of his eyes and struck the box. The light stopped and a mist of fog came out of the visage and surrounded the box. When the fog dissipated, Galaxxion told them to open the box. Slowly, the creature that had stolen the box went up to it and pulled at the top. The hinges creaked and the top lifted. A flash of light shot out of the box and the rat creature jumped back, afraid he would be killed, but the light slowly coalesced into a human man.

It took awhile, but his muscles started to loosen up. He couldn't believe he had been in a box all this time. The last thing he could remember was looking for

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the witches in that cave, and that only seemed like minutes ago. He knelt down to the visage that stared at him with an evil grin. "Evil One, what do you ask of me?" "First of all, Tolman, my name is Galaxxion. Do not call me "the Evil One." Tolman nodded. "You must come to me. Bring these creatures to me so that they can be rewarded for finding and returning you." Tolman nodded again and the visage of Galaxxion was gone.

The snapdragons came through the porthole and saw a light just over the next hill. They hadn't gotten more than two hundred feet from the cornerstone when the light went out. "Spread out," said Carillion, the leader of this mission. There were six snapdragons in all: Carillion, Mino, Nual, Urcha, Bunak and Oursa. These were all young dragons and none had been on a mission like this before. There had been no need before, but things were changing fast. "Stay low," said Carillion through the mind link. They all flew as close to the trees as they could, flying between the treetops. It was dark here also, but the sun was starting to rise. The sky was clear and the stars were still visible. "There they are!" said Urcha, "But there is a human with them." "Be careful, it could be a magic user," said Carillion. Sethusda had been listening through the mind link and, when he heard that a human was with them, he became worried. He decided to send some large dragons to support the snapdragons, and then he sent word to the snapdragons to wait. He sent a blue named Fildorn, a wood named Blankdar and a gold named Gontor. They flew through the cornerstone; these three had found their magic quickly and were quite good at using it.

The snapdragons dove at the rat creatures and the human. Mino struck the human from behind just as a rat creature saw him coming. Mino grabbed the human under the arms and threw him head first into a tree. Tolman was only shocked by the dragon for a second and protected himself from striking the tree with magic. The rat creatures dove under rocks and stumps to save themselves from the dragons. One didn't make it and it was grabbed by the tail and thrown into the air. Another dragon caught it by the neck in its mouth and crushed the spine till it was dead. Unfortunately for the dragons, Tolman was not unconscious. A beam of red light shot from his right hand and speared Nual through the chest. He dropped to the ground with a thud of flying dirt and debris. A second beam, this time from Tolman's left hand, hit Mino in the head and decapitated the dragon in a dive for the magic user. Tolman jumped out of the way just in time to avoid the body of the dragon as it took out a small tree he had been leaning against. Carillion landed on the ground, ready to pounce on the magic user, when a rat creature bit him in the soft tissue behind his rear leg. Carillion jumped in pain, trying to swat the rat creature away, when a beam of red light struck him in the back and he went down. Oursa came at Tolman from behind, but Tolman was quicker. A beam of red light struck the dragon in the stomach, slicing open his belly. When the dragon landed, blood and guts flew into the air along with the dirt and debris. Bunak and Urcha tried together; Bunak tried from the front, Urcha from behind. The sun was up now; there was no hiding what they were trying to do. Tolman jumped and rolled onto his feet. As the dragons crossed where Tolman had been standing, a beam of red light sliced through the necks of the dragons and they went down, dead. He made a bubble

of air and he flew off, away from the scene of death. The rat creatures followed as fast as they could.

When Fildorn, Blankdar, and Gontor arrived at the scene it was too late. Nothing moved. Six snapdragons lay either decapitated or with holes burnt through their bodies. Gontor found Bunak, Urcha and Mino, all decapitated. Mino's head was nowhere to be found. Blankdar found Nual and Oursa. A hole through the chest of Nual took out his heart. He was killed instantly. Oursa, on the other hand, had been hit in the stomach and must have died in great pain. From the looks of things, he had still been in the air when he was injured, when he hit the ground nothing could have kept his insides in. Fildorn found Carillion. He had a hole through his middle that miraculously had missed any major organs, but he was losing a lot of blood. As Fildorn rolled Carillion over, the snapdragon opened his eyes. "Looks like we lost our first battle against evil," he croaked. "What happened?" "The magic user had some strong defenses. A red beam of light did this," he pointed to the hole in his body. "We'll get him," said Fildorn. "No!" he said, coughing up some blood, "He is too powerful and knows the ways of war. Even with your magic, you would be no match for him. Tig will teach you how to fight. Then, you will fight this magic user and avenge our deaths." In a final fit of coughing blood, Carillion died.

Sethusda was contacted by Fildorn and was told the story of what had happened. More dragons were sent to recover the bodies of the snapdragons. In the mouth of Nual was found a rat creature. A second was found with his head almost burnt off. The small wooden box the rat creatures had stolen was in the middle of the destruction. This would be the proof the Council needed to exterminate the rat creatures from their world.

Tolman flew over the next hill from where the dragons had attacked him and then walked back and hid to see if any others would come. They did. Not one minute after he had flown away in his bubble, three large dragons came and looked things over. Shortly after that, another group of large dragons came, picked up the dead and flew away. The rat creatures caught up to him. "Why did you leave us behind? If those dragons had followed you they would have killed us." "That's why," said Tolman. "Besides, if they had wanted to, they would have caught us all. I guess its true what they say about the dragons. They have become weak. In the past, a dragon would never have let the death of another dragon go without being avenged. Now they only carry off their dead. What a waste. I was looking forward to killing the big ones. It's not as if they're real dangerous anyway. They're not magic. Stories say that they used to be, but that was a long time ago. Well, I'm going. If you want to go with me, climb aboard." A bubble shimmered into existence and the rat creatures jumped into it. Another bubble surrounded Tolman as he sat down cross-legged. Off he flew with the smaller bubble of rat creatures following.

24

The Trial

Rathsmus sat at the Council table, the only one on the Council who actually used a chair. On the other side of the table was a line of black dragons wrapped in a net of light. "Tridex," said Belchar, "You are here to be tried, with your fellow black dragon gang, for crimes against the Dragon Council and against dragon kind in general. You are to be tried as followers of the Evil One. How do you plead? And, may I remind you that, when the bindings are removed any movement that is deemed threatening will be acted upon swiftly and deadly." Tridex nodded his agreement. Rathsmus removed the bindings from around the dragon's mouth, but kept them tight around his chest so it would be harder to take in a breath of air to use his biological weapons. "To the crimes committed by the black dragon gang, I plead guilty, but only to the extent that we followed Kragdar through most of them. We knew no better. To the part of us being evil, I personally, am not evil. I know evil comes in different shapes and I cannot speak for all members of my gang, although I don't believe any are truly evil. Also I request the chance to prove that we are, in fact, not evil beings just because we are black. You cannot condemn us just because of one black dragon."

"We don't condemn you just because of one black dragon. There were two. Kolder, of the Dragon Council was also evil. But, I do see your point. If that were true, we would also have to condemn other types of dragons just because of the actions of a few, and that wouldn't be right," Belchar looked at the table, deep in thought. He looked up at the line of black dragons. "Do all of you plead the same? A nod or shake of your head will do." All of the black dragons nodded. "Very well, we will commence with the trial of evil. If you are found to be evil, you will be killed where you stand. If you are found innocent, you will be held over for sentencing of the crimes Tridex pled guilty to." Belchar pounded his gavel on the table and motioned for Krondok, keeper of the seals, to come forward. "Pick up the first seal and place it on his forehead," Belchar told Krondok. He did as he was told and placed the seal on the forehead of Tridex. "In your own words, pledge your loyalty to the seal." "I pledge my loyalty to the Dragon Council and to the first seal. None will come before you," said Tridex. The seal glowed brightly and then was done. "Now, place the second seal on his forehead." Krondok replaced the first seal and placed the second seal on the black dragon's forehead. "Now pledge your soul." "I pledge my soul to the Council and to the second seal. None other will have my soul." The seal glowed brightly and then was done. "Now, place the third seal on his head." Krondok replaced the second seal in the case and put the third seal on Tridex's forehead. "Now denounce all evil." Tridex took in a deep breath, "To the Council of Dragons and the third seal, I denounce all evil and all of its works in all of its different forms. I pledge my life to the war against evil." The seal glowed brightly and then was done. "Place the fourth seal on his head." Krondok did as before and placed the fourth seal on the dragon's head. When the seal was placed on

his head, a strong gust of wind circled around the dragons. A cloud started to form above the black dragon; it just swirled around in a vortex that centered above the seal. "You have pledged your loyalty, your soul, your life. Now is the most important part. Anyone can pledge these things and, at the first moment things get difficult, the oaths are forgotten. This seal will know if you were truthful. It will mark you in such a way that all dragons will know that you made the pledge to the seals. Continuing on will change your life in ways you could not imagine. You have passed the trial of evil at this point. You may stop now and only be sentenced for the crimes of the black dragon gang. Do you wish to continue?" Tridex nodded, "I want to prove to you all, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that I am not evil!" "So be it." Belchar stood up, leaned over the table and placed his hand on the fourth seal. He chanted something low so only he knew what he said. He felt a tingle go through his hand. The seal glowed brightly and was done. Belchar removed the seal and handed it to Krondok. Belchar then returned to his original position behind the table. The clouds above Tridex swirled faster and faster. His eyes were closed and he was in a trance, chanting the words that Belchar had said. A funnel shape came down out of the cloud above Tridex and touched where the seal had been. His body started to give off a misty fog that was pulled into the funnel cloud. Slowly, the cloud engulfed his head, then his neck and, finally, his whole body was gone, covered in a swirling cloud. In an instant the cloud stopped swirling and just floated off.

Tridex was standing there with his head bowed. On his forehead was a copy of the fourth gold seal. When he opened his eyes, Krondok gasped aloud. Tridex had gold eyes, not a yellow or goldish color, but actual gold eyes. "Show me your hands," said Belchar. Tridex stood up on his rear feet and held out his hands. On the bottoms of his hands, (his palms, if he was a human) were two of the other seals. The one on the left was the first seal, the one on the right was the second seal and over his heart was the seal of life, the third seal. "You are a creature of the seals. All will know you by the seals embedded on your body. You will live and die by the oaths you took to the seals. You will know truth when you hear it; you will know evil when you see it. You will kill evil and you will save the soul."

Tridex felt somewhat tricked by the Council. He would not have chosen this if he had known, but he would not deny that he felt an inner strength he had not felt before. He searched his being and found something hidden away. Magic! He had magic! The magic was tied to the seals, but did not originate because of the seals. It had been there all along. "I am magic!" said Tridex. "Yes," said Belchar, "All dragons have the ability. You just need to find it. The seals helped you find it, but you always had it." "Yes I feel that, and I can see your truth. It is like listening to a bird chirp a beautiful song when you speak the truth. It sounds good." That is the seal of truth. You will also see evil. Can you see any evil in the black dragons?"

Tridex didn't really want to look at them. They were his friends. He didn't want any of them to be evil. Slowly, he looked at the first one on the end: Wardak... nothing. Good. He took a big breath and slowly let it out. Next was his best friend, Dirkan... nothing. Good. The next dragon had not been with them long and he didn't know him very well. He had joined the group of dragons with about ten others. All were buddies of Kragdar. He never really liked or disliked him, but he always stuck to his own. His name was Rovendell. When Tridex looked at him it

was like looking at a rotten piece of meat. It made him sick just to look at it. He had to look away. Rovendell struggled; he knew what was happening. He could see his evilness. He looked at the dragon struggling to escape his bindings. He walked up to the dragon. "Rovendell, you are evil and I free your soul!"

Tridex placed his right hand on the forehead of the struggling dragon. When the seal touched the dragon, it was as if a thousand shocks went through his body. Rovendell froze as his muscles tightened up from the shock. Then, his skin split and the bindings fell off it. A creature with six arms stood up out of the skin of the dragon. It was wreathing in pain from what Tridex was doing to it. It hated pain. It wanted to escape. It grabbed Tridex by the hand that was on its forehead. The magic would not let go. It tried to grab him by the neck, but Tridex caught its hand with his free left hand. Then, a burst of energy came from the creature's eyes and struck the dragon in the face. Tridex staggered back, but the magic held on. Rathsmus knew Tridex was in trouble and ran up to the creature. Half way to the creature, he became Korg. Before he had taken a full stride, his sword was out and was coming down on the elbow of the arm that was holding onto Tridex's right arm. The blow did not sever the arm completely, but it was only hanging on by a few strands of muscle. When Rathsmus hit the ground, he struck another blow with an uppercut to its leg just above the back of the knee. The creature was yelling to the sky in pain. An arm reached for the cut on its leg as another reached for Rathsmus. A down swing split the hand in two past its wrist. It pulled its hand back so fast that Rathsmus lost the sword, which was buried in the wrist of the creature. The hand that had gone for the leg now went for Rathsmus. He didn't see it coming because he was trying to regain his balance after the sword was pulled out of his hands.

He felt a swish of air as the creature's hand grabbed him around the waist and the hand pushed him to the ground. He expected the hand to crush him as he noticed it was no longer connected to the creature. Korg was standing over him; "Next time, let me know when you are going to go out and play." He held out his hand to Rathsmus. "I'll keep that in mind." Rathsmus grabbed Korg's hand and was pulled out from under the severed hand. "Why don't you use your magic?" asked Korg. "Not while Tridex is still stuck on him using the seals. It could either kill him or rebound and kill me. I don't like either scenario."

The creature was in such pain now it couldn't stand it. The hand with the sword in it came over Tridex and was met by another hand to pull the sword from its bloody wound. Korg ran at the black dragon with a leap and landed on the shoulder of Tridex. He continued up in the air toward the hand with the sword in it. With a strong downward blow, he severed the wrist and the sword fell to the ground. Before Korg could jump away, the creature caught him in the hand that was going after the sword.

Rathsmus was picking up the sword just as it stuck in the ground. He struck at the creature's leg just above the knee with all of his might. He severed the leg cleanly. The creature fell over like a giant tree, pulling Tridex with it. When the hand with Korg in it hit the ground, Korg rolled out of it and was ready to strike again. Tridex was standing above the creature's head with his hand still stuck to it. Rathsmus and Korg walked up to the creature, one on either side of its neck. With a final blow, they both struck its neck at the same time. As its head came off into

Tridex's hand, the magic stopped, and the head was released from Tridex. It hit the ground with a splat.

Both Rathsmus and Korg were covered with blood and gore. Tridex looked at them with a strange curiosity. Rathsmus remembered that he was still in Korg's shape and he changed back to his normal form. Tridex nodded as if it all made sense now and walked back to the line of black dragons. The others were all normal. "The problem is that there are ten more just like him back at our home." Just exactly what was that? asked Belchar. "That was a creature from the same world as the Evil One," Amoss said, "It is called a Frasher. Most creatures from that world don't leave it because, believe it or not, they are afraid to leave their home. A few, like the Evil One, overcome this fear and venture out to find new things. They hate pain. So the more pain you can generate on them, the better the chances of them running away. The only thing that saved us from this one was that the seals hampered its movement. It could have easily killed Korg and Rathsmus by themselves. But, by the same token, if the seal had not held it here, it would probably have run off after the second hit from Rathsmus' sword."

"We will need to rout out those creatures from our world," said Belchar, "But, first we need to finish with these dragons." Belchar motioned toward the line of black dragons. "I can now vouch for these dragons. They are not evil," said Tridex. "Good," said Belchar, "Which leaves us with only one problem. Do you dragons wish to be sentenced for your crimes against us, or do you wish to become a truth seer as Tridex has done?" "It will take some getting used to," said Tridex, "But, I would do it again knowing what my options were and what yours are. I believe it will be best for all if you do." They all nodded and Belchar nodded to Krondok to begin the process of making the black dragons truth seers.

Outside the cave of the Evil One, Tolman and the rat creatures waited. The Evil One had contacted them and they were instructed to wait for Torcyclenese and then to enter together. It wasn't long before Tor showed up and they said their hellos. Tor was not a human. He was a human/animal mix like the creatures Tolman had led into the cave when he had been captured. Tor was part man and part lizard, and not much man at that. He was tall, about ten feet, had broad shoulders and was very muscular. In a fight of strength, Tor would beat Tolman, if they didn't use magic. Tor didn't have any magical ability, and he wasn't very smart either. He was Tolman's second in command, which was the perfect job for him. He did as he was told and was strong enough to carry out any order, as long as thinking wasn't required. Galaxxion did not know that fact about Tor because he was always given good reports about him from Tolman. Tolman liked Tor because he was loyal and fun to be around. According to Tor, the only reason he and his troops were still alive was because he had not gone where Galaxxion had told him to go. This made their Master very angry, at least until he was the only real army that was left until reinforcements arrived. Galaxxion did not like to have to eat crow because of an imbecile, and he did not like Tor. He would use him if that was the best he had, but he had Tolman back and Tolman knew that Galaxxion didn't keep things he didn't like.

Two others arrived with Tor. A birdman named Screech and a snakeman named Slith. They were Tor's bodyguards, not that he needed one, but these two

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were smarter than Tor. They had convinced him that all commanders of an army needed bodyguards, even if it was only for show. They did not like the fact that Tolman was back. They had not been his best soldiers.

The group made their way into the cave, followed by the rat creatures. The back of the cave opened and they followed the all too familiar path to see Galaxxion. The path brought them to the lava lake. They waited at the pier for the boat, but it wasn't coming for them. They should hear the drum beat. Tor told Tolman about the red dragon and his strange behavior. For the last couple of months he had not been beating on the drum and he had eaten two of the rowers for no reason. Tolman looked out over the lava lake and saw a shadow moving closer. The boat was coming. As the boat came up and docked, Tolman noticed that the red dragon was sleeping, actually lounging on its back with one foot hanging over the rail of the boat. Its head was on the rear railing, with its mouth pointing up and open, and the dragon was snoring.

Tor started to climb aboard and Tolman touched his shoulder, motioning him to be quiet as not to wake the dragon. Tor nodded and slowly climbed onto the deck, followed by Slith and Screech. Tolman motioned for the rat creatures to quietly go aboard. As the rat creatures went onto the boat, the dragon started to stir, but didn't wake. Tolman climbed aboard and motioned for the rowers to leave the pier. Shortly after leaving, the dragon stirred again, but still didn't wake. Tolman didn't want the dragon to wake up while he was on the boat. He could no longer see the pier and nothing but lava was visible. Again, the dragon stirred, this time he was waking up. With a big sneeze it sat up and looked around, confused. "I smell rats! I hate rats!" the dragon yelled, as it grabbed for its whip. A rat creature scurried from one side of the boat to the other in hopes of escaping the wrath of the dragon, it couldn't. With a flick of its wrist, the whip lashed out and encircled the rat creature's neck and he was pulled back to the dragon's awaiting hand. The whip had broken the rat creature's neck, it was dead. The dragon dropped the creature to the deck.

"Do not kill these creatures," yelled Tolman, "They are guests of Galaxxion." "I take orders from no one," said the dragon, as he saw another rat creature. The dragon spit out a flame toward the rat creature and the boat caught fire. "Stop it or you will burn the boat from under us," yelled Tolman. "So?" laughed the dragon, as it flicked the whip toward Tolman's feet. Tor was quick and pushed Slith in front of Tolman. The whip wrapped around the snakeman's legs and the dragon flipped him overboard with a deep laugh. Slith screamed in agony as he landed in the lava. The rowers had stopped rowing and were trying to put out the fire. A rat creature ran away from the fire and the whip caught it around the neck and was flipped back to the dragon, dead.

"Get him!" yelled Tor to Screech and then he pushed him toward the dragon. Screech ran to keep his balance and then jumped when he realized he wouldn't be able to stop in time. He drew his sword in mid air ready for the down swing. The dragon lifted the large drumstick and caught the birdman in the side of the head, crushing his skull with a loud crack. The birdman flew overboard. He was dead before he ever hit the lava.

Tolman pointed at the dragon and a beam of red light shot out at its chest. The dragon was quick and jumped out of the way, but pulled the chain that bound him to the boat. The red light severed the chain as if it was a loaf of bread. When the dragon landed, the boat lurched and Tolman went up in the air and landed on the railing. He held onto the boat, dangling just above the lava. The soles of his boots were smoldering from the heat. Tor flew up in the air and landed on the bow of the boat. His head hit the wood and he fell to the bottom of the boat, unconscious. Three of the rat creatures landed in the lava. The dragon caught another in his mouth as it leapt into the air and flew toward the exit. Five of the ten rowers landed in the lava. That left five rowers, two rat creatures, Tolman and Tor.

It wasn't long before Tor started coming around. "You start rowing on that side," said Tolman, pointing to one row of oarsmen. When the rowers were ready, he cast a spell on the other set of oars and they started rowing and matched the speed of the other side. They were on their way again.

Belchar finished with the last of the black dragons. Now he had ten truth seers. "Tig, we must send a group of warriors to the home of the black dragons to get rid of the Frashers that have invaded our world. I want you to send another group with three truth seers to the rat creatures. Destroy any that are evil. The rest may live where they wish." Tig was glad Belchar did not order the destruction of all of the rat creatures. He didn't really like them, but that was not a good reason to kill them.

Twenty dragons, led by Tig, went to the black dragons' home. Five black dragon, truth seers, showed the way. When they arrived, things were normal until the black dragons noticed who was flying into their village. Black dragons came from everywhere, but when they realized there were five black dragons leading the way, they slowed down. Still, they poured from everywhere. When Tig landed, the black dragons looked at him with awe. Rathsmus had come as a wood dragon, but was ready to become Kragdar, if Tig needed any help. One dragon stepped forward from the hoard of black dragons. The dragon's name was Prinam. "What do you want?" he said to Tig. Tig looked to one of the truth seers and he nodded the o.k.

"My name is Tig. We have come here to tell you of a danger amongst you all. There are ten creatures disguised as dragons. They are very dangerous." "They are not here," said Dirkan, "I don't see them anywhere." "Ten dragons left here just before midday. They didn't say why or where they were going. Nobody stopped them because nobody here liked them. They were friends of Kragdar, and since his death, those dragons have seemed really strange. They kept to themselves and only went on raids with us." "He speaks the truth," said Dirkan. "Good. Kragdar had a spell on you just as he had done on the Council when he was with us. He was evil and promoted evil thoughts. I am here as an emissary of the Council. I offer you the chance to join the rest of us and reunite all dragons in a fight against evil. Those of you who have committed crimes against us in the past will be forgiven. The only thing we require of you is to pledge your loyalty to the Council in front of a truth seer."

"What is a truth seer?" asked Prinam. "This is a truth seer," said Tig as he pointed to Dirkan, "He went through a ceremony and became a seer of truth, and of evil. We would not require any of you to do as these dragons have done. To save

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you, they sacrificed themselves and the magic of the seals gave them certain powers. Things have changed a lot since you have split from the Council. We have discovered our heritage and our magic. We wish you would join us, please.”

“I cannot speak for the others here, I am not their leader. We have not had a true leader since Kragdar, and maybe that is good. I am ready to join you. We have been separated for too long,” said Prinam. Dirkan placed his left hand on the forehead of Prinam, felt a tingle through his hand and it was done. “You are loyal to the Council.” One by one, the black dragons came up to a truth seer and pledged their loyalty to the Council. There was a small group of about twenty young males, about the same age as Dirkan and Tridex, which were staying off to one side. It took a long time, but eventually all that was left was the group of males. “How do we know if we can be loyal to a Council that abandoned us?” asked one of the dragons. “You were not abandoned,” said Dirkan, “You were led away by an evil dragon and we are here to bring you back.” “We want to become truth seers, like you.” “If that is what you truly want, I think that can be arranged.” Most of the dragons had already left for the Council lands. Tig had stayed here with Rathsmus to watch the proceedings. Now everyone here was ready to return to the Council.

Amoss had gone with Sethusda to find the rat creatures. They were not that hard to find. The truth seer, Wardak, pointed out the leader to be evil and about twenty-five others that also were evil. They were rounded up and carried off. “Now that the evil in your midst has been removed, you are free to go wherever you wish. The old dragon law that kept you here no longer will be enforced. We wish that in time, our peoples will become friends,” said Sethusda. “What will you do with the ones you took?” asked a female rat creature. “They will be destroyed like the evil creatures that they are.” With that, Sethusda vanished and the rest of the dragons leapt into the air and were gone. The rat creatures were somewhat sad at the loss of their fellow rats, but not that much and not for long. After all, it was twenty-six less mouths to feed, and now they could go anywhere they wanted. It seemed like a fair trade to them. You always had to look on the bright side.

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A Time for War

Over the next couple of weeks Sethusda, Tig, Belchar, Rontal and a few other dragons, trained the new dragon army in the uses of their new magical ability. Sethusda taught them how to find it and the others trained them how to use it in battle. The deaths of the snapdragons against a single magic user made them realize they were not prepared for an all out war against magic users. Rathsmus, Amoss, the sisters and even Korg taught techniques, both magical and hand-to-hand. Tricks of the trade, is what Korg called it. During this time, the Dragon Council sent out emissaries to groups they hoped would ally themselves with the dragons. Amoss, Rathsmus and Korg were sent to the Minotaurs. They hoped that, since they had already talked to them once, it would be easier to convince them to join the cause. Crystal and Dalna were sent to the White Guild. They didn't hold out much hope in getting them to join. Rontal and Albon went to the world where the human/animal mix creatures came from. In every world, or at least in most, where there was an evil side to life there was an opposing good side. Dark and light, good and evil, they all meant the same thing. They had a good chance of getting allies in the worlds where the Evil One got his allies, except for his home world where there was no good or evil, you killed to survive or you were killed and eaten, according to Amoss. He had been there once when he was exploring the worlds of the cornerstone. The cornerstone was the beginning of a world, the foundation that the world was built on. Some worlds, such as Rathsmus', had several. Some had only one or two. Some cornerstones could take you to several worlds; some could only take you to one. No one knew the origin of the cornerstones. Most could not even tell you what they were. Amoss had studied the cornerstones for years and knew where most of them were and where they would take you. Amoss sent everyone to the particular places and told them who to talk to and what to say before they left. He would have liked to have gone personally to each of the worlds, but he knew there was not enough time for that. He could only hope things would go all right.

Tolman and Tor finally made it to where Galaxxion was, the rat creatures were told to stay behind. He was sitting in a high back chair with big armrests. It was dark so they couldn't see him. Two torches lit up the area behind and on both sides of the chair, but Galaxxion's face and body were hidden in shadows. His hands were hidden in the long sleeves of his robe and his feet were covered by its length. The platform he was on was about ten feet above the floor with stairs that worked their way to the top.

About halfway up, on both sides of the stairs, were platforms where there were large creatures, the likes of which Tolman had never seen before. They were big and they wore no clothes to hide the sight of their hideous bodies. Their muscles were tremendously over-developed. They had six arms, three on each side of their bodies and legs that were larger than tree trunks. The head was the worst. They had teeth that were too big for their mouths and long pointed fangs that went in all

directions. Their ears were small, almost nonexistent. Their heads were bald, with what looked like tattoos covering the skull. Their noses looked like a bumpy potato and their eyes looked more like a bug's than an animal's. On one arm was a large gold shield, something that Tolman did not think he could have even budged without his magic. In another hand was a large curved sword that shone like a mirror. It was larger than either Tolman or Tor could have used. Each of the other hands had some sort of throwing weapon. A small knife, of course small for them was like a short sword for a human, an axe, and a throwing star that was the size of a small shield. They had grieves that covered the tops of their bare feet to their knees. Anyone that wanted to get to Galaxxion would have to get through these war machines first. That looked next to impossible.

"You have made it at last, my friend," said Galaxxion. "However, there seems to be some missing members of your party." "We had some trouble with some small dragons right after your first contact with us. The red dragon on your boat killed quite a few of the rat creatures also," said Tolman. "I am tired of that dragon!" said Galaxxion, "I will have it killed within the hour." "That will be a little difficult to do since it escaped from the boat. The last time I saw it, it was heading for the exit." Galaxxion said nothing, but Tolman could sense that the news was not pleasing his Master. There was total silence for about five minutes. The heat was making Tolman sweat so bad that he felt like he had just climbed out of a bath with his clothes on.

"Tor," said Galaxxion finally, "Come closer. You do not say much and we have not talked about my army that you led in Tolman's absence. You did not follow the instructions I gave you. Had you done as you were told, the others might not have died. Faldor and Baldor might have caught the witches and destroyed them. Now, they are dead. The witches have allied themselves with the dragons and, in a very short time, have destroyed things that took me one thousand years to create. The dragons are very powerful now, where, until only a little while ago, they were like a pen of turkeys being fattened for a feast. The one I called the Dragon Master is now dead, killed by the witches' pimp. All dragon kind that were under my power are now breaking the bonds that held them and returning to their home world, as you witnessed first hand with the red dragon. He was my prized possession. He is the son of the leader of the Dragon Council. He was the ace up my sleeve. I could have crippled the Council just by pulling out his teeth and sending them to the Council one-by-one. But, now he is gone and someone has to pay!" With that he slammed his fist on the arm of the chair.

A table appeared in front of Tor with assorted battle weapons. Thorn-whips, blades of all sizes and types, throwing weapons, shields and axes. "But, I am not unreasonable," said Galaxxion, "I will give you a chance to defend yourself. Choose your weapons carefully. Your fight is to the death. You will fight three different creatures, one at a time. If you win against all of them, you will have the choice of going free or joining with Tolman again." An evil laugh came from the creature in the chair.

Tor looked to Tolman. "He cannot help you now." Tolman vanished and reappeared, sitting on the stairs before Galaxxion. Tor looked up at Galaxxion and saw Tolman on the stairs. Tor looked over the equipment on the table. He picked up

some grieves and put them on his legs. He picked up a belt with throwing stars and buckled it over his shoulder. He picked some knives and placed them around his uniform. He placed a sword and sheath around his waist. His own sword was placed over his shoulder and on the opposite side of his waist from the sword, he tied the thorn-whip. On his head, he placed a metal helm and, on his left arm, he placed a shield with large steel spikes. This shield would enable him to keep his left hand free, if needed. He looked at the table to see if there was anything else he could use. The table vanished. "If you pick up one more thing, you won't be able to move. Your first opponent."

Off to one side, a light came on. The light came from the ceiling like a spotlight. All around the circle of light on the floor was darkness. A creature stepped into the circle. It was about five feet tall, weighed about two hundred fifty pounds and it was very muscular. It wore no clothes, no armor, but it was a weapon all by itself. It had a whip-like tail with quills like a porcupine. It had wing-like appendages on its back, but they weren't wings. Where a dragon's wing had skin between the bones, this creature had only bones and they were sharp, like claws. They slashed the air around it as if it was fighting an enemy. They would be very dangerous. Out of the back of its wrists were sharp, bony sword like protrusions, two on each arm. Out of each knee was a six-inch thorn that could injure an opponent in close combat. Tor had never seen such a creature as this before. Its face was the least menacing. It had one big eye on its forehead, no ears or hair. Two small holes under its eye must have been its nose and its mouth had a lower jaw that didn't look like it could ever close. Two large fangs came up out of the lower jaw as greenish colored slime like watery pea soup seemed to perpetually drip over its lip.

It bowed its readiness to Galaxxion and then to Tor. Tor bowed to Galaxxion and Tolman, mostly to Tolman, and walked to the circle of light. The circle on the floor expanded to a diameter of about twenty feet across. "You cannot leave the light or you will loose automatically. Begin!" said Galaxxion, and a gong sound came from off in the distance. Tor drew his sword from over his shoulder and took a small knife for his left hand. He moved toward the creature and it backed up until Tor was in the center of the circle. Then the creature side stepped slowly around the circle as Tor turned in place to keep the creature in front of him. The tail slashed out at his feet and he jumped and swung his sword down while holding the shield high. The ball of quills rolled across the floor and into the darkness as the wing-like appendages slashed and hit only the shield. A blue gooey substance splashed the floor as the tail whipped the floor in pain. The creature made no noise but Tor could tell it wanted to run away. Pain was not something this creature liked and it was trying to stay away from Tor. He re-sheathed his sword and untied the thorn-whip. He was as good with a whip as he was with a sword and he was magic with a sword. He let the length of whip unroll on the floor and flicked his wrist to untangle it. The creature heard it hit the floor and slowly turned to see what the lizard man was doing. With a flick of his arm, the whip lashed out. With another flick, the thorns dug into the flesh of the creature's stomach. His arms flew back and the whip returned to the ground behind Tor. More blue fluid leaked from the new wounds in the creature. Again, his arm flicked and the whip circled both of the creature's legs. Another flick and the whip returned, tripping the creature, ripping

long gashes in its skin. The floor under the creature was becoming slippery from the blue fluid. He flicked the whip again. This time, the creature was ready when the whip came and it turned and caught the whip in the wing-like appendages of its back and continued to turn to bring Tor closer. Tor tried to pull the whip, but the creature had it solid. With a movement of his left hand, a silver flash flew through the air and struck the creature in its eye. Both hands came up to its face. It tripped on the end of the whip and fell into the darkness.

Finally, he made his way outside. The sun was shining brightly. His eyes watered from the light. After being in the dark for so many years, it was actually painful. He wasn't going to wait for his eyes to become accustomed to the light. His senses felt out to the cornerstone and, with his eyes squinting, he flew as fast as he could. After about half an hour, he came to the cornerstone. He landed and stretched out his wings. They were sore from the exercise. They did not get much use on the boat. He activated the cornerstone and leapt to his home world. He walked for awhile. It was night here, the stars were shining brightly and he could see the paths quite clearly, (dragons have great night sight too). He decided he could not wait any longer, the muscles in his wings and legs were sore and he was exhausted from the flight to the cornerstone. It should have taken him an hour to go the distance that it took him half an hour to cover. He walked off the path and collapsed, asleep.

"Your second opponent!" Into the light stepped another strange creature. This one stood about six and a half feet tall, and most of that was head. Its head alone was almost as big as his last opponent. It was about three and a half feet wide at the shoulders and about three feet wide from its cheeks down to the bottom of its chin. From there up, it got skinnier in kind of layers of skin rolling over the skin below. Little strands of hair stuck up randomly on the top of its head. Its mouth was a large gaping hole. The lower lip came up and overlapped the upper lip when the mouth was closed. Already, Tor could tell that the most dangerous weapon this creature had was its breath. Every time the creature exhaled, the stench was almost overpowering. Tor wanted to cover his mouth and nose. Every now and then the creature's tongue would come out of its mouth and lick its lips. The tongue was covered with a cream colored slime that added more sticky crud to the creature's lips than it took off.

In the creature's right hand was a long thin sword. It was nothing special, but, because of its length, it would be a difficult weapon to get around to strike his opponent. In its left hand was a small shield with sharp spikes around its edge. The creature stood and looked at its opponent with a dumb glazed look in its eyes. Out shot its tongue to lick its lips one last time before the battle began. It took a deep breath and let out an ungodly stink that would gag a maggot. As fast as lightning, the creature lunged at Tor. The creature's breath had stunned Tor for a second too long and the long sword sliced a section of Tor's side. If Tor had not been as quick as he was, the cut would have been through the center of his belly. As the creature followed the sword, Tor slammed the back of its head with his shield and one of the spikes cut from just behind the ear to its shoulder. Ooze flowed from the cut. Tor jumped and rolled as the creature turned to strike where he had been. As Tor came to his feet, he threw two stars; one high and one low. The creature didn't expect it. It caught the high one eye level on the shield; the low one hit the right ankle and

shattered the bones beneath the thin skin. The creature went down; it couldn't stand on one foot because its head was so large it threw off its balance.

Tor slowly walked over to the creature, lying on its back, as its blood flowed from ankle and neck. The long sword came up and pointed at Tor to warn the lizard man not to come closer. The creature let out a ghastly burp that Tor would have sworn came out in a green haze. Tor held his nose and backed up several feet. The creature rolled toward Tor and, with a fling of its arm, the deadly spiked shield flew toward Tor's chest. Tor brought up his own shield to block the blow. He had backed up so close to the edge of the light that he could not roll that way to get away from it. The shields connected as he turned and let the shield continue past him. The spikes had gone through Tor's shield and, when he turned, the creature's shield took Tor's shield with it. He was now without a shield and he still had to finish this battle and then continue with a fresh opponent. He looked at his arm and saw where the spikes had made a dotted line up his forearm. The spikes must have been poisoned because he was feeling groggy and numb. With another lunge, the creature threw the long sword at Tor. He never saw it coming. Luckily for him, he stumbled and fell flat as the sword flew past him into the darkness. Tor was drifting in and out of consciousness. He knew the battle wasn't over, but he just couldn't seem to keep his mind clear. He felt something move around his feet, but he didn't know what it could be. It got closer. Clear thoughts. Clear thoughts. Closer. Clear thoughts. Tor was pounding his fist on the floor, clear thoughts. Tor rolled over as the creature grabbed for the sword at his waist. Every warrior has secret weapons, Tor was no different. He kicked the back of one boot with the other and a six-inch knife pointed out from the front of the boot. A quick kick just above the creature's ear and the six-inch blade struck the creature's brain. He pulled his foot back and pushed the creature away with both feet in the creature's eyes and all the strength he could muster. In one movement, Tor rolled to one knee, drew his sword over his shoulder and swung down on the back of the creature's neck, separating its head from the rest of its body.

"That's cheating!" yelled Galaxxion, "You did not get that weapon in your boot from the table." "That creature cheated by poisoning the spikes on the shield," said Tolman, low enough so only Galaxxion could hear. "It is also not fair for Tor to be fighting another opponent when he is already drugged." Tor walked away from the creature and collapsed again. "'Very well, you may counter the drug that is in him, but make it quick,'" Galaxxion hissed. Tolman had taken a big chance talking to Galaxxion that way. He did not like being stood up to. It could have gotten him killed. Tolman cast a spell to counteract the poison in Tor's system.

The light around Tor shrunk and then was big again, but it had shifted. The creature he had killed was no longer in the light. Tor stood, he had left his sword in the neck of the last creature, something he never would have done if he hadn't been drugged. At his feet appeared the sword. "Tolman!" yelled Galaxxion. "I only returned the sword he left behind in his drugged state," replied Tolman, hoping that Galaxxion would not be too angry with him. Tolman knew that Galaxxion wanted Tor dead and, to this point, Galaxxion had barely given Tor a challenge; that in itself was making him angry. Galaxxion said nothing for awhile. Tor reached down and picked up his sword. He nodded his thanks to Tolman slightly so Galaxxion

would not take it out on either of them. "Maybe you would like to be his third opponent, Tolman?" said Galaxxion. "I would not, and, if you want me to command your army, it would not be a good idea." "Are you defying me?! Would you go against me?!" yelled Galaxxion angrily. "I would not go against you, my Master, however, in a fair fight against Tor he would kill me quite easily. I would be dead and, therefore would not be able to command your armies." In his anger, Galaxxion stood and walked to the top of the stairs. He did not even know that he had stood. Galaxxion turned, then walked back to his chair and sat. "Very well, I accept what you say, Tolman. I believe you are still loyal to me, except when it comes to this lizard man. Why is that?" "Tor is an excellent soldier. He in turn is loyal to me and has saved my ass on more than one occasion. He is also my friend. I would no more want to see him killed than you. If you want me to command your army to the best of my ability, I need Tor as my second in command." Army or not, Galaxxion knew he would not lose against the dragons and his hatred for Tor was great. Tor would die today.

"Your next opponent!" Tor looked at the creature entering the ring of light and just about shit himself. He looked to where Tolman was sitting and noticed that one of the creatures that had been standing beside the stairs was gone. It was now standing in front of Tor in the circle. Tor pulled his second sword and held it in his left hand, he had lost his shield. He tightened his grip on the swords and readied his stance. He would have to concentrate to survive this.

The creature took a step forward. It held out its right hand with the sword toward its side, its left hand was out to the side with the shield. The creature was trying to herd Tor in order to keep him in front of him. Tor knew from experience that he had to be where the creature didn't want him to be. Tor faked to the right and, when he did, he put the sword from his left hand together with the other sword in his right hand. He faked to the left. Every time he faked, the creature moved in that direction. He took a throwing knife in his left hand, spun around to the left and then went back toward his right. The knife flew and hit the creature in the inside of his right forearm, just below the elbow. Quickly, he threw another and hit the creature just above the right knee. Tor ran; by now he had a sword in each hand and slashed with both. On the pass there was a slash on the creature's left wrist, above the left elbow, on the back of the left thigh and down its back. Tor was quick. When the creature turned to keep up with Tor, he ran faster to the creature's right side and slashed behind its right knee, up the creature's right leg, in effect cutting loose the grieves on its right leg. The creature took a step and the loose grieve skittered across the floor into the darkness.

Tor slashed again with an upper cut so hard that he severed the hand that held the sword. The sword hit the floor and Tor kicked it into the darkness. The creature still had five good arms and four of them had throwing weapons. Tor no longer had a shield, so a throwing weapon could hurt him if he wasn't quick enough. The floor around the creature was getting slick from the blood that was pumping from its severed wrist. The creature was backing away from Tor now. It wanted no more of him, but it also knew there was only one way to end this: kill or be killed, and the creature still had the advantage. The creature looked up at Galaxxion. Tor noticed the other creature looked down at the ground and then back

up. The creature had not looked at Galaxxion, but at the other creature. Were they mates? It was obvious that they had no sex. Male and female were probably unknown in their world. Tolman had told him as much about Galaxxion. The creature took a deep breath and stepped toward Tor. It stepped in its own blood and slipped; its foot went out from under it and the creature fell to the floor in a heap. It was close to the edge of the light. It rolled onto its hands and knees and started to stand. Tor ran and jumped. His feet landed perfectly on the creature's rear and it went flying headfirst into the darkness. Tor landed on his back and got the wind knocked out of him. It had been a desperate move to get rid of the creature. Tor picked himself up off the floor, walked to the middle of the circle of light and bowed to Galaxxion.

"I keep my word," said Galaxxion, "You have won the battle. You have the choice of joining Tolman again or going free. Which do you choose?" "I am loyal to both you and Tolman. I know that you would have preferred me dead. I would like the chance to prove to you my loyalty. I want to join Tolman and bring success to your army." "So be it!" was the last thing Tor heard from Galaxxion. Tolman stood beside Tor on top of a small hill looking over a large plain. In front of them was the largest army camp either of them had ever seen.

Daylight came and the morning dew covered the red dragon. It felt so good being able to roll around in the wet grass, smell the summer flowers and see and feel the sun shining on his body. It had been a long time since he had experienced these things. Now it was time to go home. He stretched his wings and, surprisingly enough, they really weren't that sore. He leapt into the air and slowly flew toward his homelands. A few clouds in the sky, the sun warming his skin, he felt as if he were in heaven. After about an hour's flight, he knew he was close. Over the next hill should be the Council. As he crested the hill, he noticed a cabin that had not been there before, at least as far as he could remember. He wondered what the Council would want with it. No dragon could fit in it, except a snapdragon, and a small one at that. A few dragons roamed the area, some in groups, some flying in a dive maneuver at other dragons. He looked around for the Council table. That was when he saw it. A human! Sitting at the Council table. There were other humans as well, talking to the dragons. A large red dragon walked up to the human at the table and they were looking at a map. He didn't know what to do. Then he saw the strangest sight ever, a large black dragon with four heads, all a different color.

Rathsmus had been looking at a map at the table when Belchar and then Tig came over to him to talk about strategy. There had been dragons flying the area all day so he didn't know why this particular dragon stood out, but it did. The dragon was hovering in one place staring at him. Belchar noticed Rathsmus' silence and then saw him staring off in the distance. Belchar looked to where Rathsmus was staring and saw the red dragon hovering. "Krunchar?" Belchar said lowly. Rathsmus looked at Belchar. "Krunchar!" Belchar said again, as he stood a little straighter. Tig now looked at the red dragon in the sky. "Krunchar!" Belchar yelled loudly and started running toward the hovering dragon. "Dad?" whispered the dragon. It had been so long that he had not even recognized his own father. "Dad!" he yelled and flew as fast as he could toward his now flying father. Rathsmus was afraid the two creatures would crash in mid air, they were flying so fast toward each

other. At the last minute they both veered off to each other's right, just enough so that their hands caught the others. Due to their speed, they immediately went into a circle and, as they slowed down, they spiraled to the ground where they hugged for a good ten minutes.

Rathsmus stood with a big smile on his face and said to Tig, "The son returns." Tig nodded with all four heads but said nothing. It took a long time for Belchar to convince his son that these humans were good. Krunchar had been abused by so many. The Dragon Master and his cronies, the Evil One, who now liked to be called Galaxxion and all of Galaxxion's evil lords. He had met them all. All had abused or hurt him at one time or another. The thing that convinced him that Rathsmus was all right was when he was told of the deaths the sorcerer had caused. The Dragon Master, Faldor and Baldor, Kragdar and Kolder, the Hongar army and Galaxxion's army when Faldor and Baldor had met their demise. This human couldn't be all bad if he had killed all of those. They had all been evil or, in the case of the Hongar, stupid. He had even seen Kolder and Kragdar be summoned to Galaxxion's hide out. They had been the worst, telling him of the deceptions they did to the Council and dragon kind in general. They had been proud of their deeds. It was good to know that at least Kolder had confessed his sins to all. He especially liked how the Dragon Master had died; being eaten alive from the inside out by bugs. He would have liked to see that himself. It was the Dragon Master that had been employed to break his spirit. Although they had come close, he still had a spark they could not extinguish. Then, to continue with their torture, they chained him to that damn boat and made him beat drums to ferry the friends of the Evil One. At one point, he had been told to call him Galaxxion, but he never did. It made the Evil One so angry to be called "the Evil One", which gave Krunchar what little pleasure he could find in that dark hole.

"So, it looks like I should thank you for a great many things, not the least of which is restoring power to the Dragon Council and my father." Rathsmus smiled, "I did not do it for the thanks or any other type of recognition. I did what needed to be done because it was the right thing to do. The dragons are about to do something far greater; to stand up to the Evil One and fight back has taken a great amount of courage. The chance that many dragons will die is high. But it is not just a dragon war. I have been to see the Minotaur. My friends Amoss and Korg are still there to coordinate the gathering of many Minotaur armies. Others have gone far and wide to bring more allies to fight beside us. The snapdragons have seen large armies covering the Plains of Color. It will take more than dragons to fight them." Krunchar thought for a minute, "Will the female dragons be fighting as well?" Rathsmus sat back and looked at Krunchar, "Can the female dragons fight in a war?"

Galaxxion was still sitting in his chair when the rat creatures were allowed to enter his room. The remains from the battles had been cleaned up. "Please come up so we can talk," said Galaxxion. The rat creatures ran up the stairs. This was their opportunity to be rewarded for their loyalty. "You have done me a great service by bringing Tolman back to me. In return for this I ask what I may do for you." The rat creature that had stolen the box looked at the other rat creature that was nodding spasmodically. "For many years the dragons have rolled over us,

passed laws for us, treated us like dirt. We want revenge. We want to rule over the dragons. Make my leader powerful over the dragons.” Galaxxion brought his left hand to his chin, as if in thought. “Your leader,” Galaxxion spit out the words, “and his followers have all been killed by the dragons. There is no chance that you will ever be stronger than the dragons, which leads me to only one question.” “What is that, Galaxxion?” asked the rat creature. “What do rat creatures taste like?”

The stars were shining brightly through the dark velvet backdrop of the sky. Tolman was laying on his back watching. Every now and then a streak of white crossed the sky faster than his eyes could follow it. No one knew exactly what the white streaks were. Some said it was angels, others said it was falling stars. Everyone had their theory. He didn’t think it was falling stars because he had never seen one fall to the ground. But then, he didn’t know exactly what a star was. Maybe they just got tired of sitting there and chased each other around, who knew for sure. Some people used them to navigate the oceans, had names for certain ones. He didn’t care about all that, he hated the ocean. He just liked to watch the stars.

So far there had been no trouble with the different armies; some were humans from this world, some were from Tor’s world and some were like the creatures Tor had fought for Galaxxion’s amusement. “Tolman, the strange creatures are eating one of the other armies. I tried to make them stop, but they just ignored me,” said Tor, as he ran up to the commander. Tolman sighed and stood up. “Let’s go,” he said, with a deep breath. Tor led the way. When the creatures saw Tolman, they backed off. “Do not eat another soldier from my army or I will make your skin bubble in pain.” The creatures had been told by Galaxxion that Tolman was a magic user and they were to do what he told them to. They were more scared of Galaxxion, but they also believed that Tolman could give them more pain than they wanted. They had killed about thirty-five soldiers from a rag tag group of humans. Their loss was no big deal. They had not given the creatures a single wound in return for their deaths. Tolman almost gave them the rest of that group for food. If he had thought it would keep them away from the rest of his army, he would have, but he knew it would not. This group of humans would be his front line expendables, they would show him where the enemy army was. The creatures would be the main strength of his army. He would hold them back in reserve. When he hit a pocket of resistance, he would transport a group of them and they would crush the enemy. He knew they hated pain. He would give them drugs to numb them from the pain before the battle. If they didn’t feel any pain, they would be unstoppable. The dragons would be his biggest problem. Galaxxion seemed to feel that there was no way the enemy would win. Tolman was not so sure. He had heard rumors that the dragons had found their magic. The small dragons, like the ones he had killed the day he escaped the box, had been seen around. They were scouts; they knew the size of his army. He had no intelligence reports. Any spies he sent out never returned, luckily some of his army was still underground. They were boring creatures, they would dig their way under the battlefield and come up behind the enemy, and with them would be about two thousand of his own army, led by Tor. The rest of this army was just for show. His army was expected to kill the sorcerer and his witches and with them gone, the rest would flee only to be followed and killed by the main attack force. It was a simple plan, not his though; Galaxxion told

him what to do. It was almost too simple. He didn't really like it, but he didn't have any choice. In another three days they would be in position. He only had to hold off the dragons until they were ready.

"We are ready," said Sethusda to Tig, "The females have come along fine. If we mix them in with the rest of the army, they will help the weaker areas of the army". Tig and Sethusda went to Belchar and Rathsmus. "The army is ready. Amoss and Korg brought an emissary from the Minotaur. They will be ready when we engage the enemy. Reports from the snapdragons have told us where the Evil One's army is waiting and their strength. The White Guild has agreed to join us, but I wouldn't expect much from them. They have grown weak over the years. A lot of human armies have joined us, something about returning the favor for past debts? We're not sure what that meant."

Rathsmus knew. The sisters had helped a lot of different kingdoms over the years. Now it was time to return the favor and help themselves at the same time. "The human armies will converge on the southern edge of the Plain of Color and set up camp tomorrow afternoon. The Minotaur will join them by nightfall. By the next morning the mountain dragons will have transported the catapults and we will join them then. Rathsmus, Amoss, Korg and the sisters will stay in the command area with Sethusda and me," said Tig, "The children will stay in the cave at Dragon Mountain with a group of dragons for protection."

Crystal did not like the idea of being away from the children. None of the sisters did, but they were needed in battle. Everyone had to make sacrifices, this was theirs. "We should engage the enemy the following morning. We have done all we can." "No," said Krunchar, "I have an idea that might help." They looked at Krunchar questioningly.

"I have been in the cave of the Evil One. I know how to get in and I know where he will be when the battle begins. With a small contingent of dragons, we can sneak into the cave and kill Galaxxion." "Galaxxion?" said Rathsmus. "Yes, that is his true name," said Krunchar. "What do you think, Tig?" asked Belchar. "It could work. It might even make his army lose its desire to fight and then they will run." "Krunchar, do you think you're up to it? You haven't been home very long," said Belchar. "Everyone else is doing their part and all are using their strengths to the best advantage. I am the only one who can lead this." "I know it will be dangerous going up against the Evil One, but I must do it; for myself as much as for all dragons."

Belchar knew his son was right. "Good luck, my son. Return safe. I do not want to lose you again." "Thank you, Father." They hugged one last time. "I already have a group of ten dragons, five of which are snapdragons. We will leave tonight so we will be in place for the beginning of the battle." Tig nodded and Krunchar turned to a group of dragons, he nodded and leapt into the air. The group cheered and then followed their leader. "I hope he knows what he's doing," said Belchar. "He does, Belchar, he does," replied Tig. "Sethusda, gather your mountain dragons and go to the human armies. When the time is right, you may start transporting the catapults." Sethusda nodded to Tig and vanished. "Albon," called Tig. The snapdragon flew to the front of the army coordinators. "Your group will have to split up on both sides of the advancing army. You will be our protection from them

trying to flank us. I want you in place by morning.” Albon nodded and flew to the group of snapdragons he was in charge of. Within minutes the sky was dark with snapdragons flying for the cornerstone. They finalized some more plans and sent a few more groups of dragons away for various special missions. It was beginning to get dark. “We will get a good night’s sleep and finish this in the morning. From that point, we will have about twenty-four hours to get set up.” Tig nodded to the others and retired for the night.

Rathsmus and his family gathered in the library of the cabin. “I have taught you the fireball spell and a few others that I know. We should be able to wipe out a lot of the enemy army with them. We are outnumbered, by last reports, four or five to one. We have magic on our side, where, as far as we can tell, they only have a few magic users. Korg, the sisters will be separated along the back of our forces to heal the wounded and load the catapults with fireballs. You will have to do your best to protect them. Amoss and I will be watching them as well. Korg nodded, “I will do my best.”

They talked the rest of the night away. One by one, the sisters got up and went to bed. There was a lot of preparation needed before they left for home. Dalna had been watching the children for most of the time in the dragon’s world. They had been growing up fast. It was not going to be easy for the sisters to leave them behind, even with the dragons for protection. The sisters had made a pact with each other. If anything should happen to any one of them, the children would be kept together, raised and taught in the old ways of magic. Sheena had told Rathsmus and he agreed with it. He only wished that they had included him, but that was women for you. Finally everyone retired for the evening, hoping for pleasant dreams.

The clouds rolled in before morning and the sky drizzled a mist that, over the course of a couple hours, covered everything with little white drops of water. By noon, the mist ceased and a warm breeze worked its way up the plain. Tolman was beginning to get reports of several human armies converging on the southern end of the Plain of Color. They were nowhere near the size of his army, but he had not really expected any human armies to join the dragons. By three o’clock the clouds had moved on and the skies cleared. The sun was warming the grass and tents enough to make an eerie fog rise up around his army. Another couple of months and snow would be falling. Tolman hated snow. You could feel the cold in the air even now. He only hoped the war would be over long before the snow came. Nothing was worse than fighting a battle in the snow. Sickness, frostbite, deaths due to bitter cold nights, all were things he hated about fighting in the winter. The sun shone on his back as he looked over the foggy tent village that was his army. The heat of the sun melted the bitter thoughts of snow away. Tor came running up and saluted, “Yes, Sir!” “Bring the archers to the front of the catapults for a dry run. Swords and pike men in front of the archers. Swords and pikes to keep shields up when the enemy arrives to block our own archers. When our archers fire, swords and pikes are to duck low enough to allow the archers access to their targets. When the archers fire a volley, sword and pikes stand to block again.” “Yes, Sir!” said Tor, “Are you expecting the enemy to advance tonight?” “No. According to Galaxxion, the dragons haven’t come yet; possibly by tomorrow.” Tor saluted and left to instruct the archers, swords and pikes on their positions. The commander of the archers

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would yell “down” when the archers were ready to fire. Then the swords and pikes would stand and hold their shields up to guard the archers. It looked good in practice, but Tolman only hoped it would work during the battle.

The creatures from Galaxxion’s world were behaving themselves. There had been some unexplained disappearances over the last couple of days, but it could have been deserters. Tolman thought it was probably closer to “dessert”. He kept them practicing different maneuvers until dark and made them retire early. It could be a very busy day tomorrow.

The kingdoms of Odan, Dennison and Alnar were the first to arrive on the Plain of Color. They knew each other and had had a few minor squabbles in the past but, in general, they considered each other friends. They all had long histories and long memories, that was why they were here now. The sisters had helped each of them many times. Many knew that they had been used as the bait that had gotten the sisters captured in the first place. It was getting dark and they were expecting an army of Minotaur any time now. By morning the dragons would have the catapults in position and, hopefully, the other armies would be here before the fighting started.

The ten dragons that Krunchar had gathered had all grown up together. “Friends ‘til the end,” they always said. They all had nicknames that they had picked up through the years because of some trait they had or something that had happened in their past. Krunchar was the last of this group to return. Summer, the orange dragon, had only returned a little while ago. There was Finney, his real name was Findor, he was a crystal dragon; Rocky the rock dragon; Fist, the bronze dragon, he was called fist because he had such a bad temper. Boulder was a cave dragon; he had always been a big dragon growing up. The others in the group had surpassed him in size, but not in weight, strength, or stubbornness. Trying to move him was like trying to move a boulder. Then, there were the snapdragons. Most groups of young dragons didn’t include the snapdragons because of their size. Even after the inclusion of snapdragons into the Council, it was unusual. This group of dragons was different than most. They had nothing to prove, nothing to hide; they just enjoyed each other’s company. There was Speedy, for obvious reasons, he was fast; Bump, he was sort of clumsy, at least in his younger years. Brain, was very smart; and Medic, always played a doctor when they were younger and still was interested in the medical field. And finally, Eyes. He was always teased for being able to see things further away than any of the others.

Krunchar was looking through the thick bushes at the opening to Galaxxion’s lair. Everything looked quiet. Three snapdragons were checking out the surrounding area to make sure there were no sentries; as Krunchar expected, there were none. Through the mind link, snapdragons told Krunchar everything was clear. He motioned for the rest of his group to work their way to the cave, but to stay low. The snapdragons easily worked their way through the trees. The larger dragons did not have it so easy. Trying to find a path through the trees and brush without making much noise or shaking and breaking the trees was very difficult. Eventually, they all made it to the small clearing around the entrance. Krunchar was just staring at the opening as if it was the mouth of a giant ready to eat him whole. None of the dragons moved from their point of cover. Krunchar was leading this expedition and

they stayed still waiting for the go ahead. The snapdragon that was closest to Krunchar quietly moved up beside him, "Is there something there?" Krunchar jumped slightly as the smaller dragon spoke. "No," he said clearing his throat, "No, I wasn't sure at first, but no, there is nothing. Let's move carefully."

He nodded to the other dragons and they moved into the cave. It took all of his courage to take the last couple of steps. It had taken him a lot of years to escape; now to return, he was beginning to think it was a bad idea. Surprisingly, the back of the cave was open; he had not expected that. Each of the dragons had certain magical talents. He motioned for Finney, the crystal dragon, to go into the cave. Invisibility was this dragon's particular ability. Slowly, the dragon's image faded from view. Even though he had left a snapdragon hidden outside, he didn't want to take any chances.

Time was the biggest factor when traveling through the cornerstones. It wasn't consistent. One time you might leave a world at noon and enter the other world at midnight. Another time you might leave at noon and enter that other world at noon, you just didn't know for sure. The dragons had the mind link, and it worked through the cornerstone as long as you knew exactly where the other dragon was and that the other dragon was expecting it. Belchar had coordinated call-in times with some of the snapdragons so, even if he missed one or two he would still have others that would be calling in. So far, the ones he had talked to had quick messages, all quiet, or nothing new. That was good news, but he still kept thinking about his son. He knew his son was right about going; anything to bring this war to an end. He just wished that he'd had more time with him before he left. Time seemed to drag on minute by minute. The whole deal finally caught up with Belchar and he went home to his cave and passed out.

The last of the catapults had just been transported and were being put into position. The Minotaur army was setting up a base camp away from the human armies, but still within one hundred yards from them. It was as much of a buffer as Sethusda would allow the armies. A group of animal/human creatures approached the rear of the camp and a fight almost broke out. The Minotaur thought it was the Evil Ones army coming up behind them. Luckily, Albion and Rontal were with them to stop the two armies from killing each other. As soon as they knew that they were all on the same side, the animal/humans set up camp with the Minotaur as if they had partied with each other for years. A few other human armies arrived and set up beside the other human armies. Some were from other worlds, some from this one. Armies of the mythical dwarves and elves also came. Some were magic users and some were not, but they were not native to Rathsmus' world. Rumor had it that Galaxxion had gone to their world before this world and they had pushed him out before he gained any real power. They had intended to kill him, but he escaped. When they heard that he had come here, they didn't waste any time agreeing to help. They didn't want him to return to their world stronger than he had been. He had vowed revenge upon their world and, being who they were, they took vows of revenge very seriously.

The elves were tall and thin, the dwarves short and stocky. It seemed the weapon of choice for most of the elves were long bows and swords. The dwarves had short compound bows and axes. Without a doubt each had advantages over the

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other, but one pretty much equalized the other. Long ago elves and dwarves were bitter enemies. Now, although not always the closest of friends, they are always allies. Unfortunately, even these two groups still remember the stories of the war and some still hold past grudges even though none living now had ever fought in it. Wars did that sometimes. When it came to archers, they were considered the best. They were everything that myth and legend said they were. Apparently, it was not myth or legend, but the truth.

It was beginning to get light out. The armies had set up camp and posted sentries. Most of the armies had been sleeping since around midnight. As each of the armies joined the others, camps were set up and sleep was ordered. The sun was just peeking over the horizon when a dragon alarm was sounding. "Quick! The enemy is advancing!" yelled Rontal. Albion was racing around from camp to camp rousing the soldiers from their beds. The dwarf and elf armies were the first to the front. Shortly after, several pike men and swords from the human armies ran to protect the archers. Word was sent to the dragon world that the enemy was advancing. This was about twenty-four hours earlier than they had been expected. The mountain dragons that had transported the catapults vanished, only to reappear at the cornerstone. As groups of dragons came through the cornerstone the mountain dragons would transport them to the battlefield. Rathsmus and the sisters were the first to come through. Amoss, Korg, Tig and Sethusda were right behind them. "Take Rathsmus and his family, I'll take Tig," said Sethusda to one of the mountain dragons. The dragon nodded his head and they vanished. Seconds later Tig and Sethusda vanished.

Tolman watched the dragon army through his magic ball. It was not a crystal ball, just a ball of air that Tolman could use like a pair of binoculars. It didn't have much of a distance, but he would be able to see the front line quite clearly. There was only a minimal amount of troops on the fore of the dragons' force. Tor had relayed the message for the army to slowly advance just to see how far they could get before the dragon army noticed and before they met resistance. Tolman wanted to know their range of fire, weapons, strengths and weaknesses. In this case, the only way to find these things out was to send some troops. Of course, the first troops he sent were the expendables. Not all of his human armies were expendables, but at least the ones that would give him the information he needed to protect the rest of his forces. They didn't get far before the dragon army started moving. There were soldiers running to the front, archers, swords and pikes. Catapults stayed in the back.

Something didn't look right though. He saw some dragons flying around trying to get soldiers to their positions, but there weren't many. That meant he had surprised them! They weren't ready! He was getting ready to give the order for a full attack when a dragon just "appeared" with a group of humans. Then, two more appeared, one was a black dragon with four heads, Tolman remembered that one from the Dragon Master's compound. More and more just started to appear to fill the ranks of their army. He held back the order and just watched. His army was too distant for the archers, swords and pikes to worry about; they just stood there watching as the enemy approached in the waist high dead grass. The catapults were being set as the big arms were pulled back. Tolman looked around for the rocks or

other ammunitions the catapults would use and saw nothing. Unless they were going to shoot bodies through the air, the catapults would be useless. He watched the male human closely. He put more magic into the ball to strain to see what was happening.

The male human wore a gray striped robe and had long gray hair and a beard. He was just watching the advancing army without much concern. He slowly raised his hands, one palm up in front of him, the other shoulder level pointing at the first. A small reddish-orange ball hovered above the hand that was palm up. Then, a second ball surrounded the first. The ball floated to the waiting catapult. Each of the female humans had done the same. The male human nodded his head and the catapult let loose the ball. The advancing army saw it coming and dropped into the grass. The ball struck the ground in the center of the advancing army and exploded over one hundred feet in all directions. Grass and army alike went up in flames. The soldiers that were lucky enough to be outside the blast circle jumped and ran from the flames. Black smoke billowed up into the sky as the dry grass caught fire and raced after the soldiers.

Another catapult let loose. This ball hit several hundred feet from the first. More soldiers went up in flames. Another catapult and then another, until all six had let loose their barrage of fire. Tolman looked away. He would be lucky if even one of the soldiers made it out alive, not that he really cared for this particular army; after all they were his expendables. He just hadn't expected such devastating weapons. He knew it had been magic, but he had never seen anything like it before. The male human and the females had to be the sorcerer and the witches that Galaxxion had talked about. His only hope now was to have his private army make it behind the enemy and kill the sorcerer. Originally, he had planned to send his army with those creatures that were digging under the dragons' army, but he held them back. He could use Tor until the tunnels were done. As soon as he got word back that all they had to do was go up to the surface, he would send Tor and his army. It was very plain now that they were his only chance. Tolman called Tor forward; "I want any magic users to be gathered. We need protection from those fire balls." Tor nodded and ran to do as he was told.

Tolman wanted to know how to make the fireballs. It couldn't be that hard. He held up his palm and a small ball of fire appeared above his hand. What kind of fuel would he have used? thought Tolman; the wrong one could be dangerous. He let the flame go out and then walked down to the group of magic users that Tor had gathered. "Sir," said Tor, "These are the few magic users we have, also word has come back that the tunnels are complete. When you are ready, we can attack." "Good, go. We will give you 'til noon and then we will create a diversion for you. They won't expect you. Kill them!" he whispered the last. Tor nodded and left to lead his army to victory. Now, it was Tolman's turn to set up a diversion for his secret army.

Krunchar told the snapdragons what to look for. They had to find the boat before anyone on the boat saw them. The Lava Lake brought back more memories. Krunchar thought he was going crazy. "Krunchar, we found the boat. It is coming to the dock now," said Eyes, through the link. As the boat came closer, he noticed several large creatures on the boat and all were wearing many weapons. When the

boat docked, the group of creatures left the boat and followed the path to the exit of the cave. When the creatures left the cave the entrance closed. "The entrance is closed," said one of the snapdragons through the link. "Ok, you stay there and watch the entrance. I'll take care of the boat," replied Krunchar.

He hated the boat. He leapt into the air, flew above the boat and lightly landed in the space he had always occupied. The rowers felt him land on the boat and they all stood and looked at him with big eyes. "How many of you are captives of Galaxxion and how many are here by choice?" They all held up a chained arm and foot, except one. "What are you doing here? Galaxxion will kill you when I tell him...", was all he said. Krunchar grabbed the human and threw him overboard into the Lava Lake. "The rest of you are free," and with a clap of his hands the chains fell from the rowers.

"Now, you cannot leave by the path because Galaxxion has closed it and has positioned sentries outside the cave. You will have to find another way out or, if you wish to get revenge on Galaxxion, you can help me." The humans looked at each other and talked lowly. They all sat down, except one. "There is no other way out on this side of the Lava Lake. We can show you where Galaxxion is now, if you wish." Krunchar showed his teeth in a kind of smile. "I would like that very much thank you, but before we go, I have some friends that need to come with us."

The five big dragons came out of hiding and flew to the boat. "We can't all fit in here," said Rocky. Summer started to climb aboard, "I think he's right." The dragon leaned up against the railing. The railing was rotten and gave way under the weight of the orange dragon and he lost his balance. Overboard he went, right into the lava. Krunchar tried to grab him and missed as he watched the dragon go under in a puff of steam and smoke. Krunchar let out a breath as anger tried to overcome his thoughts. He fought back the feeling, he knew he still had to think calmly and clearly to lead the rest of the dragons and kill Galaxxion. He looked at the other dragons still on the dock. No one said anything. They could not believe that they had already lost someone and they hadn't even gotten close to Galaxxion, all because of carelessness and a rotten boat.

A bubble of lava burst a few feet away from the boat as the orange dragon stuck his head above the surface. Krunchar looked at him with disbelief. "How?" was all he could say. "I don't know. I fell into the lava and thought I was dead. I sunk to the bottom and couldn't believe I was still alive. So I swam around a bit. Then I came to the surface. It's just like water, just a lot warmer." "You didn't know that you could do that?" The orange dragon just shook his head. Krunchar thought a minute and slowly lifted his tail above the lava. "If you can do it, maybe all dragons can." "Just be careful. Go slow. It hurts at first." Slowly Krunchar lowered his tail to the lava. The heat was painful and he hadn't even gotten within six inches of the surface. Lower and lower, inch by inch, the pain didn't get any worse. Into the lava it went. Nothing. His tail just felt really warm, but there was no more pain. He put his tail in as far as it would go and then he jumped in. It was great, no pain, just the sensation of hot liquid around him. Rocky climbed onto the boat and looked over the edge at Krunchar. "Should I try it?" "Ok, but go slow. We don't know if all dragons can do it or if only certain ones can. We don't need to lose anyone because we're experimenting."

Slowly, the rock dragon lowered his tail to the lava. The pain was too great and his scales started to blister. He quickly pulled back his tail. "Ouch! That hurt!" he said louder than he had meant to. "Shhhhh," said Krunchar, "You have to be quiet." "Look, I've burnt my tail and it still hurts." A snapdragon flew to the boat and surrounded the burnt tip of the rock dragon's tail with both hands. "Hey, my tail is still black and bubbly." "Next time you see someone do something stupid," said Medic looking at the two dragons swimming in the lava, "Think twice before you do the same thing." The snapdragon flew off to stand sentry again. Boulder, who had been standing on the dock, climbed up beside the rock dragon and snickered in his ear, "Sounds like good advice to me." The rock dragon hit him in the chest and walked to the front of the boat.

"Finny and Fist, you stay here with Speedy and Bump. When we get to the other side of the lake, I'll call you to come to us. Brain, Medic, and Eyes, you fly ahead and see if anything is around. Summer and I will swim beside the boat. Let's go." The boat slowly lumbered away from the dock and then picked up speed. Summer and Krunchar, since they were already with the boat, helped the boat go. Eventually, the rowers stopped rowing because they couldn't keep up with the boat's speed. "Krunchar," said Eyes, through the link, "You better slow down. We've got trouble."

Tor and his men were running through the creature-made tunnel. When they reached the end, they would have fifteen minutes to rest as the creatures made the final push to the surface. Then, it would be search and destroy. All of his men knew what to look for and who to kill, if the chance arose. Tor had prepped his men as good as he could. Now it was up to them.

Tolman was working with the catapults. He knew how hard it was to watch someone do a spell and then try and copy it without knowing the spell. That was how you got hurt, bad. But, at this point, he didn't really care. In another twenty minutes his special army would be attacking the sorcerer and his witches, with Tor leading them. He only had to create a diversion long enough to keep the dragon army's attention.

The catapults were ready and the magic users were stationed, one for each catapult. Any extras were put in front of the catapults to use magic to block any fire from the enemy catapults. The fires had been put out, but the grass was still smoldering, along with the dead. Tolman wasn't going to waste manpower to pick up those useless humans. Tolman stayed back. He had shown the magic users how to make the fireballs, but he didn't know if they would work properly. If one of those things exploded, he wasn't going to get killed by it.

"Move out!" Tolman yelled, and the catapults started to move forward. As they moved one after the other, the magic users made fire balls and fired them. The first one exploded when the catapult let loose. Catapult, magic users and a few archers were caught in the explosion. The second exploded mid-air and only killed a passing bird unlucky enough to be too close. The third flew perfectly. When it hit the ground, the ball broke open and the surrounding grass started to burn, but there was no explosion. Another exploded as the magic user tried to place it in the catapult. The explosion took out that catapult, the one beside it and both magic users. The other magic user had already placed a fireball in his catapult. No one let

the fireball go, so as the catapult burned, the mechanism broke and actually threw the fireball in the wrong direction into the center of Tolman's army. The resulting explosion killed about one hundred men and wounded about one hundred more.

Tolman called up the strange creatures from Galaxxion's world. "Attack! Now!" he yelled. The creatures looked at him and grinned. Tor had given them the painkillers, as instructed. They would walk through the dragons and barely slow down. There was only about one thousand of them. A small amount compared to the other groups in his army, but probably ten times as dangerous. By the time they met the front line, Tor should be coming up from the tunnels. "Archers support the creatures," he yelled. He missed Tor. Tor would usually do all of the commanding of the army and all of the yelling. He only had to command Tor. Oh well, he thought, that could not be helped. Tor was where he was needed the most.

The catapults still were not having much luck. A couple more went up in flames. A couple fireballs made it to the enemy side but were duds. A couple exploded but hit nothing. "Swords! Pikes! Attack!" he yelled. That was the rest of his army. As long as he could keep their concentration in this direction, Tor would have the greatest chance of success. The enemy was now letting loose their catapults. The big creatures kept coming even though they were on fire. The dwarves and elves were shooting as fast as they could. The creatures looked like pincushions, but they kept going. The swords and pikes were staying behind the big creatures for protection from the arrows. Suddenly, from behind the lines of the enemy, a big cloud of dust was thrown into the air as the tunnel makers broke through the surface. Some of the dragons and Minotaur had gone to the front line to support the dwarves and elves. Tor was the first through the hole after the tunnel makers got out of the way. The rest of his army crawled out of the holes in the ground like ants.

Amoss had been standing beside Rathsmus when he noticed the dust from behind. As he turned, he saw massive worm-like creatures crawl out of the ground, turn and bore another hole to get away from the fighting. After the creatures disappeared, men started crawling from the hole, attacking the dragons from behind. The sisters were just in front of that line of dragons. "Rathsmus!" he yelled. Rathsmus turned to see more worm-like creatures disappear as men crawled out of the ground. Korg heard Amoss yell and looked to the older metamorph. Then he saw Rathsmus turn and stare behind them. Korg ran as fast as he could. Amoss turned into a snapdragon as Rathsmus turned into Kragdar, the black dragon. At the sight of the black dragon just appearing, the line of men coming out of the holes faltered for just a minute then, being pushed from behind, they rallied again and charged. The sisters now knew of the problem from behind and fired spell after spell at the enemy flanking their position. If it hadn't been for the dragons behind them, they probably would have been killed, but the dragons protected them as well as they could.

Kragdar had unusual biological weapons. Fire, ice and acid, most dragons only had one of these. He also was quite powerful magically. He froze some here, burnt some there and melted some someplace else. He threw magic weapons that flew through the enemy as easily as a bird flying through a cloud. Some of the weapons were the size of an axe; others were the size of small pebbles, all deadly.

The pebbles used the least amount of magic and did the widest amount of damage. Larger weapons for larger enemies. Korg made it beside Rathsmus in time to see the leader sending his assassins toward the sisters one at a time. The first was a snake man. Korg stood in front of him with his arms crossed and his sword sheathed over his shoulder. The snake man was half the size of Korg, but he also had poisonous fangs. He hissed his fangs at Korg and ran with his sword held high. Korg sidestepped, kicked the creature in the chest and swung his sword from behind, removing the creature's head.

Tor saw the Minotaur with silver horns. He sent three for this pain in the ass creature that was keeping him from victory. They came at him in a "V" pattern, one in front and the other two flanking the leader. The leader charged with his sword held high. The others ran with their swords ready to swing from the side. Korg blocked the blow and turned him to the right where the soldier running up behind him couldn't stop in time and his leader speared him through the stomach. Korg followed the sword's path and, with a back swing, severed the leader's head from his body. The third soldier was on the wrong side of his fallen comrades to get at Korg. He tried a running leap over the bodies. Kragdar saw what he was going to do, and with a flick of his hand, an axe-sized projectile caught the soldier in the chest, almost splitting him in half from top to bottom.

Now Korg was focusing on this lizard man. Two more soldiers were sent after Korg. They slowly circled him, trying to keep one behind him and one in front. One lunged and lost his arm with a backward upward swing and lost some teeth as Korg followed it with a punch from his free hand. The soldier went down in a pile. Tor sent three more to get this Minotaur. Now it was four against one. Rathsmus was busy with other problems; the strange creatures that had attacked the front line were starting to break through. The catapults were useless at fighting as close as the enemy was now. The sisters had been using them some; in between fighting off the attackers from behind, they would make a fireball and let it go into the enemy. The dwarves and elves were fighting with sword and axe. The enemy archers were slowly picking off the defenders. Rathsmus became himself again and made a big fireball and floated it high above the enemy archers. No one saw the ball. Rathsmus let it go. When the ball hit the ground it made a crater five feet deep and a couple hundred feet across. The archers were no more. The fighting stopped as the ground shook and bits and pieces of the archers made smoking trails through the sky and into the battle. Tolman had been watching the progress of his army and Tor. He had also been watching the Minotaur with the silver horns, but now he was watching the sorcerer.

Korg finished off the four soldiers when the explosion shook the ground. Now no one stood between him and the leader of the enemy. Now that there was no more fighting to keep their minds off the pain and the drugs were wearing off, the creatures that had been the brunt of the enemy force, suddenly wanted to either lay down and die, which some did, or to run away. When the creatures turned and ran, a big portion of Tolman's forces ran away too. The sisters had killed the soldiers that had come up behind them, with the help of the back line of dragons. Tolman was trying to rally the troops for another run.

On the shore of the Lava Lake was Galaxxion jumping up and down yelling, "We had them. We had them," at about ten creatures covered with weapons. "I gave him the victory on a silver platter and he dropped it!" The creatures just stood there with a blank look on their faces as Galaxxion yelled and screamed at them. "And where is that boat! I summoned that weasel ten minutes ago! He won't even acknowledge my summons." Then, Galaxxion looked out at the Lava Lake and saw the boat slowly being rowed to shore. "It's about time," he said. He looked at the creatures that he had been yelling at, "Go to the exit closest to the battle and kill as many of the enemy as you can, especially the witches, the sorcerer and any Dragon Council members. The red dragon with the gold amulet is the Council leader. If you kill him, bring me back the amulet."

When Krunchar heard them talking about his father, he could hold back no longer. Speedy, Bump, Finney and Fist were on their way. Summer was waiting in the Lava Lake beside Krunchar. Rocky and Boulder were still in the boat with the rowers. Brain, Medic and Eyes were watching from the shadows. Krunchar swam as close to the shore as he could and leapt out of the lava toward the creatures. Summer was only one step behind. Rocky and Boulder leapt from the boat when they saw Krunchar go after the creatures.

The shock of the dragons coming out of the lava made Galaxxion trip and fall, which actually saved his life. Brain had seen Krunchar and aimed a magic projectile at Galaxxion's head. The projectile missed the intended target and sliced a hole through the chest of one of the creatures, it fell over dead. Medic and Eyes jumped from cover, but couldn't hit any of the creatures because of the big dragons that were already there. Galaxxion rolled onto his hands and knees and pushed himself to his feet, but stayed bent over to hide behind some rocks. Galaxxion knew all of the secret passages of his home and it didn't take him long to find the closest one and escape. Speedy, Bump and Fist were now mixing in the fight with the creatures. Fist hit one so hard it broke its neck as it flopped backwards to the ground. Krunchar and Summer were still red hot from being in the lava and only had to touch a creature to make it burst into flames. Galaxxion had not had enough time to give the creatures painkillers, so they were now running away rather than staying to fight.

"Let them go. We want Galaxxion," said Krunchar. "Did anyone see where he went?" asked Boulder. "He went into that passageway," said Eyes. "I know where that goes," said one of the humans from the boat, "None of you would ever fit in that 'cause you're too big." Krunchar agreed, "Where does it lead?" "It goes to his main chambers. From there, he could go anywhere. He will probably want to find out the progress of the battle so he will go to his magic room." "How do you know so much about his habits and this place?"

"I was not always kept in the boat. I used to be one of his personal servants and could go anywhere. My wife also used to be one. The day he killed her, I also tried to kill him. Since then, I have been chained to the boat." "I know where his main chambers are, you should leave here now," said Krunchar and he motioned for the other dragons to follow him as he left the humans at the boat.

They flew out over the Lava Lake and into a tunnel. It wasn't long before they were flying up a set of stairs to the landing of ten doors. One had a new door.

“That is the lair of the Manchain. Do not open it. It is a very dangerous creature. The last time it escaped, it killed fifty of Galaxxion’s servants and wounded twenty more so badly that they might as well have been killed. It hates everything.” Krunchar knew which door to take. He had always been the one to instruct visitors as to which door to take. It had been his fault the Manchain had escaped the last time, or at least partially. “The third doorway from the right. Follow me,” he said aloud and started down the path. The path was just barely big enough for the big dragons to fit. The snapdragons had all kinds of room. Krunchar had had to use this path before, more than once. They would make him go to Galaxxion’s chambers when he wanted entertainment and the Dragon Master would try and break him. Krunchar started walking faster. Galaxxion would not escape him again.

The battle was breaking up into little skirmishes now. Tolman had turned his soldiers to fight again. The creatures had either fled in pain or died. The painkillers had not lasted long enough. Tolman was now in search of the human sorcerer himself. It was his job to kill him if his army failed. He had lost sight of Tor when the giant, silver horned Minotaur appeared. His catapults had exploded from the fool magic users, sending up thick black billows of smoke into the air. Smoke hung to the ground as well. He couldn’t see ten feet in front of himself, but he could sense the powerful sorcerer, the witches and another older sorcerer. He wanted the younger sorcerer. He would kill them all eventually, but he wanted the younger one first.

The smoke was getting thick. Korg knew the leader of the enemy was here somewhere. Every time he would get close to him, the lizard man would send others to kill him. He made quick work of them and continued his search. Finally, there he was, standing alone trying to decide which way to go. Then he saw Korg. The lizard man unsheathed his sword and threw the sheath on the ground. Korg walked slowly until he was about twenty feet away from his opponent. He slowly unsheathed his sword over his shoulder as he sized up the lizard man. Quality sword, although not as heavy or as large as his own, grieves and bucklers. He had leather armor, not as heavy as what he wore, but it would stop a fair blow. His stance was that of a trained swordsman, not like the ones he had fought earlier. He was a little shorter than Korg by about a foot, had wide, muscular shoulders and a tail that he would have to watch out for.

The lizard man slowly crossed his legs and moved to his right. Korg swung his sword in an “X” shape in front of himself as he turned in place. “My name is Tor.” Korg just growled in return. He hated it when people talked to him when they were supposed to be fighting. He liked to keep focused on his enemy. Tor swung a high arching blow and turned to swing his elbow at Korg’s stomach and his tail at Korg’s knees. Korg blocked the sword, jumped and rolled away from the elbow and tail. Tor started laughing. His opponent was quick for his size. “Not bad. I didn’t expect you to be so quick.” With a quick flick of his wrist Tor threw a star at Korg’s knee. Korg spun out of the way and, with a powerful swing, sliced through Tor’s leather chest armor just enough to scrape the skin beneath it and start a trickle of blood to flow. An inch closer and he would have cut muscle too.

Tor jumped back and blocked the next swing that didn’t come. Korg was still sizing up this creature. He didn’t want to get too cocky and be led into a deadly

swing, which was just what Tor wanted. They circled around each other, “Good, good, you are cautious. Maybe too cautious?” said Tor. “Shut up and fight!” yelled Korg. That was exactly what Tor had wanted. Korg’s attention had been on yelling not on fighting. Tor danced across the distance, sword shining off a non-existent light. Three stars were thrown at the same time all aimed true at their mark. Korg turned to take the stars on the thick leather armor on his back. Thud, thud, thud, all three hit. No pain, luckily they had hit the sheath of his sword, it had been just enough to stop them from going completely through his leather armor. Tor’s tail struck Korg behind the knees and brought him down. Again luck was with him and he had turned enough to land on his side. If he had landed on his back, it would have driven the stars through the leather armor.

Tor’s sword continued to arch around and was stopped by Korg’s sword. With a kick in the face, Tor flew to the ground. Korg kicked his feet up and landed standing on his feet facing Tor who was lying on the ground. Korg removed the sheath from his back and threw it away. Tor quickly recovered his feet and stood staring at the Minotaur. The laugh had gone out of Tor. Trying to trick the Minotaur only made it mad, “You are good. In other circumstances, we could have been friends or allies. You don’t need those witches to...” Korg did not let him finish. “My name is Korgrathkamalog. My friends call me Korg. I only tell you this because I want you to carry my name on your tongue when you die so my ancestors can celebrate in my victory.” As he said that he moved closer. Tor tried to ready himself for the blows to come. When he got close enough, the first swing came and was deflected by Tor’s sword. It was strong and purposeful. It made Tor step back. “You and I could never be friends because you are evil.” The next swing came from the opposite direction and Tor deflected it and stepped back again. “You do not fight. You try to trick your opponent with words.” Another swing deflected, but this time Tor stepped to the side and swung his tail around to catch Korg in the knees. Korg saw it coming and swung his sword with all of his might. Blood spewed from the wound on Tor’s body. His tail was flopping around on the ground like a worm on a hot stove.

Tor reached for a star and Korg removed Tor’s hand that held the star. Tor jumped to kick Korg in the face. Korg blocked with his sword and severed Tor’s right leg at the knee. Tor went down on his stomach, arms out slightly above his head. Korg stepped on the hand holding onto the sword as Tor pushed up with his arms. “Remember, the name is Korg.” The final swing removed Tor’s head.

“Tolman! Tolman where the hell are you!” yelled Galaxxion. A patch of fog hung in the air in front of him. The battle was not going well. Smoke filled the air around the fighting. The catapults were either on fire or ash and rubble, nothing useable. The creatures he had sent had been killed or ran away. Tolman’s army had attacked from behind, only to find more dragons defending the witches. Those damn dwarves and elves had followed him here and held back and killed a lot of the front line soldiers. The sorcerer killed his archers. Only sporadic fighting was going on now, and only then, if you could find the enemy in all of the smoke. “Tolman!” he yelled again. Finally, there he was walking over the dead bodies. “Where have you been? I’ve been trying to contact you for half an hour. I have some dragons after me here. One is that stupid red dragon you let escape.” Tor looked at Galaxxion; “I

don't have time for this. I'm trying to find that sorcerer that you want killed. I can feel him close by." Galaxxion looked behind Tolman and saw a shadow coming out of the smoke. "Look out behind..." was all he got out before the shadow shot a fireball at the image of Galaxxion, which broke the connection. "Damn it all to hell," Galaxxion yelled aloud, as he turned the words stopped dead in his mouth. A group of dragons were standing there looking at him.

The explosion of the fireball on the vision of Galaxxion knocked Tolman to the ground in a wall of flames. A puff of ice cold air came from nowhere and extinguished the flames. Tolman was covering himself with a glossy black robe. As he unfolded the robe he and Rathsmus looked eye to eye for the first time. "I don't think we have met. My name is Tolman." "Actually, we have met before, just not long enough for introductions. My name is Rathsmus. I helped capture you and place you in the wooden box. Tolman's face turned red with anger, "You! Do you know what it was like living in that box!? Not knowing what happened or where I was!?" Tolman tried to control himself. He didn't want to lose his concentration when dealing with this sorcerer; he could feel the power emanating from Rathsmus. Power wise, Rathsmus was his superior. Knowledge wise and in experience, Tolman figured he had Rathsmus beat. "Those fireballs you used are quite ingenious. How did you come by them? I've never seen that type before." "I trained many years with a master sorcerer and he passed on his knowledge to me over the years," which was a load of crap, but then it might throw off his opponent. "Just for curiosity sake, how did you capture me?" "I tripped you. When you hit the ground, I knocked you out." "Oh, sounds easy enough," he said, with a slight snarl. "Well, you didn't expect it and it happened quite fast. You didn't really have time to react." Tolman just looked at him and shrugged his shoulders. Rathsmus could hear some fighting and it sounded as if it was getting closer so he created a dome of air around the two of them to keep intruders out. Just in time too, because shortly after the dome was finished one of the large creatures ran into the dome followed by a group of dwarves. Before he could see them finish the creature off, the dome went opaque and a light at the top of it lit the interior.

"I suggest we don't use any type of fireballs inside the dome. If you wish I can remove it, but I thought you might like some privacy. "Sure, doesn't matter to me," of course he didn't mind; the more magic Rathsmus used on the dome, the less he had for other things. "Well, I guess we should get down to business." Tolman held his hands palms up as he spoke, as if he was shrugging his shoulders. Beams of red light flashed from his palms toward Rathsmus. A ball of air surrounded Rathsmus in a second as he floated cross-legged in front of Tolman. The light beams struck the ball around Rathsmus and bounced off toward the dome. When it hit the dome, it bounced off again. It kept bouncing off every surface it hit, a couple of times almost hitting Tolman, until it struck the ground between the two sorcerers sending dust and debris into the air. "Now, that wasn't nice. Maybe you would like to sit down and talk some more," Rathsmus pointed behind Tolman. When he turned he saw a fireball setting on the ground and knew it was already too late. The fireball exploded and shot Tolman into the air. Air was not his strongest magic, but he did his best to cover himself with a barrier of air. The explosion knocked him into the dome and then he fell about ten feet to the ground. Fire and heat bit at him

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unmercifully. The wind was knocked out of him and the fire fought him for what little air was left. A burst of ice cold air extinguished the fire and Tolman stood looking at Rathsmus sitting in his bubble totally unaffected by the fire. Tolman's clothing and hair were singed in places.

Tolman growled at Rathsmus as a big root grew out of the ground and grabbed the bubble. "This seems familiar," thought Rathsmus. The bubble's surface oozed an oily poison that quickly killed the root as it fell to the ground and melted away. If Rathsmus' strength was fire, perhaps cold could slow him down, thought Tolman, as he shot a spell of cold at the bubble. The bubble was immediately engulfed in a skin of frost. The frost grew and grew until the ball of frost sat on the ground. Tolman laughed. If the frost on the outside had grown this much, then Rathsmus had to be a human icicle by now.

Tolman stopped the spell. The ball of frost kept growing. The dome was now half full of frost and Tolman was getting cold. Frost worked its way around the dome, like fingers of cold, to engulf Tolman. Tolman started a spell of heat to fight the cold. The heat melted the frost back a little at a time. Tolman's feet were getting wet as the melting frost was making water build up around the base of the dome. If he let up on the heat, the frost would grow. When he increased the heat, the frost would melt and increase the water around his feet. There was now a foot and a half of water and it was increasing rapidly. Two feet. Two and a half feet. The ground was getting slippery; as the water got higher, it stopped the heat from getting to it and a layer of ice was covering the ground. Three and a half feet of water and his toes were freezing. Four and a half feet and his whole body was shivering from the icy water. Five and a half feet and it was up to his neck. He was now swimming in the icy water. His heat spell was no longer working and the water was skimming over with ice. He couldn't think straight because of the cold. His only thought left was that at least he had killed the sorcerer first.

Tolman was getting sleepy. His head was held above the water by the now half inch thick layer of ice on the surface of the water. Sleep was all he wanted now, peaceful sleep. Out of the corner of his eye he saw movement. He didn't really care, but in the back of his foggy mind he knew it was important. He turned his head as best as he could and saw a small light moving under the surface of the ice. It moved to the front of him, slowly melted a hole in the ice and floated before his eyes.

It was a small ball of light. It moved back away from Tolman and expanded in size. Tolman watched, in a disconnected curiosity, as the ball got larger. Inside the ball was a man sitting cross-legged. Tolman knew that he knew who it was, but he couldn't put a name to him. "Friend or enemy?" he asked himself. Not a friend or he would be helping him now instead of watching. Definitely an enemy, but he didn't know why. Anger at seeing his enemy watching him warmed his mind and started his blood to flow. The man in the bubble watched and then the bubble was gone and he was standing on the edge between the frost and the ice. He could not tell what the man was thinking. It was such a blank stare. It didn't matter, Tolman knew he would die, but he would kill his enemy with the last ounce of strength. In the back of his mind he had a thought, that grew into an idea, that became a plan.

Galaxxion almost fell over when he saw the dragons standing there. The smaller ones flew off into the shadows. That left six big ones. One was the son of Belchar. The others he didn't know, maybe the orange one, he thought, the Dragon Master had taken quite a few dragons over the years, there was something about this one, it was a fleeting thought and was gone, it didn't really matter at this point. Galaxxion was a Bick. Magic was not one of his major abilities, although he did possess some. His strength was his mind. Quick thinking, especially under pressure, but he also had special powers. The ability to read the thoughts or emotions of certain beings, the ability to move small objects just by thinking it, the ability to put thoughts and visions in the minds of others. That was a lot of power, depending upon the strength of mind of the ones he was working on. Most humans and lower forms of life were quite easily manipulated and, since he wasn't using magic it, was not detectable by magic users. Dragons could usually only be manipulated if their minds were broken first, that in it self was not an easy task. The red dragon had never been completely broken, although at times he could read its mind or place random thoughts in its mind. Usually, it was like trying to make a brick wall think something. None of these dragons would be susceptible to his powers because they had never been broken. Then, he noticed the orange dragon. It was like a crack in a plaster wall, only visible if you were close enough and looking for it. This dragon had been broken, probably by the Dragon Master. Although there was something familiar about this dragon, he could not place where or when he had seen it, or under what circumstances.

Summer saw Galaxxion looking at him, trying to remember something tickling at his memories. But then, there was no reason he should remember an obscure dragon on an obscure little farm in an out of the way land where the Dragon Master had placed him and several others trying to break their spirits and their minds. It had been many years ago when the Dragon Master had asked the Evil One, as he was known at the time, to come out and see his method for breaking a dragon's will. Galaxxion had been more than willing. The farm turned out to be a disaster. The methods he used didn't work. Galaxxion ordered all of the dragons destroyed and left very angry.

The Dragon Master had not been so quick to give up and kept the little farm working. Locals from the village had been employed by the Dragon Master to run the farm and keep the dragons fed. The dragons were used to till the fields and do the heavy work of the farm. In the winter, the dragons used their fire breathing ability, the ones who could, to warm the buildings. In the summer, the dragons that could breathe ice were used as a crude air conditioning system. The Dragon Master had placed a spell on them that would not allow them to leave the farm. If they did not do the work that they were told to do by the locals, they would get punished when the Dragon Master returned. Eventually, all of the dragons had been broken to one extent or another. Once the first dragon broke the rest seemed to fall like dominoes.

Summer had not been the first to crack under the pressure from the Dragon Master, but of all of them, he had been the least effected by him. The Dragon Master would get so mad at the orange dragon; he could see the crack in the wall of his mind. Once the crack was there, it was just a matter of finding something to

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make it bigger, or so went the theory. Just like a crack in the side of a big rock, get some water in it and let it freeze, it was only a matter of time before the rock fell apart. That was how it worked with the majority of the dragons, but not with Summer. The Dragon Master could find nothing to enhance the crack. Eventually, he gave up on the orange dragon and used him as a pack animal or for working in the fields. The dragons that had been completely broken were used for more sinister plans. Fortunately, the Dragon Master could not force them to betray their fellow dragons. Eventually, the dragons would go into complete depression, get sick and die. Only two other dragons survived the ordeal. They were all separated and Summer had not seen them since.

Summer escaped the farm because the locals stopped coming around. The farm fell into disrepair along with the harness that bound him there. He could have escaped long before he did, but he was afraid of the Dragon Master. When the last of the locals stopped coming around, he escaped. When he was free he swore he would never be captured again. Now, he was staring at the creature that had condemned him to the farm. Hatred built in him and killing this creature was all he could think of.

Galaxxion could see the hate in the orange dragon's eyes and he had to look away. The red dragon's eyes were the same. There was only one thing for Galaxxion to do. Escape! Now, before these dragons could attack. A flash of light blinded the dragons. Summer closed his eyes and leapt, teeth bared, to where Galaxxion had been standing before the light blinded him. He bit deep into the flesh of the creature. He held on even though the creature had stopped fighting. When his sight returned, the creature was gone; the only thing that remained was the creature's arm, from elbow to hand, that was still in Summer's mouth. He quickly spit the limb from his mouth. "Quick!" yelled Krunchar; "There should be a trail of blood to follow." The snapdragons came as quickly as they could. A trail of blood went to a small secret door in one of the walls. It was way too small for any of the dragons to follow him.

"That door goes to the surface, close to the cornerstone," said the voice of the human from the boat, "You will never catch him. He will be there before you could make it to the exit of this place." Then a blood curdling scream was heard and more yelling. "What is that?" asked Fist in confusion. A howl echoed in the halls of Galaxxion's now abandoned lair. "The Manchain," said Krunchar lowly, "To keep us busy so we could not follow him, he freed the Manchain. We are in great danger." Krunchar looked to the human, but he was gone. He had taken the same escape route as Galaxxion. Krunchar did not blame him; if he could have fit, he would have done the same. From the sound from the halls, the Manchain had killed the rest of the humans from the boat, unless they were lucky enough to find an escape route, which Krunchar somehow doubted. "If we stay high in the ceiling it won't be able to reach us," said Brain. I'm afraid that won't work. The Manchain, although it has no magical ability, has great strength. He could easily jump that high," said Krunchar. "Then, what do we do?" asked Boulder. "We have a couple of options. We can stay together and fight him here, or some other place in this hole, or we can separate and hope some of us escape. If we separate, he will surely kill at least half of us. He is very strong and very fast." "Too late!" yelled Eyes. They all

turned together to see the Manchain enter the chamber. “Stay back,” said Krunchar, “Let me try something.” Krunchar stepped forward.

“Hello, Jartran.” The Manchain stopped and looked at the red dragon. “Yes, it is me, Krunchar.” The Manchain raised its nose in the air to smell. “These are my friends. They too are here to kill Galaxxion.” Krunchar picked up the arm that Summer had spit on the floor. “Here is his arm.” Krunchar threw the arm toward the Manchain. The creature went to the arm and smelled it. It growled and ripped it apart. “Galaxxion escaped through that doorway. It will take him to the cornerstone.” The Manchain was still in the shadows, but when he heard that his eyes glowed bright red. “How could you let him escape?” said the deep voice. “He blinded us with a flash of light. Summer bit off his arm.” The Manchain roared in anger and despair. “Krunchar,” said the Manchain, “You and I have not been friends, although we have not been enemies. You tried to save me on more than one occasion and spoke to me as a friend even when I would not do so in return. I hold no malice toward you or your friends. Galaxxion has escaped; his home is now mine. You are welcome here anytime. Maybe we can become friends, in time.” Krunchar nodded, “I would like that very much; however, there is something I would request of you.” The Manchain walked from the shadows into the light. He looked like a deformed lion. He was the size of a small elephant and his teeth were long and sharp. His feet had long pointed claws that looked like they could cut through solid rock. His mane looked like another animal wrapped around its head and neck. “What is it?” “In time, when the effects of Galaxxion have been removed from this world and ours, someone will have to go hunting him. This is not the first world he has tried to destroy. If he is allowed to build his strength somewhere else, he will come here to exact his revenge. When the time comes to hunt him, I would really like you to be with us. You would be a great asset.”

The great cat looked at Krunchar and then at the other dragons. “I am tired. Now is not a good time for me to think of such things. When the time comes for you, ask me again.” Jartran ran from the chamber in search of other beings that Galaxxion left behind. “Let’s go,” yelled speedy as he flew for the exit. Without a word, they all followed him until the air of the mountains touched their faces. “Maybe he didn’t make it to the cornerstone,” said Bump. “I can go ahead and see,” said Speedy. “No, he is gone. We should join in the clean up on the Plain of Color. I’m sure they could use our help.” They could see wisps of smoke coming from over the mountains. They took to the sky and aimed toward the battle.

Tolman looked up at the sorcerer floating in the air. Slowly, the ice and the dome began to shake. The dome cracked, effectively breaking the spell and it disappeared. The heat from the outside air melted the ice. The water Tolman was floating in ran away and he hung from the ice around his neck. Heat cracked the ice and, as it snapped and broke, Tolman fell to the ground as the air slammed out of his body. He was still cold and his body shivered and spasmed as the heat tried to enter him. A big icicle hit Rathsmus on the back of his head and he tumbled to the ground into some nearby bushes, unconscious.

“Tolman,” yelled some soldiers from his army. They ran up to him and picked him up out of the ice and water. “Where did this come from?” asked one of the soldiers. “There is a sorcerer around here,” he croaked with a half-frozen, half-

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crushed throat, "Be wary." The smoke was clearing up and they could see further than they had been able to before. The wind was also picking up and that was helping to drive the smoke away. The soldiers holding Tolman stopped in their tracks. Standing about one hundred feet away was the Minotaur with silver horns. Behind him were several other Minotaur, a few dragons and the witches that ordered him around.

Tolman did his best to stand up straight. The two soldiers walked in front of their leader and prepared to defend him. From behind them more of his soldiers came and joined the defense. The smoke had cleared to the point that you could see everything. Only a few spots on the plains still smoldered and they were only putting off small streams of smoke that were dissipating as the wind caught them and carried them away. Soldiers were coming from far away when they saw their leader in trouble. "Give up," yelled Korg, "Or you will be destroyed." The two soldiers that had picked Tolman up ran yelling at Korg. Korg ran and met them half way. Three swings of his sword and one was cut in half and the other was decapitated. More soldiers stood ready to run at Korg. A group of five Minotaur stood beside Korg. Ten soldiers ran at the group of Minotaur. Korg took out three without breaking a sweat. The rest were cut down by the other Minotaur. About fifty soldiers stood between Korg and Tolman. Ten more Minotaur stood beside Korg. They all ran at each other. Swords ringing off each other. Blood flying in the air. Screams of the dead and wounded filled the air.

Finally, Tolman was alone. His soldiers were all gone. A few Minotaur were carried away that had been hurt, none had been killed. Behind Tolman, Rathsmus was crawling out of the bushes. A barrier came up between Tolman and the Minotaur. Tolman was recovering quickly now as he turned to see the sorcerer on his hands and knees with the back of his head covered with blood. "Good bye, Rathsmus," Tolman said with a snarl, "It was fun." Tolman held his arms out in front of him fingers curled and pointing at the crawling form on the ground. Korg saw what was going to happen and ran, "Nooooo!" he yelled. He drew his sword and jumped with the strongest down swing he could muster and his sword struck the barrier. He bounced off, landing on the ground on his back, his sword lying by his side. The noise of Korg hitting the barrier made Tolman hesitate for a couple seconds. He started laughing. "Oops," he said, as he giggled to himself. White-hot light fired from Tolman's fingertips and struck the crawling sorcerer all along his body. His body glowed red and when the light stopped all that was left was a puddle of ooze. The sight surprised Tolman. Something wasn't quite right. Nothing should have been left. Rathsmus should have been vaporized. Slowly, he stepped closer; hands still up in front of him, elbows bent, fingers curled and pointing forward. His eyes moved back and forth in front of him; there was a puddle of grayish brown ooze.

The sisters moved forward. They circled around the magic user. As they circled him, the barrier followed them until he was completely surrounded by it and the sisters. This was the closest he had been to the witches. They were beautiful; long flowing hair, bodies a man would kill to protect and faces that could make one fall in love at first sight. Tolman shook himself from continuing that line of thought. He still had five witches surrounding him. Crystal nodded to Tolman, reached up to

the front of her robe and pulled it off letting it fall to the ground. Daphney did the same. Tolman stood watching. Next was Dalna, then Serena and finally Sheena. He didn't know which way to look; they were all so beautiful. He took a step forward and ran into his barrier. He let go of the barrier, but it was already gone. This barrier was not his. The sisters were now floating in front of him sitting cross-legged, he could see everything about them, nothing was hidden.

The ground glowed and added to the light that lit up their bodies. Slowly, the sisters floated around the barrier. Tolman tried to follow their movements, but he could not. Faster and faster they went. His mind was cloudy, he couldn't think straight. He closed his eyes and concentrated on a spell that would block his vision of the witches circling around him. He scratched a spot on his leg as he concentrated on his spell. The barrier started to darken. His other leg itched and he scratched the spot without thinking about it. "Ouch," he thought, as the spot he scratched began to hurt. Both legs began to itch and he scratched at them. His concentration was gone and the barrier was clear again. It didn't matter now. He wasn't looking at the women; he was too busy scratching. He fell on his rear and pulled up his pant legs. His legs looked grayish and some spots actually looked clear to the point that he could see into his leg, but he knew that was impossible. The witches were making him think that he was seeing this and feeling the itch. His feet were tingling as if they were falling asleep. He pulled off one of his boots and almost threw up. His foot was a massive ball of small worms. When he pulled off the boot, it split the thin layer of skin and the worms fell into his lap. As the worms fell, his toes fell with them. The bones were bare. He pulled off his other boot and the foot stayed in the boot, there was only a stub below his pant leg with the worms falling out. His arms and chest were itching. He looked at his hands and the skin split as worms fell from the opening. His whole body was crawling with the bugs. He opened his mouth to scream, but only worms came out. He fell over dead as the worms consumed his brain.

Slowly, a small ball floated above the seething body of worms. The ground quickly smoldered and puffed into flames as the dark, oily smoke lifted to the barrier and coated it with soot. The worms wiggled and squirmed to escape the heat, but there was no escape for them. Rathsmus could not let such a dangerous bug loose on the world. In minutes, all was ash including the remains of Tolman. The barrier shimmered out of existence. The sisters, now standing around the circle of ashes, just looked at Rathsmus. By the time Tolman had realized that there was a problem, it was too late. Rathsmus had not used magic, as such, to kill the magic user so Tolman did not know what was happening. Korg walked up to Rathsmus; "It is done." Rathsmus looked up at the Minotaur with tired eyes and nodded. The sisters picked up their robes and put them on. Belchar, Tig and Sethusda had been watching, "They say that you did the same to the Dragon Master," said Belchar, "I would not have truly believed it unless I had seen it myself. It is good to know that the Dragon Master suffered in payment for those he made suffer. Rathsmus did not really feel good about what he had done to Tolman. He had just been a misguided sorcerer. Rathsmus had not felt any evil in him, just loyalty to an evil master.

Picking up the Pieces

Rathsmus looked up to the sky and took in a deep breath. The sun was hanging just over the horizon, not a cloud in the sky. The wind was barely blowing with small gusts from time to time. He thought he could see a flock of birds off in the distance, but as they got closer he could see that they were too big to be birds. "Belchar, I think your son is returning." Belchar looked to the sky and saw several dots in the sky; one, two, three, four, five small ones; one, two, three, four, five, six big ones. "They are all there!" Belchar said with excitement. It wasn't long before the snapdragons were flying around the rag tag remnants of their army. Krunchar was the first to actually land and then the rest of the group landed together.

"Sorry to report, Sir, that the Evil One has escaped to the cornerstone. Summer bit off his right arm before he got away though, so he is wounded." "It's good to have you back home, son," said Belchar, "It's good to have you all back." "Something else you should know, Sir," said Krunchar. Belchar looked at him. "Summer and I can swim in lava and not be hurt." Belchar looked around for Biktron. "Biktron," he yelled. "Yes, Sir," came the reply as the brown dragon ran to the front of the group surrounding Rathsmus. "What do you know of dragons swimming in lava?" Biktron closed his eyes and concentrated as if he was reading a book in his mind. "It appears in certain writings that different dragon types have certain inherent abilities. As far as which ones can swim in lava, actually there are quite a few with that ability. Red, orange, silver, gold, yellow and black have the ability to go into lava without being hurt." "Why didn't we know of this already?" asked Belchar. "There are many things that were lost when we lost our magic. It will take a long time to recover it all, if that is even possible," said Biktron sadly.

The armies of the dwarves and elves approached. "Our job here is done. We heard that Galaxxion has escaped. He will surface again and, when he does, we will be ready." "Thank you for your help. If we can ever help you, please let us know," said Belchar. The leaders of the armies bowed to Belchar. "Albon, take a group of snapdragons and go with our friends to the cornerstone. Return them to their home with our thanks." Again, the leaders bowed to Belchar. The armies backed away and started marching toward the cornerstone surrounded by a group of snapdragons.

The next army to come forward was the Minotaur. They had their share of losses as all of the different armies had. They were thanked for their help and they left for their home. Korg and Amoss offered their help and company for the long march home, but were turned down. "Your place is with your family. We will meet again another time," they said. Korg and Amoss obeyed the wishes of the Minotaur leader and bade them farewell. The armies of Odan, Dennison and Alnar all came and were thanked for their help. Before they left, they asked to see the sisters so they would know everything was all right. The sisters approached the armies and, when they came into view, a rumble went over the crowd. All of the soldiers went

down on one knee and bowed their heads. The leaders stood and turned to their troops. From the middle of the armies came a young man dressed in rags, apparently, a stable hand, not a fighter. He handed a package wrapped in cloth to the leaders, turned and ran back to his place.

The cloth turned out to be the three flags of the kingdoms. A uniquely carved box was held out to the sisters. Crystal motioned for the men to come forward. When they got to the sisters, the box was opened. Inside were five matching gold pendants, each showing the three flags of the kingdoms. "These are our meager offering to you for your help to our three kingdoms when you were needed most." Crystal took the box, "Your thanks is appreciated, but it is us who should be thanking you. Without your help, we quite possibly could have lost the battle." "Because of your help in the past, we have all grown prosperous and learned the need to help others despite the danger to ourselves. Today we not only fought for you, but also for ourselves. Once you know freedom, it is a hard commodity to live without."

Belchar thanked the army again and they began their march home. The remaining armies were thanked and that left only the dragons, Rathsmus, Amoss, the sisters and Korg. The largest part of the dragon army returned to the dragons' home world. Belchar, Tig, Sethusda, Biktron, Krunchar and his friends stayed to talk to Rathsmus. "We dragons were quite lucky," said Belchar, "None of the dragons were killed. We had some seriously wounded, but the healers say that they should be okay with some rest." "That's good," said Rathsmus, "Without the healers, we would have lost more of our allies too. We had luck on our side this time." Everyone agreed. "There is something we need to talk about," said Krunchar. "What is it, son?" asked Belchar. "Galaxxion was not killed. He will find a place to hide until he becomes strong again. We need to find him before he does and comes seeking revenge. We have an ally that will help us find him." "Who?" asked Crystal. "Jartran. He is a Manchain that Galaxxion captured and held prisoner in his lair. He now roams free in that place. He didn't promise his help, but when we are ready I do believe he will help us find him. He hates Galaxxion."

"Yes, and well he should," said Amoss. "What is a Manchain?" asked Rathsmus. "A Manchain is a mixture of animals. It looks most like a lion, but it is much larger. It is also somewhat magical because it can change its form when it wants to," said Amoss. "You mean, it is a metamorph?" interrupted Serena. "No, not quite. It can only change its shape. It does not actually become that which it changes into, like Rathsmus. It will have the basic abilities; thought, speech and so on, but if the creature it turns into is magic, it will not have those abilities. It also has only a set amount of creatures it can become and that is set at birth. It cannot add abilities, like Rathsmus can with just a touch and it cannot turn into a specific person or creature. They live a long time and have great memories. I believe I have met this one you speak of before. If he is the one I think he is, he will help."

"I think it is time for us to be going home as well," said Belchar, "We have much more to do to recover our past and I think it will take a long time. We will keep in contact with you. As a Council member, there will be times when you will be required to be present, but more than that; you are all considered family. We have been through a lot together and we will be thrown together again." "Why do

you say that?" asked Crystal, "What do you mean?" Belchar hesitated, as if he knew he had said too much, but he also knew that because of it he would have to say more. "The dragons of my world, thanks to Rathsmus, and to you all, are regaining their magic very fast. A few of them have regained the power to tell the future. They say we will all fight together again and the next time the war will be much larger. One has added that there is a small chance that the war can be averted, but he cannot see the way to do this yet." With that, Belchar bowed to the sisters, then to Korg and then to Amoss. He looked at Rathsmus, "We will send for you when you are required to be present, but please, come to visit also. There is much we can learn from each other." Rathsmus bowed and said, "We will."

Belchar bowed and nodded to Tig. "Let's go home!" yelled Tig aloud, nodded to Rathsmus and family and leapt into the air, followed by the rest of the dragons, except Sethusda and Belchar. "Good bye, my friends. I will return shortly with your children," said Sethusda as he bowed and the two dragons disappeared.

Amoss watched the dragons fly over the horizon. He turned laughing lowly and shaking his head, "Those dragons sure are funny creatures." "What do you mean?" asked Crystal. "Oh, nothing much. They just try so hard to be proper when they are around other species. Remember, I used to live with them for a long time after I metamorphed into a snapdragon. They do not act like that all the time." "Speaking of that," said Rathsmus, "When I was listening to you talk about the Manchain and how I can metamorph into anything I touch, I started thinking about you. You are a metamorph also. Can you turn into other things besides a snapdragon?" "Yes," he said, "But, not as completely as you and not for the length of time that you can. I could turn into Korg, but would not have his strength or skill, only his size and looks." Amoss looked at Rathsmus; "You have many talents because of your metamorphic ability. If what Belchar said is true about us going to war again, you will need them."

A flash of light in front of the group produced Sethusda and the children. The children ran smiling and laughing to their mothers. Sethusda bowed again and was gone. "Let's go home," said Rathsmus, as he produced a gondola out of air. They all climbed in, except Rathsmus and Amoss. "I'm glad to call you my son-in-law," said Amoss to Rathsmus, as he extended his hand. Rathsmus grabbed his hand with a large grin on his face and pulled Amoss closer into a hug. "Thank you, I appreciate that." Amoss hugged him back. Rathsmus metamorphed into the largest dragon he knew, Kragdar, and leapt onto the handle of the gondola. Amoss started to climb into the gondola, then stopped and closed the door. He smiled at Crystal and metamorphed into his snapdragon form. He leapt into the air and led the way home. Rathsmus leapt into the air with the gondola and followed.

It was dark and damp as he crawled up the passageway. He was losing a lot of blood and he was getting sleepy. This would be an awful hole to die in. He found the door that led to the outside and pushed. He didn't know how long it had taken him to get here, but it was dark now. The cold night air gave him a chill as it hit his sweaty clothes. He pulled himself out of the hole and the door closed with a slam. He didn't care. He knew he would be dead before he made it to the cornerstone. He stood up and stumbled toward the cornerstone. He couldn't see it, but he knew where it was. He tripped on a root, tumbled down a hill and landed in some bushes.

The Cornerstone

Through his half-closed, half-dazed eyes he saw two creatures come to him as he lay in the bushes. “Master, it is I, Ceries. Qular is with me. You are hurt! Qular! Quick, Galaxxion is hurt, we must get him home.” Galaxxion blacked out.

The End

Craig C. McCabe

About the Author

The author was born in Connecticut. He moved to Maine with his family when he was a young child. Craig still resides in Maine with his wife and two daughters. He has always had an interest in science fiction/fantasy and a fascination with dragons and magic. He began writing this book to pass the time during quiet periods at work. Craig is very creative and enjoys woodcarving, pyrography and painting in his spare time.

