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Table of Contents

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Chapter One | Chapter Two | Chapter Three |
| Chapter Four | Chapter Five | Chapter Six |
| Chapter Seven | Chapter Eight | Chapter Nine |
| Chapter Ten | Chapter Eleven | Chapter Twelve |
| Chapter Thirteen | Chapter Fourteen | Chapter Fifteen |
| Chapter Sixteen | Chapter Seventeen | Chapter Eighteen |
| Chapter Nineteen | Chapter Twenty | Chapter Twenty-One |
| Chapter Twenty-Two | Chapter Twenty-Three | Chapter Twenty-Four |
| Chapter Twenty-Five | Chapter Twenty-Six | Chapter Twenty-Seven |
| Chapter Twenty-Eight | Chapter Twenty-Nine | Chapter Thirty |
| Chapter Thirty-One | Chapter Thirty-Two | Chapter Thirty-Three |
| Chapter Thirty-Four | | |
| About the Author | | |
| Chapter One | | |

"...and it came to pass that in the one thousand, six hundred and thirty-fourth year following the

end of the Great War of Devastation, or 1634 NCC by the New Common Calendar we use today, the Ancient One did return from the Void. Not in the manner a new birth enters the world, or even in the manner of a sleeper awakening from a long sleep, which is how the Ancient One once described this moment. No, it was more in the manner a maggot hatches in a fresh corpse, life arising from death."

- Lord Caladis, The Eddasine Chronicles, 1817 NCC

The pain woke me eventually. A long, dull, throbbing pain that couldn't be ignored, yet had to be. I slowly became aware that I was nude, prone, face down on a cold, stone floor in the dark. I tried to remember what had happened, who I was, or even *what* I was, and found I couldn't. The only thing I knew was that I was alive.

I felt a warm wetness on my head. *'A head. I have a head,'* I thought giddily. Somehow, that was reassuring. Reaching up to it, I realized I had arms and legs as well. *'I think I'm a human - or something very like one.'* Passing my fingers over myself in the darkness, I realized I had breasts. *'I think I am female - or something very odd indeed.'* Somehow the idea that I was female didn't seem right. I checked my groin, and found I was, indeed, female. *'This is strange. I don't remember being female before. Somehow, that doesn't seem right,'* I thought, puzzled.

I reached up and examined my head again. *'I am wounded,'* I realized, my head throbbing as my fingers gingerly felt the large goose-egg on my scalp and a sticky wetness that apparently was blood. No cut was apparent, though the whole of the area was very sore. *'Something happened to me. What was it?'*

Wherever I was, it was black as pitch, and I could see nothing. I reached out with my mind, without thinking, feeling the flow of *Mana* around me until I felt the vibration of a particular frequency of *Mana* I needed to correct that problem, then paused in realization. *'Ah. I'm a sorcerer. Or sorceress, as the case may be. Somehow, I seem to remember that not everyone can do this. How very interesting.'* Opening my mouth, I spoke the words of power that somehow lay within my brain, and a flare of light appeared at the fingertips of my left hand. *'Ah. I'm in a pit of some kind,'* I thought, looking around.

There was a low, stone edifice within arm's reach, engraved deeply with scenes of battle and mayhem - it looked very familiar. I realized after a moment it was a sarcophagus. *'No, I'm in a tomb of some kind,'* I thought to myself. *'Why is that sarcophagus so familiar, though?'* I wondered.

I looked down at myself, and saw I was definitely female, with long red hair that hung down to the middle of my back. I reached up to brush my hair out of my eyes, and realized my ears were pointed. *'Ah. I'm some kind of elf. Judging by the build, more likely a half-elf - elves are more willowy,'* I thought,

then wondered how I knew that.

I found myself tired. *'This body is not used to sorcery, and tires rapidly.'* I looked again to the stone sarcophagus, and rose to my feet. With a gesture and an incantation, I lifted the lid and had it float to the side. This drew a quickening of breath from the body, and a sense of deep exhaustion. I looked inside the sarcophagus, and understood a bit more.

A skeletal form grinned up at me, its remains garbed in fine silken robes that had nearly rotted to dust. *'That is me. I was dead,'* I realized. Somehow this female had approached close enough to become entrapped by the Spell of Hidden Life I'd lain upon myself an age ago. I realized that just beneath this stone sarcophagus lay my *animuary*, a small crystal vial that contained my soul - or did, as it was now in the body of this naked half-elf female. I took a deep breath, savoring it despite the dust of the tomb. *"I live again,"* I said aloud, hearing a soft, feminine voice speak my words. Reaching again to the wound on my head, I had a flickering memory of it being sealed and healed by *Mana* controlled by the force of my will as I took this body - though my scalp was bloody, there was no cut skin or broken skull-bone beneath my fingers, just a large goose-egg. Yet the process seemed incomplete, somehow, in a manner I couldn't quite put my finger on at the moment.

Shrugging, I reached down and removed the ten rings my skeletal corpse wore, placing them on my new fingers. With a gesture, I adjusted them to fit snugly. I then reached down and recovered my wizard's staff, a shaft of oak capped with the skull of a wolf. The staff throbbed with the power I'd stored in it ages ago, and I resolved to use its stored energy for the nonce instead of drawing upon this feeble body I found myself in. *'I'll have to work on the endurance of this body, or I'll soon find my soul back in my animuary,'* I thought.

After resting a bit to recover my strength, I looked around my tomb and spotted the hole through which the female had fallen in the ceiling. *'Ah. I'll have to seal that again before I leave,'* I thought, seeing the carved stone block that had fallen, apparently ages ago, lying shattered on the floor below the opening. Like the stone that had slipped from it, the hole was a hand short of a cubit across - barely wide enough for the shoulders of the female to have fit through. I touched the light from my fingertips to the staff and left it there. *'There is something else amiss - this female's groin hurts.'* I checked, and found a soreness and a trace of blood. *'I do believe this body was raped. Interesting.'* Drawing on my staff, I threw a Curse of Infertility on my new body - I wasn't quite prepared to become a mother at the moment. *'I must know more of what has happened to me,'* I thought, looking around.

I searched around on my corpse until I came up with a single-edged knife, and used it to cut a lock of hair. Its ensorcelled steel was unblemished and razor sharp, though its scabbard had long since rotted to dust. Soon, I held a lock of red hair in my hands, and I laid the knife aside - I'd have to take it with me

when I left. Incanting the words of a spell I knew, I tied a loop into one end of the strand, and tied another strand horizontally to the first. I gently separated two halves of the lower section, and lay the little hair-doll on the edge of the sarcophagus. "Speak to me, little doll of mine. Tell me the tale of this body I find," I called. The little hair-doll sat up, hopped to its feet, and began to speak in a tiny voice.

"I am the hair of Ellysande Northstar. To come to this place, she has traveled far. Her mother was human, her father was an elf. After her mother died, she grew up by herself. On the streets of Greenhaven she grew up alone, the gutters and dark alleys she learned to call home. The Greenhaven thief's guild later improved her skill, teaching reading and writing and new ways to kill. She burgled the house of a mage named Arlon-Hap, and her reward for this crime was an ancient map. She and four companions set out to reveal the treasure the map said a tomb did conceal. Her companions once here were angered with Northstar, as the search of the tomb revealed little so far. An opening was found at the crypt's dusty center, one which only her thin frame could possibly enter. She refused to go in, and her companions grew enraged. She feared that this might be the ensorcelled tomb of a mage. They stripped her and raped her and tossed her down in. At her silence below, they walked out again. Goblets and cups were all of value they'd found, and their silver and gold they'd simply melt down. As her companions left, they did laugh up their sleeves - she had forgotten there's no honor among thieves. Ellysande's greedy soul has now been crushed and destroyed. Another rules her body - one risen from the Void. I once was the hair of Ellysande Northstar. Now I am the hair of mage Eddas Ayar," the hair doll said, then collapsed into dust as the spell ended.

'Eddas Ayar. That would be useful if I knew who that was,' I thought. I knew what it meant - in my native language, the name meant *'Word of Honor.'* It was also a male's name. Unfortunately, that was all I knew. The name seemed to ring a bell, but no other information was forthcoming - I couldn't even remember what my native language was called, or where my native lands might be.

It suddenly dawned on me that the damage to the female's brain had addled my own mind when I possessed her body from the animuary. I nodded to myself. *'Well, that may heal as time goes on. For now, I must be away from here. There are four others with knowledge of this place, and their lips must be sealed. The slightest damage to my animuary, and my soul shall be destroyed,'* I thought to myself. It seemed logical that the only reason they'd failed to enter was that they'd neglected to bring the equipment or sorcery necessary to remove the stone blocks of my tomb and make an opening large enough for them to enter. They would not make that mistake a second time. I wished the hair-doll could have said more, but it was only a hunk of hair, after all - I'd have to have cast the spell on her skull to get as much information as I'd really like, and I had other uses for it at the moment. I couldn't cast the spell on my own skull in the sarcophagus - it won't work on me, which was why the hair-doll had ended its tale with my possession of the female's body.

After using the telekinetic enchantment on the ring of my left middle finger to replace the lid of my

sarcophagus, I picked up the knife. Placing the it between my teeth, I used the enchantment of the ring on my right index finger and floated up to the hole. It was a narrow squeeze, but I managed to get out. A slight pain in my chest caused me to look down, and I realized I'd abraded the female's breasts against the granite blocks trying to get through. *'No, I'd better get used to thinking of them as my breasts - this body is mine, now ,'* I thought. The injury was slight - no need to waste my strength on it. It did remind me to activate my ring of protection, however, and I did so - now the aura of the ring would provide this body with protection greater than the finest articulated plate. I then knelt down to the hole and shined my light into it. Using the ring on my left middle finger again, I raised the pieces of the shattered block back in place, then used a spell of repairing to seal them together and seal them to the surrounding stones again. Afterwards, I slowly went over all the stones that overlay my crypt, repairing those that seemed lose or cracked. After a few hours, I was satisfied that my crypt would be safe for another millennium or two. During the process I also found the shreds of Ellysande's clothing, torn off by the companions who raped her. I shrugged - none of it was wearable, so I decided to reserve my strength for repairing the stones instead of repairing her garments. Thus, I just used the scraps of cloth to wipe the drying blood from my wound off of my face, and tossed her rags aside. By the time I had finished repairing the stones, I found I was a little too tired to really consider trying to piece together her clothing with magic, anyway.

Rising to my feet and replenishing the spell of light, I shivered with the cold of the tomb and exhaustion. A dull pain from my stomach told me I was hungry - a sensation I'd not experienced in a long time. I looked down and saw that my nipples were crinkled with the cold, and my flanks were covered in goose-bumps. It felt strange to see a woman's curves, but I couldn't remember what I used to look like, other than that I was a male. *'Well, even though she never knew it, Ellysande Northstar did me a great service in bringing her body to me. Besides the fact that I'd rather not die just at the moment, I think I should at least repay her by taking care of her flesh,'* I thought. I activated the ring on my left pinky, which had an enchantment of adaptation. Shortly the chill eased to nothingness, as I was now protected against any natural extreme of cold or heat. Unfortunately, the growling of my stomach reminded me I was still hungry. *'That will have to be handled later,'* I thought, because first, I had to find the would-be raiders of my tomb.

My crypt was secreted beneath the floor of a cavernous room of pillars, the shadows of which flickered eerily about as I wandered the silent tomb. There once were poisonous snakes and spiders here, but apparently they had died. The treasure of golden and silver goblets I had hidden about the room for would-be tomb raiders had done their job, though - the thieves had taken them and left. I checked, and saw that the chests of gold coins I had left were still in their hiding place - and beside them, my old *chatto* board. I smiled as I ran my fingers over the carvings on the ancient wood, vaguely-recalled memories of many games flickering through my mind. The board itself was a hinged box that folded in half, the delicately carved ivory and ebony pawns and the decks of cards used in the game fitting neatly into a drawer on each side. A pair of handles made the whole thing conveniently carried - but I did not pick it up. Unfortunately, there were still more pressing matters for me to deal with.

I wanted to take some of the gold with me, but being naked, I had no pockets. I searched about some

more, hoping to find a hidden stash of clothes or something else that might have survived the ages, as my own recollections of my tomb were a bit scattered. To my surprise, I found a hidden panel in the wall that opened into another crypt. A skeleton lay on a bed of stone, a pillow of marble under its skull. *'Ah, I remember you. Dyarzi, my courtesan,'* I thought. She, too, had once been a thief, as Ellysande had been - though Dyarzi apparently had been much better at it. I decided she wouldn't mind if I appropriated some of her belongings - somehow I knew that if she were still alive, she'd have been happy to give them.

Her clothes had rotted away to dust, and her jewelry did not appeal to me, save for a silver ring that expanded and shrank on command. I pulled my long red hair through it and tightened the ring, pulling my hair into a ponytail to get it out of my way - in a ponytail, my hair hung down to just below my shoulders. All that was left of Dyarzi's clothes was a chainmail garment she'd bought - it consisted of two triangles of elfin-mail that covered her breasts and another that covered her sex, all held together by elfin chain. The upper part was held on by two fine chains (one around the back, one behind the neck), and the lower part was held in place by a chain that went around the waist and another that went between the buttocks. I remember she used to like to wear it as she pretended she was some fantastic warrior-princess and dance for me.

That memory was fresh and bright in my mind, and it brought an ache to my loins that surprised me - I didn't know females felt that way about coupling. I reached down and touched myself, to discover I was damp. *'Interesting,'* I thought. My male soul seemed to have no trouble with this female body - though I could see that being alive again was going to have other problems later on. *'Well, I can't go about nude. This will have to do until I can find something else,'* I thought, and put it on. Looking down at myself, I saw a mass of pubic hair spreading from around the edges. *'That looks ugly.'* I searched Dyarzi's possessions and came up with the stone hemisphere I'd bought for her ages ago - it had a depilatory enchantment on it, and its effects were permanent. I removed the chainmail garment and applied the depilatory, finding the hair vanished easily. Looking down at the bald sex that remained, I was reminded of Dyarzi again, and the memories of her were pleasant, indeed. She had used the little cantrip on all her hair, save her eyebrows and the hair of her head, and the feel of her smooth skin was something I remembered *quite* clearly. I looked to her skeleton, laying quietly in repose, and bowed to her. "Thank you for all the pleasure and love you gave me, my sweet," I said, again finding my woman's voice a little strange in my ears.

I was about to put the depilatory away, and realized that I should do as she did to honor her. I think she would have been pleased by that - assuming she could eventually stop laughing at the idea that I was now a woman. I rubbed the stone across every inch of my skin that I could reach, then used my telekinetic ring to apply it to where I couldn't reach. I left only the hair on my head, my eyelashes and eyebrows, just as Dyarzi had done for me. Looking down at the results, I gave a wry little smile. *'Fascinating. My male soul seems to have integrated with the female brain of this body very well. I find the whole effect not only stimulating to look at, but interesting to feel. At least I shall not have to worry about finding female companionship - I need look no further than myself,'* I thought, and chuckled at my own little joke.

After replacing Dyarzi's depilatory, I put the chainmail garment back on. It fit fairly well, and was adjustable. *'Well, at least I'm not naked, anyway - though I'm nearly so,'* I thought, and I resolved that I'd have to find *some* type of garments as quickly as possible. I searched the rest of her belongings, and was pleasantly surprised. The enchanted gloves and boots she'd owned were still here. The boots came up to just above the knees, while the gloves came up to just above the elbows. I slipped the boots on, and they adjusted snugly to my feet and calves. The gloves easily slipped over my rings, then adjusted snugly over my hands to cover them. *'Ah, very good. No chance of losing them,'* I thought. I felt about in the right boot, extracting Dyarzi's knife from the hidden scabbard and slipping in my own (which was a far superior blade). I felt about in the left glove, and discovered her skeleton key was still there. A simple yet powerful magic item, it detected traps and could be used to unlock or lock anything that wasn't sufficiently enchanted to resist its spell. It didn't look like much, however - a small silver key topped with a little silver skull was all it was. *'That may come in handy,'* I thought as I slipped it back into place and felt the magic glove snug down to hold it. The enchantments on the gloves and boots were also simple ones - they allowed the wearer to move as silently as a cat, climb like a spider on any surface that would support their weight, and were invulnerable to harm. They were also very thin, being made of black-dyed kidskin. Dyarzi wore them with a silk bodysuit back in her thieving days, but that garment had apparently long since rotted to dust.

I continued searching, opening a cabinet that looked like it might contain clothes. I jumped back, startled by the sight of a strange redheaded female, then realized I was looking at myself in the mirror inside the cabinet. After chuckling at myself for a moment, I stepped back to get a better view. *'Gods, if this woman had come to me in my living days, Dyarzi would have had fierce competition for my heart,'* I thought. I ran my hands over myself to reassure myself that the body was indeed mine, and found it was a strange sensation. The appearance needed alteration, though, as I realized that any enemies this half-elf woman once had would recognize her and believe I was she.

I took up my staff again, drawing down its reserves for a spell of alteration. First, I tried changing the eyes from blue to green. *'I still resemble her too much,'* I realized, looking at my reflection, and altered the hair from red to jet black and the eyes from green to black. *'Much better,'* I thought - I now looked very much like a Malani elf, those mysterious folk who dwelt deeper under the earth than even the dwarves. Of course, they also had pale white skin - with my more normal complexion, I looked like a half-elf of Malani parentage (as unlikely as that might be). *'So much the better - none will suspect who I really am, or who this body once belonged to,'* I thought. I found Dyarzi's sword, and laid it beside her corpse next to her knife. Though I could use my staff as though it were an extension of my will, using an actual sword was a skill I'd never learned. I looked at the reflection again, and suddenly realized that my staff was incongruous. A shaft of oak capped with the skull of a wolf looked out of place in the hands of the woman I saw in the mirror. In addition, any enemies *I* might have who were still alive (or undead) might remember me by it.

I focused my will, and molded my staff's physical form until the wolf skull was absorbed into the wood,

then altering the texture and color of the wood itself until it resembled mahogany. It still had the same length and mass, coming up to about my chin and resembling an oaken fighting or traveling staff - but as it was actually my wizard's staff, it was also still a nigh-invulnerable extension of my will, no mere club. Now the woman in the mirror resembled neither the thief Ellysande Northstar nor the mage Eddas Ayar (at least, I didn't *think* I looked like my old self - I distinctly remembered having been male). More, looking at this outfit and my new body wearing it, I doubted that many would be looking at my *face*. All the better, for the moment.

Finding nothing else of use to me, I went back out into the main chamber. Taking up my staff, I slid the stone back into place carefully, so that none would disturb Dyarzi's rest. She had been my closest companion in life, and had greatly helped me even after her death - I could not simply leave her tomb open, as though she was merely an offering for tomb-robbers. Still lacking pockets, I went back to the chest of gold and silver and took out a dozen gold coins. Tucking three coins into each glove and boot and snugging them down tight again so I couldn't lose the coins, I closed the hidden panel that protected the chest and scattered the remainder on the floor nearby as offerings for future grave-robbers. With any luck, they'd find them, find the panel, discover the gold and silver and believe they had obtained the treasure of the tomb (and leave my animuary in peace). A single hallway led to stairs that approached the surface - it was time to leave.

I saw by the footprints in the dust that the five thieves who had entered were indeed skilled - they'd carefully avoided stepping on any of the steps that were the triggers for various traps. The little skeleton key vibrated as I neared each dangerous step, and as I spotted their footprints in the dust, I simply followed them out. At the top of the stairs was the entry-room, which once was sealed. Apparently time and weather had undone the stone, and a shaft of sunlight streamed inside. I doused my own light and carefully approached the opening - no need to let anyone outside look into the dark hole and see a glowing staff approach. I hadn't needed the light since halfway up the stairs anyway - the illumination from the opening shone enough light down below so the half-elven eyes that once were Ellysande's could clearly see the steps. The eyes of elves and half-elves couldn't see in total darkness like those of the dwarves and goblins, but they could see in nearly any other condition where there was at least *some* light. I needn't have worried - a quiet forest of oak trees lay before me, with no sign that Ellysande's former companions were anywhere around.

I clambered out the hole, then listened carefully - only the chirping of birds disturbed the stillness. '*Good. Time to seal my tomb,*' I thought. I knelt and rested, building up my body's strength. I already knew my body wasn't used to real sorcery, and I couldn't afford to lose consciousness during a summoning - I'd die. When I felt I was ready, I drew a circle on the ground with my staff and chanted the words to the spell of abjurement. Seeing my protective circle was in place, I again rested for several minutes before beginning the summoning.

The earth before me shifted, and from it arose a vaguely humanoid being made of stone and grassy dirt.

He was about twice as tall as I, and very broad. *"Who calls?"* the earth-elemental growled in his own language, his voice the deep, gravelly rumble common to his kind.

"I, Eddas Ayar. I need your service," I said in the same tongue (my ring of translation allowing this feat), and began to focus my mind for the battle of wills that would shortly follow.

"You are Eddas Ayar?" he asked, not bothering to struggle against me.

"Yes," I replied simply, my mind focused in case this was merely a trick to throw me off-guard and allow him to win our contest of wills.

"Forgive me, earth-friend. I didn't recognize you in that guise. What can I do for you?" the elemental asked.

I raised an eyebrow. *"You will help willingly?"* I asked, amazed.

"Of course. You are an earth-friend, and Grome, Lord of Earth, commands it."

I shook my head. I knew I was safe within my protective circle, but this was a result I hadn't expected. *"You'll have to forgive me. I've just recently awakened to this body, and I find my memories are a bit scattered. I do not remember becoming an earth-friend, nor how I did so. I only know I needed my tomb behind you sealed against intrusion, and that only an earth elemental could do the job properly."*

"I see. The story is a long one, earth-friend. Can you hold the summoning long enough that I may tell you?"

"I'm afraid not - this body is weak and unused to sorcery. I only recently possessed it."

"Then I will have to simply say that you are a friend of the elements. Not merely earth-friend, but friend of fire, water and air, as well. You earned this honor, the only mortal who holds this title. I am pleased to see you returned from the Void, and shall spread the news that you live again. Perhaps you'll come to visit our plane again some day."

"I think I shall do that, friend. Now, can you help me with my tomb?"

"Gladly," he replied, and sank back into the earth again. After a few moments, the hole in the hillside closed, and was covered with grass - it was completely invisible. By the time he rose from the earth again, I found I was bathed in sweat and gasping with the effort of keeping him on the material plane. "I see you are exhausted. I thank you for holding me long enough to say farewell, friend."

"Farewell," I gasped, and dropped the summoning. The earth elemental faded, and finally vanished. I rose to my knees long enough to draw a second circle of abjuration, setting it to abjure predatory animals, then collapsed.

Chapter Two

"Lo, in times of tribulation, I will send my raven among you, to pluck out the eyes of your enemies, and so render them helpless before you. Such is my promise to you, my faithful ones."

- The Holy Tome of Yorindar, Chapter 3, Verses 27-28.

When I awoke again, it was approaching sunset. I was too exhausted to cast a spell to conjure food and drink, and too exhausted to hunt - not to mention unequipped for it. The shade of the towering oaks combined with my ring of adaptation had protected me from much of the sun, but I found I was thirsty as well. Sitting up and gripping my staff again, I pondered my alternatives. It seemed I had no choice - I drew the last of the reserves of strength I'd placed in the staff, then chanted a spell of conjuration. A wooden bowl of oatmeal and a wooden pitcher of water appeared, and I nearly swooned again. My new body was totally unused to the demands of sorcery, and I firmly fixed the thought in my mind that this would have to be changed.

After eating the food and drinking the water, I felt a little better. I meditated for half an hour to bring my reserves back up, then picked up the empty bowl and pitcher and moved under the shade of a nearby tree. Using my staff as a digging stick, I cleared out a spot in the ground to start a fire. Dropping the bowl and pitcher in, I sparked them alight with a simple cantrip. Once they were cheerily burning, I cast about for more dry wood to place upon the fire. Shortly, I had a small stock of wood that should last through the night, and had a warming blaze going. My ring of adaptation allowed me to ignore the cold of the

night, and certainly a wolf probably wouldn't be able to harm me through my ring of protection, but somehow the notion of sitting alone in the dark in an unfamiliar forest without even a cheering campfire seemed quite unappealing. Besides, only an idiot relies completely on an armor spell to save their life. After laying a simple circle of abjuration set to repel insects around both me and the fire, I leaned up against the tree to spend the night recuperating.

As night fell, I mused upon the humor of the situation. I remembered the battle scenes on my sarcophagus, and knew that I had fought most of those battles. An age ago, I had laid waste to armies. I could bend an iron poker in my bare hands. Now, I was exhausted after only a few incantations. Of course, my previous body had been that of a mage, one with the *Talent*. *Mana* had been flowing through me since before I was born, and constant practice and use of the *Talent* to manipulate the *Mana* that flowed through me and the rest of the universe infused me with a strength beyond my appearance. This body I had now, however, was that of a mundane, and probably had never even used an ensorcelled item. It had no experience at mastering the flow of *Mana*, and the strain was too much for it. It wasn't that it was female, for gender was irrelevant to power. No, it was simply that it was a mundane. To possess a mundane whose endurance would have matched mine, I'd have had to possess a mighty warrior, with thews like rippling pythons and fists like ham-hocks. Instead, I'd gotten a female half-elf of no remarkable physical prowess. *'Well, better than being dead,'* I thought. The body seemed agile and swift, the senses seemed very sharp and its appearance was quite beautiful, so that would have to do.

My lack of memory was irritating, however. I'd hoped I'd recall more of myself by now, and yet I had not. Certainly I remembered many things - for instance, I could remember my system of measurement. A cubit was a measure from the tip of the elbow to the tip of the middle finger, a distance about four and a half hands wide. A pace was four cubits long. A league was four thousand cubits or a thousand paces long. For dry weight, a stone was the basis of measure, with smaller divisions of pounds, ounces and grains. A stone was about fourteen pounds, the average man weighing about eleven to twelve stone. For the life of me, however, I couldn't remember *where* I'd learned all these measurements.

It dawned on me that I might have possessed a body that was nearly dead when I did so - if Ellysande's companions dropped her head-first through the hole, her spirit might have flown as she cracked her skull on the stone floor below. This would have left me an easy opening to enter, and my strength of will had forced the body to live where hers could not do so. It would explain much - as a possessing spirit, my own mind could only function through a living brain, and this brain might be damaged. I swore loudly and profanely, and was again surprised to hear a feminine voice. *'Well, like it or not, this is my body now. I'll have to make the best of it,'* I thought.

"Such foul language from such a pretty mouth." a male voice called from my left, my ring of translation again allowing understanding.

I turned to look, and spotted a man standing in the darkness - apparently, either magic or a high degree of skill at stealth had allowed him to approach without my sharp ears detecting him. I realized I was too weak to fight, and decided to simply sit there - I just gripped my staff and waited.

"What, no words of welcome? No words of greeting or introduction?" he called in friendliness.

I simply stared at him and waited. If he came close enough, I might be able to smash his skull with my staff - it was no mere shaft of wood, after all. The man was dressed all in green, and his hood partially concealed his face.

"Come now, my dear. I mean you no harm." the man said, not stepping closer.

I thought about answering him, but decided to remain silent.

"I see. Well, perhaps it's best I introduce myself, then. I am called Darian Underwood. I've been watching you for the better part of a day, now. I saw you come out of the earth, summon that earth elemental, have it seal that hole, then I watched you release it and collapse afterwards. I saw you wake up later, summon food and drink, and sway afterwards like you were about to swoon. You look very hungry, my dear. You know, if I had wanted to do something to you, I could have done so while you were unconscious. I really don't mean you any harm at all, my dear."

'Huh! 'My dear' indeed! I never realized how demeaning that was until just now, having had it said to me by a stranger. How do women put up with men's asinine behaviors?' I wondered.

"Ah, I see by your expression that I have either offended you or you are afraid of me. Perhaps if you spoke with me, you'd understand I'm completely harmless."

"Harmless as a wolf," I replied.

Darian shook his head. "I have never touched a woman save by her permission."

"You might have restrained yourself because you feared what sorceries I may have had prepared to flay the flesh from your bones, triggered simply by your touch."

"Perhaps, but I might also have restrained myself because I'm a man of honor."

I snorted. "A man of honor who addresses a strange woman as he would the love of his life? I doubt it." I was trying to muster what little strength I had hoarded - perhaps a blast of lightning, even weakened, would bring him down should he move in suddenly. I did *not* like the idea of being raped, and was well aware that I was simply too tired to resist him. I may be in a woman's body, but I still had the soul of a man - I found that the thought of even being *considered* as a sexual interest by another man disgusted me.

"You're right, I'm sorry. It's just that as I watched you, I began to like you. You're very beautiful, you know," he replied, apparently looking me over. The whole experience made me ill.

"If I'd had a cloak, I'd have worn it instead. This was all I had. Wearing it has nothing to do with whether or not I'm interested in you - and trust me, I'm not. The thought of lying with you or any other man makes me ill."

Darian nodded. "I understand. I know another woman who's like that. May I approach your fire?"

"It seems I can do little to stop you, other than warn you that if you try to touch me I'll do my damndest to kill you."

"And I'm sure you'd probably succeed. Summoning an elemental is no mean feat, as I understand it," he

replied, stepping closer.

"Walk slowly, keep your hands where I can see them," I warned. Darian held his hands away from his body as he approached. I could see he had a bowcase and quiver on his back, and a shortsword and dagger at his hip. He was wearing a broadbelt, and had a large pouch on the right side. He also had a waterskin, and the sight of it made me realize I was thirsty again. I suppressed it with an effort. Darian slipped off his bowcase, and I saw that the case and quiver were one and the same. He set it carefully down, then sat down beside it near the fire. He had brown hair and blue eyes, and I could see his gaze roaming all over me. It did *not* make me feel comfortable - in fact, it made me feel distinctly *un* comfortable. "Stop that!" I snapped.

"What?"

"You're looking at me like I was a piece of meat and you were a starving dog. I told you - I didn't have anything else to wear."

He shrugged. "Sorry," he said, and focused his gaze on the fire.

I carefully studied him. He didn't appear to be wearing armor, but that didn't mean anything - he could have a chain shirt under that tunic. I realized that if he grappled me, my staff would be less useful. I quietly reached down to my boot and slipped the knife into my hand, hiding it behind my leg. Its ensorceled edge would do about as much damage as a shortsword despite its small size, though my staff could do more. He looked up after a few more moments. "Would it help if I gave you my cloak?" he asked.

"Why?" I asked in return.

"Because I want you to understand I truly mean you no harm."

"Alright."

He untied his cloak at the neck and slipped it off his shoulders, handing it to me. I took it with my free hand and draped it over me like a blanket. With his cloak off, I could see he *was* wearing a chain shirt under his tunic. I'd have to go for his throat - his chain might turn my blade. "Better?" he asked.

"If you're asking if I feel more comfortable around you, the answer is no. If you're asking if I feel better covered up against your eyes, the answer is yes."

Darian nodded again. "I understand - like I said, I know another woman like you."

"I doubt that sincerely," I replied with a snort. *'I really doubt this man has ever met a woman possessed by the spirit of a dead male sorcerer ,'* I thought.

"Do you mind if I ask you a question?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yes, in fact I *do* mind," I replied, knowing he was going to ask some rather pointed questions about my origins I didn't want revealed.

"Well, what if we played the Question Game to pass the time until dawn? I have food and drink I can share with you, if you'd like. I'm sure you're probably quite hungry."

'That I can handle,' I thought. "What food do you have?"

"Smoked meat. Here," he said, and pulled two dark brown slabs of jerky from his belt-pouch. I felt them as I took them from him - they were hard as boiled leather. I lifted up my knife from underneath the cloak and cut off a bite-sized piece with ease, like cutting paper. He wasn't surprised to see the knife, but his eyes widened when he saw how easily it cut. *'Good. Maybe you'll keep your hands to yourself until I have enough strength to blast you,'* I thought. He passed over his waterskin, and I popped the meat

into my mouth along with a swallow of water to soften it. "Keep it for now," he said when I handed it back. I set it beside me.

"Well, you challenged. Ask your first question."

Darian nodded. "I saw four men and one woman go into that hole two days ago. Yesterday, the four men came out, their sacks bulging. The woman did not. Now you come out, and I watched you do sorcery that the woman who went in didn't seem capable of - she looked like nothing more than a common pickpocket. May I ask what happened to the woman that went in there?"

I thought about my answer for a minute or two, and realized I could blend the truth with a bit of 'creative fiction' to explain myself. "I am she. The woman you saw gathered her companions and went in to raid a tomb. There was little booty to be found, and her companions grew angry. They ripped her clothes to shreds stripping her, then raped her and then left her for dead. When I awoke, I found I had no clothes to wear but that which you saw, which I found in the tomb of a dead courtesan. This was all that remained in her tomb, as all her other clothes had rotted to dust. I sealed the tomb to protect the courtesan, who seems to be the only person who has helped me that I can remember - and she apparently has been dead quite some time. I have used sorcery to alter my appearance because I intend to hunt those men down and kill them," I said. *'An artful blending of truth and fiction. In fact, nearly all of it is absolutely true,'* I thought, very pleased with myself.

Darian's face grew enraged. "I can see why you'd be repulsed at the idea of a man touching you. I wouldn't blame you if you never wanted to be touched by a man again. I swear on my honor I'll help you find them and kill them," he said, then controlled himself with an obvious effort of will. "It's your turn," he said, looking into the fire.

I was confused for a moment, then remembered we were supposed to be playing the Question Game. Its origins were lost in antiquity, but the rules were simple. Each player exchanged questions until one player was unable or unwilling to answer three questions - the other player then won. It was a simple game, and was often used as a way of social interaction in casual environments, as at a party or pub. I didn't know how long I'd been in the tomb, but apparently it was still being played. I sliced off another piece of meat, and chewed it as I spoke. "Alright, here's my question: I know your name is Darian Underwood, but who is that?"

Darian shook his head. "I can only give you a partial answer on that. All I can say is that I'm a simple

hunter. I wasn't always a hunter, but that's what I am now. The rest, I cannot say. I'm afraid that's one against me."

'Interesting. A geas? Perhaps he doesn't answer because his origins are embarrassing - or criminal? Very interesting,' I thought. "Ask your next question."

"Alright. What's your name?"

'Hmm. Can't tell him the truth, and I don't think I should use the name of the former owner of this body,' I thought. "My head struck the stones in the floor of the tomb when they threw me down. I simply cannot remember what my name is, or much of anything beyond a few days ago. I'm afraid we're even, now."

His face again screwed up in an expression of outrage, and he had to struggle to master his emotions. "They will definitely die in pain," he finally said.

"My turn, I believe. Is the reason you cannot tell me more about yourself because of honor or sorcery?"

Darian struggled for a few seconds, trying to speak. Finally, he said "Not honor," and seemed to gasp with the effort of saying even that little.

'Ah, I see. He's not only been geased, he can't even speak about the geas. Very interesting ,' I thought. "Rest a few moments before you ask your question - fighting a geas can be very painful and exhausting," I said, and cut off some more of the meat. He nodded, smiling slightly, and waited till he had recovered his breath before he spoke again.

"Thank you. Hmm. With you not remembering much past a few days ago, I can't think of many questions I could ask you that you'd remember the answers to... Well, how about this: How good a mage are you?"

I shrugged. "Well, I don't have much endurance, but I'm probably the best you'll see in a long time," I replied truthfully, then spoke again. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I have a g- Because I have a g-g-" he tried to reply, and couldn't - the pain of the geas was just too much, and caused his face to grimace in agony each time he tried to explain it.

"I understand. You've been geased - and it appears to be a very well-laid geas, too."

He nodded, unable to speak for a moment. "I'm afraid that's a second one against me - I couldn't answer," he said once he'd recovered his breath.

I shook my head. "No, it's not. I understood your answer. I am a mage, after all. It's your turn," I replied, and cut off some more of the meat. "Ask me your question."

"Can you lift it?"

"Possibly. I'm a little too tired right now, though - lifting a geas like yours is no simple task." He nodded. I couldn't think of anything to ask him - much of what I was interested in appeared to be concealed by his geas. I shrugged, and asked a simple one. "Will you help me find the four men I'm looking for?"

He nodded. "And kill them, too. For what they did to you, they deserve to die."

"For that, I'll gladly try to lift your geas," I said, but he shook his head.

"No. I'm helping you because I think what they did is despicable, not because I want you to help me."

'He really is a man of honor. Either that, or he's trying to get on my good side,' I thought - I was still wary of the look he'd given me earlier. "Perhaps we should call off the rest of the game then. I can't remember enough to answer many of your questions, and you can't speak enough to answer many of mine. I think the game has served its purpose, anyway - I've gotten to know you a bit better, as you've gotten to know me."

Darian nodded. "I've heard that sometimes when memory is lost to a blow to the head, it sometimes comes back over the course of time. Maybe we'll take this game up then."

I shrugged again. "Maybe. I don't know. I *do* know that I'll need to rest before I can even begin to help you, and I can't sleep if I'm worried about what might happen while I'm sleeping," I said, and I sheathed my knife and stood. I handed him his cloak. "Here. I've sorcery that protects me from the cold," I said, and as he took the cloak and again goggled at my body, I used the boots and gloves to clamber up the tree easily. Laying myself down in a notch between two branches, I relaxed. No matter *how* stealthy he was, I was sure he couldn't climb this tree without waking me.

"You've left your staff here. Shall I toss it up to you?" he called from below. I held out my hand and my staff flashed to my fist - it *was* an extension of my will, not just a simple shaft of wood. "Never mind," he said. I glanced down, seeing him wrap himself in his cloak and sit with his back against the tree.

'I appear to have an ally,' I thought, and laid back to sleep.

Chapter Three

"In the beginning, there was nothing, only the Creator. The Creator did expand their WILL, and from the WILL, the infinite, formless Void did spring. The Creator did gaze upon the Void, and see it's endless nothingness. Then did the Creator speak the WORD, and from the WORD, some of the Void took form. The universe in all it's vastness and glory sprang forth fully formed from the Void, and the gods in all their power and wisdom did awaken, and thenceforth did overlook the universe, in keeping with it's laws and covenants. Yet did the Void remain, for it was infinite, and the immense universe that sprang from it was yet finite, and infinity reduced by the finite remains infinity, just as the ocean reduced by scooping out a teacup of water remains the ocean."

- *The Holy Tome of Yorindar, Chapter 1, Verses 1-6.*

I awoke to the smell of cooking meat and a pressure in my bladder. I looked down, and saw that Darian was roasting two rabbits over the fire. *'Damn, that smells good,'* I thought, and my stomach began growling. Darian looked up at the noise (it was surprisingly loud), and grinned. *'Oh, really?'* I thought. I

activated the ring on my right index finger and rolled out of the tree. He looked up in shock, then blinked in amazement as I floated to the ground. He looked down at me sheepishly for a moment - he was fully a head taller than I.

"Sorry - I thought you were going to fall. I forgot you were a sorceress," he said.

"Well, I'm also a sorceress who has to pee," I said, and walked away to go behind a tree several dozen paces distant. It suddenly dawned on me what I must look like from behind dressed as I am, and I glanced behind me. Sure enough, he was staring at my buttocks, his eyes wide. "Stop that, or by the gods I'll turn you into a slug and stomp you flat!" I ordered. I wasn't pleased with the feminine little yelp that came out of my throat, but he seemed to be intimidated by it.

"Sorry," he said, and turned his gaze to the fire again.

I walked away behind the tree, and reached for my groin. *'Damn, I forgot - women have to do it differently,'* I realized, and unhooked the chain that ran between my buttocks and lifted the triangle of mail out of the way as I squatted. *'Gods, this is embarrassing. Why couldn't they have jammed one of the men down the hole?'* I thought to myself with a repressed groan. It's not like I had any choice myself - when my soul is in my animuary, I'm not really conscious. It's like a dreamless sleep, and the whole possession attempt is a subconscious reflex, like a dreamer trying to awaken.

When I was through, I realized I didn't have anything to wipe with - and I couldn't simply shake myself as I had before. *'What do women do in this situation?'* I wondered. A squirrel buck chattered at me, as though laughing. *'Oh really?'* I thought, and gestured at it, dominating the squirrel's tiny mind with a short incantation. I crooked a finger at it, and it bounded over to me helplessly. Grabbing the little rodent, I used its soft, fluffy tail. I then stood and tossed the beast away, dropping the spell. It rolled to its feet and screamed its outrage in a stream of squirrel chatter as it tried to clean its soiled tail. I raised my hand as though to gesture again, and it zipped away in fear. *'There, you little pest. Laugh at me, will you?'* I thought at its retreating form, and hooked the chain back up. I realized to get a proper fit again and to cover my vulva and anus, I'd have to pull the chain tight between my buttocks. *'How did Dyarzi wear this? I mean, I didn't notice when I was so tired yesterday, but today, I find having this garment drawn up between my buttocks very distracting. Gods, that woman must have loved me dearly to put up with this ,'* I thought. As I came around the tree again and walked back over to the fire, Darian again goggled at me briefly as he watched my breasts sway while I walked. I gave him a stern look and he looked back to the rabbits again. I realized I was *not* enjoying being a woman at all, especially not a young, nubile half-elf. Now that the sun was up and Darian could see me clearly, I was a bit much for him to ignore. As such, just being around him was making me distinctly uncomfortable. I wished I could make the major alterations to this body necessary to turn it into a man, but that simply couldn't be done at the

moment. Minor changes in the body were nothing - the spell I had used to alter the coloration of this body's hair and eyes I had originally learned simply because I hadn't wanted my beard to go gray. Altering this body's gender, however, was a spell that would require some research, and this body *hardly* had the strength to attempt sorcery of that power and survive. No, I was a black-haired, black-eyed, voluptuous, nubile half-elf maiden, and I was stuck with it for the moment.

"I've made breakfast for you," Darian said lamely, trying to make up for having stared.

"Thanks," I replied, and sat down. I caught myself before I managed to get into a half-lotus position - I realized just exactly how *that* would look just in time - and simply sat on my heels. This didn't help much, but at least I wasn't spreading my legs. '*Gods, how do women survive?*' I wondered. It dawned on me why women often wore long dresses - so that they could sit without looking like they were spreading their legs to every man that passed by. I could tell my presence in daylight was driving Darian mad. He didn't dare look at me, for fear of offending me. At the same time, he couldn't help himself. I knew a spell of invisibility, but this body couldn't possibly hold it longer than a minute or two before passing out. In my previous life, I'd never really worried about being invisible - in fact, being invisible on a battlefield is stupid, since your own allies won't know where you are anymore than the enemy will. '*Wait a minute! I've just remembered something!*' I thought, and grinned broadly.

"What? What is it?" Darian asked, seeing my face.

"I just remembered a little bit of what life was like before I lost my memory. Nothing important, but I think that means my memories will eventually return," I replied, deciding not to tell him I definitely remembered being in many different battles and leveling entire companies of men with fiery explosions of lava.

"That's wonderful. Even the smallest details are important, though. Can you tell me what it was?" he asked, trying to talk to me without staring at my breasts. I looked him over - he was a good man, a man that if I'd met in my living days I'd have gladly called a friend. I could see he was struggling not to stare *not* because he feared my sorcery, but because he really *was* a man of honor.

"It's nothing, a trifle. Look, I can see that trying to keep your eyes off of me is killing you. I'm sorry I said you couldn't look at me. You can look, I understand you can't help it. Even so, please keep in mind that I have *absolutely* no desire to be touched by you or any other man. Just the thought of it makes me physically sick. And try not to have that look you had the other night, where you look at me like a hungry

dog gazes at a cut of meat. If you must look, please be discreet - it really bothers me. As soon as I can, I'll get something to wear that reveals significantly less. For now, I'll try to understand you looking if you'll try not to stare, alright?"

Darian gazed at my breasts, his blue eyes showing nothing but lust. I immediately regretted trying to relieve some of the pressure on him, as his gaze made me feel nauseous. He then suddenly wrenched his gaze away and turned his back to me. "No, absolutely not. I can see it makes you uncomfortable, and you've already explained that you have no interest in men. I told you - I've never touched a woman without her permission. For you, dressed as you are, even my gaze is like a touch. It sickens you. You've been raped, an assault against you that you can't possibly ignore or forgive. My staring at you makes you remember that, and hurts you. I won't do it."

I stared at the back of his head for a while, impressed by his sense of honor. I'd met only a few men of his caliber in my living days, and was proud to count myself among their friends and allies. *'Damn, what do I do? If he's a good hunter, I'll need him to help me track down my tomb-robbers. Even so, I can't have him constantly distracted by me, and I don't think we can take a few weeks out to kill enough game and tan their hides so I'll have more respectable clothing. What in the hell do I do?'*

I thought about it, and realized that having men stare at me was going to happen no matter *how* I was dressed, unless I wore so many layers and skirts that I couldn't move. I couldn't remember much of my previous life, but it seemed to me that the sorceresses I knew in my living days all wore loose, light clothing so they could gesture freely (and run, if necessary). I remembered that I myself always gave them a leer behind their backs - I simply couldn't help it. No, men staring at me was just something I'd have to get used to. Besides, if they saw my beauty, maybe they'd hesitate in attacking - that split-second of hesitation could give me the edge I need to kill an opponent with a spell, a stroke of my staff or a thrust with my knife. As uncomfortable as it made me, telling Darian he couldn't look at me was like telling him he couldn't breathe - he couldn't hold his breath forever.

"Darian, it's alright. You can look, I'm giving you my permission. You've proven you're a man of honor, and besides - maybe if you aren't prohibited from looking at me, you'll get used to me until I can get something that conceals a little more. Just don't touch me, okay?"

He turned back to me. "You mean it? You don't mind?"

"Of *course* I mind. Just the thought of it makes me *very* uncomfortable. Even so, I understand it's natural,

and you can't help it. If you're going to be helping me track down those four men, you can't do it if you're always staring at me. For my part, I'll try not to do things that will distract you too much," I replied. *'Which means no stretching, no deep sighs that move the breasts around, no walking in front of him so he watches my buttocks bounce, no scratching the itch between my thighs that's killing me right now, no nothing. Just kneel here and eat quietly and hope the muscles in my thighs don't cramp any more than they already are,'* I thought to myself. I suddenly realized just exactly what women had to put up with, and I vowed that if I ever became a man again, I'd treat them completely differently.

"Well, I appreciate that, um, hey - I still don't know your name. Do you remember it yet?" he asked, his eyes showing concern.

I shook my head. "No, I don't. Why don't you give me one?"

He thought about it as he looked me over for several minutes. His gaze made me feel uncomfortable again - it just felt nauseating to be thought of as an object of sexual desire by a man. If I was in my old body and saw a man look at me like that, I'd probably have killed him in disgust. Darian spotted my reaction and turned away, then resumed thinking as he ate his rabbit. I finished my own, then took a long drink from his waterskin. Finally, Darian shook his head. "I simply can't think of a name that's appropriate. If it's alright with you, for now I'll just call you Sorceress. Eventually you'll remember your real name, and then we'll use it instead," he said at last.

"That's fine, Sorceress it is. Now, shall we find the four men I'm looking for?"

He stood, turned to me and grinned as he held out his hand. "Certainly, Sorceress," he replied. I stared at his hand for a couple of seconds, and finally realized he was offering to help me up. My hesitation was too long, though - his face suddenly changed to an expression of embarrassment, and he turned away again. "Sorry, I forgot you didn't want to be touched."

"That's alright," I lied. *'Damn, I could have used a hand up, too. My thighs are cramping from kneeling as demurely as I could,'* I thought, and managed to stifle a groan as I regained my feet. At least my joints didn't crackle and pop as I stood - this body was much younger and healthier than my old one had been, perhaps no more than twenty-three.

Darian spent half an hour extinguishing the fire and erasing all traces that we were here - shortly, I couldn't tell that there had been a campsite here at all. *'All the better. This hides my tomb even more effectively,'* I thought. He then began walking about around the area in wide circles. Finally, he waved to me. "Here, Sorceress. I've found their trail," he called.

I came over and began following him. I couldn't see what he was looking at until finally he pointed out a heel-print. *'This man is truly skilled,'* I thought, watching him work. Shortly, he began taking long strides as he followed the trail, and I found my shorter legs couldn't keep up without having to trot. *'I'm glad I'm behind him - he'd never be able to watch the trail with my body jiggling before his eyes,'* I thought. At first, it wasn't that difficult - I could tell by the feel of my new muscles that this body was used to sprinting away from danger, and a slow trot wasn't going to be much of a problem. Unfortunately, after half an hour of trotting behind Darian, my breasts began to hurt along the top from the bouncing they were getting.

'Gods, is there nothing about being a woman that's enjoyable? They can't even run without feeling uncomfortable. How do they do anything?' I wondered. I couldn't just hold them up with my hands - Darian was sure to turn around and see *that*. I reached behind me to the clasp that held the chain that passed around my back, tightening the top up two links. Pressed tightly against my chest, the soreness in my breasts eased eventually. As Darian continued his easy, long-legged stride, his eyes glancing downwards to continue following the trail while I trotted along behind him, I slowly began to feel miserable.

'Gods, at first I thought being a woman would be alright, perhaps even kind of fun. I even joked to myself that I wouldn't need to look for companionship any farther than myself. I certainly thought it was better than being dead, anyway. Now, I'm wondering if I shouldn't just turn back to my tomb, restore my rings and knife to my sarcophagus and slit my throat with a sharp rock,' I thought. I looked up to the sky for a moment. *'Dyarzi, wherever you are, forgive me if I ever took you for granted, even for a moment. Your life was an endless hell,'* I thought heavenward, and turned my gaze back to the trail. Of course, she'd had her entire life to get used to this - I'd only had the last day or so.

My legs started to wear out, and to cramp up from the constant running. I tried to distract myself by thinking of Dyarzi. She *seemed* happy most of the time. Being a woman didn't seem to bother her, and the everyday things they put up with apparently weren't a problem for her. *'Maybe it's just because I'm not used to it. After all, I spent my previous lifetime as a man, and mentally I still am a man. Why, the only times I ever remember Dyarzi being uncomfortable or unhappy with being a woman were... Oh, no!'*

I staggered to a stop, exhausted and miserable. Darian stopped, and turned to look back at me. I placed my hands on my knees, heedless of how it looked to him, and struggled to regain my breath. "Are you alright?" he asked.

"Fine. Just tired," I gasped, hating the sound of the gasping woman's voice in my ears. My feet were sore from running in the thin boots, my legs were cramping, my breath was coming only in gasps, I was flushed and sweaty, and I was totally and completely miserable because I realized that sometime in the next few weeks, I'd have my first menses. Half-elf females weren't like elven females who only come into heat in the spring - half-elf females had the same monthly cycle as human females. *'Maybe I should just slit my throat now, and save myself the trouble later.'*

"Couldn't you use your magic and just fly along?"

I shook my head. "Takes the same amount of effort to fly as to walk. Magic only allows three-dimensional movement - the effort you have to provide yourself," I gasped, thinking of my ring of flight. With my ring, I wouldn't have to maintain the spell and would only have to make the effort to move. Even so, I'd still get tired.

I straightened up, and saw Darian looking at me with concern. "Well, we can't spend too much time here. We've got to make as much distance as we can before dark."

I nodded, then remembered a transportation spell I knew that *didn't* take physical effort. "Wait, I've got an idea," I replied, and spent a few more minutes regaining my breath. When I had recovered, I gestured, incanting the words of the Spell of the Invisible Steed. Shortly, the beast appeared, and I was gasping from the effort of having summoned it. *I* could see it, as I was the summoner, but to Darian it was nothing more than four dishpan-sized hoof-impressions that appeared in the grass. To me, the creature looked like a ridiculous parody of a horse - a large, squat animal summoned from its home dimension, it resembled a cross between a draft-horse and a giant child's toy.

Once I regained my breath, I started to just step into the stirrup and swing my leg over its back, then I realized just what *that* would look like to Darian - a near-naked woman with her legs spread wide floating in the air. As the saddle was merely a part of the steed's invisible body, I commanded the steed to mold the saddle into a side-saddle for me. It did so, and I mounted. "What is that?" Darian asked,

seeing me sit on air.

"An invisible steed, a summoned beast. It can carry me effortlessly, and will remain for a day. Let's go."

Darian nodded, and returned to his ground-devouring stride. The invisible steed kept up with him easily at a walk. The 'Steed, being as it was a bit smarter than an actual horse, eventually figured out that I was trying to follow Darian. Once it finally did, I didn't have to control it anymore, and it simply walked behind him. I tried to relax, regaining some of my strength as I rode. Darian continued following the trail all morning, glancing about him as he kept an eye on signs he spotted on the ground that were completely invisible to me. We passed over a patch of bare dirt where I spotted a few footprints, but other than that, he seemed to be reading bent blades of grass and disturbed stones. "They appear to be heading towards Greenhaven - I think we can catch them before tomorrow evening, if we can keep up this pace," he called at about mid-day.

"That sounds right - I seem to remember something about a town called Greenhaven," I replied, mentally kicking myself for not mentioning it earlier. Of course, I knew nothing of the local geography anymore - the mountains and forests appeared to be the same, but I was certain their names had changed. Darian's language was similar to mine, but different enough so that I needed the translation ring to understand him. I guessed his culture was a descendant of mine - though I had little idea what my own culture was like.

"Do you remember having come from Greenhaven?"

"Actually, no. I can't remember much of anything before awakening in the tomb. I don't even know the name of the country we're in," I replied truthfully.

"Well, the name of the country is Arcadia. Ring any bells?" he asked, looking at the ground.

"No, I'm afraid not."

"Hmm. Well, we're in the Myrmidon Forest, at the western foothills of the Granite Mountains. We're

headed west, towards Greenhaven. Greenhaven's a fairly large city - maybe thirty thousand people. It lies at the edge of the Bright Sea, and the Silver River passes by it and empties into the sea. Anything yet?"

"No, though the Granite Mountains does sound a little familiar. Don't dwarves live there?" I asked, remembering a fragment of information.

"Yes, the whole of the Granite Mountains belongs to the Dwarves, though the Goblin-races are always fighting them for possession of various parts of it. Arcadia is bordered by the Granite Mountains on the east, the Bright Sea on the west, the Black Forest and the Black River to the south, and the Hyperborean Wastes to the north. The Black River marks the edge of Larinia, a nation which split off from Arcadia about three hundred years ago after a civil war. On the other side of the Granite mountains and bordering Larinia is the elf-lands, which stretch all the way from the mountains to the Inland Sea, of which little is known. Many leagues across the Bright Sea is another human nation called Vilandia, and there's a distant nation called Palome even farther away than it. Caravans come from beyond the inland sea from a desert nation called Mysantia, but I know little of it. There's also another nation far to the northeast called *Schnee-Vurste*, but all I know of it is that it snows most of the year there. Does any of that sound familiar?"

'Part of that sounded very familiar ,' I thought, and spoke up. "Yes. Wasn't there a kingdom of some kind called Hyperborea?"

"Yes, but they became involved in a terrible war about fifteen, sixteen centuries ago and were destroyed. Only dragons, giants and other monsters live there now. The legends say that the survivors fled south and founded Arcadia."

'Definitely sounds familiar. I think my living days may have been spent in that kingdom - the name has a 'home' ring to it. That would make me at least fifteen or sixteen centuries old - probably older. No wonder the language has changed ,' I thought. I concentrated on it, but nothing specific came to mind. "Well, some of that sounds familiar, like I've heard it before."

"Good. That means your memory is slowly returning, Sorceress. In time, you'll probably remember everything," he said, glancing at the ground again.

'I sure as hell hope so,' I thought grimly.

Darian slowed, and I rode up next to him. "What is it?" I asked, seeing his face.

"Goblins. Raiding party, I think. Off in the trees to the left, there," he replied quietly.

I looked, and the sharp half-elven eyes I'd appropriated spotted short, black-haired, pointy-eared humanoid forms hiding in the bushes. "They've got bows. Stand next to me," I said, and began a spell.

Two goblins suddenly rose up, their small bows drawn. I could see their faces twisted in a grimace of glee at launching the first attack of their ambush, and their skin gleamed from the oily green pigment they'd applied to conceal themselves. *'Interesting. Goblins still paint their skin, even after all this time,'* I thought. I finished the spell with a flourish just as they fired. "Don't move!" I called. Darian started to try to dodge, but halted at my words. The two arrows the goblins fired struck the edge of my spell's effect, and bounced back in the direction they came from. Two short cries resulted, and the goblins lay still. "A spell that reflects missiles - the more accurately they shoot at you, the more accurately the arrows are reflected. Watch my back, I'll try to handle these pests," I said. Darian walked around the steed, feeling its invisible sides with his hand. It didn't move, of course - it wasn't a real horse, and was aware that nothing on this plane of existence could damage it. The goblins, after recovering from their surprise and realizing their arrows were useless, drew their knives and charged. I spotted six on my side, so I uttered the words to one of the more deadly spells I knew and thrust my hand out at them.

There was a thunderous detonation, and the goblins were enveloped in the flare of an enormous ball of lightning that erupted in their midst. Their scorched and blasted remains pattered back down to the ground as I swayed in the saddle. I gasped with the effort of having cast the spell, and turned to look over my shoulder at the thrum of a bowstring.

Darian was firing his longbow at six goblins that charged from my right, the spell not affecting him - it only reflected missiles fired from outside its radius. Unfortunately, goblins are faster than the swiftest elf and only as large as a human child - they dodged his shots easily. "Duck," I called, and began my next spell. Darian did so, and I swept my hand horizontally. A lance of fire from my fingertips swept across the goblins, immolating them and sending them to the ground writhing and screaming. In a few seconds, they were still. I swayed in the saddle, nearly faint with the effort.

"We must flee, the forest is ablaze!" Darian called.

I uttered the incantation for a blast of water - useful for not only suppressing rioting crowds but also for extinguishing a blaze. I played the water-stream across the burning grasses and tree trunks for several seconds, then dropped the spell. I felt the blackness of unconsciousness close in, and I struggled to push it back. Through force of will alone, I mastered this frail little body I found myself in. *'I will not pass out!'* I shouted inside my skull, and managed to remain conscious. My heart was fluttering like a caged bird, I was bathed in sweat and my breath came in shallow gasps, but I remained conscious. Darian didn't notice me swaying in the saddle - he only saw the destruction I'd wrought.

'Gods, this body is weak,' I thought sourly, trying to control my labored breathing. Darian gaped at the destruction I'd wrought with two spells that I once could have tossed off with hardly any effort at all.

"Unbelievable," he said at last.

"I'm afraid I'll need to rest for a while. I'm a little too tired to continue at the moment."

"Alright, go ahead and rest under that tree there. I'll check the bodies for anything that may help us along the trip," Darian replied. I led the Steed beneath a large oak, then tried to lift my right leg from the grip of the sidesaddle, and found my trembling muscles lacked the strength to do so. Darian, seeing me slump in the saddle, quickly trotted over. "What's wrong?" he asked, his face a mask of concern.

"I-I'm too weak to dismount without falling," I said, angered and embarrassed.

"Shall I help you?"

"Please," I replied, feeling mortified. Darian reached up, placed his calloused hands about my bare waist, and easily lifted me from the invisible steed. He tried to simply set me on my feet, but I lacked the

strength to stand. He gently lowered me to the ground, then loomed over me for a moment, his face near mine. *'Oh, Gods! He's going to kiss me! I think I may retch!'* I thought, realizing I didn't even have the strength to draw my knife and stab him. He didn't, though - he simply stood up and walked away. I lay there for several minutes, breathing hard and staring at the green, leafy canopy above me. Finally, despite my best efforts to remain awake, I fell asleep.

Chapter Four

"May you live forever."

- *Ancient elvish curse.*

I dreamed I was in my tower, and Dyarzi was with me. I drew her face close to mine, and we kissed long and passionately. *"I love you, Dyarzi,"* I said, stroking her smooth skin.

"I love you, too, Eddas Ayar, Master battle-mage of the Dyclonic Circle," she replied, tugging my beard and laughing.

We coupled with passion and intensity, and in the languorous moments that followed, she rose from the bed and smiled. She then drew away from me, and danced about the bed-chamber. As I watched, it slowly changed into an enormous, shadowy room of pillars, and she danced between the stone columns like a flitting spirit. The room seemed ominous, and I feared for her. *"Where are you going, my love?"* I called. Her laughter echoed after her, and I rose to follow. She danced through a small doorway, and I stepped into the room that lay behind it. Dyarzi smiled at me inside her tomb, then lay down on a bed of stone and placed her head on a marble pillow. She closed her eyes and breathed her last, then her flesh melted away, leaving only bones. *"Dyarzi!"* I called, weeping, but she did not rise again. I knew no spells for raising the dead, and wept at my impotence. *"Dyarzi, please don't be dead. I can't fix that. I can smash an army, I can level a castle, I can summon a roaring demon from the pit of hell, but I can't make you live again. Please don't be dead, Dyarzi, please,"* I begged. She remained silent, her skull grinning at me from her repose in response to some eternal joke beyond my comprehension.

I wept. Dyarzi's soul had gone to the Plane of Shades, to be with her family and friends in the afterlife. Mine was in an animuary, like all the members of the Dyclonic Circle. Our souls would never move on. If we died of old age, our spirits would animate our corpses as a Liche. If we died of accident, disease or foul play, our souls entered our animuary. If it was broken, our souls were destroyed. I would never see her again.

I lived forty-nine more years after Dyarzi's death from an assassin's knife. I managed to live without her, but I never forgot her. In my spare time I searched every tome and grimoire I could find, but never found a way to bring her back to me. As my end approached, I realized I had no desire to spend the rest of eternity as a moldering corpse, a Liche who wandered his tomb in silence and alone, waiting for the

Dyclonic Circle's call to fight their latest battle. I lay myself into my own sarcophagus and closed the lid over myself. Just as the end came upon me and I felt my soul being drawn to my animuary, I saw a brief vision of Dyarzi, happy and carefree in the afterlife. I reached out to her, but the pull of my animuary was stronger. I fell into a dreamless sleep, to awaken in the battered body of a half-elf woman.

"*Dyarzi!*" I yelled, and awakened to the sound of a woman's voice echoing her name. I looked, and saw I was lying on the ground beneath the branches of an oak tree. A man in a green cloak I didn't recognize sat next to me, his face turned down to my own in an expression of concern. "What-where?" I asked, sitting up. My voice sounded strange in my ears, like that of a woman or boy. I felt breasts shift on my chest as I sat up, and I remembered. I was dead, my spirit in repose in my animuary. I'd possessed the dying body of a half-elf woman, and now traveled to slay her rapists, her would-be murderers and the robbers of my tomb. Dyarzi was dead and gone, and had been for many centuries. I was alone, and trapped in the pathetically weak body of a half-elf woman. I struggled not to weep, but the tears still came.

"Sorceress, are you alright now?" Darian asked.

"Yes, I'm fine," I lied, controlling myself with an effort and wiping my tears with the back of my gloved hand.

"You had a dream, and it seemed to disturb you. What happened? Can you tell me?" he asked, his face showing deep concern.

I shook my head in answer and wiped my eyes, ashamed to be seen crying before another man. Then I realized it was compounded by the fact I was in the body of a woman - it made me look more vulnerable and thus desirable to him. I wanted to snatch out my knife and slit my throat to escape the shame and humiliation.

"Who's Dyarzi? I heard you call that name - it sounds like a woman's name."

I looked to him, cold rage burning in my eyes through my tears. "Never speak that name again. Your lips are not worthy enough to even shape its sound. She was the most wonderful, beautiful human being who ever lived. Now she's dead, just as I should be, and I'm alone."

"No, Sorceress! You're alive, and I'm with you! You're not dead - you slew the goblins with ease. You're not alone - I'm right here, by your side, as I have been these last two hours. Your invisible steed is still here - I've seen grass disappearing, so I think it's been standing right here, eating. Everything's alright. You just had a bad dream, that's all."

I sighed. "Part dream, part memory," I replied, placing my back against the tree and drawing up my knees. I hugged my knees for a while, thinking.

"So Dyarzi was real? Someone you remember? Who was she?" Darian asked, heedless of my earlier warning.

I placed my forehead on my knees, too distraught to care. "You wouldn't understand," I replied, fervently wishing I was dead.

"Try me," he shot back.

I shook my head. "Someday, perhaps, but not today. Just leave me be for a moment, and then we'll continue on."

"What's the matter, Sorceress?" Darian asked, unable to let it lie.

"Nothing, nothing. You wouldn't understand," I replied. *'Yes, how could you possibly understand that I am completely and utterly miserable because I find myself having awakened in the body of a woman who's so weak I can hardly cast three spells before I'm exhausted, I'm fifteen or sixteen centuries out of my time, my one true love is dead and my memories scattered?'*

"Alright," he replied, and fell silent. I could see by his expression he deeply wanted to comfort me as a

woman, and the thought of him hugging me and telling me something stupid like *'everything will be alright, my dear'* made me ill.

When I was again the master of my emotions I stood, finding my sleep had restored most of my endurance. Stepping over to the 'Steed, I swung up into the sidesaddle it presented for me. Darian rose and stood beside me. I could see his eyes stray over me, but I just didn't care anymore. "Let's go. I want this to be over with."

"Alright, Sorceress," he replied, and turned back to the trail.

By evening, Darian said we were about two days out from Greenhaven and only half a day behind the men we were following. The forest was thinning as we approached the sea, with large clearings scattered about the trail. Darian estimated we'd catch them around noon tomorrow. I nodded my assent in silence, lost in my own maudlin thoughts. I sat down by the small fire he made, over which he was roasting a pair of rabbits he'd shot as we traveled. Taking up my staff, I concentrated and pushed some of my body's strength into it. The staff stored it readily, and I meditated to recover. I was charging my staff because I felt I'd need some reserves to call upon - I wanted to make sure these men died, and didn't want to pass out during the battle. I repeated the process several times, until my body was wracked with bone-cracking weariness and muscular cramps. I carefully assensed the amount of power I'd stored - less than a quarter of what my staff could possibly contain. By repeating this process for perhaps five days, I could fully charge my staff. I slapped it to the ground in frustration - this body was simply too weak for any *real* sorcery to be done.

"What's the matter, Sorceress?" Darian asked, startled by my slapping my staff to the ground.

"Nothing, nothing. You wouldn't understand."

Darian looked into my eyes for a while, then spoke again. "Thank you for saving my life."

I blinked in confusion. "When?"

"With the goblins today. There were fourteen of them. They'd have easily riddled me with arrows had you not used your magic to protect me and kill them. The goblins you blasted with your first spell were blown asunder - their limbs and entrails were scattered for a dozen paces. Those you struck down with that jet of flame were burned and charred. I was so shocked by the destruction I forgot to say it earlier - thank you for saving my life. They'd have easily killed me if I was alone."

I shook my head. "If you were alone, then that means you never would have met me. I'd be lying in that tomb, dead, as I should be. Alone, you never would have set such a fast clip in following that trail so that you stumbled into their ambush - hell, you'd never have followed it in the first place. No, this all started because I refused to die and stay dead, like I should have done in the first place."

Darian rose to his feet and looked down at me angrily, the fire adding eerie, flickering highlights to his face, making him look ferocious. "Stop it! Stop it right now! I don't know why, but ever since you had that dream, you seem to be yearning for death, Sorceress! I can see it in your eyes, and I can hear it in your voice - I won't have it! You're *alive!* Breathe in the air, smell the smells of the woods! I don't know what happened to you in that tomb, but I *do* know those men are responsible. You're a beautiful, intelligent woman, and from what I've learned of you, I think of you not merely as a powerful mage but as a friend. You have all your life ahead of you, not behind you. You called a name as you dreamt; Dyarzi. I don't know who that is - a sister, a friend, a lover, I don't know. All I know is that from what you've said, that person is dead, and you cared for them deeply. *Think!* Would Dyarzi want you to die and rot in a grave, or would she want you to live? I think that if she truly cared for you, she'd want you to live, as I do."

I looked at him, my anger rising to meet his. I nearly screamed '*Yes, she'd want me to live, but not as a woman!*', but managed to hold it in. I looked into the fire and struggled to control my emotions. Once I was the master of my soul again, I looked back up at him. "Sit down next to me."

Darian looked down in surprise.

"Do it," I ordered, hating the sound of the woman's soprano in my ears and wishing I had my old *basso profundo* voice back.

Darian came around the fire and sat down beside me, and I spoke again. "I promised you I'd remove your geas. The first step is examining its construction. Sit quietly and allow me to concentrate."

Darian nodded and held his tongue.

I extended my hand and held it near his head, then closed my eyes and extended my mind to feel the *Mana* flow that was passing through him. "You have a very carefully laid geas on you. It prohibits you from speaking and acting in reference to a single subject. I cannot tell what that subject is, only that it is never far from your thoughts. Most geasa are laid with a command pattern called linear structuring. Your geas is laid with a command pattern called lateral structuring, which is harder to phrase but also harder to resist. The mage that laid your geas was skilled, and it will be difficult for me to remove. It was not laid on you voluntarily, so at least it *can* be removed - a geas that is voluntarily accepted is unbreakable. It does not seem to affect your ability to help me, however, so once we have slain these men, I'll sit down with you and remove your geas," I said, and leaned back again. I didn't tell him that I also sensed some sort of minor artifact, its purpose being the detection of moral states in living beings - it seemed totally harmless to me, and I figured he'd reveal it when he was ready (if ever).

"Thank you," he replied, and resumed his seat across from me with the fire between us. "I'm sorry I yelled at you, I just got angry for a moment. I've dealt with my own dark thoughts for many years, and seeing a beautiful woman like yourself succumb to the same thoughts was too much for me. Even with my geas removed, however, all it would mean is that I'd be able to speak freely. Even afterwards, I'd still just be a simple hunter."

'Damn, I wish he'd stop calling me a 'beautiful woman'. It makes me feel very uncomfortable,' I thought. Of course, I *was* one, now. *That* thought made me feel even worse. *'Why didn't they jam one of the men down the hole? Why did it have to be the woman?'* I wondered. I *hated* this life. I couldn't think of *one good thing* about being a woman. "I need to sleep, I'm very tired. Wake me after midnight and I'll spell you on the watch," I said, and then I laid down on the ground on my side with my arm as a pillow and tried to relax and sleep. I heard him over me and found he was covering me with a small blanket.

"Something one of the goblins had. I checked it - no fleas or lice. Perhaps it'll make you feel a little more comfortable sleeping near me."

Placed under my chin, the little blanket reached down to my knees. It wasn't much, but it did make me feel better. "Thank you," I replied, and after he moved away again I closed my eyes.

I dreamed of battles, and of traveling the elemental planes. I dreamed of becoming an elemental-friend by saving the elemental planes from a sphere of annihilation that threatened to return those timeless lands to the chaos of Unity. I dreamed of ships that sailed the sea, and ornithopters that sailed the skies. All that I dreamed seemed familiar, and yet strange. I knew it was from my own life, yet I could not fully remember. I remembered the instant of possession, when I entered this body just as Ellysande's spirit left it. The hair-doll was wrong - of course, it was only a hunk of hair, and couldn't know everything. Ellysande's spirit wasn't destroyed by the spell of Hidden Life - I'd felt it slip away as I animated her flesh. I'd focused my will and forced her body to live where her feeble will could not, the *Mana* flow crystallized by the Spell of Hidden Life as a point of focus, allowing me to heal some of her injuries before I lost consciousness. The damage to the skull was too great for me to remain conscious for long, but her body did not die - it was animated by my soul, now. Had I been able to remain conscious, I'd have been able to use my will to not merely knit her damaged flesh together, but to re-shape her body entirely, following the pattern laid down in my animuary, made at the time I was thirty. I would have been my old self again, a male Hyperborean battle-mage of the Dyclonic Circle, at the peak of my youth and power, down even to the minutest detail of my germ plasm. Instead, I'd been in a coma for perhaps a day before I awoke again - the chance to manipulate the energies gathered by the Spell of Hidden Life having long since vanished as the *Mana* had dissipated, unused. As I remembered awakening in the body in the crypt, I awoke from my dream and saw the glowing embers of the fire Darian was tending. Darian looked up, and saw my face. "Did you have another bad dream?" he asked, his face again a mask of concern.

"A dream, and a memory," I replied quietly.

"So your memories *are* coming back. Can you tell me what you remember?"

For one wild moment, I opened my mouth to tell Darian everything.

I knew Darian was a man of honor, and thought of me as a friend. I was going to tell him that I was really Eddas Ayar, an ancient battle-mage from his nation's past. I was going to tell him how I'd possessed the dying body of a half-elf woman, and the strength of my will had forced the body to live where her will could not. I was going to tell him how Dyarzi was my courtesan, and we were going to be wed until an assassin's knife struck her down a month before the wedding. I was going to confess and tell him everything I could remember, and everything I thought I remembered.

But then, I realized he'd probably be horrified and disgusted at knowing the truth. He would probably look at me totally aghast as he realized I was not an ordinary being, but someone risen from *beyond the*

grave. He might be so horrified he refused to help me find my tomb-robbers and silence them, and might even dig up my tomb and try to find a way to destroy my animuary, destroying what, to him, might be a ghastly liche.

I closed my mouth and shook my head. "No," I replied, hating the sound of the soft woman's voice in my ears.

Darian looked into my eyes for a moment. "I'd like to take up our Question Game again. May I ask you a question?"

"It *was* your turn, as I recall."

Darian nodded, then prodded the fire with a stick to move the coals into a more favorable position before speaking again. "Why can't you tell me the things you remember? Are *you* under a geas, or is it that you think I'll be upset by what you tell me?"

I carefully considered my answer as Darian lifted a branch and placed it on the fire. I decided to tell him the truth - he obviously cared for me as a friend, and deserved at least that much. "The latter," I replied.

Darian nodded, and reached up to his neck. He pulled a thin silver chain from beneath his chainmail shirt, and I saw that there was a pendant at the end of it, a silver medallion of some kind - after a few seconds, I realized it was a stylized owl's head. "I've had this since I was a boy, a gift from my father. It has one power - it grows warm in the presence of good, and cold in the presence of evil. That's all it does. I've felt its warmth ever since I saw you come out of that cave. No matter what you tell me, I know you're a good person. If you decide not to tell me anything now, I'll understand. Even so, I want *you* to understand that I won't pass judgement on you based on what I hear. I already know you're a good person, and nothing you say can change that," he explained, and put his little artifact away.

I looked at him for several minutes. "You say we'll catch them tomorrow. Well, after we've finished them and I've lifted your geas, I'll tell you then."

"Thank you," he replied, nodding.

I rose to stand watch as it looked to be after midnight, and handed him the blanket so he could roll it up for a pillow. *'Yes, I'll tell you then,'* I thought, *'because afterwards, I intend to return to my tomb, store all my possessions in my sarcophagus, end this miserable existence and return to my animuary. I cannot live like this - it's simply more than I can bear. I only hope I'll catch another fleeting glimpse of Dyarzi before I enter the dreamless sleep again.'*

Chapter Five

"And as the Age of Chaos draws to a close and the dawn of the Golden Age approaches, you will see three of my Ravens come among you, one at a time, to defend you from mine enemies. The first shall arise from the grave, a horrid, mad thing. The second shall stride out of the wastelands, a quiet, lonely thing. The third shall appear at the death of a queen, a smiling, happy thing."

- *The Holy Tome of Yorindar, Chapter 42, Verses 64-67.*

As noon approached the next day, we stealthily advanced around the edge of a clearing, Darian using his skills as a hunter and I simply relying on the enchantment in the magic boots to insure near-silent movement. Four men we'd been following were seated in the shade of a tree. Unlike Darian and I, they traveled at a leisurely pace and stopped for lunch - after all, they had no idea they were being followed, and as such were in little hurry. That was why we'd been able to catch them. I looked them over - four men and a pack-mule laden down with sacks that were obviously full of my treasure. They looked like common thieves, and I doubted they had any real magic. We hid behind a large oak, and as Darian watched over me, I used a spell of astral projection and sent my soul over to investigate. Beneath their glowing white outer auras, their inner auras glowed red, and they were shot through with red and brown flashes and green blotches. I looked closely, but none had the neon-blue sparkles of *Mana-flow*. They were simply mundane human thieves; evil, greedy, and apparently occasionally contemplating betraying each other for a larger share of the loot. A movement of my own limbs caught my attention, and I looked down to my astral form - then sighed. My soul was that of myself, Eddas Ayar - a Hyperborean battle-mage and a Master in the Dyclonic Circle. My astral form was that of a tall, mature, bearded male with a shaven pate. Seeing myself on the Astral reminded me I was trapped in the body of a half-elf woman, and depressed me greatly.

I released my will and returned to my body, a feeling not unlike awakening from sleep. Quietly, I asked Darian to hand me his quiver. Pulling out all his arrows and drawing on my staff for the stored power, I quietly incanted a battle-assistance spell I'd developed myself back in my living days. Squeezing tightly, the arrows all collapsed into one arrow. "Fire this at the one in the center," I whispered, handing the arrow to him.

Darian nodded, and nocked the arrow. Drawing it back, he took careful aim and released. He gaped in amazement at the results. The arrow he fired burst asunder into all the twenty-odd arrows of his quiver, and rained down upon the thieves in a single volley. They never had a chance - each was simultaneously

punctured with several arrows, and fell thrashing to the ground to die in a pool of blood. Such is the sorcery of a Hyperborean battle-mage, trained to augment an army's striking power like spikes on a gauntlet.

"That was amazing!" Darian said as the last of the thieves finally lay still.

"You did it, not me - it's your accuracy with the initial shot that determines the accuracy of all the arrows. I merely helped," I replied truthfully.

While Darian recovered his arrows, I searched the pack-mule's bags. All my cups and plates were here, as was all my gold and silverware. I stopped as I looked through the collection. *'Ah. I'd forgotten I put this in here. My wit must have been a little muddled with senility towards the end,'* I thought. I held the silver goblet up to the sunlight. It wasn't much to look at, just a simple engraved cup. I clutched it to my bosom and held it tight - it once was to have been the cup Dyarzi and I drank from at our wedding ceremony.

"You act like that cup has special meaning to you," Darian said, coming up from behind me.

"It does. I'll tell you later," I replied, and gently set it down on the grass. *'That will go in the sarcophagus with me,'* I thought, and turned my attention to helping Darian.

We packed up the mule again (I carried the cup in my free hand, not wanting to lose it), and moved across the clearing to the shade of another tree. Darian had searched the thieves, and strapped everything of value to the pack-mule. It stood quietly in the shade, eating grass. Darian had said it looked thirsty, and had emptied two of the thieve's waterskins into its mouth. The animal seemed pleased by that. Once Darian was seated comfortably, I sat down in front of him, setting my cup aside. Drawing deeply upon the reserve of strength I'd placed into the staff, I began the incantation. I wanted to make absolutely sure I'd succeed, so I took extra time with the spell. Normally, I could have snapped off a simple disenchantment in under three seconds, like any other spell. In this case, I spent an hour, weaving the *Mana* into the desired pattern, repeating the words of power carefully and precisely. With a final gesture, I released the spell upon him. Ordinarily, a disenchantment smashes into the targeted knot of *Mana*, blasting it apart. This one slipped carefully between the *Mana*-threads and snipped them, causing his geas to simply fade. Darian blinked, and found the walls of pain that had surrounded his mind were gone.

"You've done it! I'm free!" he cried beaming with joy.

"You're welcome," I replied, and picked up my cup. Standing, I walked over to the mule and took its reins. I remembered the way back fairly well, and besides - if I got lost, I could always resort to another of my spells - the Spell of Returning. Anyplace I'd been in this body, I could instantly transport myself back to. Since I no longer needed the invisible steed (as I had no need to travel quickly), I dismissed it with a nod.

"Where are you going?" Darian asked in confusion.

"I'm leaving. You've helped me, and now I've helped you in return. I'm going home," I replied, and turned the mule back the way Darian and I had come.

"But-but Greenhaven's *that* way!" he called, rising to his feet and pointing.

"I know," I replied, and kept walking.

"Wait! Sorceress, wait!" he called, trotting up to me.

"Why?" I asked, looking up into his face as I halted.

"You said you'd tell me your memories after you removed my geas. I'd like to hear them, if I may."

I paused for a long moment, staring at him. Finally, I decided he at least had earned knowing the truth about me, no matter how horrid he may find it. He had proved himself honorable - perhaps he would

allow me to rest in peace in my tomb. Nodding to him, I turned and led the mule back into the shade, then sat down. Darian sat next to me, and waited.

"Alright, Darian, I'll tell you. I can't tell you everything, for I find my memory is like a slice of dwarven cheese - it forms a single, solid piece, but it's full of holes and bitter to the taste," I said, and began.

I told him everything I'd remembered, and everything I thought I remembered. I told him who and what I was, and how I came to be this way. I told him why he'd seen me weep, and who Dyarzi was. I also told him why I hadn't told him before - I didn't want him to destroy my soul. I told him what the cup was, and why I'd clutched it tightly. In short, I told him everything I could remember, even though I knew it was pitifully little. He sat through it all in silence, and when I finally stopped, he spoke. "So they didn't really rape you."

"They raped and murdered the woman who used to inhabit this body, however. I merely possessed it shortly after her spirit had fled, and forced it to live with the strength of my will. They *were* rapists and murderers, and deserved to die. Your honor is intact - I did not trick you into killing innocents."

"I see. I understand why you thought you couldn't have told me the truth before, but I'd like to tell you that I'd probably have helped you anyway. My amulet tells me you're a good person, and it's never wrong."

"Thank you. Now, I must go," I said, and stood.

"Where? Back to your tomb?"

"Yes. I intend to return my possessions to my sarcophagus, put these cups and things back where they belong, then slit my throat," I said, and turned away from him.

He jumped up and grabbed my shoulder, spinning me around, then grabbed both my shoulders. "Why in the hell would you do that, Eddas?!" he asked.

"Take your hands off me," I said coldly. He did so, and I looked up at him. "I can't live like this. I'm miserable. At first I didn't realize how much I missed Dyarzi. My old body was used to solitude, and the call of the flesh was weak. This body is young, and the blood sings hotly in my veins. In my old body, I'd become used to being alone. Now, all I can think about is her. I can't walk around like this for the rest of my life - and that'll be a while, too, because half-elves are fairly long-lived. I estimate this body is about twenty-three. On average, that means I'll live over three centuries more. Over one hundred thousand days and nights, each and every one spent alone. And I *will* be alone, Darian. Even if I found another woman to replace Dyarzi, what would I *do* with her? Meanwhile, I'm always going to be the focus of male sexual attention, no matter how I dress, and I'm not interested in men at all. No, I'm absolutely miserable, and I want to go home."

"I can't let you do that. For you, that means killing yourself, and I can't let you do that. You can't judge this life by three or four days of it. At first when you told me you were the spirit of a man inhabiting a woman's body, I was angry. Then I realized you hadn't done it to trick me - if you had a choice, you'd have picked one of the male thieves. I think of you as a friend, and someone who has helped me out a great deal. I can't let you kill yourself - it would just be wrong. You talk about your love for Dyarzi. From what you've described of her, I think she'd have wanted you to live. She didn't hate being a woman, and she would probably have resented your thinking that a woman's life is all hell. She'd have wanted you to live and love and laugh again, and would have hoped that you'd have the courage to try. And speaking of courage, you say you once were a battle-mage. The legends say they were the bravest mortals who ever lived, yet what I see before me is a coward. You won't even *try* to live. This life gets a little tough, you feel a little lonely, you slit your throat. That's cowardly. You say you're a battle-mage, so prove it. Be brave enough to live this life to it's fullest, despite the hardships."

I started to raise my hand to strike him down with my staff, anger boiling in my veins, and he didn't flinch. I fully intended to smash that calm expression off of his face...

But then I stopped, lowering my staff. His words had struck home, and I found after a moment's thought that he was right. I looked up to him, impressed. His speech may have been a little rambling, but it took everything I'd said and some things I'd only been thinking and showed me how foolish I'd been.

He was right - Dyarzi *would* have wanted me to live. He was right - I *was* taking the coward's way out. I shouldn't be looking at this as a tragedy, I should be looking at this as an opportunity. I was *alive*. My feelings in the tomb had been right, my maudlin self-pity as we traveled sparked by my self-consciousness and distress at the unfamiliarity of this body had been wrong. With care, I could build this body's endurance and summon guardians for my tomb who would protect it eternally. With a little luck, I could begin the Dyclonic Circle again - or perhaps form my *own* circle of battle-mages, following

my *own* teachings instead of the founder of my Circle, High Master Dyclon. Perhaps with the extended lifespan of this body, I might even find or invent a spell that would bring Dyarzi back to me. Alive, an infinity of possibilities open up to me. Dead, I had no possibilities and no hope.

"You're right. I should have listened to myself in the tomb. At first, I viewed this as an opportunity, not a curse. I actually thought being female might be fun. I never really gave it a chance - my loneliness, the strangeness of the body and my discomfort at your stare made me just want to die. Your words were spoken like those of a king."

"Not surprising. I *am* a king - or was one, anyway," Darian replied.

I blinked in surprise. "You're putting me on."

"No, my brave, powerful and mysterious friend who is a man trapped in the body of a woman, I am a king trapped in the life of a commoner. Come back into the shade, sit, relax. My story I think will at least interest you."

I went back to the shade again and tied the mule's reins to a bush, then sat with my back against a tree, waiting for Darian to begin.

"South of the Black River, beyond the Black Forest, lies the kingdom of Larinia. My father once ruled there, as his father before him and fifteen generations before that had done. As my father's first-born son, I was to rule upon his death. Our kingdom was a peaceful one, and we had not been to war in nearly a century. Unfortunately, I also had a younger brother, Dorian - my twin. I am the elder by about three minutes - our mother died birthing the two of us. Dorian resented the fact that fate had cheated him out of a kingdom by a mere slip of the womb. All through the years we were growing up, Dorian resented and hated me, and we often fought like cats and dogs. Eventually, my father lay on his death-bed, and I waited in my room, knowing that in a few hours the final news from the court physician would arrive, saying that the end had come. While I waited, my brother apparently was very busy. As near as I can tell, Dorian went to the court wizard, Gorlon-mak, and promised him power and riches beyond his wildest dreams, all in exchange for his assistance. Gorlon was not an evil man, in fact he was widely considered a wise and powerful sorcerer, and he even once explored some ancient ruins in the Hyperborean wastes. Unfortunately, the temptation of wealth and power apparently was too much for him to resist," Darian said. I nodded - I could see the end of the story before he even had spoken it. A mage may have the powers of the universe at their fingertips, but they were still mortal, and had the same

flaws as any mundane.

"When the knock came at the door, I found myself grabbed by my brother's personal guards and dragged through the hidden passageways of the castle to Gorlon-mak's chambers. My brother and Gorlon-mak, of course, were waiting for me. Dorian explained that he was unwilling to simply wait and hope that I would die someday. Instead, he wanted the throne himself - and he wanted it now. He said that he had studied hard at learning to be king, while I had spent much of my youth riding and hunting. He said he felt he would make a better king than I - he was probably right, but I never would have ruled without his advice. He was far more glib of tongue than I, and knew the hearts of men better than I did. I'd intended to ask him to help me rule our kingdom as my advisor, but I had been too busy hunting and riding and otherwise amusing myself to tell him of my thoughts. I thought of doing so then, but my amulet warned me that my brother's hatred of me and greed for power had finally pushed him over the edge - he had become evil, and my amulet felt cold as I looked upon him. I remained silent, and awaited my end. My brother grew angry - he wanted to see me beg and plead for my life. I did not. He considered killing me, but then decided that my suffering would end too quickly. He then considered torturing me to death, but again decided that this would be too quick an end. I was still dressed in my hunting clothes, for the physician's messenger had called me in from the hunt. He looked down at me, saw my hunting garb, and had Gorlon geas me to leave the kingdom and never return, to live the rest of my days as a simple hunter, and never speak of who I really was or what had been done to me."

"Now, I can speak freely - my true name is Darian Vemcrior, of the house of Vemcrior, and I am the rightful king of Larinia. My brother has stolen my name and stolen my kingdom, and claimed that 'Dorian' has left the kingdom in anger at not having been born first. The lie was easily believed, as my brother's hatred of me and our constant battles as youths were widely known. That is why I told you that even after my geas was lifted, I'd still be nothing more than a simple hunter - if I were to return to my kingdom and attempt to reclaim my birthright, my brother would simply claim that I was he, and the entire kingdom would turn out against me. I could raise an army to fight him now that my geas is lifted, but then I would be spilling the blood of my own people to reclaim a throne I wasn't really sure I could manage," Darian explained, and shrugged as he continued.

"From what little I've heard over the five years since I left, he seems to be handling the kingdom fairly well. He rules harshly and the punishment many of the people face for violations of the king's law is death, but his laws seem to be applied fairly. The people aren't happy, but they aren't miserable, either. Though I'd like to reclaim my throne, I don't know that I'd be a better king than he is - I may end up a worse one, because I paid little attention to my studies and more attention to my entertainments. Thus, though I can now speak freely of who I really am, I don't think I'll try to reclaim the name Darian Vemcrior. I think I'll just remain Darian Underwood; hunter, tracker and fur-trader," Darian finished.

I shook my head. "*Now* who's being cowardly? Your lack of skills in running a kingdom can be easily corrected - I once had a tower and lands about it that stretched for over several leagues, so I know of

handling the financial and agricultural needs of an area the size of a barony. The same skills could be applied to a kingdom's needs for planning the harvest and watching the treasury. I've helped many noblemen outfit their armies, and helped them fight their battles, as well - this can also be taught. As for dealing with men, these are skills you seem to already have for the most part, and your amulet gives you the ability to know the kind of men you're dealing with. I believe that's why your father probably gave it to you in the first place, to supplement your abilities as king. You're simply too afraid of failure to reach out and take that which is rightfully yours. I'll bet your people today are living under a king who rules with an iron fist, and would probably be happy with a change for the better."

Darian stared at me for a moment, his face showing anger. "I'm no coward, I just don't think I have the necessary skills to be king," he replied hotly.

"Then *learn*," I said firmly. I didn't like the way it sounded with a woman's voice saying the words, but it seemed to strike home to Darian. He was silent for many long moments before he spoke again.

"Would you teach me?"

"I'd be happy to teach you what I remember of running my own lands and of equipping and fighting with an army - the rest, I think you can figure out for yourself," I replied, and smiled.

"Ah, but there's still Gorlon-mak to be dealt with."

I snorted. "I doubt Gorlon-mak is prepared to deal with a Hyperborean battle-mage. Once I build up this body's endurance, I'll crush him like a bug," I replied, snapping my fingers, then frowned. "Of course, right now he could probably dispose of me with a single gesture - I'm simply too weak at the moment."

"It'll take time for you to train your body, and it'll take time for me to train my mind. If we work together, I think we can both accomplish our goals. For now, if you'll teach me and help me regain my throne, I'll make you *my* court wizard."

"Or wizardess, as the case may be," I replied with a smile.

Darian shook his head and chuckled. "I find it easier to think of you as a man who happens to only *look* like a woman, like a disguise of some kind. It fits your actual situation somewhat better, and allows me to look at you and not think thoughts that are... Well, less than honorable," he replied sheepishly.

I nodded, then suddenly had an inspiration. "Darian, at the moment, only you know what I really am. If I dress up as an ordinary woman, I'll lose the benefit of men hesitating before attacking me - they won't think twice before they smash me aside. If I dress as a sorceress, they'll attack me immediately, before I can cast a spell. If I try to dress as a boy, the secret will be revealed as soon as I relieve myself, and I'll probably be subjected to the normal human prejudice against half-elves. It existed in my time, and I'm sure the humans of today are still just as jealous of the greater beauty and longer lives of half-elves today, are they not?" I asked, and Darian nodded as I continued. "There is one thing I can do, however, that I think will allow me to move among people a little more easily and still retain the advantages my appearance gives me. Were any of the thieves wearing a chainmail shirt?"

"Yes, two of them were wearing them beneath their tunics."

"Good. Let's fetch them from the pack-mule and get to work," I said. Darian smiled, and extended his hand to help me to my feet. This time, I took it.

[Chapter Six](#)

"The body is but a garment for the soul.

- The Holy Tome of Yorindar, Chapter 8, Verse 3.

Much as I was tempted to leave the bodies of the thieves as food for the scavengers, Darian said it was entirely possible they might have friends. I rested for an hour while Darian carefully erased the bloody traces of the battle, then I summoned an earth elemental to secrete the corpses deep beneath the ground. The effort left me weak and faint, and it was another hour before I was ready to travel again. Truly, this body was far too weak for any *real* sorcery, and I again resolved I would make every effort to build up its strength.

We traveled back to my tomb to return my treasure, and each night I not only spent time recharging my staff, I also worked on the chainmail shirts the thieves had left. Hammering the links open with a rock and one of their cheap daggers, I eventually separated out the rusted links and salvaged those that seemed

good. It wasn't as much as I'd hoped - the thieves apparently didn't take good care of their armor, and their sweat had rusted many of the links. The elfin-chain garment I'd bought for Dyarzi wouldn't rust or tarnish, but ordinary mail had to be cleaned and oiled regularly. Darian took the time to clean his own chain shirt, reminded of it by the condition of those we took off the thieves. The whole process took three days, and by then we had returned to my tomb. While Darian secured more water from a nearby creek, I used my Spell of Returning to restore my goods in my tomb by making several trips. There was only so much my weak little body could carry, and I had to rest between castings. I placed the wedding-cup in my sarcophagus so that I'd never lose it, then cast the spell to return outside again.

On the fourth day, I began to piece the sections of mail together, using a Spell of Repairing to restore the opened links and shape the chainmail the way I wanted. Unfortunately, I found I didn't have enough good chain to fully execute my original idea, so I settled on an alternate design. Finishing it took another five days, especially considering I had to rest after casting my Spell of Repairing several times. Finally, I put it on and stood before Darian. "Well, what do you think?" I asked, turning around.

When I'd turned back to face him, Darian was stroking his chin in thought. *'Damn, I guess it's no good,'* I thought. I'd tried to put something together that would conceal a bit more of me, but I was constrained by the materials I had to work with and the fact that I couldn't spend months casting the Spell of Repairing on each and every link (nor could I cast it on the entire shirt and repair them completely - both were far too large for me, anyway). I'd ended up linking two rectangular sections together into a wraparound skirt, laced together with a strip of leather on the right side. It was held in place by one of the thieves' belts passed through several openings I'd made around the skirt as sort of 'belt-loops'. The skirt came down to the middle of my thighs, and was backed with a bit of cloth from their packs to render it opaque. It was long enough to where I thought it provided some modesty, but yet still allowed me to run if I had to. I'd originally thought about making it come down to my knees, but experimentation revealed I probably couldn't run in that and I didn't have enough chain left over to do it anyway. Over my top, I had what was left of one of the chainmail shirts, also backed in cloth. After the work I'd done, the sleeves came down to just below my shoulders, and the rest came down to just below my sternum - it left my midriff bare, but that couldn't be helped. It was loose enough to slip on and off, but only barely so. I had thought the whole thing might be acceptable - but now, as I saw Darian's expression, I realized I'd just wasted several days of effort. "No good, I take it," I said glumly.

"No, quite the contrary, actually. It makes you look like a warrior-woman of some kind, perhaps even some kind of elven warrior-maiden that humans simply have never seen before. I don't know what human women were like when you were alive way back then, but today human women don't wage war."

"Well, they didn't back then, either."

Darian nodded and continued. "With that black hair and eyes of yours, especially with the hair pulled back in a ponytail, it looks like you're some kind of dark-elf or half-elf warrior-maid that humans simply have never seen before. Very unusual, you'll get a lot of attention, but you don't look like a spellcaster and you *certainly* don't look like a courtesan, like you did before. At the same time, I think the bare midriff and flash of thigh will give you the effect you wanted - males might hesitate before they attacked you, giving you the split-second advantage you need to win. Overall, I think it came out rather well - though I'm sure that coarser and cruder men are going to make some rather pointed remarks at seeing what skin you do show," Darian finished.

I nodded, pleased both with my work and with Darian - he hadn't hesitated because he disliked the result, but because he was carefully considering my question. Thinking before speaking is one of the most important traits of a good king. "Well, that can't be helped. If it gets to be too much, I'll just crack a few skulls with my staff to silence them," I replied.

"And that may be necessary. How good *are* you with your staff?"

I smiled, and held out my hand. My staff, which had been leaning against the tree we were standing under, flashed into my grip at my will. I whirled it before me in a blur, then stopped it in an *en-guarde* position. Darian stared, amazed at my apparent skill. "Ah, well, I guess you *would* be skilled with your staff as a battle-mage. You probably trained with it for years," he said after a moment.

I grinned and shook my head, relaxing and spinning my staff casually between my fingers. "No skill at all, actually. I couldn't do this with any other fighting staff you handed me - just this one. As my wizard's staff, it's not a simple shaft of wood, Darian. This is an extension of my will, and it's also invulnerable and can be summoned to my hand at a thought. A warrior has to train for years to learn to handle a fighting staff. I knew how to manipulate this as a weapon expertly as soon as I'd finished enchanting it. Other mages cast similar spells on items ranging from daggers and swords to rings and wands. I remember a mage I once knew who had a willow-branch as her staff. She could parry a broadsword with it, and once lopped off an opponent's head with it. All the while, the green of the leaves never faded. I knew another who had a candle as their staff because they always tired of using a flint and steel and didn't like wasting their strength in igniting fires with sorcery. The candle never grew shorter and never went out, not even underwater, and I remember he once punched it through the plate cuirass of an enemy soldier who was trying to kill him in the middle of a battle. No, I can defend myself fairly well with it, never fear about that. It's my knife I had to spend several years practicing with to be skilled with."

"Really? Well, why didn't you enchant it as a wizard's staff, as well?" he asked as I set my staff back down.

I grinned again. "Only a mundane would ask that question - the answer is because you can only have one wizard's staff at a time. I invented my own version of the standard spell and my staff can be altered somewhat in appearance, but I can still only have one - it's because of the way *Mana* works in linking the staff to your mind and soul. Just as you can only have one familiar, you can only have one staff. No force on earth can break this staff, but if I choose to I can snap it with my fingers like it was a twig. This will cause it to explode - the explosion won't hurt me a bit, but will probably kill anyone nearby. After that, I could make another staff - though I couldn't use my knife, because it's already enchanted. I'd probably select another fighting staff. I like the reach you get with it, and the fact that I can easily obtain one nearly anywhere, even in the wilderness. I wouldn't do that anytime soon, though - making a staff permanently weakens the body, and it takes months or years to repair the damage to your endurance. No real problem in my old body, but in this one I'd be staggering under the weight of this chainmail halter and skirt I made."

Darian nodded. "So your staff will always be around, a fitting reminder of your true status as a mage."

"Actually, no. If a mage dies and doesn't have an animuary, their staff disintegrates into dust. If my animuary is ever broken, my soul would be destroyed and not only would this body collapse and die, but my staff would also crumble to dust. A wizard's staff is an extension of its owner's will. When they are gone, it's gone as well, just like a familiar dies upon its master's death, but otherwise lives as long as they do, easily outstripping the lifespan of ordinary beasts."

"Ah! That explains something I've wondered about for years. Gorlon-mak had a dog - a wolf, actually. I remember it from when I was a child, and yet it lived years without getting any older. Of course, he lost it a few years back when he went to explore the Hyperborean ruins - goblins, he said. Even so it lived for decades, looking like it was only five or six years old. It must have been his familiar."

"Probably. You should also be aware that familiars can be taught spells, and they can have their own 'staff, in which they store power for spellcasting - often it's a collar or other item they wear. They're also intelligent, some more so than their masters. Many learn the Spell of Transference of Power, and assist their master's sorcery by giving their own strength to them. Worse, their master can use their senses, such as seeing through their eyes and hearing through their ears, and use them as spies. You must always be wary of a familiar."

"I see. Why don't you have a familiar then? They seem to have many advantages."

"Simple - their death causes a massive and permanent drain on your body's strength, often a fatal one. Part of your soul is tied up in their body, and the death of a familiar is often the death of its master due to the *Mana*-backlash. A strong mage with a weak familiar like a cat or an owl can easily survive the blow, and slowly rebuild their endurance again as they heal the psychic damage over the course of months or years. A weak mage with a strong familiar such as a wolf or bear courts death - the familiar's demise is often too great a psychic blow for them to survive. Gorlon-mak's love of familiars may be his undoing someday. If he's ever tired or drained from spellcasting or perhaps wounded from battle and his familiar is slain, he'll join it in death. I'm actually quite surprised he survived its loss to the goblins. No, I don't have a familiar for the same reason *no* battle-mage of the Dyclonic Circle ever had one: It's simply too dangerous."

Darian scratched his head. "I can see there is much I don't know about magic."

I nodded. "Yes, and you'll need to learn it, too. One of your mistakes you made as a youth was that you never really learned to use the amulet you wear - you just wore it, and noticed when it was warm or cold. If you used its powers more fully, you could determine the general nature and moral alignment of most anyone you meet, not simply tell if they're good or evil. There's a broad range of behaviors between good and evil, and your amulet can sense them for you if you learn to read it properly. No mage in my day could make such an item - only one of the Great Mages could possibly do it, and even in my day they were little more than legend and song. The elves said back in my day that in all their long history, they knew of perhaps only four Great Mages who had ever been born among their people. We Hyperboreans knew of six more among our people, and the dwarves five among theirs. I believe it to be a minor artifact, possibly a construct from an ancient dwarven smith near the dawn of the world, or at least before the Elf-Dwarf wars, forty or fifty millennia ago - but it's impossible to say. The dwarves might know, or perhaps the elves," I explained, then shrugged. "Either way, it's a very valuable and powerful item, Darian, but only if you know how to use it properly."

He drew it out from under his tunic. "Really? I never knew that. Could you show me?" he asked, starting to remove the chain from around his neck - but I waved off the notion, stopping him.

"No, don't bother taking it off, it's attuned to you. It's not a simple enchanted item like my knife, it's an *artifact*, an item of true power - re-attuning it to me so I could show you how it worked might take anywhere from hours to days. However, I can show you without you taking it off. Here, stand still for a moment," I said, and stepped over to him. I took the amulet in my hand and concentrated on the *Mana*-flow that was passing through it. "Ah, I see. A very neat enchantment. The sensations of warm or cold it gives you are only the surface indications, Darian. Here - take it in your hand and concentrate on me," I said, releasing the amulet. He took the amulet in his right hand and closed his eyes. "No, no. Look at me,

and extend your will into the amulet."

Darian opened his eyes and looked at me in puzzlement. "How?" he asked, confused.

I was stumped for a moment. "Well, I don't know how to explain it better than that. A mage would understand what I meant immediately, but you're a mundane. Hmm," I said, placing a finger on my chin and thinking. "Ah! Have you ever been fishing?"

"Yes, several times."

"Good. Now, what do you think of when the fish aren't biting? Don't you start thinking at the fish something like '*come on, little fish, take the bait on my hook*'?"

"Well, sometimes. Other times I just think '*hurry up and bite, you lazy little bastards!*'" he replied, grinning.

"Well, it's kind of like that. You're trying to use your mind to force the fish to bite. With the power of the *Talent* and the right incantation, you *can* make the fish bite - their minds are very tiny, and they're easily dominated. As a mundane, your will doesn't extend much farther than the confines of your body, but it's still there. Extend your will into the amulet, and concentrate on me. Look at me and think something at the amulet like '*tell me the nature of this person*'... Or something like that."

Darian gripped the amulet again and I could see his brow furrow in concentration as he stared at me. Suddenly, his expression changed to surprise and shock.

"It worked, didn't it?" I asked, smiling.

"Yes! I had this *really* strange sensation. I could *feel* your nature - good-hearted, honorable. It was like I

could *feel* your heart, somehow," he replied, looking at the amulet in his hand in amazement.

"Good. Now, see that sparrow over there? Concentrate on it."

He did so, and looked to me again. "It felt just as strange. No real moral feelings, just a sense that it was responding to its drives, its instincts. Hunger. Thirst. Keep rivals out of my territory. Find a mate. Like that - but without understanding, just... Doing."

"That's because it's just an animal, and has no real morality as we understand it. Now try the tree, here."

"I just get the sensation that it's alive," he said after a moment.

"That's because it has no mind - you'd sense drives and instincts even in an insect or earthworm, but a plant simply lives. Now try it on that stone over there by that bush."

"Nothing happens," Darian replied after a moment.

"Because it isn't even alive. If it was magically animated, you'd get an impression based on the mage that enchanted it. As an inanimate rock, you get nothing. Now that you've got the hang of it, put it back under your chain shirt and tunic and try using it on everything I pointed out to you again, one thing at a time."

He did so, and after a few seconds he looked back down at me. "I think I've got it," he said with a grin.

"Good. As long as you've got it hidden, you'll have an ability that nobody else knows about - and one that's quite useful, as well, particularly for a king. Remember, however, that you have to extend your will to get anything more than just the 'warm-cold' indication of good or evil. There's a wide variety of behaviors that fit in between those extremes."

Darian returned his amulet to hiding and looked at me in awe. "So that's what it's like to be a mage."

"Well, no. That's what it's like to use a magic item."

"I mean, can't you sense the same things? I mean, how else could you know what I would feel beforehand?"

"Actually, I only knew that because I know a spell that allows me to analyze *Mana*-flow. I reached out with my will, altered my own *Mana*-flow with a spell to allow me to sense *Mana*-flow in the first place, then reached out to your amulet with my will and assensed its *Mana*-flow patterns. I can't explain it to a mundane any better than that, and for me the spell's so simple that I do it as pretty much one act of will, the same as you might reach out to feel someone's face, tensing and relaxing all the dozens of different muscles in your shoulder, arm, forearm and hand without having to think about using each muscle. As far as being able to do what that amulet does, I can't - not without knowing the right spells."

"The right spells?"

I nodded. "A spell has to be learned and studied, Darian, like a skill. *If* a spell formula that duplicates that artifact's powers could be developed, then I could probably sit down with my grimoire and write up the formula for a spell that would do what that amulet does - or fairly close, anyway. From there, I could then obtain the proper reagents, spend an hour or more in incantation, and *maybe* I'd learn what you can learn in a second or two. *If* the spell I invent works, I could then study it carefully, mastering it as a skill and learning how to shape the *Mana*-flow that passes through my body into a pattern that allows me to sense what you sense with that amulet. I'd guess that it would probably take me four or five months to master it. After that, I'd be able to do what your amulet allows you to do - though I'd have to expend a small fraction of my endurance each time, and eventually would become exhausted. That artifact allows you to do this at any time, just by having it in contact with your body and extending your will - all the work of sorcery has already been done, you just need to extend your will to gain the effect. More, the enchantment in it is that of an *artifact*, not a simple enchanted item. I can tell by its structure it's not likely the spell can be duplicated by any mortal mage - most artifacts are like that. They were made by Great Mages who lived ages and ages ago, and their secrets have died with them."

Darian shook his head. "It must be wonderful being able to cast spells."

"Well, perhaps, but consider that doing so isn't merely based on having the good fortune to be born with the *Talent* - the ability to manipulate *Mana*. No, each spell is like a skill in and of itself. You have to practice to be any good at it, and you have to master the mathematics of magic to be able to develop your own spells. As a result, you often don't have time to learn much else. For example, when you were tracking those thieves, I had no idea what you were looking at - the signs that seemed clear to you were quite invisible to me. Certainly I could take a few months to a year or so to master the basic skills of tracking, but as it stands what you were doing was pretty magical and impressive to me. That's not all, either - certainly I was able to blast and fry those goblins, but even so, *you* saw them first, not me. You're more skilled at spotting ambushes than I am, because your wilderness skills are simply far superior to mine. Sorcery may seem incredibly useful and powerful to a mundane, but remember - we have to *learn* to do this, and it's just as hard to learn spells as it is to learn mundane skills. Some mundane skills are actually *harder* to learn than spells. Yes, a mage can be a powerful and deadly opponent, but *only* if they know the right spells, and *only* if they can cast those spells before you cut them down with your sword or shoot an arrow through their heart from your bow."

"You really were impressed with my tracking?" he asked, grinning.

"Of course! *I* couldn't have done it - that's a skill you developed with *years* of practice. I didn't know how far I was behind them, and hoped I'd be able to find them by looking around while flying. That *never* would have worked - they had at least a two-day head start on me. Failing that, I'd have had to wait at my tomb until they returned, hoping to blast them when they came back for more treasure - assuming they didn't bring a mage of their own to help them search who could have finished me. Either way, I probably would have lost my wedding-cup forever, and might have been facing a whole string of treasure hunters and grave-robbers that heard the word the thieves passed around town upon their return - eventually, one of them would have killed me. Your tracking skills made it possible for me to not only recover my cup, but to protect my animuary and remain alive. You may think my spells saved your life in the fight with the goblins. Well, your tracking skills saved mine by allowing me to catch and kill those thieves."

"Well, I'm glad my years spent riding, shooting and hunting weren't completely wasted," he replied ruefully.

I shook my head. "Darian, the first thing I'm going to teach you about being a king is this - there's no skill you have that you won't use as a king. Your skills at woodsmanship would be *very* useful on the campaign trail, as you'd easily be able to spot the best place for your army to camp and be able to interpret the signs of an enemy's passage. Your skill with the bow seems excellent, and I think the only

reason you missed that goblin is that you aren't used to shooting at the little bastards - the trick is to aim for their belt buckle. They can bob and weave their upper body very rapidly, but just like a full-size man, shifting their belt-buckle out of the way takes footwork, and your arrow would have found its mark before he could have moved out of the way. Horsemanship is critical to a king in a battle - he must be able to ride to the various parts of his forces and give commands if need be, and if the day appears lost, he must be able to ride at the lead of his army as he guides them to a safe retreat. No, Darian - there's no skill you have that won't be used as a king. There's many more skills you don't have yet that you'll also use, and a good king also is one who knows that they will *never* be able to learn enough - there will always be a need for more knowledge, more skills and more time to learn it all. All you can do is keep your mind open and continually learn and improve your skills as king."

"What about advisors?"

"A good king will assemble good advisors, but you must always remember that they are only *advisors* - let them suggest a course of action and explain their reasoning for why they think it's the right thing to do, but always make sure that the final decision is *yours* and *yours alone*. A king who lets his kingdom be ruled by his advisors, as you seem to have planned with your brother before he betrayed you, will shortly find that he is king only in name - the power will actually belong to their advisors. If you get your throne back, you may indeed make me your court wizard - er, wizardess," I said, grinning, and he grinned in return as I continued. "Anyway, even though you trust me and respect me, you should *never* allow me to make your decisions for you. If you do, then it will eventually be *me* that's the ruler of your kingdom, and you'll just be a figurehead. One day you'd notice your chamberlain or other minister came in and spoke not to *you* but to *me*, and from then on, no decision or command you gave would be heeded unless I was there and voiced my approval - I'd find myself in charge of your kingdom, whether I wanted it or not. Ruling a kingdom is much like riding a horse; you must always keep a firm grip on the reins and not be afraid to apply your spurs - even to me, as you did the other day when I was feeling maudlin and suicidal," I replied, clapping him on the shoulder and grinning.

"I see. So this means that if I'm ever king, then you'll agree to stay on as my advisor and court wizard?"

"If you need me - but only so long as I'm needed, and only so long as you remember to use me as an *advisor*, not as an *assistant*. The power must be entirely yours, and you must keep a tight grip on it or it will slip away into the hands of those around you."

"Agreed - though you'll have to show me how. It seems the more you teach me, the more I realize how little I really know," he said sheepishly.

I smiled and clapped him on the shoulder again. "And *that* is one of life's most important lessons and possibly life's greatest paradox: The more you learn, the less you know. As a child, we knew everything, and understood our world completely. As we grew, we realized there were things around us we didn't understand. As we learn about these things, they lead us to other things we don't understand, until eventually we realize that there's an entire *universe* of knowledge around us that we'll *never* completely learn even if we could live forever. In my day, it was just an expression sorcerers, sages and scribes used, almost a joke - '*The more you learn, the less you know*'," I said, and he chuckled in reply.

"Well, what shall we do next?" Darian asked.

"Well, I'd like to completely conceal all traces that we were ever here. I don't want *anyone* searching around and finding my tomb, and we already know there's goblins about in these woods. Those little bastards are notorious grave-robbers, and they never quit until the tomb is bare. They'd bring a goblin-mage along once they realized it was an older tomb and might be trapped with sorcery, and that mage would easily find my animuary and kill me. Thus, the first thing is to make sure there's no evidence we were ever here, so no one would have any reason to go digging around. After that, I guess we can move on. Once I've built the endurance of this body, I can come back later and summon a guardian that'll protect it eternally. For now, the best protection is simply not to draw attention to it."

Darian agreed, and for the next four hours I helped him work. I paid close attention to what he was doing - I figured the knowledge might come in handy sometime. He doused the fire with water, stirring the ashes until it was cold to the touch, then buried the fire-pit, returning the plug of grass he'd originally removed back over the spot. He swept the ground carefully with a leafy branch, erasing our footprints. He also went over all the areas we'd been in, picking up any detritus we'd left behind and burying it. He did a hundred other smaller things that each concealed our presence, and I was again amazed at his skill. "It looks perfect," I said at last.

Darian shook his head. "Not really. I can still tell we've been here. A good rainstorm is what we need now."

"I think I can handle that," I replied. All the battle-mages of the Dyclonic Circle were taught weather-manipulation - being able to conjure a fog to hide your employer's forces or a rain to wet your enemy's bowstrings is extremely useful in battle. I gestured and incanted for three seconds. I was again gasping with effort when I was done, but I could tell the spell was successful.

Darian looked around, seeing nothing. "It didn't work."

"Yes it did, it just takes time for clouds to gather. It's been sunny and clear this last week or so - maybe four hours. That gives us about two hours to clear away from here and two hours to set up a shelter. And we'll need a shelter, Darian, because it is going to *rain!*" I said, panting and wiping the sweat from my brow.

Chapter Seven

"What is Heaven for one may be Hell for another. All pain and pleasure in life is relative."

- Elven proverb.

Darian and I quickly left, taking the mule with us. About two hours later, we stopped under the shade of one of the trees. "There's some big storm clouds coming in from the west," he said, looking up at the sky.

"Let's hurry and set up a shelter," I replied.

Darian shook his head. "The best I can give you in the time we have is a lean-to - by the look of those clouds, it won't be enough."

"Damn. Alright, let's try something else," I said, and went to the mule. Tying its reigns tightly to a tree and hobbling it with a short piece of rope the thieves had brought, I then searched through the rest of their belongings for some more rope. "Darian, I need a rope or line of some kind and I can't find any more in the supplies we've got," I said after a few minutes.

"How long?"

"At least twelve cubits in length."

"Does it matter what it's made of?"

"No, it just has to be strong enough to support our weight for a climb."

Darian took one of the wool blankets the thieves had brought and cut it into strips, then tied the strips together to form a makeshift rope. "How's this?" he asked.

I tugged on it as hard as I could (which wasn't very hard, unfortunately). It seemed strong enough. "Well, let's try it," I said, and coiled it on the ground. Drawing the last of the reserves of strength stored within my staff, I gestured, incanting the Spell of the Hidden Sanctuary, then took one end of the makeshift rope and tossed it into the air. It flew up to about twice my height and hung there in the air. Grabbing hold of the rope, I climbed up with the power of the gloves and boots aiding me. From Darian's perspective, I climbed up into the air and disappeared. "Come on, Darian! Climb up!" I called. Darian gaped for a moment or two longer, then finally managed to reach out and start to pull himself up. The makeshift rope was strained by his weight, but it held - Darian really knew his knotwork. Finally Darian was near the top, and I grabbed him by the shoulders and strained with all the strength of my frail little body to pull him in.

Darian looked around the stone room as I pulled the rope up after us. The room was eighteen cubits across and had a hole in the center about a cubit across that the rope hung through - its end was tied to an iron ring in the floor. The walls and ceiling were mortared stone, the ceiling reinforced by two oak crossbeams. There was a single glass-paned window on one side, and the fading daylight shone through it, illuminating the room. "Where are we?" Darian asked. I couldn't answer immediately - the effort of casting the spell and dragging him up before the makeshift rope snapped under his weight had nearly caused me to lose consciousness. "Are you alright, Eddas?" Darian asked.

"Fine, just tired. Give me a moment," I gasped, sitting on the floor with my back against the wall.

Once I had recovered my breath, Darian spoke again. "Eddas, where are we?" he asked again.

"You want the simple explanation or the difficult explanation?"

Darian thought about it for a moment. "I guess if I'm going to be a king, I'd better start asking for the hard explanations," he replied, smiling.

"Alright. We're in a room that's an extra-dimensional space, separated from our normal plane of reality by a slight difference in vibratory states. Our relative point of planar coincidence is still identical to our original location, but we currently are outside that reality for the moment. From the perspective of hyperdimensional mathematics, we're technically in a closed time-space continuum that's synchronized with and linked to our previous time-space coordinates."

Darian stared at me for a long moment, then shook his head. "I have absolutely no idea what you just said - I guess you'd better try the simple explanation," he replied, then managed a smile.

"That's alright, hyperdimensional theory is a little difficult to grasp at first. Um, well, how's this: You have a tunic and want to put a coin in your pocket. You don't have a pocket, so you sew one together, cut a hole in the tunic, then set the pocket into the hole. From the perspective of your tunic, a new dimension has been added - a pocket dimension. That's what we're in - a pocket dimension, a small pocket of time and space. When the spell ends, we have to be out or we'll just fall back to the ground. From the perspective of your tunic, the pocket disappears as though it never was, and what was in it falls to the ground."

Darian shook his head. "That's easier to understand, I guess, though I think someday I'd like to learn enough so that you don't have to simplify the explanations for me."

"Certainly, though it'll take years for you to really understand it. For now, just understand that it's like I've added a little 'pocket dimension' to the fabric of reality."

Darian nodded, and looked out the window. "It's starting to drizzle," he observed.

"It'll be a full-blown downpour in a while. I could feel that this area was already due for rain, and when I cast my spell, I speeded up the process quite a bit. The result is it's going to rain *very* hard for a while, more than was actually coming this way in the first place."

"Well, at least we have a comfortable place to stay."

"Do you like it? I built it myself," I said, looking around at the stone walls.

"Of course - with magic," he replied, grinning.

"No, I actually built it with my hands. Before this spell can be cast, you have to have already prepared the area you're going to summon. The Dyclonic Circle taught the spell to me, and once I'd learned it, I spent several months building this little room. It was quite a lot of work - it has to be assembled on a wooden platform to hold it several cubits above the ground. The first casting of the spell separates the room from the rest of the universe - it ceases to exist, and becomes a tiny little pocket dimension. Further castings realign the room with my current time-space coordinates so that I can use it. I made it hang about ten cubits in the air so that nobody would accidentally walk or ride by and poke their head into the opening. From the outside, we simply don't exist anymore. Look - the rain isn't spattering on the windowpanes," I said, pointing.

"You're right - the glass is completely dry. Incidentally, this is excellent glass - there's no rippling or other distortion at all," Darian said.

"Well, pane glass was pretty common in Hyperborea. I guess the technology got lost somehow - probably in that big war you talked about that I don't seem to remember. The window *is* my proudest accomplishment, however - it's a second point of coincidence with the reality outside this room, and was very difficult to enchant. I just wanted to be able to see what was going on outside without having to poke my head out and look. It doesn't open, though - that was a bit too much. You can tap on it if you want - the whole of this room is invulnerable to harm."

"Why didn't you use this before? I mean, this would have been much more comfortable than sleeping on the ground or in a tree."

"Because it took most of the strength this body had left and all that was left in my staff to conjure it. I

simply didn't have the strength to do it before without fainting. Besides that, I didn't have a rope to climb up into it."

"That bit you mentioned earlier - the bit about falling when the spell expires - that worries me a little. How long will this spell last?"

"Well, if I was in my old body, I could stay in here indefinitely, just meditating or sleeping to recover the strength it takes to maintain the spell once a day or so. With this body, we can stay here no longer than a day. After that, the spell will need re-energizing and this body simply isn't strong enough to do it. We only fall because we're attuned to the reality outside this room. I could attune us to this reality, but then we'd never be able to leave, and when the spell faded, we'd cease to exist. I used to have this place stocked with food, water, a bed, a brazier to cook with, a little desk, all sorts of things I might need on the campaign trail, all attuned to this pocket dimension. Well, as my end drew near, I realized I wouldn't need it as a liche, and gave the items away to a friend of mine so he could attune it to his Hidden Sanctuary and use it himself. Of course, I eventually decided I didn't want to live as a liche, puttering about my tomb and waiting for the Circle to call me to fight in the latest battle they'd been hired to fight in, so I sealed myself into my sarcophagus and suffocated to death instead of waiting for old age to take me."

Darian sat on the floor, his expression showing sympathy. "Don't worry, Eddas. You'll have this little room stocked up again, and you'll be strong enough to summon it and use it like you used to eventually. It's very nice - not too cold, not too warm, but just right. I can feel a little breeze coming in from the hole in the floor - I guess that's what's cooling it."

"Yes, that's part of the enchantment. Air is exchanged through the hole, so the temperature is always comfortable in here and the air never gets foul. Of course, if the air outside is full of smoke or bad smells, then this place gets that way, too. When I was using my Hidden Sanctuary often, I was always careful to set it up away from the other troops so I wouldn't have strange smells in here when I next conjured it."

I could tell by Darian's expression he was thinking, and he suddenly brightened as though struck by inspiration. "Hey! Eddas, you seem to be always worried about your animuary - you could attune it to here and store it in here!"

I chuckled. "Only a mundane would think of that. Darian, if I attune my animuary to this room and then let the spell drop, then my animuary will be in a pocket universe that can only be accessed by me and in

which time does not pass unless I've conjured it to me. Since nobody in the multiverse can conjure this room but me and perhaps a god, if I was killed or died, I'd be lost forever - I'd never be able to possess another body, and my spirit couldn't move on to the next life, I'd just cease to exist. No, Darian, that won't work. It shows you're *thinking*, however. If you understood more about magic theory, you'd have an advantage most kings don't have - no sorcerer would be able to trick you into spending piles of gold for his services by exaggerating what the powers of magic can do."

Darian looked at me sheepishly. "Next to you, I feel like a child. I mean, you know so *much*."

"Maybe, but keep in mind that you know things I don't. I can't track, I can't hunt, I don't know a *thing* about woodcraft, I have absolutely no idea what the local geography or history is - hell, I can't even *talk* to you without my ring of translation. Certainly you'll feel like you're ignorant if we're talking about things *I* know about, I'm a *mage!* You were never taught what I was taught - the knowledge is nearly useless to you except from the standpoint of being well-informed about what a mage can do. By the same token, I felt like a child watching you conceal our campsite - when you were done, *I* couldn't tell we were ever there. *You* still could. To you, that's a simple skill. Well, hyperdimensional mathematics is a simple skill to me. You're not stupid, you and I just have different skills and knowledges. Understanding that is an important part of being a king, as well. A good king always knows his limitations, and tries to understand the limitations of others."

"So, you're saying that we're equals?"

"Yes and no. Yes, in that there's things you know I don't and vice-versa. No, in that you're Darian Vencrior, the rightful king of Larinia, and I'm just Eddas Ayar. Yes, I'm a Hyperborean battle-mage from at least a millennium or two in the past. Certainly I can level a castle when I'm at my full power - though right now I don't think I could level a hut without fainting. Undoubtedly I understand more about the hidden mysteries of the multiverse than you - hell, I've even visited other planes of reality. Even so, I'm just a commoner - *you're* the king, not me."

"You could become a king - or queen, as the case may be. With your powers and skills, you could easily raise an army and carve out your own kingdom," Darian replied quietly.

I shook my head. "Assuming I wanted to, which I don't, and assuming I could get a few hundred thousand men to rally to the flag of a low-born half-elf woman, yes. Even so, I'd rule by right of might, not blood, and all my people would *never* see me as the rightful ruler. No, I'd always be seen as a

conqueror, a usurper. A true king rules because his people believe he has the *right* to rule. When they don't, they revolt. I'd always have to keep the people in line with soldiers, and I'd be constantly putting down one rebellion or another - not to mention fighting off the allies of the previous king I'd dethroned that would resent having a usurper as a neighbor. No, thank you, I think I'll pass. Hell, Darian, I built my tomb many leagues south of Hyperborea in land that was back then unknown wilderness just because I didn't want armies fighting over the lands I was buried under or farmers digging me up when they were trying to sink a new well. Rule my own kingdom? No, thanks. That's *your* place, not mine."

Darian sat quietly for a while, and we both listened to the rain falling in silence. Finally, he spoke again. "Well, we'll have to have a new name for you."

I raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Well, we can't stay in the wilderness forever. I was heading back to Greenhaven when I first ran across the thieves entering your tomb - you see, I'd lost my horse and the majority of my supplies when my horse stumbled and broke its leg a few weeks back. I can't keep us alive out here for long with virtually no supplies. We can sell the weapons and things the thieves had and gain more supplies, but eventually we'd still have to come back to town for more. That's how I survived all these years - I hunt and trap for furs and trade the furs for what I need. If we go to town, I can't call you 'Eddas' - people will recognize it as a man's name, and an ancient one at that. We might run across a mage or scribe who'd heard of you from an ancient legend or story, and they'd put two and two together and figure out who you were. At the same time, I can't just call you 'Sorceress' - that reveals what you are, and anyone who wants to attack us will try to kill you first. No, we'll need a new name."

"Well, did you have a name in mind?"

"Yes, actually - Raven. I was thinking that you were in many ways like the Raven that serves Yorindar, the God of Wisdom. You're wise and ancient, a good teacher and a good friend. Also, it fits with your black hair and eyes, and the name can be either male or female so I don't have to worry about revealing your true situation just by speaking with you when other people are around - though I still find it easier to think of you as a man with some sort of magical disguise that only makes you *look* like a woman."

I nodded. "I like it. Raven it is, then."

"Good. Raven, I have a question: My amulet says you're honorable and good-hearted, and yet from what you've told me, when your spirit possesses a body from the animuary, the soul of the previous owner is destroyed. How do you reconcile that with your morality?"

I glared at him in sudden anger. "That's why most mages who believe themselves to be good keep their animuary in their tomb *and* go to great pains to not only hide their animuary in their tomb, but to also hide the tomb itself. That way, the only people we'll possess are grave-robbers - the lowest of the low. Evil mages often take an iron box, pad it with silk or other soft materials, bolt the box shut and protect it with a permanent enchantment of the Spell of Invulnerability so the box won't open, won't rust and the padding won't rot. They then take it and bury it beneath a road. When they die, they'll possess the very next person that walks by. Sometimes they wear an iron box like that around their neck or on their belt - whoever kills them becomes the next victim. Sometimes they even hire innocents to wear it, or imbue the box with a spell or two the victim may find useful to encourage them to wear it all the time. I justify my actions by limiting the people that can be exposed to it to only grave-robbers, Darian. An evil mage doesn't bother to limit their potential victims," I replied hotly.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you angry. I know you said that Ellysande's soul wasn't destroyed - it had flown just as you entered the body. I was just wondering if it was something along the lines of a 'necessary evil'."

I shook my head. "Damn few evils are necessary, Darian, and far too many evils are justified as 'necessary' by those too lazy or selfish to do the right thing. As king, you should always try to avoid 'necessary evils' whenever possible. You may see them as necessary, but your people rarely will," I said, and Darian nodded as I continued. "Taxation is a good example. Many kings simply say 'it's a necessary evil' and tax the people for whatever they need, regardless of what that does to them. If they'd keep their taxes low, their people would have more money. Money begets money, and eventually your people will have more money than they did before, so the amount of revenue you gain can actually increase slowly if you keep your taxes reasonably low. It may take a long time, but it does work. If you have a sudden need for revenue, such as if you find yourself in a war and need more soldiers, you can raise taxes briefly. Even so, once the war is over, you should lower your taxes again so that the people of your kingdom can rebuild their wealth," I finished.

"I understand all that, except for one thing. I've heard that money begets money. My brother once said he understood it, but I never did. Can you explain it?"

"Certainly. Say you're a farmer and you only have a copper piece to your name. You buy a nanny goat

with that copper. You can kill the goat, eat it and sell the hide for a copper, or you can sell the milk for a tin piece a pail. Which do you choose?"

"Milk it, I guess - in the long run, you end up with more money. If you milk it a hundred times, you have as much as you'd get from selling its hide."

"Right. It takes longer, but you can do it. Now; after you've saved up a copper's worth of tin pennies, you buy a billy goat. After a while, you have several goats. You milk as many as you can, save one billy-goat for stud, and sell the excess. Now what do you have?"

"A goat-herd!" Darian laughed.

"Yes, but you also have money begetting money through the process of investments and dividends. You started with a copper, and after four or five years, you have a herd of goats worth perhaps twenty copper that are producing around thirty copper a year in milk and maybe another thirty in excess goats you sell. That's how money begets money. If you have the copper, you can make it grow with some hard work and a little luck. If the king taxes the copper out of your hands, however, you have nothing. Of course, this example is a very simple one, and it doesn't take business overhead or market forces into account."

"I can see there's a lot more to being a king than I thought," Darian observed.

"Yes, and your brother's had several years head start, so you'll have to really concentrate," I said, looking up to my window at the increasing light. "For now, the rain seems to have finally stopped. Let's lower the rope and climb down, and we'll head to Greenhaven. I want to see if we can't parlay the money we have into a little nest egg we can use in a year or two to regain your throne."

[Chapter Eight](#)

"Only a fool owns not a good bedroll and a stout tent. For each jeweled city that do sparkle in the sun, there be yet a thousand leagues of wilderness that do loom in the moonlight."

- *Dwarven proverb*

After a brief moment of amusement once we'd climbed down (Darian wondered how we'd get the rope back without climbing back up to untie it, and I showed him by simply dropping the Hidden Sanctuary

spell - the makeshift rope fell limply to the ground as the iron ring it was tied to and the sanctuary the ring was attached to ceased to exist), we headed towards Greenhaven again. I charged my staff each night during the journey, and by the time we sighted the city in the distance several days later, I finally had stored as much strength in it as it could contain.

A few days later, on what was the tenth day of my new life, Darian grinned and pointed as we crested a hill. "There. Greenhaven, my friend."

"I see," I replied. I looked at Greenhaven a little disdainfully - though a city of thirty thousand people might be large by Darian's standards, to me it was merely a walled town. I couldn't remember much about Hyperborean cities, but I had the impression that they were *much* larger. Darian guided us to the road, and we walked along it as we approached Greenhaven. The city was surrounded by farmlands, and I spotted several huts belonging to local farmers. The huts looked very familiar, and I suddenly realized that these people probably were building them very similarly to the way Hyperborean farmers and villagers had done. There were, after all, only a few ways one *could* build a hut, given the same raw materials and the same weather to protect against.

As we approached Greenhaven, I looked at the city's defenses. A simple crenelated wall surrounded the city - no moat, no ditches, no curtain walls, and there were not only ploughed fields that went nearly up to the walls itself, but there were small clumps of trees that had grown nearby the walls. A river ran nearby the town - the Silver River, Darian said it was called. It didn't look very silvery to me - it was muddy and dirty with animal and human wastes that had been tossed in upstream by the farmers, and looked like there hadn't been a living fish in it in ages. "Well, you have to drink wine, beer or ale in Greenhaven - the water will make you sick," Darian explained. When we were close enough that I could see that the river was separated from the city by nearly a quarter of a league, I snorted in disgust. "What is it?" Darian asked.

"Darian, look at this place. Its defenses are ridiculous - why, if I had a few thousand men and was at my full strength, I could easily take it. Their main water supply is polluted, so they left it outside the city. I could easily drive the farmers off by firing the fields, and after summoning a few days of good, hard rain I'd have the stream clear enough for my troops to use. These people obviously must use well-water. I could dam the river with an earth elemental, who could also destroy their wells deep underground. From there I could lay siege to this city with ease, and probably have them screaming with thirst in a matter of a few weeks - or less. If I didn't want to wait, I could simply have my troops approach and blast a hole in the wall for them - that's a single wall and doesn't appear to have much room at the top to station men, and I only see a few access towers. They wouldn't be able to concentrate enough archers to stop me, and if I chose to hide behind that tree there, I could protect my troops advance into the city by simply reflecting the defender's arrows back at them. I don't see any battle-towers, siege engines, or any mundane defenses that could stop me, so I guess the only way they defend this city is by magic. They must have at *least* twenty battle-mages to defend the city - it'd take that many to do the job right. A

squadron of ornithopters might also be able to do it - assuming I don't blow them out of the sky while they're trying," I said, pointing out the various features I'd seen.

Darian stopped walking and gave me a strange look. "Um, well, actually a city like this is defended by its troops fairly well. There *aren't* any battle-mages in the world today - well, at least not in Arcadia and Larinia, anyway. There are a few wizards who know spells that throw blasts of lightning, fire or other things, but not many, and they charge an enormous fee for their services. Besides that, my father said once that they're not really all that useful - he said he could hire a thousand warriors for what it takes to hire one wizard, and the warriors would be more useful in winning a war. In a battle, this city would probably have plenty of time to prepare because of the cloud of dust the enemy would raise as they approached. They'd wheel out their siege engines, set up spiked logs as barricades around the walls, and set the siege engines and troops behind that. On the walls, they'd put archers. Together, they'd hold off a large army - maybe as much as twenty thousand men being held off by one or two thousand defenders. Incidentally, what's an ornithopter?"

"*Gods*, you people know *nothing* about war! Twenty thousand men isn't an army - it's just a brigade. A *hundred thousand* men or more is an *army*. Plus, the defensive strategy you describe wouldn't hold off a *real* battle-mage and the eight or nine thousand troops the king placed under their direct command for longer than an hour or so. If they were relying on the dust to warn them of the approach of *my* troops, they'd be in for a nasty shock - I always make it rain ahead of my troops so that they don't raise a dust cloud. If this city didn't have powerful sorcerers protecting it, they'd be sunk. If you don't know about ornithopters, then that's another technology that's been lost, I guess. An ornithopter is a flying machine - it's got a simple spell that reduces its weight to nearly nothing, and four wings like a dragonfly that propel it through the air. Why, a single ornithopter armed with fire-bombs could easily start a blaze that would reduce this city to a smoking ruin before sunset. These people are lucky that the elves and dwarves are at peace with them - a dwarven army equipped with steam-cannons and blunderbusses could take this place in a day or two, and never have to cast a single spell. An elven army would swarm over this place like ants on a pile of sugar, blasting anything that moves with spells or a hail of arrows. Once they breached the walls, they'd use elven steel to wash the streets with a river of blood. No, Darian - these people are *very* fortunate that nobody who knows the business of war dislikes them. And the elves and dwarves *do* know war - the Hyperboreans learned much of what we knew about war from *them*, through painful object lessons taught at sword-point," I replied, shaking my head.

Darian and I resumed walking towards the city. I could see he was thinking about what I'd said. Finally, he spoke up as we were walking. "Raven, what you said has brought up several questions. First, how could you possibly command an army of a hundred thousand men? Magic? How do you keep them outfitted, fed and otherwise take care of them? Also, what's a steam cannon and what's a blunderbuss?"

I gaped at him in amazement. "I don't know what happened in that war you talked about that ended the Hyperborean age, but apparently a *lot* of developments were lost. Firstly, a steam-cannon is a dwarven

siege engine that propels iron or stone balls through the power of steam. They also sometimes launch barrels that are full of iron darts - the darts fly out of the barrel and rain down on the enemy," I began, but Darian interrupted.

"How can steam be used to do that? Magic?"

"No, actually - there's no magic involved at all. The dwarves know how to build it, I only know how it works. It's a little too complicated to explain to you, but it works kind of like an assassin's blowgun. Anyway, a blunderbuss is a firearm. It uses an explosive powder to propel a handful of lead balls at an enemy - very deadly up close. I can see you're about to ask - no, there's no magic involved there, either. Dwarves don't use magic much in battle, other than protective spells and spells to counter enemy wizards. As far as your first question is concerned, there's no magic involved *there*, either - what's involved is simply better logistics. Logistics is a military science, and we'll be spending a lot of time studying it, Darian. A king who doesn't grasp logistics can't support his army and can't fight. Commanding an army that size doesn't take magic either - though magic can definitely help. No, commanding an army that size is done mainly with training, logistics and a uniform system of signals."

"It seems as if you're saying the most important thing a king should study is warfare," Darian observed.

"Correct. Everything else you can make mistakes with, and learn from your mistakes. In war, you can't make mistakes. If you do, you won't be king - you'll be dead," I replied. This wasn't exactly correct - you could afford to make *some* mistakes in war, so long as you make fewer than your opponent does and your mistakes are less critical than theirs. Even so, that was something that Darian would learn by experience. I didn't want to train him to make mistakes - I wanted to train him to win.

"I see," he said, looking me over. I could tell he was examining the small half-elf body I was inhabiting and wondering what I had once been like, and my guess was confirmed by his next question. "Tell me, what did you used to look like before? I mean, in your previous life?"

"Well, I was a bit taller than you, and about as broad. I kept my head shaved, and always wore the steel skull-cap of the Dyclonic Circle of Hyperborean battle-mages. I wore my my ten magic rings, and my enchanted knife was always at my belt, and I preferred robes of black. In my youth, I wore a full beard and moustache, and my beard was black and curly. Like all Hyperboreans, my skin was olive and my eyes were dark brown. My voice was deep and low, not the pathetic little squeak I have now. Women once said I was handsome to gaze upon, and my limbs were strong and muscular. As I was a mage with

the power of *Mana* flowing through my veins since before my birth, I was much stronger than even I looked, however. I had built my strength over the years to the point where I could bend an iron poker in my hands with ease, and I once laid waste to armies with my spells. Now, I'm gasping for breath after a few incantations, and unconscious after three of my battle-spells. It's pathetic," I replied, making a *moue'*

"Interesting. That's very similar to how I already pictured you," Darian replied, then caught onto my last statement. "Hey, don't worry. You'll have your strength built up again eventually. Besides, maybe some day we'll discover a way to restore your former appearance and, ah, gender," he said, smiling. I grinned in return, and joined the small crowd of farmers and merchants entering Greenhaven.

We passed in through the main gate of Greenhaven, Darian paying the penny entrance toll for each of us. "Let's get a room, Raven," Darian said, using the new name he'd given me.

"You're the expert here - where do you suggest?"

"Well, I usually go to the Bear and Boar Inn when I'm in town - it's just down the street," Darian said, pointing to a sign painted with a Bear and Boar - apparently, either it was a local custom to paint signs of businesses with simple symbols, or the majority of the people in this city were only semi-literate, at best. Judging from the condition of the city, with offal in the streets and a general stench in the air indicating his people hadn't discovered simple sanitation techniques, I was betting the latter.

"Fine," I replied. We walked into the place, and I looked around.

'I hope Darian knows what he's doing,' I thought to myself. The inn was small, and the common room was dominated by a bar and a dozen tables. I looked at the other customers at the table and the bar - they were all men, and many looked like sailors (not surprising, considering the town was next to the ocean and the harbor was just outside the city walls). I was going to say something to Darian, but he simply walked up to the bar and greeted the barkeep warmly - I followed quietly.

"Tharald! How are you?" he called, clasping forearms with the barkeep.

"Darian! Back in town so soon? It's only been a couple months!" Tharald the barkeep called in return.

Darian shrugged. "My horse broke its leg - I lost most of my supplies, so I'm back to outfit myself again."

"Who's your pretty friend?" Tharald asked. I managed to keep my expression neutral, despite my irritation at Tharald's remark.

"Tharald, this is Raven. Raven, this is Tharald Round, owner of this inn," Darian said in introduction.

"Well, my dear. You certainly are a pretty little thing. Are there any more at home like you, or did Darian manage to land the only one?" Tharald asked, grinning.

'Gods, how do women put up with this kind of asinine behavior?' I wondered again. "No, Tharald. I'm the only one," I replied, for lack of anything better to say that wouldn't be rude.

Darian looked at me, realization finally dawning. "Ah, Tharald, Raven and I aren't an item - we're just friends," he said lamely and late.

Tharald's gap-toothed grin widened. "Good! Then there's still a chance for me yet."

'When pigs fly and sing opera,' I thought, disgusted. "Darian, let's just get a room," I said, wanting to cut this conversation off short. I saw Tharald's expression, and wished I'd kept my mouth shut.

"Oho! 'Just friends', is it Darian? Well, I'd better get you my best room and have your dinner sent up - I think you'll be busy for a while!" Tharald chortled.

I considered crushing Tharald's skull with my staff, but managed to restrain myself. "Tharald, we'll eat dinner here in the common room, and I'll take a separate room," I said, barely keeping the anger out of my voice.

"As you wish, my dear," Tharald replied, still grinning as he gave Darian a sly wink.

We took a seat at an empty table, and Darian began a fumbling apology. "Save it, Darian. We'll talk more later," I said, cutting him off. I spotted the serving-wench, and waved her over. "Gods, I'm starved. I hope your purse is deep - I'll have to get my coins exchanged first, as they're a little out-of-date and would draw some unwanted questions."

"I've got enough for the moment," Darian replied with a nod.

The girl came over, and gave Darian a sour look. "Darian, who is this *person*?"

"Ah, Penelope, this is Raven, a friend of mine," Darian said, suddenly realizing his error.

Penelope looked down at me with an expression of anger. "Darian, I thought *I* was your girlfriend."

"Darian and I aren't an item - we're just friends."

"You're damn right, bitch! Darian's *my* man! I've been waiting for him to finally come in from the woods for the last time for *five years*, and no damn elf-bitch is gonna screw up all my hard work!" she said, and tried to slap me. I blocked the blow easily and stood, sending the chair I was sitting on flying.

"Penelope, I don't want any trouble, I just want food," I said calmly, trying to keep this from getting out of hand. I did *not* want to participate in a cat-fight.

"Come on, Penelope, she means nothing to me! She's just a friend!" Darian tried, standing and taking Penelope by the shoulders. She slapped him hard, then turned to me with her hands spread into claws.

"I'm gonna rip your eyes out, bitch!" she yelled, then started to step in.

My body may have been weak, but it was fast and agile, and I was trained in hand-to-hand fighting. I easily sidestepped her charge and tripped her as she ran past, sending her sprawling. This brought guffaws from several of the other men in the common room who were watching. Penelope regained her feet, then closed with me more slowly.

"Penelope, stop this before I have to hurt you," I said warningly. Unfortunately, the woman's voice I was saddled with made it sound like an empty threat.

"Penelope, don't! You've got it all wrong!" Darian added uselessly.

Penelope ignored Darian's remark and my warning, stepping in to grab and wrestle. I drilled her in the face with a quick jab, stopping her advance and bloodying her nose. In my old body, I'd have smashed her nose flat, knocked her to the floor and rendered her unconscious for a while with the same blow. In this body, I just staggered her - Penelope was larger and stronger than I was. Penelope held her nose for a moment, then looked at her hand and realized she was bleeding. "You *bitch!*" she screamed, and dived low for my knees. I tried to jump aside and hit a table instead, and suddenly she was on top of me.

"Penelope, stop it!" Darian called, stepping over to pull her off of me. Unfortunately for her, I didn't wait to see if Darian would be able to restrain her - she was already trying to rake my face with her fingernails, and only my ring of protection saved me from injury (her fingernails simply skidded off uselessly, held away from my skin by a hair's-breadth). I smashed her across the temple with my elbow, knocking her out, then rolled out from under her and back to my feet. Penelope lay there, unconscious. I figured it was over - I was wrong.

"Look! She's killed her!" one of the men in the common-room yelled. Four men stood up, anger on their faces and their fists balled tight.

'Damn, it's going to be a bar-fight unless I do something to stop it,' I thought, and snatched up my staff. Whirling it before me to force the men back, I brought it down on one of the tables, smashing it to pieces - it was no mere club, after all.

Dead silence reigned.

"Gentlemen, that could just as easily have been your skulls. The woman's not dead, I merely knocked her out. Throw some water on her and she'll come around. As for me, I'm leaving. Anyone who tries to stop me had better know a good healer," I said, and backed up to the door. No one tried to stop me, and I walked out. Darian tried to follow, but Tharald grabbed him and started yelling about Penelope and the smashed table.

I waited across the street, trying to ignore the glances of the people on the street who found my chainmail garb and half-elven appearance strange. Eventually, Darian emerged. Spotting me, he unhitched the mule from the rail and came across the street. I turned and started walking away, forcing him to trot to catch up. I had no idea where I was going, other than away from here and deeper into the city.

"Raven, wait!" Darian called. I slowed my step, and Darian caught up. "I'm sorry. I should have realized that I couldn't take you to my usual place. I'd pretty much stopped thinking of you as a woman, and didn't realize the trouble that might ensue. I hope you're alright."

I stopped and looked at him. "Darian, a king always has to think ahead, and think about what might go wrong. Anticipating problems and planning for them is important for anyone, especially a king. Don't worry about me, Darian - I'm not hurt. Unfortunately, because you didn't think ahead, that woman *did* get hurt. Her reaction was natural and predictable - you've known her for years, and should have known what her reaction would be to seeing you with another woman. Meanwhile, Tharald treated me like I was your lover, or perhaps some cheap whore you'd hired for the night. I *won't* have this kind of thing happening again, Darian!"

Darian blushed deeply. "I'm sorry, I'll do my best to see it doesn't."

"Alright. Now, let's go to a different inn - preferably one a little higher-class, so I won't get attacked by the hired help or the patrons," I said, trying to control my anger.

"Well, we'll have to sell some of the thief's goods before we do - I had to empty my purse to keep Tharald from calling the city guards and sending them after you. He woke Penelope with a bucket of water, like you suggested, but he was very angry about the table and the fact that Penelope got a bloody nose - she's his niece. I'm broke," he said, sheepishly.

"*Dammit*, Darian! Alright, lead me to a moneylender. I've got a few coins we can exchange for some local currency," I grumbled.

As we walked, I slipped the gold coins I had out of my gloves and boots, palming them. I had plenty back in my tomb and could easily afford to get more, but I needed a quiet place (like a private room) where I could cast the Spell of Returning without being noticed. After a few minutes, Darian eventually stopped before a small building with barred windows, the sign above simply reading "Rhazes." Apparently, all those who entered here already knew what was inside. I went in, Darian following. The moneylender sat behind a desk, and had two large and burly men as bodyguards, each armed with a broadsword. He was a short, fat little man with mouse-brown hair whose rat-like eyes gleamed as I came in and he looked me over. "Good afternoon, my dear. What can I do for you today?" he asked.

"I'd like to exchange these coins for some local currency," I said, placing the eight gold coins on the desk.

He picked one up and looked at it closely. "Where did you get this?" he asked, his face showing he recognized its age despite his efforts to conceal his reaction.

"Found it," I replied, and Rhazes and I exchanged a look.

"Of course, my dear," he replied, his smile never fading. He gestured to one of his bodyguards, who brought over a small sack. He laid my coins in a line and laid eight gold coins of the local currency across from them, and I nodded. After he swept my coins into his hand and dropped them into his desk, he spoke up again. "Would you like change for one of these coins?"

"Please," I replied. He then counted out nine silver coins and ten copper coins as he withdrew one of the gold coins. I had Darian take the coins and put them in his purse, and we walked out again.

"Well, that was easy enough. That's more money than I've had in years," Darian commented.

"It should be. The coins I gave him were worth far more than a straight exchange. Didn't you notice he didn't even take a small cut for his services? I'd estimate that my coins were worth about ten times what he gave us."

"You mean Rhazes cheated us?" Darian replied angrily.

"No, he believed the coins were stolen, possibly from a collector. Didn't you see the look we gave each other, and how he laid each of his coins opposite to one of mine? He and I both knew the coins were more valuable than the equivalent coins of this kingdom. He assumed I'd stolen them, and was saying that he'd give me the equivalent coins and remain silent about where he got them. In exchange, I take what he gives me and keep my mouth shut. I can bring other coins here, and he'll exchange them just as readily - he and I now have an understanding."

"I guess I've never been very streetwise," Darian replied sheepishly.

"I'll say. For now, let's get me my own belt-purse so I can carry my own money - I see a leather store just down the street. From there, we'll try again at getting a room."

After Darian had bought me a belt-pouch and I'd secured it to the belt of my chain skirt with the remainder of my money inside, we continued down the street with Darian and the mule in the lead. I

spotted a beggar in gray robes sitting at the side of the street, and Darian said "That's a priest of Yorindar. They live by begging." I started to pull out a coin, but Darian shook his head. "They only take food and drink."

I nodded, remembering priests who lived under similar vows in Hyperborea, then drew slightly on my staff, conjuring a wooden bowl of stew and a wooden pitcher of watered wine. Kneeling, I laid them before the priest. He looked up to me, and I felt power flow. *'This is no mere beggar-priest, but a sorcerer,'* I thought as the priest laid his hand on my forehead in blessing.

"Your mind is troubled, my child. Be at peace and accept your fate, Mage. Remember, the flesh we wear is a mere garment, a covering for the soul. Keep that in mind, my son," the priest whispered, and I stood quickly and in shock. The priest nodded to me, and I nodded in return and walked away.

"What did he say?" Darian asked as we continued down the street.

"He blessed me, and told me to be at peace," I replied, my mind still whirling at the priest's words, and my heart not wishing to share those words with everyone on the street. As I pondered them, I realized his words had truly made me feel *much* better about being a woman - which made me even less inclined to share them for the moment.

Darian eventually led me to a large inn with a painted sign showing a gold or gilded cup. I wasn't worried that a higher-class inn might be more expensive - I could buy eight or nine broadswords with the money I had, or four riding horses, or perhaps even a full suit of chainmail. In addition, this was only a fraction of the treasure I had in my tomb. No, money wasn't a problem. After we entered I looked around. The clientele was mostly men, all well dressed, with a handful of women who appeared to be their guests. Some wore finely-crafted armor, and nearly every single one was armed - yet despite all the weaponry, the atmosphere was quiet, relaxed, and quite elegant. The conversations were subdued and genial as the patrons chatted over their cups, and occasionally laughed at a jest of their friends. Quite lovely, actually - there was even a musician playing a psaltery in one corner for entertainment. "Very nice, Darian. We should have come here first."

"Well, I don't come here often, as it's quite expensive. This place is frequented mainly by professional adventurers - they can afford it," he said, and led me to an empty table.

I nodded - I could see why Darian might like it here, as he was, in truth, a king who had been geased to live the life of a simple hunter. The atmosphere here probably reminded him of what he once had, years ago, in his home in Steelgate. "What, like mercenary soldiers?" I asked as we sat down.

"No, though they do that on occasion. These are men from different walks of life who have all taken up the life of an adventurer. They make good money by hiring out as caravan guards or bodyguards or mercenaries. They also hunt down wanted criminals for the king's bounty, hire themselves out to recover stolen items or kidnapped daughters, and other adventurous things. A few are even moderately famous for that... Heroes, to some. Of course, that's not where their real wealth comes from. Their real wealth comes from searching out ancient tombs and catacombs and looting them," Darian replied.

I almost shouted in anger, but managed to control myself. "*Grave-robbers? You brought me to an inn frequented by grave-robbers?*" I hissed.

Darian blinked in surprise, then looked at me sheepishly. "Well... I suppose I did, yes. I'm sorry, but to us, it isn't grave-robbing when the tomb is hundreds or thousands of years old. They call it 'delving', and sometimes call themselves 'delvers.' It's considered quite adventurous and bold..."

"Try telling that to an elf, Darian. They live six or eight centuries, sometimes more - a tomb that's a thousand years old is *nothing*," I replied in disgust, barely able to keep my voice down. "These... 'Delvers' probably have to skulk about in the dark of night when they go to practice their craft in the lands of the elves, Darian, for the tombs they are looting when the stars are out are carefully tended by living relatives when the morning light comes. They may see themselves as brave and noble adventures, seeking out lost necropolises and looting the wealth of the ancients, but the truth is they're little better than any thug with a shovel who digs through *your* graveyards, seeking to gather a bit of jewelry or pry the gold fillings out of a few skulls. Hell, Darian, my *own* tomb is probably only fifteen or sixteen centuries old, and I *hardly* want these... Glorified grave-robbers, here, looting it."

"Darian!" one of the men called suddenly, spotting us at our table from where he stood at the bar.

"Hello, Corwin," Darian called back, smiling. I simply gazed at Darian coldly, and when he caught my gaze, he blushed slightly.

Darian's friend strode over. He was a large, powerful man, his red silk doublet and hose barely covering his enormous bulk. A gleam of metal and a slight ripple in the fabric at the top of his shoulders showed me he was almost certainly wearing a light chain shirt beneath. At his hip he bore a bejewelled longsword, and his gait and smooth step showed he was likely a skilled and deadly warrior. His close-cropped blonde hair and sparkling green eyes probably turned many a woman's head here in this little dump of a city, though I wondered how he'd gotten the scar on his cheek. "How are you, my friend?" Corwin asked, extending a meaty hand to Darian.

'Bah,' I thought to myself as I watched Darian shake hands with Corwin. 'Now this is who should have been stuffed down the hole. A body like that would have been far more useful than this one.'

"I'm fine, Corwin."

"And who is your lovely friend?" Corwin asked, smiling at me. He had manners, at least - his gaze was on my face, not my breasts.

"Corwin, this is Raven," Darian replied simply, and I extended a hand. It wouldn't do to make a scene.

"Ah! A lovely name. I'm quite pleased to meet you, my lady," Corwin replied, taking my hand gently by the fingers for a moment, and inclining his head politely. He then looked back to Darian. "Tell me, my friend, what have you been up to? Word had it you wouldn't be back in town for at least another two or three months."

"My horse broke its leg, and I lost most of my supplies. I had to come back to town - I met Raven along the way, and we became friends."

"Then you're doubly fortunate, friend, for I just might need your help," Corwin replied, grinning broadly. "Your friend would be invited, too, if she's a good hand with that staff."

"Oh? What's happened?" Darian asked.

"Well, Arlon-hap has hired me to find someone who burgled his home, and stole a map of his. From what I've been able to find out, a flame-haired half-elf named Ellysande Northstar stole it. She's a member of the thief's guild, but once I greased a few palms with silver, I found out where she'd gone. Apparently the map is of some ancient Hyperborean tombs, Darian - immensely valuable. The loot from just one tomb might be staggering. Well, she and four other thieves set out to find one of the tombs on that map a fortnight ago - and that's the last anyone saw of them. I'd need an expert tracker to help me find them, Darian - and that means you. All anyone knows is they went east."

I gazed at Corwin, controlling myself with an effort. "And I suppose that once you have the map, you'll simply return it?"

Corwin did a double-take at me, then laughed. "Of course not! The loot from one or two of those tombs could *easily* be worth a king's ransom! I'll just hand Arlon-hap his money back, tell him I couldn't find the thieves, then go after the loot myself," he said, and winked. "You two can come along, of course - though we'll need a skilled mage at our side. Many of those ancient Hyperborean tombs were the tombs of battle-mages, and they kept their souls in tiny little vessels of crystal to possess the bodies of anyone who might think to rob their tombs. We'd need a skilled mage to summon an elemental or something to find and crush those vessels before we could loot the tomb. Their services won't come cheap, of course, but there should still be plenty of loot to go around. What do you say?"

Darian blanched, glancing briefly to me. I kept my face smooth with the skill of an expert *chatto* player, and Darian glanced back to his friend. "Well... Raven and I have... Some other commitments, unfortunately."

Corwin grinned wryly. "Alright, my friend. Let me know if you change your mind." Corwin lifted his head, spotting another person in the inn he apparently knew. "Ah! Barlos is here. He and I are to go gambling at the Red Unicorn, tonight. It was nice meeting you, Raven. See you later, Darian - don't take too long to change your mind, now!" he said, and winked before striding away.

"Grave-robbers," I muttered, and gazed at Darian coldly. "You've brought me to a nest of grave-robbers. The lowest of the low."

"You're right - and I'm sorry. It's just that people today just don't look at it like that."

"And what if he finds someone to help him, and they find my tomb? They'd destroy my animuary without a thought. I'd be *dead*, Darian, my soul destroyed."

Darian shook his head. "Not possible. It's been two weeks, and we've had a good, hard rain, thanks to you. The tracks of those thieves are long gone."

I nodded, still fuming as I watched Corwin leave the inn with his 'delver' friend. If Darian said it couldn't be done, it almost certainly couldn't - he was a true master at tracking and hunting. But I was still furious at Corwin. "He talks about destroying the soul of another human being as though it was nothing, simply because they're dead and he wants to steal their treasure," I muttered. "They are scum, Darian. Lower than maggots."

Darian nodded. "You're right again, Raven," he replied, his voice low, "though if I hadn't met you, I never would have understood that what they do *is* grave-robbing. You're right, my friend. Though I never saw it before, now I can see that they're little better than any dirty ruffian who sneaks into a grave-yard with pick and shovel and loots the helpless dead. They dress well and speak politely, much as any proper nobleman might... Adventurers even have a modicum of respect in our society, and some are even seen as heroes... But in truth, they're low and base creatures whose greatest wealth comes from looting the ancient dead. Now I can see that... And when you help me re-assume my rightful place, I'll pass a law against it. I'll pass a law against *all* grave robbing, whether the grave is fresh or ancient. I'm only sorry I couldn't see them for what they were, before..."

"Well... I suppose you can't help living in this culture. If you *do* pass a law like that, I'll have to move my tomb to your lands to take advantage of it," I replied, and then we both fell silent as the serving-wench approached.

We talked quietly as we ate, and planned what we would do. We'd spend the next few years training Darian to be king and increasing my endurance, and then travel to Larinia. Once there, I planned on crushing Gorlon-mak and quietly eliminating Darian's treacherous brother Dorian, then having Darian simply assume his place - since they *were* twins and Dorian had assumed Darian's name, it shouldn't be that difficult. Once I was back to my full power, I was certain that Gorlon-mak couldn't possibly resist

me - from Darian's description of the way his kingdom waged war, I was pretty sure that it would take his entire *army* to stop me at my full power.

Yes, I could see it all - after I'd restored Darian to his rightful place and summoned an elemental to secretly move my tomb, I could spend the next few hundred years of this body's life studying ways to bring Dyarzi back to me. With that much time available, I was sure I'd succeed. Of course, I probably could have discovered a way to bring her back after a few hundred years as a liche, but apparently my wits *were* a bit muddled with senility towards the end, and that thought simply hadn't occurred to me. Yes, barring any unforeseen complications, I'd have Darian back on his throne in two or three years, and begin my studies in magic that would bring Dyarzi back to me. I smiled - I could already smell Dyarzi's perfume.

We were just about to rise and ask the innkeeper about the price of two separate rooms for us to stay the night when four men entered. Two carried clubs, one was dressed in the tattered robes of a mage, and the third I recognized easily - it was Tharald. "There. There's the half-elf bitch who attacked my niece. 'Ware her staff, it's surely magic," he said, pointing.

"Tharald, what are you doing? I thought we settled this!" Darian called, rising to his feet. I stood also, readying my staff. I was hoping Darian could defuse the situation, but I was ready in case he could not.

"Take the one in green, I'll handle the woman," the mage called, beginning a spell. The two men fell upon Darian, clubbing him senseless as he tried to draw his sword. I couldn't use my usual battle magic in here - though I might despise the 'delvers' as grave-robbers, the people who worked at this inn hardly deserved to be killed for my own distaste of their patrons. Instead, I drew upon my staff and tried to cast the Spell of Evisceration. Unfortunately, before I could complete it, the mage finished his spell - a simple Magic Dart.

An age ago, in my former body, I'd have laughed at this feeble attempt to capture me. I'd have easily shrugged off the attack, stepped over to this obviously puny hedge-wizard and smashed his skull with my staff. An age ago, his spell would have hit me with little or no effect, like water sprayed on a duck's back, and I'd have finished my spell of evisceration and ripped out this little weakling's heart, calling it forth from his chest to fly across the room and come to rest in my hand, still beating. Unfortunately, in this body, I couldn't resist the attack. The spell pounded through the protection afforded by my magic ring and smashed me to the floor, unconscious.

[Chapter Nine](#)

"The sea is my mother, the wind my sister, and the stars we guide by my father. That family I thought I had on land was but an illusion - the sea, the wind and the stars are my true family."

- *Vilandian apprentice seaman's oath.*

We Hyperboreans had a god in our pantheon we never prayed to. His name is Kargato. He's the god who punishes those who put all their eggs in one basket, or count their chickens before they hatch. Hyperboreans never prayed to Kargato, we just hoped we wouldn't attract his attention. When we did attract his attention, we acknowledged our mistake and tried never to repeat it. Thus, when I awoke, the first thing that ran through my head was '*Kargato!*' I knew I had offended this ancient god of the Hyperboreans with my pre-hatch chicken accounting, and now I had paid the price.

'Or perhaps the full penalty has yet to be paid,' I thought glumly as I opened my eyes and examined my situation. I was laying on a wooden floor in darkness, my breasts, belly and thighs bare against the wood. The floor pitched slowly, and I realized I was aboard a ship, probably at sea. I was nude, manacled hand and foot with my wrists behind me, and gagged. My magic rings were gone, the boots and gloves were gone, everything was gone. My heart sank in despair. I'd probably never recover my magic items, and that was a crushing blow. I had lost Dyarzi's equipment, as well, and I felt I'd failed her again. Most likely her gloves and boots graced the hands and feet of some flea-bitten thug back in Greenhaven.

I strained against the manacles, but the frail body I was in couldn't possibly snap them. I might have in my old body, but it lay moldering in my tomb. I tried to wriggle my hands loose from them, but my captors knew their business - they'd selected a set small enough to clip closely about the tiny wrists of a half-elf female. I considered summoning my staff to my hands, but realized that was pointless - there was nothing I could do with it once I had it. Bound and gagged, I simply couldn't fight or cast spells. I was helpless.

I lay there in the dark for awhile, miserable. I could hear voices muffled by the deck of the ship, and realized I was belowdecks. Without my ring of translation, however, I had no idea what they were saying. My best guess was I'd been sold as a slave. Darian hadn't mentioned there being slavery in Arcadia, but it seemed a likely bet. Darian was most likely dead or imprisoned. Either way, he was gone, too. I was alone.

I saw a gleam of light near the floor, and realized I was looking at a dim sliver of candlelight. I could hear voices and footsteps, and knew that my captors approached. The tiny fraction of light was enough for the half-elven eyes I'd appropriated to easily see the room I was in. It was small, perhaps only six cubits on a side, and there were several barrels stacked against one wall - a storage room of some kind. I was simply laid down in the small aisle they'd left themselves to get at the barrels more conveniently.

The door opened, and three men entered the room. One carried a lantern, and he hung it from a hook in the ceiling while a second man dragged me to my feet by my hair (which was *very* painful). The third I recognized - the mage in the tattered robes. He grinned toothily at me and held up his hands for me to see. All my rings were present on his fingers. "*So, bitch, what do you think? Do your rings look good on me?*" he asked, my own ring of translation he wore allowing him to speak to me in the Hyperborean tongue. I glared at him in hatred. Somehow, some way, this bastard would die painfully.

The second man ran his fingers over my flanks and belly, then squeezed my right breast painfully. I winced, but made no outcry. I was determined not to give them the satisfaction. He made some comment to the first I couldn't understand, and all three grinned. They probably were commenting on my hairlessness. The first man then spoke and made a gesture, and the mage and the second man laid down one of the barrels on its side as the first one held me by the arm. The second man then produced a key, and unlocked the manacles on my wrists.

I instantly lashed out with my fist, trying to deck the mage. I clipped him squarely across the jaw, but it only rocked him back. The other two men then grabbed my arms and held me over the barrel, and the mage produced a rope. "*You'll pay for that, bitch,*" he said with an evil leer. He clipped the manacles back on my wrists and tied the rope to the chain, then passed it underneath the barrel and tied it around my knees. I looked over my shoulder, and saw the first man fumbling with the ties for his codpiece. In horror, I realized what they intended, and my bladder released.

This only caused them to laugh.

To say that the experience of being gang-raped was painful is at least an understatement, and at worst an insult. It was agonizing. The pain was sharp and fierce, like a knife applied to my groin. It was also the most humiliating moment of my life. I wanted to die. I begged every god I knew to let me die. If I could have, I'd have bitten my tongue off and tried to drown in my own blood. Unfortunately, the gag prevented that. I tried to remain silent and not give them the satisfaction of knowing I was in pain, but I couldn't. I screamed in agony and shame, my hateful woman's voice muffled by the gag. When they were through, they simply left me as I was and closed the door behind them.

I remained there, tied in a crouch over the barrel, and wept.

I had never raped a woman in my living days. I considered the action beneath me. Even so, I had never understood why some women who were raped slit their throats afterwards. Now I knew. It dawned on

me that Ellysande Northstar might not have been killed by the blow to her head alone. Her spirit simply might not have wanted to live anymore, and had taken the opportunity afforded by the wound to flee into the afterlife. Now, after knowing what she'd been through, I envied her release from this horror.

After several hours alone in the darkness, my stomach began to growl. I was also growing extremely thirsty. Unfortunately, they'd have to remove the gag to feed and water me. If they did, I'd be able to cast spells. Since tatter-robos was a member of this ship's crew, it seemed likely he'd have warned them not to un-gag me. Most likely, I'd simply die here. I prayed to every god I knew to help me, and after what felt like many hours, another light accompanied by footsteps approached. My hope was quickly transformed into horror and shame again. It was six more of the ship's crew, here to avail themselves of me. I sobbed openly in despair and agony.

This routine continued for what felt like an eternity, but I knew from the ringing of the ship's bell was only two days. I was delirious with thirst, maddened by the ordeal I'd undergone, and realized in the back of my mind that I was going to die. I didn't fear my death. No, I welcomed it, I prayed for it, and I begged for it. I began to hallucinate. A short-eared rabbit with a long, thin, hairless tail came, and I watched it scurry around for a moment. When it tried to bite me, I struggled and screamed until it went away. I heard snatches of songs being sung from somewhere above me by the voices of men. Finally, after three days, the glowing figure of a robed man stood before me. *'Morgar, God of Death, please let this be you. Please take me now. I want to go to the Plane of Shades. I want to see Dyarzi again. Please, Morgar. Take me home.'*

'That cannot be, Eddas Ayar. Your soul is tied to an animuary. You are beyond my reach forever. Your home is in a cold tomb many leagues behind this ship,' the glowing figure replied in my mind.

'Please, then, at least let me see her before I die. Let me hear her voice. Let me gaze upon her face at least once. I am fading. I can feel my death coming. Please, Morgar.'

'That also cannot be. You are alone, Eddas Ayar, and will be for eternity. The body you wear now is doomed to die, and this death will be a miserable and dishonorable one. You will not be able to revenge yourselves on your killers, as it will be millennia before another stumbles into your tomb again - these men will be long dead by then. Give up. It's hopeless.'

'Please, please help me!'

'No. Only you can help yourself,' the figure replied, and faded from view.

I screamed my indignation. After all I'd done for Morgar, helping him fill the Plane of Shades with the souls of warriors I'd slain in battle, he abandons me when I need him the most. I struggled mightily to break free, so I could reach out and throttle him before he had completely faded. He may be a god, he may be a hallucination, but I was going to do everything in my power to kill him either way. Suddenly, the rope that went around my knees, under the barrel and to the chain between my wrists parted. I fell back, exhausted, and lost consciousness for a while.

When I awoke, I felt about myself. I discovered that the mage's knotwork had been faulty - after three days of strain, the knot he'd tied to the chain between my wrists had slipped. The ship's bell rang three times from somewhere overhead. *'Damn, that means they'll be here in a few hours or so to rape me again,'* I thought, and grew very depressed. I was tired, starving, and dying of thirst, so it was several minutes before it dawned on me that I was free.

I lifted my manacled hands in the darkness, realizing with joy that I could move again. Quickly I pulled my gag free, and was about to begin an incantation to blow a hole in the hull of this ship and drown us all when I realized I both lacked the strength and simply didn't need to. Here was my opportunity for vengeance. I wasn't going to waste it.

I knew no spells for unlocking locks, I'm a battle-mage, not a thief. Even so, there were other ways of freeing myself. First things first - I summoned my staff to my hands. I didn't know where it had been, though most likely it had simply been tossed into a ditch once tatter-ropes realized what it was. It felt dirty and muddy, so that seemed the most likely bet. I drew on the strength I'd stored in my staff days before, and conjured a simple bowl of oatmeal and a large pitcher of water for me. It took great effort not to consume it all at once - it'd been three days since I'd eaten or drunk anything, and I didn't want to waste any of it by vomiting. I took breaks between slow and careful mouthfuls of food and deliberate swallows of water to untie the rope around my knees. When I was done, I rested for a bit to recover some more strength and let my meager meal settle. When I felt a little better, I took my staff and rapped the chain between my ankles, willing the staff to part the links. After a few blows, my ankles were free. Placing the staff between my legs, I then rubbed the links of the manacles on my wrist against it, willing it to cut. That took longer, but eventually the staff's destructive power took its toll on the iron and the links parted. It would have been faster if my staff had been a knife or sword, but it wasn't.

"Hah. Free," I said aloud, and was shocked at the sound of the woman's voice in my ears. Three days of

screaming and begging for mercy, all while dying of thirst had left me hoarse, and my voice was little more than a feeble croak. Using my staff for support, I pulled myself to my feet.

I swayed there in the darkness, and knew I was in no shape to fight at the moment. I would have to use stealth if I was to survive. I quietly opened the door to the storage room, then looked out into the passageway beyond. The ship was large, and I judged I was near the keel. Few lights were lit this far belowdecks. Drawing deeply on my staff, I cast my spell of invisibility. It wouldn't last for long, but it might give me the time I needed.

Reaching out to sense the *Mana*-flow around me, I quietly darted along the wooden corridors of the ship. I only had to step around four sailors who worked belowdecks, my bare feet silent on the wooden floors. Shortly, my efforts were rewarded - I sensed *Mana*-flow on the deck above me. Judging by the patterns, it was Tatter-rob's and my items. I went up a gangway, stepping around two more sailors, then followed the indications to a door. I tried the handle, pleased to find it was unlocked, then opened the door as quietly as I could.

Tatter-rob's was seated at a desk, poring over a tome before him. Knowing he wore my own ring of protection, I snuck up behind him and swung my staff at the base of his skull as hard as I could.

Some small sound, some instinct must have warned him, for he started to turn in his chair as the blow landed, and took the blow along the side of his head instead. He fell to the floor heavily, blood flowing freely from his split scalp, but was still breathing when I checked him - my ring of protection had saved him. Quickly stepping back to the door, I closed it and threw the latch. My spell of invisibility couldn't have more than a few moments left, though I'd drained my staff to make it last as long as I could.

I quickly pulled my rings off his fingers and slipped them back onto mine, then activated my ring of protection to armor myself. I then walked over and picked up my grimoire from his desk, the book he'd been reading with such interest, and slipped it back into its protective bag. Lifting up a jewel on my right thumb ring to reveal a tiny compartment, I slipped the enormous book back into the enchanted extra-dimensional space that the ring contained. I then searched his cabin for the rest of my items. If mages today were anything like mages were in my day, he'd have saved *all* my items. He may have no need for the knife, gloves, boots and magic skeleton key, but ensorcelled items were too valuable to simply throw away. If he'd ever run across a mage who *did* have a need for them, he could trade them for a spell or two. I was rewarded in my search when I opened his footlocker - he'd retained not only my knife, the boots and gloves, the little silver skull-key and hair-ring, but he'd also kept the elf-chain garment. This at least showed he had *some* brains - even the little scraps of elf-chain in it were valuable, and an elf would give him a fair price for it. The garment I'd made out of the thief's chain shirts he'd apparently tossed away, however (which made sense, as they were non-magical and not worth much). I

also found his own grimoire, a thin tome written in a scratchy hand. I tucked it in my thumb-ring's compartment, and was relieved to discover it fit. Though I doubted he knew any spells of interest to me, no mage with half a brain ignores the grimoire of a defeated foe.

After using the skull-key to rid myself of the manacles, I dressed in the elf-chain garment again. I noticed as I did so that my groin and inner thighs were a mess from dried blood. This brought a flare of anger as I remembered my ordeal, and I drew my knife as I stepped up to the unconscious mage. I was simply going to slit his throat, then came up with a better idea. Cutting his robes into strips, I bound and gagged him tightly with his hands behind him as he lay there on the floor. Sheathing my dagger and searching him, I found he also had a dagger, apparently his wizard's staff, and Darian's little artifact-amulet. I drew his knife and tossed it aside, slipped Darian's amulet over my own neck, then took my staff and smashed his hands to a bloody pulp against the deck.

He awoke during this with a muffled shriek, and instantly willed his staff to his hands. Unfortunately, his broken and smashed fingers couldn't grip it and it slipped to the deck, out of his reach. He couldn't even snap it to try to kill me in the explosion that would follow. "You should have killed me, Tatter-robles. Now it is *you* who shall pay," I croaked hoarsely, and drew my knife. He tried to throw himself to the door to escape, but I leaped upon him, rolled him face up and sat on his chest, then pulled his robe up. He let out a muffled, high-pitched squeal as I cut, the blood pouring from between his legs like a river. I got off of him, then looked down at him as he struggled to press his thighs together against his groin in a useless attempt to stop the flow of blood.

"I'll bet you'd like me to finish you, Tatter-robles. I'll bet if you could speak, you'd beg me to slit your throat. I'm not going to, though. You didn't show mercy to me, so I have no reason to show mercy to you. No, I fully intend to stand here and watch you bleed to death, just as you intended to allow me to die of thirst and starvation while you and the men of this ship raped me over and over again. Oh, and here - you can have this," I rasped, and tossed his genitalia on the floor before his face. He screamed through his gag, then fainted. After a few minutes, his breathing grew faint, then stopped. His useless dagger shimmered, then crumbled to dust. He was dead.

And that, somehow, was immensely satisfying.

I'd killed many men in my time - most in battle, but some in duels. Nearly every man who had fallen to my spells or my staff had been a thousand times more worthy than this little cockroach whose corpse lay before me. Yet, his death gave me more satisfaction than any other ever had.

I realized I still had the rest of the ship to deal with, and sat down to meditate on a spot of the deck not covered in the mage's blood. After a couple hours, I felt a little better. My body needed rest and food to fully recover, but I had enough strength for a simple battle-illusion. Without a mage to defend them by dispelling the illusion, I was certain I could beat them. I blocked the door with the desk, hid myself in a corner and covered myself with a blanket, then relaxed. I merely had to wait.

Finally, I heard a hue and cry as my absence from the storage room was discovered by the latest group of sailors, come to pay their respects. I then cast my spell of astral projection, and sent my spirit soaring through the ship to the top deck. A sailor came running up a gangway from below, bellowing about my absence. I then cast the illusion, crafting it carefully. I was weak and trembling afterwards, as the strength for any spell cast on the Astral was limited by that of the physical body one's spirit was tied to, but the spell was successful. Each sailor on deck was now covered with an illusion of me, and they knew not which was friend or foe. I then let my spirit return to my body, uncovered myself, then gave them a minute or two to begin killing each other as I rested to recover my strength again.

An age ago, I used spells like that to confuse enemy soldiers, to send an entire company into a self-destructive melee as they suddenly saw themselves surrounded by the enemy. Its area limited its effectiveness in battle, but it was a simple spell that hardly drained my old body at all, and as such was useful for conserving my strength as I eliminated a single company of men. By the sounds coming from above my head, the men aboard ship were fighting furiously with each other. I pulled the desk away from the door, then unlatched it and stepped out of the cabin. It was time to join them above.

As soon as I reached the top deck, I could see that all or nearly all of the ship's crew was there, each struggling to kill the others. I saw at least forty men covered with an illusion of me, hacking at each other with swords, stabbing and ripping with boarding pikes and smashing at each other with belaying pins. One was roaring out commands, trying to restore order, and I ran over to him and began swinging with my staff. For several moments we traded blows. He was stronger than I, and armed with a thick-bladed cutlass. He also hadn't been starved and dehydrated for three days, and was fighting for his life. Even so, I was faster, better-trained and bound to kill him even if I had to die in the process - all I could hear was the blood singing in my veins for vengeance. His foot slipped in a puddle of blood on the deck, I slapped his sword aside with the butt of my staff, then spun it and smashed him in the head. He fell heavily, the illusion fading, revealing the first man who'd come to 'visit' me - apparently the ship's captain. I then turned to the remaining men, stepped up to them, and screamed a hoarse cry for vengeance.

Then I began killing them.

At first it was simple - I kept moving, running up behind my enemies and smashing them down, then finishing their startled opponent. After a minute or two, they began to realize that *I* was their real enemy,

and tried to group together near the forecandle to defend themselves. Another illusion-covered sailor stood to my left and fought his own friends, and I decided to let him be while I concentrated on killing the remainder. The half-elven body I'd appropriated was swift, far swifter than they, and the enchantment in my boots made me sure-footed on a deck that now was slippery with blood. My staff flew in my hands, a true extension of my will, and my will was to kill them all.

Soon there was only one remaining - the one who'd been fighting to my left. He was woozy from loss of blood, and was staggering from the effect of half a dozen light wounds scattered across his body, my spell faithfully showing them on the bare, illusory flesh of the mirror-image of me he was cloaked in. I turned to him, raised my staff, and charged in for the kill. Just before I swung, he looked to me and tossed his weapon aside. I managed to halt my blow a finger's breadth from his head as he dropped to his knees in surrender. I dropped the illusion (there was no need for it now), and was stunned. It was Darian.

"Darian! By the gods! I could have killed you! Why didn't you speak out?!" I said hoarsely.

Darian looked up to me, his face a mixture of relief and exhaustion. "It was faster. I saw your face, and could tell that you were in no mood to waste time talking. I knew it was you - everyone else had swords, belaying pins and boarding pikes. Only you would have a staff. I stopped men from attacking you from behind three times, but had to run like hell when I saw your eyes light on me. Finally, you had the last six or so cornered, so I stepped up to help you. When the last went down and you turned to me, I knew I had perhaps a heartbeat or two to get you to stop. I'm sorry, it just seemed the wisest course of action at the time."

I leaned against my staff, breathing heavily as I drew my knife. "Well, good. Now I'll need your help. Some of these men are only unconscious. I need to make sure they're all dead before any of them wake up - I'm in no mood for prisoners, and there's only two of us, so we couldn't guard them anyway. Pick up your sword and let's get to work," I rasped.

Darian and I then went around the prone forms of the sailors, slitting the throats of those that still breathed. As we worked, he talked.

It seemed that Darian and I had been grabbed by the press-gang of a Vilandian privateer. Vilandia, a large nation many leagues to the west of Arcadia over the Bright Sea, had little regard for the rights of the citizens of other nations. For a small fee, their press-gangs could easily be steered towards anyone you

didn't like, as Darian explained it. It appeared Darian owed Tharald a debt of blood. Darian considered fighting to the death to win back his freedom, but the ship's captain told him my safety depended on his good behavior. Besides, at the end of the voyage, Darian would get a small share of the profits, like all the sailors did (though as an impressed crewman, his would be smaller). He agreed, though very reluctantly, and simply hoped I'd find a way to get us both out of this mess.

Finally we were done, and Darian leaned back against a mast and rested while I gave him his amulet back, then bandaged the minor gashes he had in his arms and legs with strips of cloth cut from the dead sailor's clothes. Once I was done, I looked around at the corpses for a moment. My vengeance was complete, and they were all dead. I was weak as a kitten from exhaustion, so I knelt on the deck and rested, laying my knife and my staff before me.

After a while, Darian looked over to me. "Well, what do we do now, Raven?"

"I'm going to rest here until I have enough strength to take us back to Arcadia, where you can exact your vengeance on Tharald yourself. You'll have to, because I intend to return to my tomb, restore my possessions to my sarcophagus and kill myself as soon as you're safely back on land," I croaked in reply.

"What? That again? Why?" Darian asked, irritated.

So I told him. I pointed at the dried bloodstains between my thighs and told him how I'd been tied down and gang-raped repeatedly for three days. My guess was that as each watch of sailors went belowdecks to eat and sleep, they decided to come by and avail themselves of me. I told him how I nearly died of thirst because they didn't dare remove the gag. I told him how I'd wept and begged the gods to let me die. I told him how I'd screamed myself hoarse begging for mercy. "Darian, I can't live with this. The shame of it is simply too much. Being a woman in this world is hard enough. Their lives are an endless parade of misery and suffering. They have to watch how they sit, how they speak, how they move, and every little action they make or they risk being raped. And I *know* why they fear that, Darian. Rape is the most painful, the most humiliating experience anyone can possibly have. It's agonizing. Even without that, their bodies are a monthly source of pain and discomfort. Then there's the blood and pain of childbirth. Many women die giving birth, Darian. No, Darian, I can't take this anymore. I just want to die," I croaked.

Darian sank to his knees before me, reached out and took my hands. "I am so, so sorry, Raven. I never

intended for this to happen. I thought they really were taking care of you. They said they planned to sell you into slavery when we reached Vilandia. I knew that would be a few more weeks, and simply hoped that if I obeyed them they'd at least feed and water you, and maybe you'd figure out a way to get us out of this. I never knew what was happening, though I did notice many of the other sailors who hadn't been press-ganged into serving on this ship often gave me a strange grin. I thought you were simply being held belowdecks somewhere, and hadn't yet figured out how to escape from your bonds."

I pulled my hands from his. Just his touch nauseated me, and made me think of all those who had touched me over and over again. "Please, Darian, don't touch me. Right now, I just don't want to be touched by any man, not even a friend. As for your thinking they could just hold me belowdecks and I'd be alright, that only shows you're a mundane, and know nothing of being a mage. To hold a mage prisoner, you can't just tie them so they can't gesture. That won't stop a mage from casting their spells. It makes it harder to cast spells and makes it harder to aim targeted effects, but not impossible. No, Darian, a mage must be manacled and gagged. In Hyperborea, we used a metal gag that locked behind the head, covered the mouth and had a tube in it. The tube was wider than your thumb, and prevented them from speaking but still allowed them to breathe easily. They could also be fed and watered through the tube, though you could only feed them soup. Even then, some mages still escaped with spells they'd developed that didn't require spoken incantations - being manacled made their casting difficult, but not impossible," I said, and trembled - even Darian's simple touch, given in friendship, made my skin crawl.

"No, Darian. They lied to you. I was being gang-raped three times a day by three watches of sailors, and slowly dying of thirst and starvation. The first rule when you're captured is never trust anything the enemy tells you. I was *dying*, Darian. In many ways, I wish I had died. At least then I wouldn't have to sit here with you and have you look at me like you are now. This body may be female, but inside, I'm a man. I've been captured before, and I've even been tortured before, but this was the most horrible thing I've ever experienced. Please, I just don't want to talk about it anymore. Just let me sit here and rest, alright?"

Darian sat there silently for a long while after that, just thinking and looking at the deck. The ship continued traveling aimlessly, no hand at the helm. I didn't know where it was going, nor did I care.

Finally, Darian looked up. "No. Raven, I can't say that I've ever had something like this happen to me, so I can't say 'I understand' and have it really mean anything. Even so, that's how I feel. Please, don't kill yourself. You were once known as Eddas Ayar, a Hyperborean battle-mage. You've said you were a Master battle-mage of the Dyclonic Circle. I don't know what that means, but I can tell by the way you explained it that it was a title you bore with pride. Now, I ask you to bear another title: Raven, friend of Darian Vemcior, the rightful king of Larinia. I don't know who Eddas Ayar was, but I can tell you who Raven is. She's a woman with the soul of a man inside her, a being torn by two worlds. She's brave, honorable, trustworthy, noble, powerful, mysterious and wise. Her body is young, but her soul is ancient. Older than the oldest elf, half-elf or dwarf. I beg of you, Raven, don't kill yourself. I know you're in pain. I know your experience was more than anyone should have to bear, man or woman - and you are both.

Please. I have a friend who lives in Greenhaven, and I'd like you to talk to her. Her name's Arella-tor. That's all I ask. As your friend, I beg you to please talk to her. If you decide that you still can't live afterwards, then I'll accept that. Can you do that for me?"

I *hated* the pitying look he was giving me. In fact, I found I couldn't even bear to have him *look* at me. His face was covered in a three-day growth of beard, and he reminded me of the sailors who'd raped me. After a moment, I realized that just being *around* him made my skin crawl. "Alright. Just *stop looking at me* for now. I'm sorry, but even the gaze of another man makes me feel extremely uncomfortable and vulnerable, and I hate this feeling. I wish I could cover myself up in the ground and just melt away. I wish I was dead. Even so, I'll do what you ask. Just this once, Darian. Now, please, just *stop looking at me*," I said, gazing down at my knife longingly.

Darian slowly rose, and walked away. His wounds were apparently starting to ache, and he moved stiffly. If I was at my full strength, I'd simply have used a Spell of Healing on him. As weak as I felt at the moment, I didn't think I could heal a shaving cut without blacking out. Since apparently mages in Arcadia hyphenated their names with '-tor', '-hap', '-mak' or '-val' (the root-words in Darian's language for the four basic elements of Earth, Air, Fire and Water, respectively), I could only guess that he wanted me to speak with a female mage. Beyond that, I really didn't know or care.

After an hour, Darian returned and placed a bowl of boiled, salted meat and a skin of wine before me, laid down a cloak he'd scrounged up, then stiffly walked away again. I managed to get the food down, and felt a little better afterwards. Darian was sitting on the opposite side of the deck, facing away from me. He slowly finished his own meal in silence. I realized he'd spent the last hour arranging the food and drink for me, and had searched around to find something more for me to wear than the elf-chain garment I had so I wouldn't feel as uncomfortable. I wrapped the cloak around me, then came over to him and sat behind him. "I'm sorry, Darian," I croaked.

"There's nothing for you to be sorry for. All this is my fault. If I'd never taken you to Tharald's inn in the first place, none of this would have happened. You should rest your voice, now. Try not to talk for a couple days," he replied quietly.

I sat there quietly after that, thinking. I realized after a while that after I was dead, Darian would have no way of building the money he needed to reclaim his kingdom. I looked around the ship, and realized I had the perfect opportunity to solve that problem. "Darian, I think I'll do just that. This ship has plenty of food and water. If we sail it back, I'll have plenty of time to rest and recover, and I can even take the time to heal your wounds properly. Then we can sell the ship, and you'll have a nest-egg to work with when you try to reclaim your kingdom."

"Okay, but how will you sail the ship back? This thing's a three-masted, square-rigged ship. It'd take a dozen men to sail it at least," he asked, still facing away from me.

"I'll have the crew do it."

"What? How? They're dead!" he asked, still keeping his face from me.

"Darian, we Hyperboreans were once the masters of warfare. One of the most powerful tools at an army's disposal is the Walking Dead, and they allow you to give your dead soldiers one final chance to avenge themselves and kill the enemy. They make your army phenomenally easy to track because of all the vultures and other carrion-birds that follow them and rip at their flesh, as well as all the wolves and other animals that harry them, but their psychological impact in battle can't be underestimated. I'll simply animate a dozen or so of the crew, and have their zombies sail the ship back for us. It'll take me a day or two, what with resting between castings, but it can be done."

Darian shivered. "No. That's not merely disgusting, it's horrifying. It'd be better for you to use your magic to take us back, and leave this vessel adrift."

"And lose out on the money it could get you? I think not," I croaked, and fell to coughing.

"I don't care about the money, Raven. I care about you. You're my friend. I won't have the entire town of Greenhaven turning out to kill you when they see us sail into harbor with a ship crewed by walking corpses. I know it's nothing to you, seeing as you've been hardened to things like that, but to most people, the idea is horrifying in the extreme. Just rest for a couple days, don't speak, don't work. Just rest. You've been through a terrible ordeal. Give yourself time to recover."

"Well, we'll have to toss the bodies overboard. After a day or two, they'll be rotting," I said, my voice hardly above a whisper and broken by coughing.

"I'll do it. You just rest."

"And somebody will have to mind the helm so we don't run aground on reefs or an island or something," I whispered.

"I'll do it. I'll do it all. You just go rest. Take the captain's cabin - he won't be needing it anymore. Go on, I'll handle everything else."

I nodded, heading towards the door he was pointing at. I went inside, and saw a nicely appointed cabin with a wooden, coffin-like bed suspended from the overhead by two ropes. I looked through the bed, but didn't spot any lice or other irritants. Climbing in was a bit of a chore, but once I was in, I drew the covers over myself with a smile and fell fast asleep.

[Chapter Ten](#)

"The gods speak to us in our dreams, if we will but listen."

- Hyperborean proverb.

I dreamed I was standing on the deck of the ship, the corpses of the slain scattered about me. I looked up, and saw the glowing, robed figure again. *"Morgar. Why didn't you help me?"* I asked.

"I did, Eddas Ayar, I did. Look about you. What do you see?" he asked in reply.

"The corpses of my enemies and my rapists," I replied, glancing around at the dead in hatred.

"Exactly," the robed figure replied.

I looked at the figure closely. *"You aren't Morgar, the Hyperborean God of Death. You're someone else. Who are you?"*

"You've heard my name. You've accepted my blessing. Now, accept your own name; Raven. Be my raven, Eddas Ayar. Advise Darian Vemcrior as my own raven would. Pluck out the eyes of his enemies, defeating them and destroying them as my own raven would. Accept your new name, accept your new body, and fulfill your destiny."

I lowered my head in misery and sorrow. *"I can't. I just want to go home. I just want to see Dyarzi again, to hold her in my arms, and to make love to her. I know that's not possible, but that's all I want. I just want to see her, even if it's only for a moment."*

"You will, Raven. You will," he replied, and when I lifted my head, I was alone.

I awoke, and found I felt much better. Darian had laid a plate of cold, salted meat on the table and some fruit he'd found, and another skin of watered wine. After I'd eaten and used the head (which I found in a small closet nearby), I cleaned myself up with some water and a sponge I found in the captain's cabin. Dressing again, I searched around the cabin and found a drawer full of clothes. I didn't feel comfortable walking around nearly naked in Dyarzi's elf-chain garment, gloves and boots, and so I decided to slip on a black robe and long, hooded cloak I found in the drawer. After pulling the hood over my head, I felt much better.

I went out and up the gangway to the helm, and found Darian there. He was seated in the captain's weather-chair, having secured the helm with the belaying rope. At the moment, he was just watching ahead of the ship, making sure we didn't drift into anything or run aground. He looked up to me, his face showing bone-cracking weariness, and did a double-take. "Damn. That looks impressive. You startled the hell out of me for a moment," he said, his voice showing the strain.

"You think so?" I whispered, trying not to strain my voice.

"Yes. With those black gloves and boots, all I can see is your face, and those black-irised eyes you have really stand out. I saw you coming up the gangway out of the corner of my eye and knew it had to be you, but the look really startled me, anyway. How do you feel? Any better?"

"If you're asking how I feel physically, I feel much better. Thanks for the food you brought, by the way - it helped immensely. If, on the other hand, you're asking how I feel mentally, I still feel violated, vulnerable, and ashamed. My groin still burns from what they did, and that's going to take several days to a week or more to heal. For now, I figured I'd heal up your wounds and then you can get some rest. I can watch the helm, and by the time you're up again, I can cast my spell of returning and take us back to Greenhaven," I whispered.

Darian nodded, rising stiffly from the chair. "Sounds good to me. Tell me, though: Why don't you use your healing spell on yourself? That would at least eliminate the pain, wouldn't it? If it did, that would at least take away the constant reminder of what happened to you."

I smiled slightly. "Magic doesn't work that way. There are damn few healing spells that work on the caster themselves, they're all incredibly difficult to cast, and I don't know any of them. Most healing spells only work on others. I can heal you easily. Healing myself is just going to take time. Disease isn't a problem - I've a ring that cures diseases and poisons. Even so, the vaginal tearing, bruising and other injuries can only be healed by another mage or by rest and food."

Darian nodded, and I gestured for him to be seated. I could see that a couple of his wounds were infected, so I threw a Disease Curation spell, then treated each wound with the healing spell I knew. It didn't take long, but it was *very* tiring. Soon he was examining the tender scars through the blood-stained rents in his clothes with interest. "Still a little sore," he commented.

"I'm not quite strong enough to heal you completely, but your wounds are closed and the infections are cured, anyway. You should be completely healed in another day or two," I whispered, gasping for breath.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't complain. You're doing your best, and I appreciate it. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now get some sleep. Try the bunk in the captain's cabin. It's very comfortable."

"Thanks, I will. I've got the ship drifting more or less easterly, back in the direction of Arcadia, and the wind seems to be in our favor at the moment. Wake me if you have any trouble."

While Darian slept, I sat in the weather-chair and rested, watching the horizon. I knew a little about seamanship (as sometimes a battle-mage has to help out in a naval battle), but not much. Sea navigation and the skills of sailing weren't my job - my job was simply blowing enemy ships out of the water and keeping the same thing from happening to the ship I was on. As I rested, I looked around, and guessed our speed to be about four knots. We might have been able to make more speed with a stronger wind, but then we'd find the ship extremely difficult, if not outright impossible to control (there were only two of us, after all). I sincerely hoped the wind *didn't* pick up. We'd have to pull the belaying pins that held the lines to the sails to lower them (so a strong wind didn't heel the ship over), and the two of us probably didn't have enough strength to raise them back up again afterwards. This wouldn't be much of a problem, but if the ship ended up drifting with the current and was headed into a reef, I'd have some difficulty turning it without help from the sails.

I spent an hour meditating, recharging my staff and meditating again, just to give me some sort of reserve should I need it. It wouldn't be much, but it'd be something, at least. Besides, the only way to build up my body's endurance and its ability to do sorcery was to *do* sorcery and tap my endurance. It may not be much, but eventually, it would make the difference. I then relaxed and simply waited, watching the eastern horizon quietly.

As the sun slowly began to set behind the ship, I noticed a small spot in the sky above. It grew larger, and eventually resolved itself into a bird. The animal flew closer and closer, and eventually circled the ship, as though looking for a place to roost for the night. *'Hmm. That means we're near land,'* I thought to myself. At first I thought the bird was a seagull, but as I looked at it, I realized it was all black. I expected it to land at the top of the mast, but it didn't - it flew down and perched on the helm. I looked at it, and realized it was a raven.

I remembered the dream where the glowing figure had commanded me to accept my new name, to help Darian, and to fulfill my destiny. *'Perhaps this is a sign,'* I thought. *'Perhaps the dream was no mere dream.'* I held out my gloved hand, and was only half-surprised when the raven flew over and perched on my wrist. I looked at the raven, and it regarded me with its beady, black eyes. "So, my feathered friend. Are you a messenger from the gods, here to pass along some numinous phrase I'll ponder as the stars come out?" I asked in a whisper.

"No, actually. I was looking for Darian Underwood. He was reportedly press-ganged onto a Vilandian privateer, along with a female half-elven mage with black hair and eyes. You appear to be female, I can see by your ears you are of elvish extraction, you have black hair and eyes, your *Mana*-flow assenses as that of a mage, and this is a Vilandian privateer that apparently lacks a crew. I can only assume that you escaped from wherever they had you imprisoned, then killed them all. Is Darian here?" the bird

squawked in reply.

I was startled, to say the least, but managed not to jump. "A familiar, I take it," I whispered, spotting a small polished hematite ring around the shank of its foot. I reached out with my will and assensed the bird's *Mana*-flow, and realized I was correct. The bird was a familiar, and the ring was its wizard's staff.

"Of course. Is he here?" the bird asked again.

"Who wants to know?"

"A friend who heard what that bitch Penelope and her bastard of an uncle did to him and his friend - the story is all over town. Please, I must know."

"Arella-tor?"

"She's my mistress, yes. She's watching and listening through me even now."

"Darian's asleep in the captain's cabin. He's had a rather long day."

"Ah, good. My mistress is very pleased. Are you heading back to Greenhaven? If so, you're a bit off course - I estimate you'll end up somewhere around the Hyperborean coast. Not a very safe place to make landfall, in my opinion."

"I wasn't going to sail this ship all the way back, anyway. As soon as he's rested, I was going to simply use a Spell of Returning to take us back to Greenhaven. Darian wants me to visit your mistress and speak to her."

"Why?" the raven asked, cocking its head.

"I have no idea, nor do I really care."

The raven regarded me silently for a moment, then its eyes glazed briefly as it concentrated on viewing my aura. That was one of the reasons many mages I had known in my previous life had chosen ravens for their familiar - ravens, like owls, cats and some dogs, can see into the astral plane. Few mundanes knew or cared, of course, but it was one of the reasons they were able to avoid the undead and other creatures of darkness - they could see their true nature in their astral aura. After a moment or two the raven blinked, then looked into my eye. "You are in pain. Great pain. Not just physical, though there is some of that. Your spirit is in pain."

"Don't worry, that will be over soon," I replied dryly. I disliked the prying gaze of ravens, especially raven familiars.

"My name is Swift-wing. What is your name?" the bird asked.

"Darian calls me Raven."

The bird squawked for a couple moments, and I realized it was laughing. "A raven speaks to a Raven! Well, Raven, my mistress says she looks forward to meeting you. Farewell," the familiar chuckled. It then clacked its beak as it muttered a Spell of Returning, then vanished. Since the spell succeeded and the little beast didn't pass out or die in the process of casting it, I assume it tapped its staff for the power it needed - a tiny raven's body wasn't very strong, even as a familiar.

[Chapter Eleven](#)

"And in the dark shall the creature awaken, a loathsome undead thing. The hideous beast shall be drawn from sweet darkness to serve the wretched light, a monstrous perversion. Older than the oldest elf, a creature of War and Death, a thing from the crypt, drawn by wicked Yorindar and corrupted to serve his will. Fie on that day!"

- *The Collected Prophecies of Ushrak IV, High Priest of the Goblins, 984 NCC*

Darian came out from the captain's cabin shortly after the stars came out. He'd recovered most of his gear (save for his bow and arrows, which appeared to be missing), and his money-pouch looked full. 'Well, at least he had the common sense to clean these bastards out,' I thought. "Just hold my hand, Darian," I whispered, extending my gloved left hand and gripping my staff in my right. "Is there anyplace in particular we need to go? I can take us anywhere we've already been."

Darian took my hand lightly. "Actually, just outside the Golden Cup would be fine, if that's alright with you."

"So be it," I whispered, and began the incantation as I gestured with my staff. The world blurred around us for a moment, and then we stood outside the inn Darian and I had been shanghaied in. "Lead on to your friend's house, Darian. I want to get this over with as soon as possible."

"Alright. I'll have to talk to her for a few minutes first, though - she doesn't know we're coming or why I want you to talk to her," Darian said, leading the way.

I sighed. "Darian, two things: First, I don't know why you want me to talk to her, either. Second, she already *knows* we're coming, though she still doesn't know *why* we're coming."

"She does? How could she possibly know that? And how could you know that she knows?" Darian asked, amazed.

"Her familiar, Swift-wing, managed to find us out at sea. My guess is from what he was saying that she heard what happened and was worried about you. I told you, Darian, you must *always* be wary of familiars and mages who have them. The mage can see through their eyes, hear through their ears, and engage in constant mental communication. The beast itself has all the abilities of a normal member of its species combined with keen intelligence, and they can often surprise you. He's probably been searching for days by flying very high so that he might see as far as possible, then flying up and down the coast until he spotted the ship. Ravens are one of the better familiars. They have keen eyesight and can see in the astral plane, they can soar effortlessly for long distances like vultures or buzzards, they can eat just about anything, and if they're killed their tiny little body usually isn't enough to cause a fatal *Mana*-backlash."

"Hmm. Well, you don't need to worry about Arella-tor. She's a good friend of mine."

"Perhaps. Either way, I hope this doesn't take long. I'm only doing this because you asked me to, and you're my friend."

It didn't take long to get to Arella-tor's small house, though Darian kept his hand on the hilt of his sword the whole time as we walked through the dark streets (apparently his experience at the Golden Cup had at least taught him to be cautious at all times, a good character trait for a king). When we arrived, Darian knocked quietly at the door while I looked over the sign above it - *'Arella-tor, Fortune-Teller, Herbalist, Midwife,'* it said.

'Great,' I thought, *'Darian's taking me to see a damn hedge-wizard.'*

"Who's there?" a woman's voice called from behind the door after a few moments.

"Darian."

I heard the sound of a bolt being thrown back, and the door opened. The woman who answered was in a floor-length, long-sleeved blue dress with a high collar, and her face was veiled in a light blue silk veil. Her hair was copper-red, her eyes emerald green, and it struck me that she was *very* beautiful. I sighed and suppressed *that* thought with an effort. Her familiar was perched on her shoulder, and it regarded us quietly. "Darian! I'm so glad to see you! Come in," she said in a voice that would melt a statue's heart, and Darian allowed me to enter first.

The inside of her home was quite simple - a small fireplace and two doors that led to other rooms. There was a simple woven carpet atop the wooden floor near the fireplace, and a small table with four chairs sat atop the carpet. *'Probably for her clients - soon she'll have me show her my palm or cut a deck of cards or some other such nonsense,'* I thought to myself. The one pleasant thing was the smell - the whole house was filled with the scent of burning incense, and the room was lit with a small candelabra on top of the table that was fitted with three perfumed beeswax candles.

"Please, have a seat. Raven told Swift-wing that you wanted me to talk to her, but she didn't know why you wanted us to meet," Arella-tor said.

"Raven, would you mind if I asked you to take your ring of translation off for a moment? I really need to talk to Arella privately. I hope you don't mind," Darian asked.

"Darian, I don't have to take it off, I'll just deactivate it. Point at me or something when you'd like me to join in your little chat," I replied dryly, and mentally commanded the enchantment on my ring of translation to cease as I crossed my arms.

For the next quarter of an hour or so I was bored stiff watching the two of them talk. Darian's language was obviously a descendant of mine just from the sounds, but I could only clearly make out about one word in twenty or so, with the rest being garbled half-words and familiar-sounding phrases. While I waited, I decided to start planning a few modifications I'd make to my tomb to insure that the *next* person who came near my animuary was male. Perhaps a huge stone barring passage that only a mighty warrior could move, enchanted to resist telekinetic magic and slay any female that touched it with a blast of lightning. Or maybe just a hideous trap that can only be deactivated by someone who could urinate up the side of a wall.

Eventually, Darian reached over to me and tapped my shoulder to get my attention. I activated my ring of translation, then spoke up. "Good. Are we done now? Can I go?"

"No, you still have to talk to Arella," Darian replied, then nodded to the hedge-wizardess. "I'll go in the guest bedroom, Arella," Darian said, then rose and left the room through one of the other two doors.

Once he'd shut the door behind him, I spoke again. "Alright, he's gone. What is it you had to say?"

In response, Arella-tor reached up and opened the clasp at her temple that held up the veil, removed it and set it on the table before her. I struggled not to grimace as I saw her face. Someone had taken a knife or dagger to it - and they had done so with a vengeance. She had a single scar that ran across her

nose, two slashes on her left cheek and one on her right, and another scar that began below her right eye, ran below her nose and across her lips, and trailed off on her left jaw. That last one hadn't healed well, also - her lips were slightly askew at the join of the scar.

"I can see by your face you have the same reaction to this most people do," she said calmly.

"I'm sorry. It's just that it's a bit of a surprise, that's all. Pardon me for whispering, but my throat's a bit sore."

"I understand. Now *you* have to understand how I got these marks. About five years ago, I met a man who was a merchant here in Greenhaven. He'd come in to have his fortune told. He was highly attracted to me, and offered to take me to dinner. I told him I already had a friend and a lover, but since I was a little bored that day, I accepted. We had a very nice chat, and this developed into what I thought was a friendship. Unfortunately, he thought it was more than that. One day, he asked me to marry him. I told him that while I cared for him as a friend, I simply couldn't marry him - I was in love with someone else, as I'd told him on many occasions, and I had been since long before I met him. He wasn't happy with my answer, but he seemed to accept it. A few weeks later, I was at my lover's house, and we were in bed together. Unfortunately, my lover had forgotten to lock the door. The man who did this to me had followed me to my lover's house, and crept inside while I was with my lover. When he saw us together, he stabbed my lover to death, raped me, then did this to me. 'To teach me a lesson', he said. Darian's told me that you know several combat-spells. I'm just a fortuneteller, and my *Talent* isn't that strong. I never mastered spells like that. I was lucky he decided not to kill me as well as my lover. I tried to hit him with my wizard's staff, the ring I wear here on my hand. He was faster and much stronger than I was, and simply grabbed my wrists and pinned them together with one hand."

"Okay, but *why*? He knew you had a lover before the relationship with him started."

"Because my lover's name was Mariah," she said quietly.

I sat there for a minute. At first, I simply didn't know what to say. After a while, though, it all began to fit together, and I began to get angry. "Ah, I see. Darian told you what happened to me aboard that ship, didn't he? Hell, Darian probably told you *everything*! That moron is probably sitting in there figuring I'll talk to you, then have a relationship with you and everything will be just *peachy*! Oh, yes, I can see his whole chain of thought now; 'My friend Raven isn't attracted to men, Raven also was raped. Put these two women together and they can talk it over and have sex and resolve *all* their problems!' *Damn you*

to hell, Darian! It's not that simple! She's a sapphire woman in a woman's body who got raped and mutilated, not a normal man trapped in the body of a woman who was gang-raped by forty-eight men over a period of three days and nearly died of thirst!" I yelled at the door, hating the hoarse woman's voice that came out of my throat.

Arella-tor reached out and took my hand, and I looked back to her. She was crying, and I suddenly realized I'd been stupid and rude. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you," I whispered, my throat sore from having yelled.

"Raven, he didn't tell me that you were a man in a woman's body, he only told me you were a woman who'd been gang-raped. He didn't bring you here to have a relationship with me, he brought you here because it doesn't mean anything when he says *'I understand how you feel'* He's a man and can't *possibly* understand how you feel unless the same thing happens to him - he's also one of the few men in the world who can understand that he'll never *really* know how it feels. He can't possibly understand the shame, the humiliation, the pain, any of it, but he knows that, and that's why you're here. You see, you *do* understand what happened to me, because like it or not, you're a woman now. By the same token, I understand what happened to you. That's why you're here: To try and ease some of your pain by discovering that other women have been through this and survived. I *never* expected you to want to have a relationship with me. Besides the fact that I thought you were a normal woman, I *know* what I look like. No man or woman would *ever* consider a relationship with me now. No, you were asked here so you could try to ease your pain by sharing it with another woman who understood," she said, weeping.

I looked at her, and was suddenly ashamed. "I'm sorry. I really am. I've hurt you, and I've made a fool of myself," I said, then reached out to hug her. She patted my back for a moment, and suddenly I began to sob. "Gods, how do you women put up with *life?! It hurts every day, day in and day out! It never stops! It just never stops! They never stop! They never stop hurting you and hurting you! I begged every god I knew to please make it stop, but it went on and on and on! I screamed myself hoarse begging for mercy, but it never stopped!"*

"I know. I was there. It didn't stop. I begged and pleaded, but the pain didn't stop," she replied, weeping.

We hugged each other for a long time after that, crying helplessly. Her familiar quietly hopped over to its perch and tucked its head beneath its wing, leaving us to our shared misery.

Eventually, our sobs petered out into sniffles, then into silence. We simply sat there, hugging each other, stroking each other's back and sighing.

After a long while, I finally realized the pain in my heart had eased a bit. Darian had done the right thing - being able to share my feelings with someone who really *did* understand had helped. I wasn't sure I wanted to live, but I no longer wanted to die. For the moment, that would have to do.

Finally, I let Arella go and pulled off my right glove. Drawing myself up straight and trying to put on my best, most formal face, I spoke. "Mage Arella-tor, you've given me something very special. Now let me give you something in return." I opened the compartment on my right thumb ring and dumped out the two grimoires (which brought a surprised look to her scarred face), then removed mine from its protective leather sack and tucked the other one back. Paging through my grimoire carefully, I stopped when I'd found the spell I wanted. "I'm having to cast this one from my grimoire because I never needed it enough to bother learning it as a skill so I could cast it off the top of my head. I'll need molten beeswax - do you have that?" I asked.

"The candles are beeswax. What are you going to do?"

"Ah, of course. Well, as to what I'm going to do, all I'll say is you'll find out. Give me a minute while I read up on this and refresh my memory. It's been about fifteen or sixteen centuries since I last cast it."

A few minutes later I'd taken off both my gloves, and I had her leaning back with her head against my breasts, face up. I began the first part of the enchantment, reading from my grimoire and gesturing carefully over her face. As I was working from my grimoire, it took twenty minutes to complete. I then began the second part of the enchantment, reading the incantation as I slowly stroked each scar on her face, especially the one that ran across her lips and made them meet unevenly. That took another twenty minutes. I then plucked one of the candles from the candelabra. "This is going to hurt. Don't move, and don't open your mouth. Try to keep your face perfectly still. I'll have to pinch your nose at one point so hold your breath when I do," I said, then began the third part of the enchantment, dripping the molten beeswax over each scar until each was completely covered. She whimpered as the drops of wax hit her face, and I began to gasp with the strain of the spell. I had to turn her head carefully to completely cover the scars on her cheeks, and she suppressed a yelp of pain as some of the wax ran into her ear. I then pinched her nose and carefully went over the final and ugliest scar, the one that crossed her lips, carefully dripping the wax and trying not to get it in her nose. I began to gasp with the effort of completing the spell on so many scars at once, and had to struggle not to break the chain of syllables that made up the final part of the incantation. Finally, after another twenty minutes, I was done. I then replaced the candle in the candelabra and blew gently on the candle-wax that coated her mouth and lower face to trigger the enchantment. Her eyes opened in surprise - the wax suddenly turned chill, and the pain vanished.

I sat her up carefully, then began to gently peel the wax off. I sighed in a combination of relief and exhaustion - the spell had worked perfectly, as it always did when I was careful. I'd originally obtained the spell to remove several scars Dyarzi had accumulated in her career as a thief, but it was also useful for removing moles, blackheads, birthmarks, boils, any kind of skin blemish. The mage who invented it was dead now, like all the other Hyperboreans, but while he lived he made good money with the spells he'd developed.

"What did you do to me?" Arella-tor asked, feeling her face.

"I removed the scars," I replied hoarsely, still very tired.

"Really? How do I look?"

"Beautiful. If you don't believe me, ask him," I said, jerking a thumb at her familiar.

The raven lifted its head at her mental call, and looked at her. "I'm sorry, mistress, but I'm a poor judge of human beauty. You all look very strange to me, all bald and featherless," he squawked, and tucked his head back under his wing.

"I can't feel them at *all!*" Arella-tor said, rubbing her face with her hands as I put my grimoire away and pulled my gloves back on.

"That's because they're gone, as though they never were. In my old body I could do this spell easily, and the only hard part was getting Dyarzi to hold still for the length of time it took to complete it. In this body, I feel like I've just finished summoning a greater demon," I said, and leaned back to relax.

"Who's Dyarzi?" she asked, smiling happily and stroking her face.

I sighed, and told her my story. I needed the time to relax and catch my breath, and she seemed like the kind of person who could be trusted with my secret. I didn't tell her where my tomb was or even a general direction, but otherwise I told her everything I could remember (which was distinctly more than when I first woke up).

When I was finished, Arella-tor looked at me in pity. "A month before your wedding? That's so sad."

"Yes. Also, it's like I told Darian at first - I may be a woman, but my spirit is that of a man. All I can think about is her, and the blood sings hot and free in my veins. Unfortunately, she's gone. Even if I *could* find a woman to replace her, what would I *do* with her?"

Arella-tor reached out and gently took my gloved hand, looking me in the eyes. I realized again she was a *very* beautiful woman. "I would be very pleased and honored if you would allow me to show you, Raven," she said.

I brought her hand to my lips and kissed it gently. "I appreciate the offer, and I'm definitely interested, but I'll have to be honest - I'm still in a lot of physical pain."

She reached out and pulled down my hood, revealing the pointed ears and high cheekbones of a half-elf. She gently ran her fingers across my cheek, along my ear, then cradled the back of my head in her hands and drew me to her, kissing me softly. "I'll be very, very gentle," she replied quietly.

Chapter Twelve

"...when the war was over, we had been split into four separate factions, divided along our own racial lines; The Sylvani, or Wood-Elves, the Katani, or Sword-Elves, the Nomani, or High-Elves, and the dreaded Malani, the Dark-Elves. The former three drove the latter into hiding, deep beneath the earth, deeper even than the Dwarves live. Thereafter, the strength of the Seelie court waned, as the rulership often fell to the hands of those best at manipulating the votes of the other two factions, rather than those best at ruling. Meanwhile, the Unseelie court also faded, as their leaders, the Dark Elves, were no longer above the earth, and the Goblins had only the strength to hold their own kith and kin, the Kobolds and Hobgoblins, to their side. Thus, while the sun slowly set on the power and influence of the Courts of Faerie, the sun slowly rose on the earliest of human nations, the Hyperboreans, so called because their first, primitive settlements were north of the Occidanic Forest..."

When I awoke in the morning in her bed, I found Arella-tor had her arms around me, and I had mine around her. She kissed me again, and we smiled at each other. "Good morning. How do you feel?" she asked.

"Better, much better. About everything. Thank you."

"You're welcome," she said, and hugged me. After a moment, she reached up and stroked the point of my left ear, then giggled. "You know, I like how you're shaved and everything because that's so different and positively *naughty*, but I have to say that what I really love the most are your ears. They're *terribly* cute!"

I drew a soft finger along her flanks, and she giggled at the tickling. "*My* interests lie a little lower than your ears, however," I replied, and for once wasn't upset at the sound of my woman's laugh in my ears.

We climbed out of bed and dressed for breakfast. I was having problems getting my hair out of my face (no brush, for one thing), but when Arella saw me struggling, she simply picked up her brush and came over to me. She carefully brushed my hair for me and pulled it back into a ponytail so I could slip the little silver hair-ring over it and shrink it down tight, then I began to dress while she washed her face and hands in a little basin of water she had in her room. I had already finished donning Dyarzi's elf-chain garment and had just finished donning the boots and gloves when Arella spoke up. "You know, that outfit looks positively *wicked!* Where did you get it?"

"Well, Dyarzi bought the elf-chain garment about a year before she died. She called it her 'dancing outfit'. She used to put it on and dance for me in these gloves and boots with her sword, and pretend she was some fantastic warrior-princess dancing to please the man she loved. The elf-chain, these gloves and these boots were the only other clothes that hadn't rotted to dust, because they're enchanted to be invulnerable. The gloves and boots have other enchantments, as well. See?" I said, clambering up the wall and clinging to the ceiling.

"Okay, but how do you get down?" she asked with a giggle.

In answer, I willed my boots to let go and dangled from my fingertips, then willed the gloves to let go and landed lightly on the balls of my feet, then grinned at her. "Dyarzi must have been an amazingly good thief," Arella-tor commented.

"The best in Hyperborea, maybe the best ever. She plucked the great ruby eye out of the statue in the Temple of Blood right out from under the nose of the high-priest's guards, and one time she even stole Queen Lunitolla's magic looking glass from under her pillow *while the queen was sleeping!* She never bragged, though - she always said her greatest feat was the day she stole my heart," I said, smiling at the memory of my beloved. I looked over to Arella as I picked up my black robe and cloak. Arella was slipping on the stockings she wore beneath her pantaloon-like undergarments (I was amazed to see how many interesting layers of undergarments the women of today wore when Arella had slowly stripped them off the night before), when I gasped in shock and dismay. "Oh, no!" I yelled, upset to hear my woman's voice come out as a despairing wail in my ears.

"What?! What is it? Are you hurt?" Arella asked, coming over to me.

"No, it's just that I suddenly realized I've betrayed her! I've slept with another woman! What have I done?!" I wailed, and sat down heavily on the bed and put my head in my hands.

"No, no. Listen to me, Raven. You loved Dyarzi, and you still do. Even so, she's dead. She has been for maybe fifteen, sixteen centuries, as you make it out. If she truly loved you, she wouldn't want you to spend the rest of eternity alone and unhappy, she'd want you to live, to love and laugh again. I know you told me you had a long-term goal of trying to find a way to bring her back to you. That might take you another hundred years or so of careful research and study, if it's even possible at all. Do you really think that you're eventually going to summon her back from the void and the first thing she's going to say isn't *'thank you, I love you'*, but *'have you remained chaste for the last seventeen centuries, dear?'*" she said, and we both laughed. "Seriously, though, I want to tell you this; what you and I have between us might flower into a relationship, and it might not. Either way, I completely understand how you feel, and I'll never push the issue. Your feelings are important to me. I know all this is new and strange to you, so we'll go at *your* pace, not mine. Alright?"

"Thank you, I really appreciate that," I replied with a smile, and slipped on my black robe. I folded the cloak to wear after I got outside, and started to help Arella dress. Once she was finally dressed, I picked up my cloak and held my hand out to her. She took it and we started to walk to the door, then she stopped and looked me over.

"You know, the thought that you're nearly naked under that is just *deliciously* wicked!" she said with a little giggle.

"Just remember, we're all naked underneath our clothes," I replied with a smile.

We came out just a few moments before Darian did, and I grinned at him reflexively - my male spirit again, I guess. He grinned in reply, and clapped me on the shoulder. Arella-tor just smiled and shook her head. "Are you feeling better, Raven?" Darian asked.

"Much better, thanks," I replied truthfully. I felt better than I had in days, possibly better than I had in millennia.

"Ah, your voice sounds clear as a bell, now," Darian said, smiling.

"Yes, Arella made an herbal tea last night that eased the hurt I'd done to my vocal chords. She also gave me a healing oil that eased much of the tearing and bruising I'd had. The pain of that's nearly gone now. I'm glad you brought me, Darian. She also eased much of the pain of my soul, and in return I eased hers. Arella, come here so Darian can take a good look at you in the light," I called, and Arella complied.

Darian gaped in amazement. "Arella! The scars are gone! You look *beautiful!*" he said, astonished.

"Thank you. I'll get the fire started so we can warm up a light breakfast. Why don't you two have a seat?" she replied, and Darian and I complied.

After Arella had poured some seed and a bit of water for Swift-wing, she tossed some wood into the fireplace, then bent to light the fire. She muttered a brief cantrip, and the surface of the wood burst into flame. I stared in amazement. "Arella, I thought you said your talent didn't allow you to do combat-spells?"

She stood and brushed off the front of her dress. "It doesn't - my *talent's* not strong enough to master it. This isn't battle-magic, it's just a Cantrip of Ignition."

"*Gods*, what *didn't* you people lose in that war Darian told me about? The formula for that little cantrip you just used is the *basis*, the very *foundation* of fire-oriented battle-magic! I was taught that as an apprentice battle-mage, and it once saved my life twenty years later when I used it on a warrior who was about to split my skull with a two-handed sword - I was too tired for anything else. He suffered first and second-degree burns over nearly all of his body, all the leather straps on his armor went up in smoke so his armor began to fall from him in pieces, his beard and hair burst into flame, and while he was dancing around and screaming I crushed his skull with my wizard's staff!" I said, then waved her over to the table. "Come here and sit down for a moment, I want to check something," I said, gesturing to a chair.

Arella complied, and I sat opposite her. I closed my eyes and spent a few minutes in meditation to focus my mind, then reached out with my will and examined the patterns of *Mana* flowing through her. "Okay, now use that fire cantrip to light the candle next to you. Take your time, and do it very slowly," I said, concentrating on her intently. She did so, and I watched the energy patterns. Her will, strengthened by her *Talent*, began to shape the energy. The energy flow crystalized as a point of focus, then dissipated. I opened my eyes and saw the candle was lit.

"Arella, there's nothing wrong with your *Talent*. You aren't some poor hedge-wizard who's *Talent* barely allows them to master a fire cantrip - you have a sparkling, powerful *Talent* and a strong, sharp will to back it up. You have the ability to master the same spells I do, and I'm shocked and surprised to learn you don't even *know* your fire cantrip can be used offensively. If you had, I think you might have been able to defend yourself against that merchant who attacked you. In fact, I think if you had shown up at the Black Tower back in my living days in Hyperborea, just as you are right at this moment, the Dyclonic Circle would have been proud to accept you as an apprentice. *Yes*, you're a twenty-five year-old woman and you'd feel a bit silly sitting in a class along with a dozen or more twelve-year-old boys, but the Circle would never pass up a *talent* like yours, regardless of your age or gender. Either someone has lied to you to prevent your learning battle-magic, or your society simply refuses to teach women anything dangerous. Judging by what happened to both you and me, I'd guess a little of both," I said, and ground my teeth in irritation.

"Mistress, I told you that you could do better. Your will and your *Talent* are far greater than mine. You always thought you couldn't, and never tried," Swift-wing called from his perch, looking up from the cup of seed attached to the side.

"Raven, I don't understand. You mean she's as good as you are, and just doesn't know it?" Darian asked.

"Hmm. Well, you're a mundane, so it's hard to explain to you," I said, and pondered how to explain the situation to someone who had no *Talent*, the inborn power to wield magic, and never would.

Swift-wing clacked his beak. "I can explain it. Geese. Everyone's seen geese fly by overhead in the fall, yet a farmer's geese can't make it over a four-cubit fence. Why? Because they were never taught to fly. They can use their wings a bit, and can even fly short distances, but they can't truly fly because they were never taught how. Mundanes are like geese born without wings. They can't fly at all. Mages are like geese born with wings. They can only fly if they're taught how," Swift-wing cackled, and looked very pleased with himself.

"Good analogy. Does that help, Darian?" I asked.

"Yes, actually. You're like the wild goose, flying high and free because you've been trained how. She's like the domestic goose watching you on the ground. She can fly up to the top of the fence, but from there she just looks up at you and wonders how in the hell you do that. I'm like the wingless goose Swift-wing mentioned. I watch you flap your wings and have no idea what you're doing because I literally don't have the equipment. I can see the effect and you can explain it to me, but I can never truly grasp what it's like to fly because it's a physical impossibility for me," Darian replied, stroking his chin.

"And what a joy it is to fly! To soar, to dive, to feel the wind rush over your feathers as you fight your way to the clouds, then zoom high above the treetops! There's nothing like it!" Swift-wing cackled with joy.

I was about to tell Swift-wing that we got the point, when Arella interrupted. "Oh, Raven! I want to *fly!* Teach me to fly like you! Teach me to use my *Talent* like you do! The Hyperborean circles are gone now, only you remain. Maybe the elves or the dwarves might be able to teach me, but the legends say that the battle-mages of Hyperborea were greater! Please, Raven, teach me!"

"Darian, do you mind if I spend time teaching her as well as you?" I asked, looking to him again.

"Of course not. Arella's been a good friend for years. Besides - if I listen in, I may learn something."

"That you might," I replied, nodding.

"Um, pardon me, but what exactly are you training *him* for?" Arella asked. I'd told her my side of our meeting and had told her my secrets, but I hadn't told her any of Darian's - I thought she already knew.

"Darian, it's your story. I think you should tell it yourself," I said, gesturing for him to sit. I went over to Arella's little kitchen area and brought some porridge back out, and by the time I was nearly done with a pot of porridge, Darian had finished his tale.

"Darian, *you're* the rightful king of Larinia?" Arella asked, amazed.

"Yes. Unfortunately, that doesn't do me any good at the moment."

"No wonder you helped me the way you did," she replied, squeezing his hand.

"How did he help you?" I asked.

"With the merchant that cut me. After Darian and I met and became friends, he asked about my veil. I told him my story, showed him what the merchant had done, and Darian grabbed his bow and stormed out. The next day, I heard the merchant had been found shot in the neck with an arrow. Darian knew I wasn't interested in men, he did it because he was my friend and a true man of honor. Now I also realize he did it because he's a true king."

Darian looked at the floor sheepishly, and I spooned out some porridge into three bowls while Arella and I gave him a moment to recover from his embarrassment. Darian was a humble man, and that, too, was an important quality in a king.

After we'd eaten our simple fare, Darian and I planned what we'd do next. Darian wanted revenge on Tharald, as did I. That bastard was directly responsible for *everything* that happened to me on the ship, and I wanted him to *pay*. Even so, Darian was the one he'd betrayed, not me. I agreed to let him handle it, and I'd just watch his back. Arella then spoke up. "You should deal with Penelope, too."

"I'm not sure I can. I've never warred on women," I replied.

"I'm afraid I have to agree - I don't know if I *could* deal with her," Darian concurred.

"Darian, *you* I'll excuse - your attitudes are noble and good in this regard. Raven, I *won't* excuse you. It's like I said last night - like it or not, you're a woman now. No woman would allow another woman to get away with doing something like that to her. She treated you like you were Darian's lover, even after you and Darian denied it, and after you and she fought, she nagged her uncle until he went up to some Vilandians and paid them all the money Darian gave him so they'd press-gang you. That experience was horrible, agonizing, humiliating, and you nearly died. No, Raven. You're *not* going to let her get away with hurting you just because she's a woman, not when *you're* one, too. Make her pay, Raven," Arella said, her eyes locked on mine and her expression grim.

I opened my mouth to try to dissuade her, then shut it as I felt a sharp pain in my lower abdomen, like a cramp. "Uh! Damn," I muttered, clutching my abdomen below my navel. The pain eased slowly, and I muttered a curse under my breath at the spirits of the dead Vilandians. My groin still ached from their assault, and it appeared my internal organs also needed to heal for a while more before I'd feel better.

"Are you alright, Raven?" Darian asked.

I nodded, my eyes closed, and Arella looked at me for a moment as I rubbed my temples. I could tell I had the beginnings of a *massive* headache, and I just wished this whole conversation was *over*. "Headache?" she asked. I nodded. "That pain you felt was kind of like a cramp, wasn't it, like one you'd get from running too far?" she asked. I nodded again. "Yes, Darian. She's fine," Arella concluded.

"Huh? How do you figure?" Darian asked. I looked up to Arella - I was wondering the same thing myself. Arella simply looked at me, and after a moment, I understood. After all, I'd lived with Dyarzi for a few years before she died. I knew the signs.

"Oh, *damn!*" I yelled, and despaired at the woman's wail which echoed in my ears.

"What? What is it?" Darian asked, his face showing deep concern.

"It's nothing, Darian, don't worry about it. Raven, I've got some herbs that will help ease the pain. I'll make some tea for you. Afterwards, I'll show you what to do to control your flow."

"Well, okay, but what's happening? What's the problem?" Darian asked, still concerned.

"It's her time, Darian! My mistress gets it every month! Mammals!" Swift-wing cackled, and Arella threw him a cold look before she went to get the herbs from her cabinet. "I'm sorry, mistress, but it's the truth," he said, shrinking away from her anger.

I was so depressed, I nearly wept with despair. "Gods, why do you women have to suffer so?" I asked Arella as she started the tea.

"*We* women, Raven. Say it. Why do *we* have to suffer so," Arella replied.

"Alright, fine! *We* women! There, are you happy now?!" I snapped, then spoke up again. "Sorry."

"That's alright, Raven. Your temper may be a bit short for the next few days to a week, and I'm not

offended - you haven't had all your life to get used to this as I have. I was taught herblore and the skills of a midwife by my grandmother, as I was taught the few spells I know by my mother. My grandmother said that the womb is like a little field the man's seed grows in, and this is your body's way of hoeing and weeding that field, making sure it will be ready to accept the man's seed and allow it to take root and grow into a baby. As I grew older, I found I wasn't really attracted to males, and I certainly wasn't attracted to the idea of going through what all the women I helped as a midwife had to endure. Even so, I know it's natural and normal. Your body's that of a half-elf woman, and in many ways it's exactly like that of a human female. Yes, you have pointed ears, your senses are keener, you can see when the light is very dim, and you'll live for perhaps three and a half centuries. Even so, the human side of your body's ancestry is expressed as well. Instead of dealing with this once each year in the spring like an elf-maid, you'll be dealing with this every month, like a human woman. My grandmother said it was our greatest strength and our common curse - it has allowed us to survive against the pressure of the other, longer-lived races, and yet it's a monthly discomfort no woman enjoys."

I sighed, then grimaced slightly as another cramp struck, then slowly eased. Darian looked at me in pity. "Raven, I'm sorry I pried. It's just that to me, I simply don't think of you as a woman. To me, you're like another man, a good friend of mine, and I can easily envision us hoisting a tankard of ale in good cheer, then later complaining about the women in our lives over our cups. I still see you as being a man who only happens to *look* like a woman, like from a curse of some kind. I'm sorry if I embarrassed you," he said quietly.

"That's alright," I replied, and clasped forearms with him in friendship and camaraderie. "Darian, I'm proud to call you my friend. I know my situation's a bit unusual, and I appreciate you thinking of me the way you do. In many ways, it makes me feel much more comfortable being around you. That first day when you looked at me like a hungry dog gazes on a cut of meat was very difficult for me to endure. Now, I feel you're a close friend and boon companion, and I'd stand by your side in any battle you fought."

"As I would yours," he replied, grinning.

"You should get used to that look, however," Arella said, pouring me a cup of green-colored tea. "That look is normal from men. They can't help it. You were once a man, you should know this yourself."

I nodded, then sipped the tea. I nearly spat it out - it was bitter and vile. "Bleah! What is this?" I asked after I'd finally managed to swallow.

"Willow bark, rose hips, nettle root, twineberry leaf and a dash of cyalomine petals to make it less bitter. Drink it all, a little sip won't help you," Arella replied. I managed to finish the vile concoction without retching. Once I was done, she took the cup from me and smiled. "In many ways, it's like that spell you did to remove my scars. It was *very* painful when you did it, but the results were well worth it. In a little while, you'll see."

"Gods, you'd think some female mage *somewhere* would have developed a spell for this," I muttered, and Arella laughed.

"Raven, you should know as well as I that you can't heal someone when there's nothing wrong with them. That's why an experienced herbalist can still make a good living, despite the fact that sorcery heals faster - there's just some things magic can't fix."

I nodded and sat back quietly. She was right, however; in a few minutes, the cramps had lessened to a mere discomfort and my headache had faded away. I was impressed - she really *was* a good herbalist. She brought over a flask she'd poured the rest of the tea into, then handed it to me. "If you feel the symptoms returning, take two swallows of this - shake it before you drink it, though, or it'll be too bitter and won't work well. Your robe has a little pocket just there, so you should be able to carry it with you anywhere," she said, then held her hand out. "Now: You and I need to take a few minutes and I'll show you how to deal with your flow, which probably will be starting any time now, since you're cramping. After that, we can go deal with Penelope and Tharald." I took her hand and joined her as she led me into her bedroom again.

Chapter Thirteen

"Revenge is a dish best served cold, with few spices, and as fresh as possible."

- *Hyperborean proverb.*

An hour later, the three of us walked towards Tharald's inn. Arella-tor was wearing her veil again, since she decided she'd keep the secret of her cure to herself - most men in Greenhaven knew what had once lain beneath that veil (though they didn't know why), and they left her alone as a result. I noticed that my black robe and hooded cloak caused the mundanes to give me a wide berth, especially with my hood pulled up. Darian was right - the ebon robe and cloak made me look very intimidating. This was a good thing as far as I was concerned, since I was in no mood to be trifled with. The method Arella had shown me for handling the flow of menstrual blood was simple - a tightly rolled strip of cloth with a string sewn to it. She had several of them, and explained that she washed them in alcohol, let them dry in the sun in a windowsill in the back of her house, then put them away while she used the next one. It was *very* uncomfortable to wear, especially considering my vagina wasn't completely healed from the abuse it had received. This left me in an *extremely* foul temper, and I'd decided that I'd repay Penelope for her actions in a manner that suited her *particularly* well.

Darian entered first, with Arella and I following. There were six men in the common room, which I thought would make a suitable audience for what was to follow. Tharald looked up to see who had entered, and his smile instantly changed to a look of shock and fear as he saw Darian. Of course, Darian was rather intimidating himself at the moment. His green hunter's garb had several rents in it stained with dried blood, his face had several days' worth of straggly beard-growth, and his blue eyes blazed with anger. "Tharald, you bastard, I'm going to *kick your damn teeth in!*" he roared.

Tharald, his face pale and his eyes wide, turned on his heel and started to run for the back door. Darian sprinted after him and tackled him behind the bar, then the two men rolled around on the floor. Arella and I stepped up next to them, and I picked up the crossbow Tharald had beneath the bar, firing the bolt into the ceiling and tossing the weapon aside. Tharald might have felt that the crossbow was only to be used in a life-or-death emergency and had decided not to try to kill Darian, but I doubted it. I figured he'd been so frightened of Darian, it hadn't even occurred to him to use it.

A couple of the other patrons rose to help Tharald, but I raised my hand as though to gesture for a spell. "Don't, or by the gods I'll turn you into pigs and have ham for tonight's dinner," I said. I didn't like the way my woman's voice sounded in my ears (to me, it sounded like a hollow threat), but the robe and cloak made the difference. I was obviously a female and a mage, possibly a powerful and dangerous mage from my look, and definitely a furious mage. As I was female, I might even be fully in the throes of a catamenial fury (which, apparently, I was). The two men decided that a powerful, furious sorceress who's anger might be heightened by an approaching menstruation was *not* someone they wanted to mess with at the moment, and sat back down.

Tharald was rather large and strong, but Darian finally had him where he wanted him, and was now in the process of pounding his face with his fist over and over and over. Penelope ran out from the kitchen to see what was the matter, and spotted Arella-tor and I standing behind Darian, watching his back. "You!" she yelped, shocked and afraid.

I was going to speak, but Arella beat me to it. "That's right, Penelope. The woman you thought was stealing Darian. Well, she wasn't. She's with me."

Penelope's eyes went wide as she looked to me. "I didn't know you were a sapphite!"

"No, you didn't, and as a result, you threw away your relationship with Darian and earned your uncle the beating he's getting right now. You also don't know what happened to me on that ship, Penelope. They raped me. The whole crew, all forty-eight of them. Day and night. For three days. I nearly died, Penelope. Now you're going to pay. I'm going to let everyone see on the outside what your soul is like on the inside. For each man that raped me, you're going to spend seventy-six days with your new appearance. I curse you, Penelope, for the next ten years," I said, and drew upon my staff for the strength I needed as I spat out the incantation for the Curse of Ugliness, gesturing briefly with my gloved left hand.

Penelope squealed with the sharp, brief pain of the spell, then brought her hands to her face, and moaned as she felt the change. The six men who'd heard my speech had looked disgustingly at Penelope as I told my tale, but now they looked at her in horror. Her face was now covered in hairy warts, red blotches, moles, boils and open sores that trickled pus and blood. Penelope drew her hands away, and saw the blood and pus on them. "What have you done to me?!" she wailed.

"I told you - for the next ten years, everyone will see on the outside exactly what you're like on the inside; an ugly, spiteful bitch," I replied venomously.

Penelope ran to me, dropping to her knees and grabbing my cloak. "Oh, please! I'm sorry, I really, really am! Please have mercy on me!"

I grabbed her by the hair and pulled her to her feet, glaring into her horrifically ugly face. "I begged for mercy too, bitch. I begged and screamed for mercy. *I begged and screamed for mercy for three days as all of those men raped me over and over and over, you bitch!* And the worst part is, I *am* being merciful! My first thought was to make this curse last for the *rest of your miserable life!*" I yelled, hating the screech of my woman's voice.

"Please, I beg you! How can I go through life like this?!" she wailed.

"I suggest you get a veil. It worked for me," Arella-tor suggested dryly.

"No, this bitch is going to need a mask. A veil will get soiled from the excretions of the sores," I said, and flung Penelope to the floor by her hair. She rolled to her feet and ran off into a back room, apparently

where she lived in the inn. After a few moments, a hideous, wailing scream came from the open door. Penelope had pulled out a mirror.

The sound was music to my ears.

I turned to the other men in the inn about the time that Darian rose to his feet. Tharald lay bloody and still, but breathing. He'd live, though it looked like it'd be several months before he was on solid food again, what with that broken jaw and shattered teeth. Of course, he wouldn't be able to see Penelope's face until tomorrow. Both his eyes were swollen shut at the moment, and his nose was flattened for good measure. "You six men have heard my tale, and you probably know what happened the first night I was here - I'm sure the tale is all over town by now. I left peacefully then, and I leave peacefully now. Even so, the next time I have to come here and right a wrong that's been done to me or my friends, I'll leave this place a smoking hole in the ground and the people of this damned city will be breathing your ashes in the air for weeks. Be warned," I said, and the three of us turned and left.

Chapter Fourteen

"Only fools and other mages trifle with a mage."

- Arcadian proverb

Darian's knuckles were bloody and his hands were swollen, so after we got back to Arella-tor's house, I examined them. "You've broken a bone in your right hand, and the knuckles of both hands are slashed up from his broken teeth. Darian, please don't tell me I'm going to have to teach you how to fight, too?" I asked, grinning.

"No, it's just that when I finally saw his face, I kind of lost control. All I wanted to do was keep pounding it over and over," he replied sheepishly.

"I can handle the cuts and the swelling if you can fix the bone," Arella said, looking his hand over. I nodded, then gripped his wrist in one hand and his fingers in the other. I then cast a spell of healing as I gently tugged on his fingers to pull the bone back in place. Darian grunted slightly as the bones shifted, then grinned when the pain stopped.

"Thanks, that feels better already. Are you alright, though? I know spellcasting is tiring for mages, and especially for you since you don't have much endurance in your new body yet."

"I'm alright, it was just a single bone in the back of your hand. After I've had a few minutes to rest, I'll be fine," I replied as Arella returned to the table with a small box. She opened the box and pulled out an unguent jar, carefully removing the lid. She then took a small dab of pink paste from inside the jar, then took each of Darian's hands one at a time and rubbed the paste into the small cuts on his knuckles. As she worked, I watched in amazement as the cuts slowly began to seal into tiny white scars. I picked up the jar in a gloved hand and carefully sniffed at the unguent - sharp, tangy and earthy. "Bloodmoss?" I asked.

"Yes, it's a standard bloodmoss unguent. My grandmother taught me how to make it. I couldn't use it on the tearing you had, though - it irritates the vagina terribly. That's why I used that Oil of White Lotus on you - it not only smells very nice, but it wouldn't make you itch for hours afterwards like bloodmoss would have done," she replied.

"*Gods*, Darian! I don't think your culture gives a *damn* about women! We Hyperboreans cherished and treasured our women, and respected their wit and wisdom. You keep yours in thrall," I said in disgust, putting the jar back down gently.

"What? What do you mean?" Darian asked, surprised.

"Darian, in Hyperborea any woman who could make a bloodmoss unguent would have been called a *Physicker*, not a simple *Herbalist*, and she'd be in service to one of the greater circles or even one of the *kings*! I don't know much about herblore, but I *do* know that bloodmoss is one of the most powerful and dangerous herbs in existence. Used properly, it has amazing powers to heal, and it can be made into an unguent that *anybody* can use with no skill or training at all - this very unguent right here. Used improperly, however, bloodmoss is a *lethal* poison."

Arella looked at me in surprise as she sealed the jar and put it away. "You mean it? You really think I have the skills of a true physicker?" she asked.

"Absolutely," I replied, pulling my hood down and relaxing in the chair.

Darian looked like he was thinking about what I said. After a few minutes, he spoke. "Raven, I guess we *do* kind of hold our women back. Women aren't allowed to join any of the guilds, not even the wizard's

guild. The only guild that accepts women in Greenhaven is the thief's guild, and they're not a real guild, they're just a large group of organized pickpockets, con-men, burglars, assassins and thugs. It's like that all over Arcadia, and Larinia is the same way. I think that's wrong, and I'd like to change it. If I ever become king of Larinia, I will. I don't know how, but I will."

"I don't know how either, but maybe we'll discover the answer sometime in the future. For now, I'd like to see Arella's grimoire - I'd also like to see Swift-wing's grimoire, if he has one. Once I have a good idea of what she and Swift-wing already know, I can work out a plan for filling in the gaps. I'd then like to sit down with you and begin your studies in logistics and military science. We're going to teach you how to be a king, and we're going to teach Arella how to fly," I said, smiling.

"Wait! Before we start anything, I'd like to tell our fortune, if you don't mind," Arella-tor asked.

I opened my mouth to say something like 'we don't have time for foolishness', then remembered she *wasn't* just a simple palm-reader - she had a powerful talent. "Alright, go ahead."

"Oh, good," she said with a smile, then went over to start a pot of tea again.

"*Please* tell me what you're making now will taste better than what you put in the flask you gave me!" I asked, grinning, and Darian chuckled.

"Don't worry, it's just tea leaves this time," she replied with a giggle.

After a few minutes, she'd poured out four cups - one for Darian, myself and herself, and one for Swift-wing. We sipped our cups quietly while Swift-wing dipped his beak in his teacup, then lifted his head to swallow the tea a bit at a time. "Tasty, tasty! Even better than muddy water!" he cackled. I decided not to ask him if he was being facetious or not - he *was* a carrion-eater, after all. We finished after a few minutes, and Arella placed the four teacups together in the center of the table. She then murmured an incantation as she gestured over them, then she gazed into the cups quietly as the spell took effect. After a few moments, she began to speak, her voice an eerie monotone.

"Trouble. Trials, difficulties. Travel. Struggle. Dragons, giants, fell beasts. Battle. War. Horror. The Army of Undead marches. Drums, drums, the thunder of incessant, maddening war-drums. Pain, great pain. Sorrow. Madness. Death. The Raven, the King, the Witch," she said hollowly, then blinked for a moment as she came out of the trance and looked up to me. "Darian, Raven, we have to leave. *Now!*" she said, her eyes fearful.

"Okay, but why?" I asked, taken aback by her prophecy of war and death. Darian looked equally shocked and surprised, but held his tongue. Swift-wing simply looked nervous, fluffing his feathers and shifting from foot to foot.

"An army is coming - a *big* one! Eighty, maybe ninety thousand men march from Larinia. It's the largest army ever assembled in the history of our two nations, maybe the largest *ever*. They've gone through the wilderness and crushed what few villages they encountered, slaughtering the people so no word of their advance is spread. They'll be here by tomorrow morning, and they'll lay siege to Greenhaven. It's the largest city in many leagues of here, and an important port. With it in their hands, they can land ships here and supply their army by sea. Nearly all the people of the city will die, and those that live will yearn for death. They will allow no one to escape, and they will allow few to survive. They'll loot the city, tear down what they don't need to build their defenses, and then begin conquering Arcadia. The king of Arcadia is going to die in battle, Raven. This nation is going to be conquered by the end of the year, and those who will not submit to the king of Larinia are doomed to die. If we stay here, though, we won't live to see it - we'll all die with the rest of the people of this city."

"There was more! You said the Army of Undead marches! You said dragons, giants and fell beasts!" Swift-wing squawked fearfully.

"He's right. Is that what's approaching?" I asked.

"No, the Larinian army is made up of men. What I say during the trance I don't remember. I only remember the part that's the most critical - in this case, our survival. Everything else must come after that. That's why I have Swift-wing. I needed someone who could point out anything I'd missed after I awoke from the trance, and possibly figure out if it's important. At the moment, though, all I can tell you is that we have to flee. *Please*, Raven! We have to go *now!*"

"Calm down. Yes, their army is large, but I've seen bigger. Remember, I'm a tad older than you, and when we're talking armies and war, we're dealing in my area of expertise. I bow to Darian's skill as an

archer, swordsman, hunter and tracker, I bow to your skill as a physicker and fortuneteller, and I bow to Swift-wing's ability to soar through the air and see into the astral without chanting a single syllable of a spell. As such, you all need to do the same for me, alright?" I asked, and they nodded their agreement. "Good. First things first. Are they all on foot, or do they have horses?"

"Some knights, a long train of wagons, most on foot," she replied.

"How long a train of wagons? How many?"

"Long. Several hundred wagons, and they travel in the rear of the army."

"But it's not a train of wagons going back and forth between the army and their homeland?"

"No, just a large group of wagons that follows them."

"Good. That's their supply wagons, and they haven't formed a supply-line back home. That means they're carrying all the supplies they'll need to take this city and establish it as the receiving end for a chain of supply ships from home. With their numbers, they should be able to take this city easily. Unfortunately for them, that also means they can't just break off and leave them - they need them too desperately to risk their loss to accident or goblins. Those wagons have to be guarded safely in the rear of the army or their whole invasion plan is sunk. That means we can out-distance them easily on horseback - an army can only travel as fast as it's slowest component. Arella, I'll need a rope at least twelve cubits in length. Darian, I need you to help Arella go through the house and select everything we might need on a long journey. Arella, make sure you take all your herbs and reagents, your grimoire, and your kitchen supplies. If you have a brazier, bring it - we'll need it. As for me, I'm going to have to charge up my staff as much as I can so that I can summon my Hidden Sanctuary. After we load it up, Darian can buy two horses and we can get out of here. We'll have to work fast, so get moving."

"Alright, but why only two horses? Aren't you coming?" Darian asked.

"Yes, but even after I charge my staff, I won't have enough strength to remain conscious - it'll be hard enough to avoid simply dying from the strain. My staff's virtually empty at the moment. If I'm careful, I'll just be unconscious. You can throw me over the back of one of the horses and take me with you."

"I know the Spell of Transference. Mistress taught it to me. She also knows it. We could both help you charge your staff. Then you won't faint," Swift-wing cackled.

"Good. If I have enough strength left over, I may be able to summon an invisible steed. Then only Darian will need a horse - Arella can easily ride with me. Alright, does everybody understand the plan?" I asked.

"All except two things - what's a Hidden Sanctuary and what's an Invisible Steed?" Arella asked.

"Darian can explain as he helps you sort out what we're going to take. For now, I have to rest and meditate. I figure we'll have to leave in four hours, so get to work."

Darian and Arella hastened to comply, and left the room. I leaned back in the chair and relaxed, trying to meditate before my first attempt to store some of my energy into my staff. Swift-wing simply flew over to his perch and began to preen, muttering nervously to himself.

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

"The difference between a woman and a horse is that the horse can live its entire life without ever once feeling a need to tell you what it's thinking."

- Mysantian proverb

As sunset approached, Darian drew back on the reins of his dun mare, halting under a spreading oak tree. I pulled up next to him on my invisible steed. Arella was mounted behind me, and when I glanced back to check on her, I could see she was exhausted. We had wanted to get two horses, but after we bought a few extra things we'd need for our trip, we simply didn't have the money. Swift-wing had flown along nearby us above the trees, keeping an eye out behind us to see if any advance scouts of the army were around. He fluttered to a landing on Arella's shoulder. "There's a small caravan headed towards the city and a few farmer's wagons heading out, but that's all," he squawked to me.

"Good. I figure their scouts are probably approaching the city just about now, but there was a chance

that they were in the area already. Good work. You're the best scout I've had in centuries," I said, and grinned as Swift-wing cackled his amusement - he knew he was also the *only* scout I'd had in centuries.

I pulled out the rope Arella had provided, coiled it on the ground, and summoned my Hidden Sanctuary. I tossed one end of the rope into the air, and it fastened itself to the iron ring attached to the opening of my sanctuary and hung there. I was glad Arella and Swift-wing had helped me charge my staff - I was reeling with exhaustion after summoning the sanctuary a second time today (the first being when we'd loaded Arella's possessions into it), and I was barely able to clamber up the rope at all, even with Dyarzi's boots and gloves helping me. I had drained my staff as little as possible, taking most of the strain myself, since I might need its stored power later. Arella had been amazed when she first saw me summon it in the back yard of her home, and Swift-wing had been very excited - he found he didn't have to figure out how to climb the rope, he simply had to fly up inside the hole using the rope as a guide. At the moment, Arella was too tired to be amazed. She tried to climb up the rope, but was too tired to manage it. Darian had to boost her up so I could grab her arms and pull her in, and I nearly fainted with the effort. I'd already dismissed the invisible steed, and Darian spent twenty minutes brushing down his horse with the brush he'd bought. When he was finished, he hobbled his horse with a short piece of rope, then climbed up and joined us.

As Darian pulled the rope up behind us, he looked Arella and I over. "Are you two going to be alright?"

"I'm fine, just exhausted," I replied weakly.

"Me, too. It took everything I had in my staff, Swift-wing's staff and a good portion of my own strength just to charge Raven's staff up to the full amount of power it can normally contain. Then we have that long, hard ride? Phew!" Arella added.

"Well, let me help you get the bed set up so you can rest," Darian said, and bent to the task while Arella and I sat on the floor next to each other and tried to catch our breath.

My little room was full of the supplies we'd packed and a few pieces of furniture we'd brought along. Very little of what Arella had would fit through the cubit-wide hole in the center of the sanctuary, but Darian had managed to slip in three small chairs, Swift-wing's perch, all of Arella's medicinal and herbal supplies, several pots and pans, a brazier and several pounds of charcoal, several weeks of food, several gallons of water, a few changes of clothes for Arella and five bottles of wine. Darian had also brought the pillows and the quilted mattress from Arella's bed, as well as several sheets and blankets. He unrolled the

mattress, tucked a sheet around it, then laid a blanket and the pillows on top of it. By the time he was done, Arella was definitely ready for bed, and I was ready to join her (Swift-wing was already asleep on his perch). I pulled off my cloak and robe, and helped Arella remove her dress. Darian goggled at me for a moment, then turned and threw the rope back down the hole and knelt to climb down. "Darian, where are you going?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, I just can't sleep here with the two of you. It wouldn't be right," he replied, and swung a leg into the hole.

"Wait!" I called, waking Swift-wing with a start. Darian pulled his leg back in and waited, his bristly, unshaven face slowly turning red as he averted his blue eyes from us. I looked him over - he was a mess. His clothes were rent and bloodstained, and they were very dirty. His brown hair was matted and greasy, and he knelt there before us hunched over. After a moment, I realized he was hunched over because he was struggling to hide and subdue a rampant erection, and he was horribly embarrassed. "Mage Arella-tor, we have wronged this man beyond all normal endurance. You wouldn't treat an animal the way we've treated him. This man should spit on the two of us and never speak to us again," I said, trying to sound formal and commanding and hating the way my woman's voice made the words sound.

Darian and Arella looked to me in surprise, and Swift-wing cocked his sleepy head as he watched silently. "What do you mean, Raven?" Arella asked.

"Arella, look at him. He's a mess. His clothes are ripped up, bloodstained and dirty. He needs a bath and a shave, and the itching of that growth has *got* to be bothering him - he doesn't wear a beard usually, and he never took a year or two to get it fully grown out and comfortable like I did in my old body. I didn't think about it at the time because I knew that Darian was used to me and I still tend to think of myself as a man, but I'm standing here nearly naked before him, and you're showing him all those layers of undergarments that in your culture I think are probably *very* titillating. I think you were too tired to really realize what you were doing, because I *know* I was. Even so, he hasn't been with a woman in a while, maybe months, and we're flashing our flesh at him without *any* consideration for how that must make him feel - worse, neither of us has the *least* bit of interest in lying with him to relieve the pressure. Arella, I was a man once, and my soul still is that of a man. I can tell you from personal experience - what he's feeling now is *extremely* painful," I said, handing Arella her dress back and slipping my robe back on as I continued.

"And this is not the worst of it, by far. He'd had a rough time before he met me, what with losing his horse and having to go on foot. He helps me protect my tomb and slay the thieves who entered it, becoming my friend and boon companion. Shortly afterwards he's clubbed unconscious and press-ganged, worked like a dog for days before I can escape, wounded six times in helping me fight the

sailors and slay them all, then brings me food and tries to comfort me while I despaired of my abuse. He then works for an entire day without sleep while I rest, then when I awake I find he's gotten me more food and drink to help me recover. After probably as little sleep as he could force himself to have, he shows great wisdom, mercy and compassion by bringing me to you. Now you and I have worked him like a dog all day to help us get out of the city with as much as we can carry, and then we're simply going to strip in front of him and lie in bed and let the man fend for himself? Arella, that's no way to treat a *dog*, much less a *king!*"

Arella blushed and held her dress over herself, and as Swift-Wing cackled his amusement, Darian spoke up. "No, Raven, really. It's alright. I'll just leave so you two can relax and be comfortable."

"Darian, my humble and self-effacing friend, I say this with all due respect: *Shut up*. Pull that rope back up while I help Arella pull her dress back on, and then we'll try to find something to get you cleaned up with."

We managed to come up with a towel, a large basin, a cake of soap, a mug and a sponge, then Arella and I got to work. Swift-wing, realizing he wasn't needed, tucked his head beneath his wing and went back to sleep. While Arella tried to rinse the worst of the dirt out of Darian's filthy and overlong hair, I drew my knife and trimmed off a large hunk of his hair, then used my silver hair-ring to hold it together tightly as a small brush. My own ebon hair dangled loose and free, draping about my shoulders and down my back, and I tried to ignore the furtive glance Darian gave me when he saw it. I sliced off a sliver from the cake of soap, dropped it into the mug with some water, then used my makeshift brush to build up a lather. Arella carefully poured the soapy foam over Darian's hair and began to massage his scalp as she tried to get the remainder of the dirt out of his hair. I made two more mugs of soapy foam for her until she was satisfied his hair was finally clean.

I then made another mug of foam while Arella combed Darian's wet hair for him, then covered his beard with the lather using the makeshift brush. I then drew my knife again and began to shave him carefully. "Um, Raven, I can do that myself," Darian commented.

"Shut up. After all you've done for Arella and I, you deserve to be treated like what you really are - a king. Besides, *nobody* touches my knife but me, and I wouldn't trust that dull little pig-sticker you took off those Vilandian bastards to cut my bread," I said, and Darian wisely held his tongue after that - though he had to struggle to suppress a grin.

As I worked, I realized that another reason Darian had been so completely uncomplaining since we'd killed the Vilandians aboard the ship - he probably still felt guilty about it. He'd taken me to Tharald's inn, and the incident that followed had been the impetus to him being press-ganged and my repeated gang-rape. I didn't blame him for what happened, though. No, I realized that Arella had been right, and as such I blamed Penelope (and I'd made her pay quite satisfactorily for it, thank you very much). Even so, Darian was a man of honor, and felt guilty for what had happened to me. I was very happy to see that by the time Arella was rubbing the last of the soap off his face and rubbing his hair to dry it, he'd finally broken out into a grin that went from ear to ear.

"I'm glad to see you're smiling, Darian. Now take your clothes off," I said. Darian and Arella goggled at me, and I burst out laughing. "No, no! They need to be cleaned and repaired, and you need to use the sponge to bathe yourself. Come, here's a blanket to preserve your modesty. Hand us your clothes from beneath it, and we'll turn our backs and get to work," I said, tossing him the blanket from the bed. In a few minutes, Darian was nude beneath the blanket, sitting on the floor and blushing wildly while Arella and I turned away from him and began.

Arella didn't know the Spell of Repairing, so I had her brush Darian's boots with the brush he'd bought for his horse while I rested for a few minutes. Once I felt up to it, I cast a spell of repairing on his breeches, tunic and cloak. His chain shirt was gone, though - Darian explained his guess was Vilandians apparently had sold it before they left port (sailors have little use for armor - fall overboard wearing it, and you're likely to drown before your shipmates can lower a boat to rescue you). His clothes were still dirty and blood-stained, but that was the best I could do at the moment. Arella pointed out how his boots were worn and needed repair, and I cast the spell again on each of them, nearly fainting afterwards, while Arella brushed off as much of the dirt from his clothes as she could. Arella and I set the clothes behind us and gave him a moment to dress again as we sat in our little chairs, Arella holding me up so I wouldn't simply slump to the floor. Eventually I felt a bit better, and Darian told us we could turn around again. I then spent a few minutes trimming Darian's hair with the razor-sharp blade of my knife, trying to make him somewhat presentable. After that, I restored my silver band to my hair, and spoke. "Darian, I'm afraid that's the best we can do for you, unfortunately. Both Arella and I care for you deeply as our friend and companion, and we respect you immensely. Unfortunately, I'm still a man in a woman's body - I'm sorry, but I'm just not even slightly interested in you. Please don't be offended. I'm sure that a woman would find you quite handsome," I said lamely.

"He *is* a very handsome man, especially now that he's clean and shaved and his hair is short again. Even so, I find I have to agree with you, Raven. I'm very sorry, Darian, but I'm just not interested in you either. You're a good friend, I owe you a lot, and with your actions today, I probably owe you my life. Even so, I simply cannot lie with you," Arella said, trying to be nice.

"That's alright. Raven, you should know that the pain of concupiscence isn't fatal for a male," Darian replied with a wry grin.

"No, but sometimes you damn well *think* you're going to die!" I replied, and Darian and I burst out laughing while Arella giggled.

Once we calmed down, Darian stood and tossed the rope out the one-cubit wide hole in the center of the floor. "Well, I'll sleep outside. Good night, and thank you, my friends. I really appreciate your concern," he said, and slipped out the hole, climbing down the rope to the ground.

I sighed as I pulled the rope back up. "Damn," I said, for lack of anything better to say.

"What is it, Raven?" Arella asked.

"Well, I felt like I was telling him he was a sodomite or something, as though I was saying there was something wrong with him. There's nothing wrong with Darian or his desires, but I simply have no interest in him sexually."

"I understand. Unfortunately, neither of us can really help him. I'm a sapphite, and as long as you have this body, you are too," Arella said, putting the chairs aside and sitting on the mattress Darian had lain on the floor.

"Not really. I know you want me to fully accept being a woman, but I'm really not. I've looked at and felt my astral body when I was using the Spell of Astral Projection, and my soul still looks as it did when I was alive - a tall, muscular Hyperborean male with a shaven pate, a full beard and a moustache. It can't be detected when I'm in this body, but when I project, my true self is revealed. Such is the power of the Spell of Hidden Life - my soul is housed in this body as though it was my own, yet it is not. If it is slain, I'll return to my animuary. The next time, I may encounter someone who has a weak enough will so that the spell will allow me to re-shape their body as I possess it, making it into a duplicate of my own body as it was at the time I first made my animuary. I might have done it with this body, were it not for the head injury forcing me to lose consciousness as I commanded the body to live instead of die."

Arella nodded, and I joined her on the mattress. I'd explained to her about my animuary, and the

difference between a mage who is good and sets their animuary so they'll only strike at their grave-robbars, and those who are evil who strike at the innocent and the unwary. I looked at her, and could tell she was thinking. I waited silently until she finally spoke. "Well, I understand all that, but I still think you should try to think of yourself as being a woman now. You should accept the change as best you can, or you'll spend the rest of your life unhappy and uncomfortable. I've been a woman all my life, and I enjoy who and what I am. You may be far older and wiser than I am, but it's like you said - you accept that I know more in some areas than you do, and you bow to my skill and knowledge in these areas. As such, I have this to say; I've been a woman *far* longer than you have, and if you want to be happy instead of miserable, you'll follow my advice."

I sighed again. "Well, I'll try. I think the best I'll be able to do is simply accept this half-elf woman's body as my own and be happy with it, though. I don't think I'll *ever* be able to truly think of myself as a woman, and think womanly thoughts."

"Oh, really? And just what is it that constitutes womanly thoughts?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"You know - woman things. Clothes, hair, perfumes, gossip, things like that," I replied, shrugging.

"Oh, really? And when you were alive back in Hyperborea, you never worried about your appearance? You let your clothes get dirty and ragged and let your beard grow unkempt down to your knees, I suppose."

"No, of course not. Image is very important when you're a member of the Dyclonic Circle. My robes were of the blackest cloth I could find, and I kept my beard neatly trimmed to about here," I said, holding my hand at the top of my breasts. "I also kept my head shaved, and wore the polished steel skull-cap of the order. I thought I made a rather dashing figure, actually."

"Ah, I see. And I suppose you never chatted with your friends over a mug of ale or wine or whatever Hyperboreans drank, talking about the women in your lives and the latest goings-on within the lives of the other members of the Dyclonic Circle?"

"Well, yes, actually. Before I met Dyarzi, I often went out for a cup or two of *byallar* with my friends, and we'd chat about women and the latest intrigues within the order. All harmless, of course - mostly

who disliked whom, and who was bucking for the next position of Master that might come open. Why I remember one time-" I replied, and Arella interrupted.

"What? Gossip among the ranks of the proud and noble Dyclonic Circle? Why you'd have me believe they were merely a flock of cackling hens instead of the brave and noble men they were!" she said, pretending to be shocked.

I laughed, then nodded. "I guess you're right, we did gossip."

"Precisely. My point is that men and women aren't really so different in their thoughts and actions as most people think. The only real difference I can see is that men tend to be more aggressive and occasionally domineering. Oftentimes the best friendships between men are established after a good, long fist-fight. You say you can't accept yourself as a woman, that the best you'll be able to do is accept this body as your own. Well, that's what I'm trying to get you to do. In the end, you'll realize that you *are* a woman, though your attraction to other women makes you a sapphite, as I am. Now come; we've got to change your cloth and get you a fresh one, then clean the previous one before we go to bed."

The process of tugging on the string to draw out the old cloth and putting the new one in place was *very* uncomfortable, and also brought a sting of pain from my half-healed injuries. I sat there quietly as she showed me how to clean the used and bloody cloth, thinking about what Arella had said. I was still considering her words as we undressed and carefully folded our clothes. As we snuggled together in the bed, I spoke quietly to her. "No. There's one difference. A great one."

"What's that?" she asked, stroking my ears with a smile.

"Women don't commit rape," I replied quietly.

She reached across and hugged me gently. "Neither do men like Darian. I think that when you were alive in Hyperborea, you were also a man like him."

"I never touched a woman against her will, and I *certainly* never raped a woman. I always believed it beneath me. Even so, I'd never understood why some women who were raped slit their throats afterwards. Now I know."

She hugged me after that, and I hugged her in return. I lay there in the comforting wrap of her arms beneath the warmth of the blanket until she fell asleep. It was quite a while before I slept, however. I simply lay there in the growing darkness of the room, thinking.

Chapter Sixteen

"In the beginning, Moradim did forge the first Dwarf and the first Dwarf-maid from iron ore he did find deep within the Earth. Once each was quenched and did have the breath of life, Moradim then did say to the couple 'I do have but two gifts to give ye, and each of ye may yet have but one. The first be who shall yet be the stronger betwixt ye. Which of ye do wish this?' The male did say 'I do, please! After all, I be the male. It be only common sense I be yet the stronger betwixt us.' The maid did bow her head and did say 'An it do please ye, my lord, then ye shall have it.' Moradim did nod. 'Done. Now, the second gift be who shall yet be the smarter betwixt ye...'"

- Dwarven proverb

The next morning, the sunlight streamed in through the window to my Hidden Sanctuary, and Swift-wing muttered and squawked about being hungry and thirsty (he, like the rest of us, had gone to bed without eating simply because he was exhausted). Arella stroked his feathers and cooed to him gently as she poured seed and water for him into the cups attached to his perch, and he was quite happy as he gobbled his spartan fare. "Hah!" I chuckled, watching him as I slipped on my boots and gloves.

"What?" Arella asked, turning to me. She was gloriously nude, and the sunlight gleaming off her pale skin brought a tingle of arousal to my groin. I shook my head as I replied to her answer - the time for things like that was later, after we were many leagues distant from here.

"I was just thinking of the time I joked with Dyarzi that she ate like a bird. Now here Swift-wing is, eating a cup of seed that must weigh fully half what he does! If Dyarzi had gobbled half her weight in those delicious sweet-meats she liked to snack on so often, she'd have looked like a fat cow!" I said, chuckling.

"I do *not* eat too much! I am lean and sleek! I also do not eat nasty, icky things like sweet-meats! I eat delicious, healthy things like seeds, berries, bugs and rotten meat! Why, I ate a dead mouse last week, and that's *very* healthy and delicious, and helps keep your feathers bright and gleaming! Why, if you humans would eat more sensibly, you might grow a nice coat of feathers, too!" Swift-wing replied with a huffy squawk, and Arella and I burst out laughing.

"Sorry, you're right, I just meant that the old saying about 'eating like a bird' was a misnomer. Unfortunately, if we ate bugs and dead mice, we'd probably die in very short order. Only the noble ravens are stout enough to consume food like that. Plus, I'll bet fully half the berries you eat are poisonous to us, too," I replied, struggling to suppress my laughter and look properly apologetic.

"Ah, I see. You weren't being insulting, I merely misunderstood. Thank you for the compliment," Swift-wing replied, and returned to eating as Arella and I suppressed our laughter so as not to disturb him. It was never wise to irritate your own familiar or the familiar of a friend - they could make life *very* miserable for you in *very* short order, especially when they're small and sneaky like a raven.

"Hello up there! I heard your laughter, so I suppose you're awake. If you're dressed, I've got two rabbits we can cook for breakfast - they're already gutted and skinned, but I don't think we should start a fire," Darian called from below the sanctuary. He couldn't see us, but we could see him easily through the hole in the floor.

"I'm almost dressed, but Arella's still working on it. Hand them up to me and I'll set up the brazier. When we're dressed, I'll drop the rope down to you," I called down to him, lying on the floor and holding my gloved hands through the hole. Darian handed the carcasses up to me, and from his perspective, my arms seemed to just poke out of nowhere and pull the rabbits up, disappearing into nothingness.

"Rabbit! Rabbit! Tasty rabbit! How long have they been dead?" Swift-wing cackled as I set up the brazier and ignited the coals with a cantrip.

"I'd guess an hour or so. We'll have them cooked in a little while, and I'm sure Arella will be happy to cut you a slice if you want one," I replied.

"An *hour*?! Why, rabbit doesn't reach its *full* flavor for at least a day or two," he squawked in disgust.

"Sorry, my friend. Maybe we'll have time to let a rabbit age properly for you once we're safely away from here," Arella replied.

"Tasty, tasty!" Swift-wing cackled, apparently already envisioning the flavor of rotten rabbit. He stopped for a moment, then spoke up again. "Wait! Where are we going, mistress? I know Raven said we flee north because the army's coming from the south, but they'll eventually take the whole of Arcadia. Where do we go? Where is safe?"

"That's a good question. Where *will* we go, Raven?" Arella asked.

"I don't know yet. All I know is we've got to keep moving north for at least a couple more days just to get out of the area of their immediate control following their capture of the city."

"We could go visit the elves! You look like an elf. They'll like you!" Swift-wing suggested.

"No, actually they'll hate me. Most half-elves are a product of rape, and the elves don't like them much at all. They consider half-elf females dumpy and plain, and consider half-elf males hairy and ugly. Humans they consider to be short-lived, extremely hairy brutes - hairy monkeys with swords, basically. For similar reasons, we can't go to the Granite Mountains. Dwarves don't like elves much, and they *hate* dark-elves. I made this body look like a Malani-elf and human crossbreed so as to be sure no one who was my enemy or the enemy of the former owner of this body would ever possibly recognize me. Unfortunately, the dwarves hate the Malani with a passion, and they war with them from time to time - well, they did in my day anyway, and it's reasonable to assume they still do. Anyway, the Malani live even deeper underground than the dwarves do, and the two occasionally come into conflict. A human culture might have worked out a peaceful coexistence by now, but elves and dwarves live a long time, so I doubt they have. It's been sixteen centuries since I last breathed air - maybe longer. For a human, that's about eighty generations, and long enough for nearly any blood-feud to have faded. For a dwarf, that's only about sixteen generations. For an elf, it's only about seven or eight. Keep in mind that the dwarves and elves had a huge war about forty or fifty millennia ago, and it was only in *my* day that they had finally started being *somewhat* civil to each other. As far as you two are concerned, Dwarves like humans but they won't let humans live with them, despite the fact that bachelor dwarves out to secure their bride-price often live and work in human lands for centuries. The dwarves are *very* protective of the secret tunnels that lead from the villages and castles on the surface of the mountains down to their cavernous underground cities. The dwarves had a saying in my day - '*It's a great place to visit, but we don't want you to live here.*' No, we can't go there, either."

"Then where *do* we go? We can't go west - that's the sea! We can't go east, that's the dwarves and elves. We can't go south - the Larinian army is there, and beyond them is Larinia itself! There's nowhere

to go!" Arella asked, finishing buttoning her dress.

I kicked the rope down the hole and Darian immediately started to climb. I helped him up inside, then answered. "You're right. There's only one place to go; home. After the rabbits are done cooking, we'll head for my tower in Hyperborea. It's probably in ruins, but I can fix that easily."

Darian was so surprised he nearly stumbled and fell out the hole, and I had to grab him to keep him from falling. He and Arella were both rendered speechless, but Swift-wing wasn't. "What? That's insane! The Hyperborean wastes are doom and death! Dragons, giants and fell beasts abound!" he squawked, flapping his wings wildly.

"Precisely as mentioned by Arella in her trance. I have a feeling that's where we need to go. My tower's as good a destination as any, and once we're in Hyperborea and I can recognize a few landmarks, I can lead us there pretty easily. Besides, I've dealt with dragons and giants before. Most dragons are only dangerous if they think you're after their treasure or if you happen to be a plump cow or sheep, and most giants are only a problem if they don't know you're around - they sometimes step on you accidentally. By and large, I've found dragons and giants fairly easy to deal with. If you leave them alone, they usually leave you alone. Of course, if you threaten them or irritate them, you *will* have a bit of a problem. So, what do you all say? Shall we follow my plan?"

"It seems we don't have anywhere else to go for the moment. I guess I agree," Arella replied.

"I agree also. I trust you, and if you say this is the best plan, then that's what we'll do," Darian replied.

"Well, I *don't* agree! I think going to Hyperborea is a *stupid* idea, and I think we're all going to get killed!" Swift-wing squawked.

"Swift-wing, we'll be alright. Raven's older and wiser than we are, and she knows what she's doing," Arella said, stroking his feathers.

"Well, alright mistress," he replied quietly, rubbing his beak against her hand. He then glared at me with his beady black eyes. "But if you get me killed, I'm never going to speak to you again!" he said in a huffy squawk.

Darian, Arella and I burst out laughing. After a moment, Swift-wing realized what he'd said and cackled along with us.

Chapter Seventeen

"...as time passed, the Hyperboreans learned their lessons in war, to the point where they were equal to both ourselves and the dwarves. Yet, it was at that point that a change occurred in their culture. No longer did they seek to expand their territory, but rather they lived peacefully beside their elven and dwarven neighbors - indeed, the Seelie court sent ambassadors to several Hyperborean kingdoms, as did the King of the Dwarves (eventually), and we engaged in peaceful trade and commerce for several centuries. No, instead of expanding, the various Hyperborean kings began to engage in internecine conflicts, both political and military, to see which of them might eventually be ruler of them all. The great Battle-Circles arose during this time, and the power of the Hyperboreans in war grew to be quite respectable. By and large, these conflicts were peaceful, only rarely coming to bloodshed - but when blood was spilled, it ran in rivers. They had nearly resolved the issue, after a millennia of conflict, when the Invaders came to their shores..."

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

The next few weeks we spent traveling overland, Darian leading the way. At my instruction, Darian was careful to keep us far from villages and towns where we might be spotted. My reasoning was simple - I didn't want *anyone* to know we were headed for Hyperborea. I hadn't told my three companions, but I was worried. Something was up in Larinia, and it couldn't be good.

I knew warfare, and I knew it far better than Darian did. Judging by what I'd seen of Greenhaven, I knew warfare far better than the Arcadians and Larinians did. There's no way a culture who had difficulty fielding an army of twenty thousand would suddenly field an army of eighty or ninety thousand. Logistics is a science, not an art, and it was a science the Arcadians and Larinians barely grasped. Command and control techniques also seemed to be lacking in their culture. Overall, I'd have said it was impossible for them to do it. Even so, the pall of smoke we'd seen on the southern horizon that first day we broke camp told me they'd gotten around these problems.

The real question I had was *how* they'd done it. Certainly it was possible a lone genius had risen to power. Even so, it was unlikely. Darian never described his brother as being a master of war, and there hadn't been word of a coup. This begs the question 'how does Dorian know how to do it?' He could have hired an expert general to run his army. Certainly an elf or dwarf trained in their military would know how to do it. Unfortunately, Arella's description of their battle strategy tended to rule that out. Dwarves didn't like relying on sea-power for logistic support - they knew a single storm or a few days of low

winds could delay critically needed supplies. Elves almost never moved anywhere with long supply trains - their armies lived off the land as they went, and traveling through wilderness was like riding through a gigantic meat-market for them. The only time they brought supplies and established supply lines was when they were going to battle an opponent in an area where they couldn't live off the land, and the Arcadian wilderness was too fecund for them to bother. Any expert general Dorian hired from either the elves or the dwarves would train his army to fight and move as they themselves had been trained to. As a result, that simply couldn't be the answer.

I asked Darian about the only other possibility - Vilandians. I couched my request as idle conversation meant to update me as to the modern world, and Darian told me as much as he could remember. Unfortunately, what he told me ruled them out as well. The Vilandians were excellent sailors and shipwrights, and could build enormous vessels that were like floating castles, hammering other ships or shore installations with a hail of catapult-launched rocks or ballista-bolts. Had they encountered the Hyperboreans at sea, the resulting fight would have been interesting to watch. Unfortunately, their land tactics weren't much different from those of the Arcadians and Larinians - an army eighty or ninety thousand men strong was more than they could handle. That left one other explanation, and it was the one I was worried about - Gorlon-mak.

Darian had said before that Gorlon-mak had once explored the 'Hyperborean ruins'. It seemed possible that Gorlon-mak had obtained one of our textbooks on warfare by digging through a ruined library (probably while looking for grimoires or tomes discussing Hyperborean magic theory). With a Spell of Translation, he could simply sit down, read it, and become the best general in several centuries simply because he knew how to command and supply a massive army, where the people of today did not. The information might have lain unused for years until Dorian made his offer of wealth and power in exchange for Gorlon-mak helping him eliminate Darian. That was my theory, the one I kept to myself. I did so because it meant that I'd have to train Darian to be able to raise and command an army of equal or superior ability, and I wasn't even sure if it was possible. There was no place for him to obtain the men that I could see, and we had no base of operations that could support them as of yet. To my mind, the situation was hopeless unless something else developed later that might give us a chance.

I was wondering if I'd be able to tell when we were in Hyperborea. When I asked Darian about it, he simply said "You'll know," and Arella nodded. They apparently didn't want to tell me something, and I allowed them to keep their secrets (since, after all, I was keeping much of my thoughts secret from them). Finally, the forests we were riding through thinned, and Darian's winding course he'd taken to avoid villages and towns became straighter. After a few more days, the forests had thinned to scrublands, interspersed with bare rock, then finally to a vast plain of broken and cracked stone. Darian drew his horse to a stop by a shallow river where it seemed the last vegetation for leagues tenaciously clung to life. "There, ahead. This is the Wailing River, and beyond it..." he said, letting his words trail off with an all-encompassing gesture at the landscape before us. "That is what we call the Hyperborean wastes. As far as I know, the land goes on like this forever," Darian said, then turned to help Arella load up our water supplies as I stared.

There were no trees, no flowers, no birds, no insects, nothing. Just bare and blasted earth, broken rocks and blowing dust. There were some bare hills a few leagues ahead of us, and the peaks of a couple mountains that looked familiar. If I was right, we were about two hundred leagues south and a bit east of my tower. I remembered this area. It was once a fertile plain covered with blooming flowers and waving grasses, a narrow strip of beauty running from the foothills of the Granite mountains fifty leagues west to the sea. We called it and everything south of it 'The Southern Wilderness'. Now, it was all dead. I struggled not to weep.

I reached out with my will and examined the *Mana*-flow of the area, then knelt and cast my Spell of Astral Projection to look at the aura of the ground and rocks. When I was done, I did weep. It was simply too much.

Arella came over and sat beside me, hugging me gently. "Raven, what is it?" she asked.

"This place is dead. My lands, my people have been completely annihilated," I replied, sobbing.

"But you already knew that. What's really bothering you?" she asked as Darian came over.

"No, no. You're looking only with your eyes. The *Mana*-flow in this area is wild, chaotic, disorganized. The astral aura of this area is rife with hot blue sparkles, astral winds and other evidence of magical destruction on a scale I simply cannot describe. Worse, I can tell that the earth is only now beginning to heal. In the past, it was worse than this. These plants growing by this stream have only been here a few decades. Ahead of us lies a battleground, Arella. A battle-ground for a war that was fought fifteen or sixteen centuries ago, anywhere from a few decades to a century or so after I died. Arella, if every battle-mage in Hyperborea had joined together and fought in a single spot, they could not have done this. No, this is the effect of raw *Mana*-energy unleashed upon the earth - a massive blast of power that seared this land and left it and everything on it dead. I cannot possibly imagine what could have wrought such destruction. I weep for my people. Something happened to them, something tragic," I replied, and Arella hugged me gently until my tears subsided.

Finally, I raised my head and wiped my eyes with my gloved hand. "Come, let us go. Darian, we have to head towards that peak there, see it?" I said, pointing.

"Yes, I see it. I'd say that's about a week's ride to reach its foothills."

"We'll be turning before then, as soon as I can spot some more landmarks. Keep your bow at the ready, Darian. We'll need it, since my spells may be erratic here. With the chaotic *Mana*-flow in this area, I don't know if I could manage a simple cantrip. Let's go."

We rode across the stream and into the wasteland, riding onwards quietly. Towards noon, the sun beat on the anvil of the bare rocks, hammering us with waves of heat. Arella slumped against me, the heat having drained her. Darian seemed a little tougher than her, able to resist the heat better. Of course, he also wasn't wearing as many layers as Arella was. As for me, my ring of adaptation allowed me to ignore normal extremes of heat and cold. "Something comes! Look, in the air, there," Swift-wing called from Arella's shoulder.

I looked, and grimaced. "Chimera. Keep moving, and keep an eye on it, it may spot us. Darian, if it attacks, shoot your arrows into the dragon's mouth when it opens it to breathe fire. Swift-wing, once Darian takes out the dragon-head, fly around it and try to keep it distracted. Stay out of the reach of its claws, though - a single swipe will kill you. Arella, cast your fire cantrip on it, like it was a log or something else you were trying to ignite. It won't kill it, but it will definitely distract it. As for me, I'll try to finish it if I can."

"So it's a dragon?" Darian asked.

"No. It's a fell beast with the body and legs of a lion, the wings of a small dragon and the tail of a goat. They have three heads. The middle head is that of a lion, the left head is that of a dragon, and the right head is that of a goat. They can eat just about anything except rocks and wood, though they prefer meat - their goat-head can eat green plants, their lion head can eat any kind of meat from fresh to rotten, and their dragon-head can chew bones to powder and pretty much eat anything else the other two heads can't eat. Each head can control the body equally, and they work as a team to hunt down their prey. At night, the heads sleep in rotation, so they can't be snuck up on. They're not intelligent, but they're cunning and vicious. They're clumsy flyers but swift and powerful. They weigh about fifty to sixty stone, and their usual method of attack is to swoop down from the air and smash their prey to the ground, ripping, tearing, biting and breathing flame from their dragon-head. We Hyperboreans hated them because they tended to swoop down for a few sheep and cattle every now and then, as well as eating any farmers or herders that get in their way in the process. Damn, it's spotted us," I replied, pointing.

Darian readied an arrow, and Arella trembled in fear as I dismounted. "Arella, get off the steed and stand here. If it attacks you, it'll hit the steed. It's not afraid and it won't run away, since it knows it can't be hurt by anything on this plane. Darian, dismount and stand clear of your horse. If we're lucky, it'll go for it first," I commanded. Darian and Arella complied, Darian standing next to me, his bow drawn and waiting.

Any normal predator might have hesitated at seeing us ready for it, but the chimera was fearless, as they always are. We watched it as it approached, swooping down from above at a distance of a hundred paces. "It's coming for you and I, Darian. Stand still and aim carefully. After you shoot, dodge aside, then try to hit it in the heart - it's only got one, and you'll find it behind the elbow of the left foreleg," I said, and moved over to Darian's left. There was only one way to deal with a chimera without a dwarven blunderbuss, a siege crossbow or a Hyperborean composite longbow, and I was going to have to do it myself. I only wished my staff was about three cubits longer. Of course, I couldn't tell them what I was planning. They'd probably argue, and we didn't have time for that.

I raised my staff above my head and waved it. "Come on! Come and get me, you misbegotten spawn of a drunken god!" I yelled, my voice coming out as a woman's screech. The chimera's wings shifted slightly as its dragon-head altered course to hit me. The lion head extended the claws and curled the body up to bring all four feet to bear on impact, and the goat head curled in to guard the beast's chest and hit me with its horns. It was coming fast, very fast - I judged about the speed of a galloping horse. I knelt and planted the butt of my staff in the ground to take the force of its charge just as the dragon head's mouth opened to breathe a gout of flame prior to impact. I aimed the tip of my staff carefully, just at the base of the lion-head's neck.

Darian's bow twanged, and a feathered shaft appeared in the dragon's gaping mouth. The dragon head recoiled in pain, and the lion-head roared as it realized my trap and tried to take over the wings to shift its dive and avoid it. After that, it hit me.

Chapter Eighteen

"One can live a full life wandering the wilderness alone and never see a chimera. However, it is difficult for those who do see one while alone in the wilderness to live a full life thereafter."

- Hyperborean proverb

When I awoke, Arella was patting my forehead with a cool, damp cloth. My whole body ached like I'd had a millstone rolled over me (at least three or four times, by the feel of it). "What happened?" I asked.

Darian leaned over me, behind Arella. "Your staff took the lion-head in the throat as it hit you, and the beast thrashed around for awhile as Arella and I attacked it. The dragon-head and lion-heads hung limp, but the goat-head still moved. With Swift-wing and Arella distracting it, I eventually got a shot into its heart, and it went down. Raven, forgive me for being rude, but I have to ask you this; *Why in the hell did you do that, you dolt? You could have been killed!*" Darian roared.

I grinned weakly. "It's the only way if you don't have a powerful enough ranged attack. With the *Mana-flow* in this area being disordered, I wasn't sure my spells would work reliably. Normally, you'd use a spear or a pike in this situation. I didn't have one."

"Well, you could at *least* have told us!" he growled.

"I knew you'd argue if I told you I was going to do it. I figured I'd probably die, and I didn't have the time to debate the issue," I said, and tried to sit up. I groaned in pain, and Arella reached her arms behind me and helped me. I realized they had laid me down in the shade of Darian's horse.

"Move slowly for the moment, you're still pretty badly bruised. No bones are broken that I can find, so you're lucky, there. The beast tried to pull up just before it hit you, and it smashed you to the ground with its chest," Arella said, holding me upright as I sat.

"Where is it now?" I asked.

"Over there," Darian replied, pointing.

"Help me up."

Arella and Darian lifted me to my feet, and then helped me over to the dead chimera. My staff had penetrated its middle throat, and the tip of my staff could be seen out the back of its lion-neck, through the spine. It was well and truly dead, and I knelt before it and stroked each head gently with a gloved hand. Dead, a chimera was almost beautiful, though strange-looking. Its lion-maned mane covered the joint at the

shoulders where the three necks became one, and the fur on the goat-head was colored to match that on the lion-head - golden brown, with a beard, crown and mane of dark-brown hair and two pale-brown horns. The dragon-head, which Darian's first shot had taken through the brain, was not scaled, but instead was furred and maned like that of the other two heads, and it had large, triangular ears to match them. Only a line of tough black spines running down between its eyes and disappearing into the mane revealed its draconic blood. The wings were brown and furry, like those of an enormous bat. Fully extended, each was twice as wide as I was tall. In the old days, I'd have cut it open and harvested the fist-sized levitation organ that lay between the wings and beneath the spine for use in making potions, though that was a chore - hacking through the tough muscles, spinal column and ribs that protected it. "Thank you very much, my vicious friend. You tried to give me death, as is your nature, but you've given me hope instead."

"Hope? What hope?" Swift-wing squawked, landing on the chimera's back.

"There's no way that scrub-land that we passed through before the river could have provided enough game to support a chimera, and there's no way this blasted, barren land could either. That means that somewhere ahead of us is land that has large game in it. Basically, they're just large, dangerous predators that can fly, and they eat a lot. That means that not all of Hyperborea looks like this - this is just one battlefield of that war Darian told me about. Predators eat prey animals. Prey animals eat plants, not bare rocks. A chimera's innate magic allows them to fly even though those huge wings they have aren't quite big enough to lift them, but they still have to eat to live. It could have survived just on eating the greenery of that scrubland with its goat-head, but Chimeras don't like to do that unless they have to - it would have moved south to find larger game. Help me onto the 'steed, and we'll move on."

"Do you want me to try to pull your staff out of it?" Darian asked. I smiled weakly, holding my hand out and summoning my staff to my grip. "Never mind," Darian chuckled, grinning.

By sunset, we were still in the blasted zone, but we could see greenery in the distance. I had to take extra time in conjuring my Hidden Sanctuary for us, as the chaotic *Mana*-flow made it extremely difficult to cast any spell more complex than a simple cantrip. By evening of the next day we were in scrublands again, and the *Mana*-flow was more ordered. We rested there for two days as Darian searched out a water-source for his horse and I rested to recover from having fifty-odd stone of flying predator bash me to the ground. Arella and Swift-wing helped me charge my staff to its maximum capacity again as I recuperated. The next day, we entered the edge of a forest, and I had to have us stop regularly so I could look around by flying above the trees with my ring of flight.

"There's a river about two leagues in that direction. If we're lucky, it's the *Juvari* River. From there, we can follow it to Wilanda city, though we'll probably have to look around carefully since it'll probably be in

ruins. Of course, it could be completely buried by now, or it may even be another dead zone," I said, settling back down onto the invisible steed after my latest flight.

"Isn't that a little out of our way?" Darian asked, obviously thinking about the direction we were traveling.

"A bit, but from the city we can find the king's road and follow it. It was made of stones, each a cubit square and half a cubit thick, and set atop a road bed of layered gravel and bricks three cubits deep. Even after a millennium and a half, we should still be able to follow the rubble onto my old lands, and once there, we should be able to find my tower - or what's left of it, anyway."

"Let's go then. I want to see more of Hyperborea, even if it is all in ruins," Arella said excitedly.

"Me, too! Me, too!" Swift-wing cackled from her shoulder.

A little while later, we were following the river upstream, headed generally northeast. The river was about eighty cubits wide and looked deep - if it wasn't the *Juvari*, it was certainly its twin. Towards afternoon, we stopped and set up our usual camp to allow Darian the time to assemble a pole, line and hook and try to catch us some fish before it got dark. Arella and I were taking the time to try to clean our clothes, and Darian was working in a loincloth and his boots in the woods nearby. "There, I think I've finally gotten his clothes as clean as they're going to get," Arella said, sitting back on her heels as she held Darian's dripping tunic before her.

"Good. We can build a rack from five branches and hang them up by the fire to dry. What was that?" I asked, hearing a sound.

"What?" Arella asked, hearing nothing.

"Listen," I said, and we sat there quietly for a moment. After a bit, I heard it again. A tinkling sound, like a giggle or a sparkling laugh.

"It sounds like a woman's laughter," Arella said.

"*Damn!* Quick, drop what you've got and *come on!* *DARIAN! DARIAN, WHERE ARE YOU?*" I yelled, leaping to my feet and running in the direction Darian had last been.

Arella must have called Swift-wing mentally, as he swooped out of the sanctuary and zoomed ahead of us for a moment, then came back. "Follow me! Follow me!" he cawed, then flew ahead of us.

After a few moments, Arella and I skidded to a stop in a clearing. There was an olive-skinned woman there, and she was absolutely, gloriously, painfully nude. Her hair was green, as was the delicate puff of fleece that graced her sex. Of course, her hair was only green because it was still late summer and the leaves of the trees had yet to turn brown. In winter, her hair would turn white. Dryads are like that. She giggled and wagged a finger at Darian, and he staggered after her, his manhood jutting large and defiant beneath his loincloth.

"*DARIAN! STOP WHERE YOU ARE!*" I yelled. He turned to look to Arella and I, and his face was a warring mixture of lust and fear.

"*And who are you, bitch?*" the dryad hissed venomously in her language.

"*I am Eddas Ayar, Master battle-mage of the Dyclonic Circle, returned from the void and inhabiting this body for the nonce. Release him, Dryad. I need him to get home,*" I replied.

"*No. The Dyclonic Circle is no more - they were gone with the rest of the Hyperboreans perhaps two hundred winters after my tree first sprouted from the ground. I like him. He's very handsome, and his desire burns like white-hot fire in his veins. I must have him.*"

"Who is she, Raven? What's she saying?" Arella asked.

"That's a dryad, and she's hooked Darian by his lust. She's an old one, maybe as old as me, and she hasn't had a man in a long while so she's dragging this out to maximize her pleasure - normally she'd just take him in her arms and teleport back to her tree. They can only reproduce with human males, Arella, and they're the bane of lone woodsmen everywhere. Darian probably wouldn't have been caught by her if it wasn't for us," I replied, then turned back to the dryad. *"I am who I say I am, and if you do not release him I will hunt down your tree and blast it with fire and lightning until it is destroyed and you are dead. Do not force me to destroy you, Ancient One. We of the Dyclonic Circle always respected the Wild Women of the Woods. Please. I need him."*

"I need him, too. I fear there may be no more dryads left. I am the last in these woods, perhaps the last in the world. I need him, too," she replied, taken aback by my threat.

"Release him and ask him. Speak to him. He has traveled extensively in the Southern Wilderness. There are human nations there, now. Perhaps you aren't the last. Release him and ask him."

"No! You'll just take him from me!"

"I swear on my honor as a Master in the Dyclonic Circle that I shall not."

The dryad looked between Darian and I, trying to decide. Darian stood there, struggling mightily to master himself and break free from her spell, yet held in her thrall by the pressure of his desire. "Raven, what's happening?" Arella asked.

"I told her to release him because I need him. She says she needs him, too. She's afraid she's the last dryad in the world - apparently, Darian's the first human male she's seen in this area in a long time, and all the other dryads for leagues around here are dead. Dryads are immortal, but their souls are tied to their home tree. If the tree is killed by lightning, fire or flood, so are they. The Wild Women of the Woods aren't violent, merely lustful and playful, but they can be dangerous if you endanger or damage their home tree. This one's desperate - she feels the survival of her species is at stake. I told her she can let Darian go and simply ask him if she's the last, but she's afraid I'll steal him from her. Run back to camp and get a pot of water from the river, I'll try to keep them here as long as I can," I said, and Arella turned on her heel and ran back to camp.

"You say you are of the Dyclonic Circle. I say prove it," the dryad said at last.

"I shall do so. My name is Eddas Ayar, which in my language means Word of Honor. It is a proud and noble name I was given by my father, though my friends here know me as Raven. I was born in Wilanda city on the fifth day of summer, in the first year of the reign of King Darrak II, when the moon was eclipsed. In my youth I displayed a strong talent, and was accepted as an apprentice by the Dyclonic Circle when I was twelve, entering the Black Tower to begin my training. I attained the rank of Mage at age twenty, and was promoted to Master at age thirty. My best friend in my youth was Faral Balorim, whom you may have heard of," I said, and noticed her raised eyebrow as I continued.

"He and I were traveling through these woods with the army of King Ragnor when I was twenty-three, and we carefully instructed the king to tell his army only to gather dead wood and not to touch any of the trees so as not to disturb the dryads. A soldier disobeyed the order, and carved his initials into a young tree on a lark. That tree was the home of a young dryad, and she nearly died from the treatment. The king had the soldier beheaded for disobeying his orders, I patched the tree as best I could with plaster, but still the dryad despaired of life. The Ancient One of that time came and said that only the seed of man could save her, and Faral picked her up and carried her to her tree, and they entered it with her power. I didn't see him again for twenty years. When he finally returned, only a single night had passed for him, but two decades had passed for us. The tree lived, and the dryad lived, but Faral's parents had died of old age and many of his friends had been slain in war over the years. He sacrificed much to give that dryad life and many seedlings, but it was all in accordance with the traditions of the Dyclonic Circle. We harmed no woman who did not war on us, and the Wild Women of the Woods war on no one. You say that you are the last dryad in these woods. If that is so, then you are the current Ancient One, and your tree must be a vast and mighty oak of surpassing beauty and wonder. You also must have received the tales of those who preceded you. Who else would know this story? How could I have known were my tale not true? We of the Dyclonic Circle used the Spell of Hidden Life to extend our power and protect our tombs. This body is that of a half-elf female who came to rob my tomb. Now I travel to my tower for reasons too long to relate. I need him to get there. Release him, please."

"I know Faral. He was handsome and sweet, his touch like a butterfly's wings, his eyes brown like the bark of oak, his voice the hoot of the night-owl. Tell me, whatever happened to him?"

"He was slain at the battle of Chorim Keep, and as far as I know his bones lie moldering in his tomb."

"That is so sad," she said, looking depressed.

Arella came back with the pot, gasping from the run. I took it from her and slowly walked up to Darian as I spoke calmly with the dryad about my old friend Faral, then suddenly dashed the ice-cold river water on his groin. "YEEARGH!" Darian yelled, jumping back. His manhood wilted, and the dryad's spell over him was broken.

"You lied to me! You were only being nice so you could break my hold over him!" the dryad screeched, her green eyes blazing.

"No, I spoke the truth. I am Eddas Ayar, and my friend was Faral Balorim. I only broke the spell because his desire would eventually have driven him mad. Talk to him, don't ensorcell him."

"Thanks, Raven, I thought she had me. I've fought off dryad's spells before, but it's been so long since I'd lain with a woman that even this one who couldn't even speak my language snared me easily. What's this dryad saying, anyway?" Darian asked.

"Here, Darian," I said, pulling off my glove, "Take my ring of translation for the moment and speak to her. She's afraid she's the last dryad in the world."

"The *last*? Hell, both the Black forest and the Myrmidon forest are overrun with them. Woodcutters won't even go into the Black forest anymore without at least three friends, and they rap on every tree they run across because they're so afraid they'll cut down a dryad's tree by accident and anger them," Darian said, taking my ring and slipping it on his finger.

Darian and the dryad talked for a while, then the dryad turned back to me and spoke. Unfortunately, I couldn't understand her anymore. Darian handed me my ring back, and I slipped it on and activated it as I pulled my glove back on. *"I'm sorry, I need my ring to speak your language. What is it you wanted to say?"* I asked her.

"I wanted to say thank you, and to show you this," she said, turning around. On her back, below her left shoulder blade and barely visible, were the thin, faint lines of two Hyperborean characters - someone's initials. "You see, I was that dryad your friend saved. I am the last of my line, and when I am gone, this forest will be empty of us. Even so, I am happy to know we shall not disappear from the world. Thank you," she said over her shoulder, then she started to walk away.

"Wait, please! I would like to talk to you. I really would like to know what happened since I last breathed air, and you are the first person I've met who might know. Could you come back to our camp and speak with us?"

"It's been a long while since I spoke with anyone, save for a couple elves who passed through a few centuries back. I would be pleased to do so, Eddas Ayar. You may call me Rhane."

"What is it, Raven? What's she saying?" Arella asked.

"It appears we've found a friend," I replied, smiling.

Chapter Nineteen

"...it was the Dryads themselves who presented the strongest case for the Hyperboreans being allowed to join the Seelie court, and given their origin, their nature and their history, the words of the Dryads carried great influence in the court. Indeed, the addition of the Hyperboreans might have instilled renewed vigor to the court, and allowed it to resume preeminence over the western half of our continent again. It was with this in mind that Queen Lunitolla eagerly awaited the conclusion of the Hyperborean's internal conflicts, and the eventual rise of a Hyperborean emperor, that the idea might be broached to them. This event seemed almost a foregone conclusion, towards the end. Unfortunately, it was not to be. The Invaders arrived, and the Great War of Devastation put an end to the Hyperboreans, and much of the hopes of the Seelie court..."

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

Once we'd covered Rhane with a blanket to save Darian the strain of having to gaze upon her nudity all the time (though she thought it was silly - her body was virtually immune to natural extremes of heat or cold, and as such she'd never worn clothes in her life), we sat down by the fire and chatted. Rhane the dryad didn't know much of what had happened, seeing as her contact with the outside world was limited to men who wandered through her forest, but she knew enough. I translated for her as we sat around the fire (she was happy to see we only used dead wood, and I didn't bother to tell her that it was only

because dead wood burns better and was readily available).

According to Rhane, the Hyperboreans were engaged in a war with a race of humans who came from the western sea. They were as skilled at warfare as the Hyperboreans. The war was long and fiercely fought, but one-sided from the beginning. Finally, the Hyperboreans were defeated and scattered, their civilization in ruins, when one lone mage discovered the secret to defeating them. He developed a spell which would unleash raw *Mana*-energy in a single-devastating blast, their body vaporizing as their *Talent* was turned inwards self-destructively. It was suicidal, but the Hyperborean people were already near death as it was - they had nothing more to lose. He taught the spell to what few battle-mages remained, and they scattered and searched out the enemy army, using this spell time and time again to blast them to vapor at the cost of their own lives. They even blasted the port-city the enemy had established, slaying all their women and children in a single stroke. Finally, the enemy assembled on the southern plains for a 'peace talk' with the few remaining Hyperborean soldiers and the last of the Hyperborean battle-mages. What was said was unknown, but the results were the devastation we had passed through coming here. The surviving members of the invader's army, perhaps a hundred thousand men, collected what few surviving Hyperborean women they could find and fled southwards to escape the raging *Mana*-storms.

I held back translating the last of what she'd said, too overwhelmed. *"But where did these people come from? What did they look like?"*

"As to where they came from, all I know is they came from the western sea. As to what they looked like, they looked like your friends here. The Hyperboreans were handsome; olive of skin, black of hair, brown of eye, their women like black-haired, brown-eyed dryads. The invaders were pasty-white and light of eye, as your two friends are. I suppose the southern dryads are used to that by now, but I dearly miss the handsome Hyperborean men," Rhane replied.

I was stunned, shocked and saddened. I had thought that Darian's account of history was more or less correct, and his people were direct lineal descendants of mine, their hair and eye colors lightened over the passage of millennia, perhaps by interbreeding with elves. Now I realized that they were the remnants of an invading culture, blasted back to the stone-age by the last of the Hyperborean battle-mages in revenge for their destruction of our civilization. Whence they had come I had no idea, but they certainly weren't Vilandians - the Vilandians weren't that advanced, and they certainly didn't resemble Larinians or Arcadians. If anything, the Vilandians resembled the Hyperboreans more closely than they did Darian and Arella. No, Darian and Arella were the descendants of an invading army that had crushed my people, then stolen the last of their women to survive when they themselves were defeated in a last, suicidal effort to annihilate them. The women did their best to raise the children as proper Hyperboreans, and our two languages merged.

"Tell me, Darian; you say the Arcadians and Larinians are descended from the Hyperboreans. Where did the Hyperboreans come from?" I asked.

"From the western sea, of course - you should know that, since you were one of them. The legends say that their homeland was an island that was quite distant from here, and it was always suffering volcanic eruptions. The sages of that day said that eventually the island would sink into the sea, so they came here and established Hyperborea. Then they had a devastating war which destroyed them, and the survivors fled south to establish Arcadia."

I struggled to control my rage. His people had totally forgotten their true origins, their ancestors having concealed them to prevent having to tell their children *'well, we were crushed by the Hyperboreans and so we stole the last of their women and went south to avoid the destruction we were directly responsible for.'* Of course they held their women in thrall and never let them learn true sorcery or have any real responsibility. By tradition, their women would have been *property*. In the beginning, the Hyperborean women probably resisted the invader-males at every turn, and would've had to be kept in line by force. After a few generations, women would simply be the chattel of the men. *'Darian's society has probably become rather liberal in this regard - they actually allow their women to walk around without manacles,'* I thought to myself sarcastically. *'Oh yes, I'm sure that in a few centuries they might even allow them to speak every once in a while.'* I looked at Darian, my friend and companion, and for a moment all I could see was the face of the invaders that had destroyed my people. I turned away and spat.

"Raven, what is it? What did she say?" Darian asked.

"You are angry. Eddas Ayar, it is not their fault. I don't even think they know the truth," Rhane said.

"You're damn right I'm angry. Darian and his people are a race of murderers and rapists, and I hate them," I said, and told her what I'd figured out.

"I believe your deductions are correct, Eddas Ayar. They at least coincide with what little those two elves and I talked about a few centuries ago. The elves miss the Hyperboreans, Eddas, and they don't like the Arcadians and Larinians at all. Yes, you occasionally warred each other, and they thought of you as hairy brutes. Even so, they still miss you. You and they both had a common bond aside from the respect you'd learned for each other on the field of battle - you both shared a

common love for the wilderness. The Arcadians and the Larinians... Well, the elves see them as little more than brutish grave-robbers who loot the tombs of their forefathers the moment the elves turn their backs," she replied, and we both fell silent.

"Raven? Can you tell us what happened? You stopped translating just before the end," Arella asked.

"Darian, Arella, you don't want to know," I replied, keeping my back to them. I thought about the dream I'd had where the glowing figure asked me to guide and advise Darian. It was no god of mine - my people were dead. It was one of Darian's gods; Yorindar, the God of Wisdom. Yorindar had a raven that advised and aided him, and apparently he wished me to be his raven here on earth. I was disgusted. I stood up, keeping my back to them, and walked away.

"Raven?! Where are you going?" Darian called.

"I'm going for a walk," I replied, and kept going.

I walked away from the camp, my half-elven eyes adjusting to the gloom of the forest easily. Once I was fifty paces away, I sat down with my back against a tree. I knew I was being foolish - it was stupid to blame Darian for something his ancestors had done. Even so, it was difficult not to feel anger and sorrow at the tragedy of it all.

I knew that Yorindar was one of Darian's gods, not mine. My people were dead, thus my gods slept. Darian's people were alive and healthy, so their gods were strong. Yorindar's words were the usual numinous phrases one associates with the gods. I pondered them carefully, trying to understand. He had asked me to be Darian's friend, to aid and advise him, to help him defeat his enemies. When I'd told him I could only think of Dyarzi and how I wanted to see her again, he had replied that I would. Maybe he'd meant I'd have her back with me again as a reward, or perhaps as Darian's court wizard I'd have the time and resources to research a way to bring her back to me. Of course, he could just have easily meant that he'd give me a brief glimpse of her as a reward, perhaps in a dream. I thought about it, and realized that even seeing her for a brief moment would be enough of a reason for me to help Darian every way I could. I liked Arella as a dear, dear friend and someone who'd helped me through a horrible, extremely traumatic experience, but I didn't love her. No, my love lay quietly moldering in my tomb, sealed behind a hand or two of stone. Even the chance to see her, the slim possibility that I might hold her in my arms again, even this was enough.

I looked up to the stars. "Alright. We'll play the game your way for the moment, Yorindar. You just damn well better not be in heaven or hell or wherever it is you Arcadian deities live, laughing up your sleeve at me," I said, then stood. I managed to wander back to camp, as my half-elven eyes could see clearly in the moonlight and I hadn't really gone that far. I arrived just in time to see Swift-wing squawking at Rhane in the guttural chatter of ravens, and have her reply in kind.

"She says Raven is coming back now, and is standing over there beyond the firelight," Swift-wing translated.

"Huh! I didn't know ravens had a true language. My ring doesn't even translate that," I said, stepping into the light.

"It's not a true language like that of humanoids, it's our calls. Wild ravens are *not* stupid, they just aren't as smart as humans. I, however, am not a wild raven, I am my mistress' familiar. I am many times smarter than an ordinary raven, so she and I were able to make ourselves understood. Raven, you were mad at Darian, so you walked off. She can't tell us why, because raven's don't have calls for concepts like that. We can talk about food or danger or being happy or angry and many similar things, but we can't talk about concepts that go much beyond that. We need you to tell us what the problem is. Darian can't apologize if he doesn't know what he did," Swift-wing squawked.

I could see Darian was just *bursting* to talk to me, but managed to hold his tongue. Arella also remained silent, waiting. I sighed, and sat down next to them. "Darian, it's not you that needs to apologize, it's me. I was blaming you for something you had no control over, something your ancestors had done. This is what Rhane said happened at the end, and what I believe followed that," I said, and began explaining what I thought.

When I was done, Arella looked shocked and saddened, and Darian hung his head. "I'm sorry, Raven. I never knew," he said.

I reached out and clapped him on the shoulder. "Darian, it's not your fault. Don't feel sorry. You didn't do it, your ancestors did. The Hyperboreans apparently forgot one of the most important lessons I can ever teach you, Darian, and I want you to listen carefully: No matter how powerful you are, no matter how

strong or fast or skilled you are, there's always someone better. A king must always remember that somewhere out there is a kingdom larger, richer, more powerful and more skilled at war than they are. As such, you must always make sure that you never overestimate your own abilities, and you must always try to improve yourself and your people. At the moment, half your people live in thrall. Judging by what you've been saying, this is a pretty common practice nowadays. Imagine how powerful your nation would be if you made sure your women and men were equally educated? Such practices are common among the elves - about the only thing that elf-maids don't do that their men do is go to war. By educating your women and giving them the same rights women had in Hyperborea, you would make your nation more powerful than any other human nation today in this regard."

"You're right. My people would be much stronger for using all the adult minds they have available. Even so, wouldn't the elves still be stronger, since they've been doing this for millennia?" Darian asked.

"Absolutely. No matter how powerful you are, someone is always better. Plan for it, anticipate it, and develop strategies to allow you to handle a stronger enemy should they present themselves."

"I can see you are content again. I will go now, Eddas Ayar. I thank you for sharing this time with me. Perhaps you will come visit me again if you find yourself in the body of a male next time," Rhane said, and stood. She pulled off the blanket and handed it to me, and Darian blushed wildly at seeing her nudity. *"Oh, Eddas. His lust calls out to me from the depths of his soul to mine. Would that I could lie with him. It's been so long..."* Rhane said wistfully, staring at Darian.

"What's she saying, Raven?" Darian asked.

"She wants you as badly as you want her," I replied, and Darian blushed again.

"I'm sorry, it's just that it's been so long. I just can't, though - I don't want to spend ten or twenty years with her."

"He says he wants to lie with you, as well, but he doesn't want to spend the Long Night in your tree," I told Rhane.

"Then I cannot reproduce, and a mating would be pointless."

"I agree, unfortunately," I replied.

"Wait!" Darian yelled, seeing Rhane turn to leave. She stopped, and Darian spoke to me. "Raven, isn't there any other way?" he asked. I could see he was desperate, but I simply shook my head.

"Darian, Rhane is a Dryad. She doesn't want to just have intercourse, she wants to *reproduce*. She can only do that with a human male and only in her tree, taking your lust and your seed over the course of something they call the Long Night. For you, it'll only be a single night. For us in the outside world, it can be up to twenty years. There's no other way."

"Well, um, isn't there any way she can make it faster, like maybe only a single night or so?"

"Darian, can you make a human baby come any faster than nine months? This isn't just copulation to them, it's *reproduction*. The Wild Women of the Woods aren't human, Darian, though they once were. That's why they need human males to reproduce. The story's a long one, and it's not important. What is important is that you *let her go*, Darian. This can never be. Go take a swim in the river - the cold water will cool your desire."

"But-" Darian began, but I interrupted him.

"Darian! It's either come with me and learn to be a king so you can reclaim your rightful throne, or stay here and throw it all away for a single night with this dryad! Yes, she's lonely and desperate. Even so, she's only one being. Your people number in the millions, Darian. One life versus millions of lives. You say you want to be king, so *I say be* a king and decide now: Your people or your lust. *Choose*, Darian!" I commanded.

Darian stood, pulled off his boots, belt and cloak, stripping down to just his tunic and breeches, then took a running dive into the river. "Yah! Ooh! Yow! Cold!" he yelped once his head reached the surface again. Rhane and Arella giggled loudly, and Swift-wing cackled. As for me, I didn't laugh or smile. I was watching a king I was training make his first tough decision, and anyone who doesn't think that turning down a dryad is *tough* is either a eunuch, a sodomite or a female. Darian stepped out of the river dripping wet, then sat down shivering by the fire as Arella wrapped his cloak around him. "Raven, tell Rhane that if I'm able to get my kingdom back, I'll try to find someone who'd be willing to come here and visit her. I know the way, and I can give fairly accurate directions to these woods to any skilled hunter or woodsman who'd like to spend time with her," he said, his teeth chattering.

I translated for Rhane, and she shook her head. She reached up to her hair and produced a thin twig, twining it together to make a ring. *"Tell him this comes from my tree. If he finds a man willing to spend the Long Night with me, simply give them this ring. It will take them to my tree, and I will meet with them. The same ring can also take them home again, though afterwards its power will fade,"* she said, and I translated. Darian nodded as he slipped the ring on his finger, and Rhane bid us farewell. Darian wisely kept his eyes averted from her retreating buttocks until she was well out of the firelight.

"Come, Arella. There's plenty of blankets and a couple towels we can use. Let's get Darian out of those wet clothes and dried off before he catches his death of cold," I said, smiling.

Chapter Twenty

"Sometimes, on a clear night, when all is quiet and all is just right, the night breeze will bring just the faintest echo to your ears. Yes, you can still hear the songs of the Hyperboreans, sometimes, very softly echoing in the wind."

- *Elven proverb*

Three days later, Darian pointed to a stone by the side of the river. I'd told him what to look for, and his skills allowed him to spot it easily. I knelt and examined it. "Good work, Darian. You've found it," I said.

"Found what? What is it? It just looks like a square stone to me," Swift-wing squawked from Arella's shoulder.

"A dwarf would laugh at you, my friend. Only a chisel makes a stone square. This stone has been carved," I said, and looked around. "There, and there. More of them. Come, this way!" I called, and trotted off into the forest. By the time Arella and Darian had caught up to me, I was slowly walking atop a wide expanse of rubble that stretched off into the forest. Finally I stopped and knelt, rubbing one of the

stones with my gloved fingers to loosen an age of dirt. Soon, I had revealed two thin markings, barely legible in the stone.

"What does it say?" Darian asked.

"It says '16'. It's a league-marker on the king's road. My tower is about twenty-eight leagues in this direction. The road that led to it split off southwards from the king's road at league-marker forty-three. At the moment, we're standing about in the center of Wilanda city. Over there is the temple of Vyleah, goddess of agriculture, healing and fertility," I said, pointing to a white, cylindrical stone that was half buried beneath the earth and nearly concealed by the trees. "You will note the beautiful marble columns, each delicately carved and polished by dwarvish craftsmen. Over there is the street of the armorers," I said, pointing to a young oak tree. "Notice the way they proudly display their fine craftsmanship as they compete with each other for customers. At the end of the street is my parent's house, a fine wood and brick structure that my brother inherited on their deaths. Over there is the Street of the Silk-Merchants. Notice the wide array of colors available in the delicate, almost ethereal fabrics they offer. At the end of that street stands the Black Tower, the home of the Dyclonic Circle, the greatest circle of battle-mages in all of Hyperborea. Yes, this is Wilanda, a fine, proud city full of a quarter of a million happy, hard-working people. Isn't it beautiful?" I said, and wept.

Darian goggled at the amount of people I said once lived here, but said nothing. Arella carefully stepped on the rubble as she made her way to my side, then hugged me gently. "It's alright, Raven. It's alright. Let's spend some time here. Show us the city, and tell us of its people. Show us the temple, and tell us what it was like. Show us the Black Tower, and let me dream of what it would have been like had I been accepted as an apprentice there. Show us your city, and let us rejoice in the happy memories you have. We've never seen a city this large, and we want to learn more. Tell us how they fed and watered this many people, Raven. I'm sure that's something Darian would be interested in. Tell me what kind of clothes the women wore. Make your memories live for us, Raven, so we may see this place as you once did. Let us not weep at their death, but rather rejoice in their life. Please, Raven."

I hugged her back, then wiped my eyes. "I'm sorry. You're right. I should show you around, and let you see more. It's just that the sight of it was too much for the moment. I cannot imagine how anyone could have defeated us. Even so, here we are. Come, let's start with the temple. I think you can still see a few pieces of the columns above ground."

I led them around the city for the rest of the day, discovering I could easily find my way around by the rubble of the larger buildings. Darian, Arella and Swift-wing were all fascinated by my descriptions of the place. When we finally approached the ruins of the Black Tower, I was explaining it as we walked around what was left - the rubble of the outer wall, about six cubits high in most spots. "As you can see,

the stones were basalt, hence the building's name. It was octagonal, and about sixty cubits wide and a hundred cubits high. Around here is the front entrance and *what in the hell is that?*" I asked, startled.

A large machine, perhaps the size of an ogre, lay huddled against the rubble of the front entrance and overgrown with weeds. It was built like an ungainly ape with bird-like legs and a bulbous body. Its top was open, and I could see a seat in it. We went over to it, and I could see it was covered with a thin patina of rust. "Amazingly well preserved for its age. Look, the metal's hardly rusted at all," Darian commented.

"What is it, Raven?" Arella asked.

"The answer to my question, I think. Its *Mana*-flow assenses as that of a golem or similar construct, yet it lacks motivation - it's a magically powered war machine. I would imagine the pilot sat in that seat there, and directed it with those levers and foot-switches here. I believe this plate here once protected the pilot from frontal attacks, but it's been blown through - probably by the collected sorcery of what few members of the Dyclonic Circle were present in the tower when it attacked," I said, then sat down on a large stone nearby and sighed. "This is why your ancestors were able to defeat my people. They didn't get tired."

"Huh? What do you mean, Raven?" Darian asked.

"It's simple, Darian. A mage gets tired casting spells. Golems and other constructs don't get tired. They don't eat, they don't sleep, and they keep on going until they fall apart. Even so, they're extremely difficult to enchant because they're intelligent. We got around this problem with ornithopters and wing-boats by inventing the semi-golem; mindless constructs that were little more than magically-powered machines. We called it magitech, as it was a blend of magic and technology. They allowed us to travel effortlessly and swiftly, and to wage war from the air and sea with ease. Even so, they had no armament other than that of the men aboard them. It appears your ancestors developed the same thing, and took the idea to its logical extreme. This machine could walk, run, lift enormous weights, bash down gates with its fists, fire a blast of flame and do half a dozen other things that we didn't know how to make our machines do. It's destructive force was easily equal to that of any single battle-mage, and it doesn't get tired. A battle-mage eventually tires after casting spells, and has to rest. These machines could keep going, hour after hour, until the pilot finally gets hungry or thirsty and decides to fall back to the rear and let another machine take its place. If you pack in a flask of water and a small lunch with him, he could fight all day. Your culture had so many of these things that they simply left this one where it had fallen in battle. They just couldn't be bothered to fix it."

Darian stared at the machine for a long time while Arella sat next to me on the stone. Swift-wing fluttered over to the machine to examine it more closely, then fluttered back. "No bones of a pilot in there," he commented.

"He probably was pulled out of the machine and buried after the battle," I replied.

Darian climbed up to look at the machine, and I called after him. "Darian, be careful not to touch anything. It assesses as damaged but partially operational. We don't know what switches make it fire gouts of flame and death and what switches make it scratch itself."

Darian nodded, and continued his examination. After a few more moments, he climbed down and came over to me. "We should take this machine with us," he said.

"What? Why?" I asked.

"We know we may have to fight to regain my kingdom. This is a fighting machine of a power unknown previous to this. No mage today has even the faintest idea how to make anything like it. It could be a powerful weapon in our hands."

"And perhaps a two-edged sword if we kill ourselves trying to figure out how it works," Arella commented.

"I agree. It's too dangerous," I said, looking at the machine in hatred. It and its like had destroyed my people.

"Raven, are you sure you aren't simply feeling that way because this was the weapon used against the Hyperboreans?" Darian asked.

"Well, yes, that too. It's an evil device."

"Raven, from what you've told me, I *am* a descendant of the Hyperboreans - through their women, apparently. I've always thought of myself as one, and it's still true, even knowing what we know. The way I see it, that machine is just a machine, nothing more and nothing less. The Hyperboreans already had developed unarmed machines like it, and given another few centuries they probably would have developed the same weaponry. Which is evil, Raven, the tool or the hand that wields it? In the hands of the invaders, these machines meant destruction to the Hyperboreans. If the Hyperboreans would have had them, then they would still be here today. In our hands, this machine could be a great boon to us. Left here, it's simply a pile of rusting, enchanted metal."

I thought about it for awhile, then spoke. "Spoken like a true king. You're right, Darian, though you should keep in mind it's only one machine. Alone and without support, it could be defeated with a simple Earth-To-Mud Enchantment that mires it down and immobilizes it forever - or just a deep pit filled half-way with water and covered to conceal it from the pilot the enemy intends to drown. You beat giants in battle similarly. Well, let me see what I can do."

I reached out my will again and examined the machine's *Mana*-flow carefully and completely. Finally, I shook my head. "Sorry, Darian, it's not possible. As far as I can tell, that machine is enchanted to resist all but the most powerful of spells. That means I can't use my Spell of Repairing on it, it's got to be repaired physically. Unfortunately, I have no idea how to do that - I simply don't have the parts or the knowledge of how it's assembled. The builders of this thing knew how, but it would take *me* months or years of study to figure it out. While I agree it would be a useful tool, at the moment, we can't take it with us. Perhaps someday we can come back and get it. Certainly nobody else is going to take it - it must weigh at least three thousand stone."

Darian nodded and we continued exploring the city. Come nightfall, we set up camp near the machine. I explored the ruins of the Black Tower while Darian and Arella pondered the war-machine over a rabbit dinner. It was very quiet, and I could hear them easily (though I don't think they were aware of it - a half-elf's ears are quite sharp). "Arella, I really feel sorry for Raven," Darian said.

"Why? I mean, I do too, but I'm interested in your thoughts," she replied.

"Well, you know Greenhaven has been conquered by the Larinian army by now. Even so, the people of Arcadia still live. Imagine how you'd feel if you came back to Greenhaven, and all you found was this. It's bad enough to know in your mind that all your people are dead, but imagine how it must feel to *see* it with your own eyes. I've been trying to imagine how I'd feel about seeing Steelgate or the king's castle in ruins like this, and I don't think it'd be very pleasant. I don't know what Raven's going to feel when we reach his-I mean *her* tower."

"I think she'll be alright. It was a bit of a shock for her to see the town she was once born in during her life as Eddas Ayar now broken and in ruins. Even so, she's still much older and wiser than us. Raven instantly realized that a woman's laugh meant you were possibly being seduced by a dryad, and leaped to her feet to chase after you. I didn't even know what the problem was until she explained it to me, and I certainly didn't know how to rescue you without violence. She's also brave, as brave as you, and braver than I could *ever* be. I was *petrified* of the chimera. Of course, when she went down under its rush I grew fearful for her life, so I screwed up my courage and followed the plan she'd given me. I couldn't *do* anything to it, I was too nervous and kept fumbling my cantrip. Even so, I still tried. Swift-wing, of course, simply leaped to the attack. He's always been braver than I."

"I was frightened too, mistress. Even so, bravery isn't about not being afraid. Bravery is about overcoming your fear and doing what needs to be done," Swift-wing squawked.

Darian nodded. "He's right. You *were* brave, Arella, though you may not realize it. In addition, *I* was frightened, too. I've never fought a beast so deadly, and I was *sure* we were going to die. I've spent years *avoiding* creatures like that - there isn't much a lone man with a longbow can do to defend himself against a large and dangerous fell beast, and it's much easier to avoid them. Fortunately, they're like all the other large predators in the world, like bears and wolves - they're rare. If they were common, they'd literally eat themselves out of house and home."

"You were all brave that day, and I'm proud of all of you," I said, stepping back into the firelight with my find. Darian, seeing steel hoop in my left hand, spoke up.

"What is that, Raven?"

"It's the headband of an apprentice of the Dyclonic Circle. Its owner was dead, but when I spoke to his skull with a spell of communication, he said he would be pleased and happy if I took it and used it for a new apprentice. It looked to be about the right size, so here it is. Mage Arella-tor, please rise," I

commanded. Arella stood, trembling slightly. "Mage Arella-tor, you stand before the last of the Dyclonic Circle. By default, this makes me the High Master of the Circle. You have said once that you wished me to train you. You have also said that you dreamed of being accepted by the Circle, and I have told you truthfully that the Circle would not refuse a person with your *Talent*. I put it to you now; Do you wish to become an apprentice of the Circle? Please bear in mind that this is no minor decision you make. The life of a battle-mage is harsh, and death lurks around every corner. In the old days, the Circle fought many wars and battles, and the lives of its members were constantly at risk. Those days are gone now, but the danger yet remains. The Larinian army needs to be defeated, yet not destroyed - they *are* Darian's people after all, and their lives are important. There is also the rules and traditions of the order to consider, as our life is a quiet and humble one. No apprentice, mage or master shall embarrass the Circle with scandal or hint of scandal, and the members of the Circle work together as brothers - or sisters, as the case may be at the moment," I said, smiling. Arella giggled briefly as I continued. "The choice is yours, Mage Arella-tor. Do you wish to join the Circle as its newest apprentice?"

"Yes, please!" she replied eagerly.

"Then kneel," I said, and Arella complied. I placed the circlet about her head, and was pleased to see it fit snugly, resting in the middle of her forehead. "Rise, apprentice. Study, learn and make your parents and your teachers proud," I said, holding my hand out to her. Arella took it, grinning broadly as I helped her to her feet again.

I then turned her so we both faced Darian, then spoke again. "Darian Vemcrior, you have approached the Dyclonic Circle, asking us to help you regain your rightful throne. After careful study and consideration, we have agreed to enter into negotiations with you for the cost of our services. As you have no money and your treasury may be completely depleted once you have your throne, we instead offer the following proposal: First, you will accept myself and this apprentice as your Court Wizards - or wizardesses, as the case may be," I said, and Darian smiled as I continued. "Second, you will work with myself and this apprentice to design and enact laws that will make your women more equal, so that they shall never again live in thrall. Third, you will ban the act of grave-robbing within your kingdom, making it punishable by slow and painful death. Finally, you will understand and accept that we shall remain as your court wizards only so long as you need us. Neither the members of the Dyclonic Circle nor the Circle itself may be the vassal of any single king, as this is contrary to the rules of our order, though we are allowed to be the friends of a king. I await your counter-offer."

"I have none. I accept all your proposals as they are," Darian replied formally and with as much dignity as he could muster.

"Then it is a bargain. Now; in the shadow of this mechanical monstrosity that destroyed the Black Tower,

let us sit and discuss the training of an apprentice and the training of a king."

We sat down together and I began to lay out my plan, when suddenly I heard a noise. "Did you hear that?"

Darian and Arella fell silent, listening. "It sounds like a distant drum," Darian commented.

I listened again, and the sound was repeated. "No, that's no drum, and it's coming closer. That sound is the footfalls of a giant," I said, rising to my feet.

"A giant?! We must flee!" Swift-wing squawked, flapping his wings wildly.

"No. If it's looking for us, we'll only irritate it by running. It surely can see our fire, and is probably headed towards us to investigate. Just relax and let me handle it. If I do tell you to flee, the two of you run in opposite directions. That way it will have to pick one of you to chase, and the other may yet survive. Darian, put your bow away. Your arrows will only sting it and make it angry," I said, and Arella swallowed a nervous lump in her throat as Darian put his bow back in its case.

After a few moments, we could see a looming shadow above the forest approach. Its footfalls echoed like slow drumbeats against the ground as it followed the light of our fire, and finally, it stood before us. "*You do not flee. You are either very brave or very stupid. Which is it?*" the giant called down from above us in the guttural tongue of their people.

I looked up at him. A slightly taller specimen of giant than was typical, he stood nearly eighteen cubits high instead of the usual sixteen to seventeen cubits. His beard and moustache was full and black, his hair long and draped over his shoulders, and he regarded us carefully with his dark brown eyes, each the size of saucers. He bore an enormous club made from the bole of a tree and tipped with an enormous iron sphere fully four cubits wide, the ball festooned with gigantic spikes a cubit long. He wore a tunic and breechclout of red-scaled dragon hide, and a broad belt of ogre-skin. His vulnerable lower legs and heel were protected by thick boots of dragon-hide, and he was quite an impressive figure. "*Neither, actually. I belong here. I am Eddas Ayar, Master battle-mage of the Dyclonic Circle, returned from the void and inhabiting this body for the nonce,*" I replied.

"What? Impossible. They're all dead."

"I can prove what I say. Ask me any question about this city, and I shall answer it."

"I can ask you little about it, for I know little of it myself. Ah! Tell me what building it is that you are standing before, little half-elf. That I do know. Lie or guess wrong, and I shall stomp you flat," he said with a toothy grin.

"A simple question. That is the ruins of the Black Tower, the home of the Dyclonic Circle."

"Well, I guess you are who you say you are," the giant replied, nodding. Giants weren't very bright, and the thought that I may simply be well-educated or have explored this place during the day didn't occur to him.

"Come and sit with us, Dragonslayer. We can exchange stories to pass the evening before we sleep," I said, guessing at the tribal-name the giant would have been given by his het-man for the armor he wore.

"How did you know my name?" the giant asked, amazement on his face. Like I said - they aren't very smart.

"How could I not know your name? The legend of Dragonslayer is known far and wide in the Southern Wilderness. There are human nations there, now, and they abound with tales of your exploits and your fearsome power," I lied sweetly, and smiled.

The giant grinned and knelt by us carefully (so as not to accidentally squash us), setting his weapon aside. Arella trembled in fear, and even Darian looked like he wished he was elsewhere. *"They seem*

frightened of me," Dragonslayer commented.

"Of course. Did I not say that the tales of your fearsome power had spread to their lands? All humans know that they dare not trifle with Dragonslayer."

Dragonslayer chuckled, his voice like rumbling thunder. After a few moments, he erupted in booming laughter. As the giant laughed, I gestured. "Darian, Arella, meet Dragonslayer the Giant. He earned that name by slaying the dragon whose hide he now wears as armor - not that his own skin is insufficient to protect him, seeing as it's nearly a hand thick in most places and extremely tough. Treat him respectfully - it's no mean feat to slay a dragon, even for a giant."

"Gods, Raven, how do you do that? I was *sure* we were going to die!" Darian said, amazed.

"I told you - giants and dragons aren't that hard to deal with so long as you don't irritate them," I replied with a smile.

Chapter Twenty-One

"We sing of our friends from long ago,

All we remember, yes we remember,

We sing of their hopes, we sing of their dreams,

All we remember, yes we remember,

We beg their forgiveness, for their deeds we do not know.

All we remember, yes we remember."

- Giantish ghost-soothing song.

We spent perhaps an hour or so chatting with Dragonslayer, learning what he knew. Unfortunately, he knew little of the history of the Hyperboreans, only that which the giants had retained over the millennia (our culture and what we were like, on the other hand, he knew fairly well). They knew that the Hyperboreans had fought some invader, and in the end, they had been destroyed. The pitiful few survivors fled southwards, never to be seen again. Mana-storms raged for years after the battles, and the giants avoided the dead zones like the plague. After a few centuries when the storms finally faded, the giants found they had many ruined cities at their disposal. They debated what they should do for a long

time, fearful that the ghosts of so many dead would haunt the land for ages to come (giants fear that which they cannot fight, and ghosts they feared most of all). They finally decided that the spirits of the Hyperboreans would be appeased if they added the destroyed cities to their territories and guarded them as best they could. I translated his story to Darian, Arella and Swift-wing, and translated their questions back to him.

"And have you seen many ghosts?" I asked, repeating Swift-wing's fearful question to Dragonslayer.

"Not here, no. There are a few in the other cities, though we appease them by clearing out goblins and other trash that sometimes move in between our patrols, and we sing into the still night air of the ruins sometimes to soothe them. Our het-men also perform regular rituals to send those last few ghosts that cling to the earth onwards to their ultimate destination. In the Dead Zones, though, there are many. There have been many sightings of ghostly armies that clash in the dead of night, and the quiet voices of the dead crying out in pain. The port-city the invading humans built, the one that was blasted into a Dead Zone, is worst of all. The ghosts of a hundred thousand human women and children are often heard wailing in the night breeze. Their spirits do not rest easy, and we are too afraid to enter there and try to appease them. My het-man says that perhaps in another thousand years when the grasses have again reclaimed the Dead Zones, then perhaps their spirits will be at rest," Dragonslayer rumbled in reply.

"Your het-man is right. By that time, the Mana-flow will have again become ordered, and the astral plane will no longer show the signs of the destruction. It will take that long for the earth to heal these wounds, however. You can tell him that we passed through the southernmost Dead Zone a few weeks ago, and weren't bothered by ghosts at all. We may have simply been fortunate, but I think that it's also because the land is finally healing," I said, then translated for the others.

Dragonslayer looked up to the stars, guessing the time, then spoke. *"I must be moving on. I have to finish patrolling this city, then move down the old road towards King Darrak's castle by morning."*

"How is the king's castle? Does it still stand?" I asked.

"No. It's in ruins, like everything else is. Where are you headed?"

"I go to my old tower, twenty-eight leagues down the road in the opposite direction."

"Ah. You'll like it there. No ghosts at all. I'll let my het-man know you have returned from the void and occupy the body of a half-elf woman, and he'll spread the word that you're living in your old tower for the moment. He said once that the battle-mages of Hyperborea used a spell that allowed them to live again from their tomb, taking the bodies of those that would rob them. Since you are of the Dyclonic Circle, the legends say you're a reasonable sort and won't try to bother us, so we'll try not to bother you. If you need to talk to me or any of the other giants in this area, though, head for the ruins of Dohbari city. My village is just outside it, and we use its old farmlands to grow our crops. Farewell," he called, carefully rising to his feet and picking up his enormous weapon. We called our farewells after his retreating heels as he walked off into the night.

Darian and Arella plopped themselves down by the fire. "Well! that was certainly very frightening. I don't know how you Hyperboreans managed to live with creatures like that around," Arella commented.

"Giants are fairly easy to get along with. They're very territorial, but if you stay out of their territory, they'll stay out of yours. They're peaceful by nature, but when aroused, they can be incredibly dangerous. I was glad he was willing to talk - I'd have hated to have to try to kill him with a spell," I replied.

"Why? Are they tough enough to resist your spells?" Darian asked.

"Not really. I could probably bring him down with two or three explosions of lightning, though he'd merely be unconscious. The problem is that if I succeed, he'll fall. I lost a good friend once when an unconscious giant fell on him and flattened him like a pancake," I replied, demonstrating with a gesture that ended in a flat-handed clap.

"Ouch," Darian commented with a wince of sympathy.

"Well, let's get some sleep. We can move on to your tower tomorrow," Arella said.

"Yes. With any luck, we'll be there before dark," I replied, and drew on my staff to conjure my Hidden Sanctuary.

After Arella and I undressed and got into bed, she reached over and stroked my ears softly. "I'm very grateful to you. I'll study hard and make you proud of me."

"I'm sure you will," I replied, lightly stroking her side.

"Um, Raven, do you want to... You know," she whispered, trying to be gentle and not pressure me.

"Yes, very much, but I'm afraid Darian will hear. I'm sorry, my dear, but you're a bit loud when you're enjoying yourself, and he's sleeping right next to the fire, just below the opening to my sanctuary. It's hard enough on him as it is living with us, and I'm afraid the sounds of a moaning woman would drive him insane," I whispered with a wry smile.

"I'll be very, very quiet," she whispered, smiling wryly herself.

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

"Ye may say what ye may of the other works they did achieve - to me, the greatest of Hyperborean works yet remains their roads. Centuries upon centuries of wind and weather, and yet still can ye see them. They be in ruins, aye. They be in rubble, aye. But they yet still be there. Dwarves they were mayhap not, yet those roads do show Moradim's blessing did grace them all the same."

- King Gunim IV, Commentaries on History, 1348 NCC

The next afternoon, we turned south off the rubble of the king's road at league-marker forty-three. The dirt road that led to my tower was long gone, of course, but I knew the direction fairly well. We rode over the rise of a hill, and I stopped, grinning. "Look! The *byallar* trees are still here! I said, pointing to the small forest that lay before us.

"What are they?" Arella asked.

"Hyperboreans grew them for the small black bean they produced. You roast it, then grind it up and make a drink out of it, like tea. It's *much* stronger, though. It smells good but is somewhat bitter to the taste, like life itself is sometimes. Many people added cream or honey to it, and it tastes much better that way. My tower should be right about there - if it was standing, we'd easily be able to see it from here. Well, let's go," I said, commanding the invisible steed to proceed.

"So you were a farmer?" Darian asked as we rode among the *byallar* trees (which I was happy to see were blooming with their bright white flowers - in a couple months, they'd be laden with seeds ready to be harvested).

"No. The closest equivalent in your system of government would be a minor noble in charge of a small area on the borders of a king's territory, like a baronet or a baron. The masters of each circle were allowed to own lands in exchange for keeping them safe from invasion. The kings then could concentrate their forces inside their lands, knowing that the lands we owned were safe from attack. I liked *byallar* in my youth, and when I became a master, I had groves of them planted on the lands the king granted me. The people who lived on my lands didn't owe me fealty or live as my serfs like the situation is with your nobility, however - they were employees, like people working for a merchant. By working together with my people, we were able to develop the strongest, blackest, richest strain of *byallar* in the lands, and we all made fairly good money - though I made the most, of course, since the lands were mine."

A while later we dismounted before the ruins of my tower. I sighed and sat on a large stone from the crumbling outer wall. "Are you alright, Raven?" Arella asked.

"Yes, I'm fine. I originally conjured the tower with sorcery, then spent months stocking it with the finest and most comfortable furniture and tapestries I could find. It's just sad that all that is gone, now. I particularly miss this one chair I had. It was very comfortable to sit in by the fire, especially as I got older and my bones began to creak. Oh, well. Stand back, now," I called, and stood, stepping away myself. "I think that this time, I'll conjure it as marble instead of granite. Dyarzi always said she wanted to live in a marble tower - marble is cooler, and would be more comfortable in the summer," I said, and gestured briefly as I quickly rattled off the incantation for the Spell of the Tower of Stone, making only a few alterations to my gestures to produce a marble tower with the windows and the hues of stone I wanted. I finished with a snap of my fingers, and the tower shimmered into existence on the foundations of the old one, a strong, square marble edifice fifty cubits high and sixteen cubits wide. "There. Now let's unload my hidden sanctuary so I can re-attune everything to the real world again," I said, and turned to Darian and Arella.

Darian simply gaped, and Arella looked so frightened she might faint. Swift-wing's feathers were completely flat, his tail was lowered, and he cowered on Arella's shoulder, trembling with fear. "What?" I asked.

"You-you did that with *ease!* You conjured this enormous building like it was *nothing!*" Arella yelled.

"It *was* nothing. This spell was developed perhaps nine centuries before I was born, and its formula has been refined so many times that when it was finally passed to me, it was perfect. Yes, it's a complex sorcery to master. Even so, its formula has been carefully tuned over the centuries so its drain on the caster is only slight. It was originally developed to allow a mage to conjure an instant fortification should it be needed in battle, and if that situation ever arises, you'll probably be *very* tired and not have much strength left. As a result, you *needed* a spell like this to drain you as little as possible. I have another spell in my grimoire that conjures a tower of iron, but I never use it - it gets *far* too hot during the day, and is only really useful where it's cold most of the year. I conjured this one with more glass windows and only a few arrow-slits, and I took a moment to make the marble outside a nice white hue. After all, I don't need it as a defensive fortification, what with the giants patrolling the land nowadays. Look, I even made the top floor set back a bit so you have a nice parapet to walk upon just like my old one had, and I put golden marble on the dome at the top," I said, pointing. I was actually quite pleased with the results - the tower looked very nice.

"But, Raven! If you could conjure a tower like this, why did you bother using your hidden sanctuary?" Darian asked.

"Darian, you have to understand something - this tower is *permanent*. It doesn't go away, I can't take it with me, and the only way I can get rid of it is by blasting it to rubble or summoning an elemental to destroy it. Sure, I could have conjured towers for us to sleep in every night. We also would have left a string of mysterious towers behind us that *certainly* would have drawn the Larinians to follow. Secondly, how would we have carried all our supplies? The Hidden Sanctuary spell is *much* more tiring by several orders of magnitude, but it's the only spell that we could have used given the situation. Yes, this spell is simple to cast. It also takes up about ninety pages in my grimoire and is extremely difficult to learn - only a few can truly master it. You wouldn't believe how many times I ended up conjuring a pile of rubble when I was trying to learn it, or having the tower collapse moments after it appeared."

"It's still quite a shock to see how easy it was," Arella commented, having regained her composure.

I began to grow angry. Here I was, standing in the middle of my lands that had grown wild with weeds, my plantation of *byallar* trees having escaped their neat rows and become a forest, my people scattered and dead, my civilization destroyed, and *I* managed to retain *some* self control for most of the trip, even in the face of this catastrophe. Meanwhile, my friends were frightened to death of a Tower of Stone spell? "What, did you think I was *idly boasting* when we began this trip? I told you *then* that I could restore my tower easily, and now we're here and I've done it! If I'd already traveled here in *this* pathetically weak body, I could have cast a Spell of Returning and blinked us here in a heartbeat, then spent the rest of that day transporting Arella's entire *household* into this tower, one piece of furniture at a time, instead of having to spend nearly a *month* traveling overland and nearly getting killed by a damned *chimera*! *Such is the sorcery of a Hyperborean battle-mage!* Arella, you should get used to it, because in a few years, *this* is the kind of spells you'll be casting! Darian, you should also get used to it, because when I've built the strength of this body up, you're going to see just exactly what kind of spells I can unleash on the army your brother has assembled! At my full power, I can level a castle with a single spell, and sweep ranks of men with waves of fire and lightning that will send their burned and blasted remains flying about in every direction like *nupta*-seeds tossed in a hot pan! I've summoned roaring demons from the pit of hell, I've explored the elemental planes and even saved them from destruction by stopping a *sphere of annihilation*, and I've even *risen from the void to stand before you right now!* *I do not need any back talk or fearful looks from any of you!*" I roared, and was further irritated when I heard it come out as a woman's screech.

Darian and Swift-wing were taken aback, but Arella simply looked at me calmly. "If you'll summon your sanctuary, I'll pull out my herbal equipment and make you another flask of that tea I gave you before while you get out one of the pledgets," she said.

I looked at her in confusion for a moment, then remembered. It had been nearly a month. "*Damn!*" I replied, and Swift-wing tucked his head under his wing as he unsuccessfully attempted to stifle a cackle.

Darian looked on in confusion for several more heartbeats before he realized why I was cursing and kicking a loose stone from my previous tower. "Oh, it's your time again," he said, grinning.

"Darian, it's *not* funny! Most women don't have as much of a problem with it as she does, but they've also had all their lives to get used to it. She doesn't even know how to recognize the *signs* yet, much less how to deal with it. We women also consider it *very* rude when a man makes fun of it or is unsympathetic, so you wipe that grin *right* off your face this instant and thank the gods that *you* didn't wake up one morning in the body of a woman like she did!" Arella yelled, and Darian smoothed his expression to one that was properly apologetic.

Four hours later, we had Darian's horse hobbled quietly outside beneath a tree (we'd done that because it looked like there might be a storm coming, and I figured it might need at least a little protection from the weather), and had the Sanctuary unloaded into the tower and were sitting around the fireplace on the top floor. I was uncomfortable from the pledget, nauseated from the taste of Arella's concoction, and generally miserable from the whole situation. Swift-Wing fluttered from window to window, looking outside. "This is a nice room!" he squawked.

"Yes, that's why it's mine," I snapped, and Arella patted my knee.

"Now, now. Try to relax. You knew this was going to happen again," she said.

"Yes, but I didn't expect it so *soon!* How do you handle it? When you had your time last week, it didn't seem like much of a problem at all."

"You get used to it. Come now; tell us about your old tower. It will take your mind off your troubles, at least."

I sighed, hating my situation, then decided to humor her. "Well, like this one, the interior walls and doors were of oak. This ones unfurnished, but my old one was full of the finest furniture, carpets and tapestries I could afford. I gave the rooms on the bottom floor to the servants I'd hired, and they appreciated not having to walk upstairs to get to their beds at night. The second floor was the kitchen and pantry, the third floor was the armory and treasure rooms, and the fourth floor was where my laboratory, library and reagent storage was located. Dyarzi and I lived on the top floor, and we often took moonlight walks around the parapet at night, or picnicked on it during the day. When I would go to fight the battles of the Circle, she would often spend hours on the parapet just watching the road, waiting and hoping to catch the first glimpse of me coming over the hill and down the road, heading home. I always rode an invisible steed homewards, just enjoying the trip, but she told me once how the waiting made her unhappy. I finally decided to save her the anguish, and just used my Spell of Returning to get home as soon as possible. I'll probably arrange this tower the same way, though since I don't *have* servants, I think I'll reserve a room on the first floor for Darian so he can have a room that's cool during the day and warm at night."

"Raven, I know you told us during the trip that Dyarzi was killed by an assassin's knife. Do you know

who hired the assassin?" Darian asked.

"Yes, Darian, I do. Unfortunately, I can't tell you. It's one of the greatest scandals of the order, and we simply don't talk about it with outsiders. I'm sorry."

"Um, can you tell me?" Arella asked.

"Yes, you're a member of the order. As an adult, you can be trusted to keep our secrets and not discuss our scandals, even though you are only an apprentice."

"Well, if it's only a scandal, I think you can tell Darian. After all, all the other members of the order *are* dead. Besides, he's your best friend," Swift-wing commented.

I blinked, then chuckled. "Truly wiser than the owls are the noble ravens," I replied with a smile, and Swift-wing looked very proud and pleased with himself. "Alright, Darian, I'll tell you, but you have to *swear* to me on your honor as a *king* that you'll never tell a soul, living, dead or undead," I said, and Darian nodded.

"I do so swear," he replied.

"Good. Well, around the time I was thirty-eight, a good friend of mine named Gorol Qual and another man, Vayanar Eddahom, were the next in line for the position of master. One day, Master Uragdar Jorgal collapsed in the middle of a lesson on higher mathematics he was giving some apprentices, the sword he used as his wizard's staff collapsing into dust instantly. Sorcerous investigation revealed his animuary had been found and crushed, though by whom, nobody knew. We also found his grimoire had been stolen, compounding the scandal. You see, when each mage attains the rank of master, they are given the Spell of Hidden Life so that they may build their animuary. Each selects the location of their tomb carefully, and only the High Master knows where they are. This way, if a Master dies of old age, their body becomes that of a liche and they can live on as an undead, subject to the call of the Circle should their particular skills ever be needed again in the future," I explained, and Arella made a face.

"A *liche*? I thought they were evil."

"Only if the liche itself was evil when they died. You see, each master represented years of investment in training, and also represented a repository of experience and wisdom that the Circle didn't want to simply lose. As a liche, each also was more powerful than they were in life, their will enhanced by UnLife energy. Also, as I've told Darian before, there's nothing more intimidating than undead in your army. The last benefit is one most simply do not realize - *the senility of age clears up*. You see, if I'd allowed myself to expire naturally instead of suffocating myself in my tomb, I'd have realized that as a liche, I'd have *thousands* of years to find a way to bring Dyarzi back to me. Liches don't eat, they don't sleep, and they don't get bored. They can *despair* of their un-life, as the UnLife energy which permeates their being is dark and powerful, but that's not the same thing. So, I'd have had an eternity to work on the problem - and I'd have found a way. Once I'd discovered how, I could have easily asked the king to give me a condemned man, and the High Master would have happily brought him to my tomb. I then destroy my liche-body and possess that of the condemned man, my will easily crushing and destroying his soul as punishment for the crime he'd been condemned for. The enchantment at the same time allows me to re-shape my new body into a duplicate of my old one at age thirty, when I made my animuary. I'd have lived again, young and strong. I then could have brought Dyarzi back to me, and we could have married as we'd originally planned and lived our lives again."

"Oh, I see. I'm sorry for interrupting, Raven. Please continue your story," Arella said.

I nodded. "Anyway, Master Jorgal's destruction was a serious scandal. It meant that the High Master's secret files of the locations of everyone's tomb might be compromised, so all the masters moved their tombs and their animuaries with them over the next few months. Still, we knew not who had done the deed, so all the masters waited until after they had moved their tombs before they would consider the matter of who would replace Master Jorgal. The rest of the masters debated for several weeks over which of the two candidates should be chosen. I objected to Vayanar - he seemed suspicious to me, but I couldn't quite put my finger on what the problem was. Gorol was my friend, but he also was the inferior candidate - at the time, I felt Vayanar was simply a stronger and more highly skilled mage. I couldn't in all honesty vote for Gorol, but I also couldn't bring myself to approve Vayanar, either. As time had passed, I had gotten to know Vayanar, and I felt he was evil, somehow. I suspected he might even be guilty of Jorgal's destruction, though I knew not how. Finally, I bowed to the will of the rest of the masters and approved Vayanar, but only on the condition that I be allowed to administer the Test of Acceptance."

"Well, I took a crystal goblet and smashed it, then took a small shard of the crystal vial which was Jorgal's animuary and two shards from the goblet and set them aside for the test. I went to the king's investigator and paid him for the privilege of copying a spell he uses from his grimoire into mine, and the next day I administered the test. You see, the king's investigator had given me the Spell of Contagion Comparison, which he used to determine murder weapons and things like that. I had Vayanar cast the spell from my grimoire, telling him I wanted him to determine which of three shards of crystal came from

the goblet - and, because casting a spell one was utterly unfamiliar with out of a grimoire was a normal part of the test, he suspected nothing. Two shards leaped to the pile on the center of the table and clung to their mate, but one shard, the one from Jorgal's animuary, instead clung to Vayanar's wizard staff, the weapon he had used to smash Jorgal's animuary," I said, and paused to look Darian, Arella and Swift-wing over. They all looked fascinated, leaning forward eagerly to hear the climax of the story.

"I raised my staff and struck that villainous bastard down like a dog," I said, grinning ferociously, and my three friends nodded in satisfaction.

"Well, High Master Frarim was understandably upset, but after I explained what I'd done, I was forgiven. Vayanar wasn't killed by my blow, though he was rendered unconscious for three days and very nearly died. During that time, we searched his tower to find his grimoire, and discovered he'd stolen Jorgal's grimoire after he'd killed him. This only sealed his fate, and we turned him over to the king's justiciar to be handled by the king's law. It was a horrible scandal, and the Circle suffered terribly in the eyes of the public for years afterwards. Anyway, Vayanar was executed two weeks later. That's when we discovered the magnitude of his crime - his wizard's staff failed to disintegrate, and a few moments after he was beheaded, it disappeared as it was willed away."

"You mean..." Arella asked, her eyes widening.

"Yes. He'd already cast the Spell of Hidden Life on himself and concealed his animuary without the circle's knowledge. We should have suspected it, but we were *far* too angry for thinking - if the law would have allowed it, we would have simply killed him ourselves. Anyway, we found out later that Vayanar had sealed his animuary in an invulnerable, padded box and simply buried it beside the king's road, crushing the soul and stealing the body of an innocent passerby - one of a group of pilgrims to the temple of Vyleah, in fact. That's when Dyarzi was murdered. You see, Vayanar had murdered Jorgal to open up the position of Master for himself, and when I defeated his plans and struck him down, he decided to take revenge on me. He took some money he'd secreted and hired the Flame-Knives, a group of assassins who were very famous back then because they used knives with a wavy, flame-like blade. Very deadly, very expensive. Unfortunately, he had little experience with the Flame-Knife assassins, and simply told them where my tower was without making sure that I'd be in it at a certain time. The Flame-Knives stole into my tower, slew all my household servants and stabbed Dyarzi in the back as she slept. They didn't kill me, as I was out fighting a battle for King Lothar and trying to help the Circle find Vayanar in between times. To this day, over fifteen centuries later, I still mourn my loss," I said, pausing in my story and sighing. Darian reached over and clapped me on the shoulder in sympathy, and I clapped his shoulder in return. Arella simply sat there, her eyes brimming with tears, and waited until I took a moment to share a hug with her before continuing my tale.

"Well, we spent fifteen years hunting him down after that, and finally killed him at the battle of Chorim keep at great loss to ourselves. My friend Faral Balorim, who had returned from the dryad only two years prior to that, my friend Master Gorol, they and many others died that day fighting off Vayanar's stolen spells and an army of undead he'd raised from an ancient battlefield. Even then, his staff did not disintegrate. We knew he had concealed his animuary again, but we knew not where. We kept his staff for years after that, waiting for when it would be summoned away, but it never happened. We finally concluded that he'd buried his animuary in a tomb somewhere, and it might be ages before it was discovered again. I spent the rest of my life in quiet solitude after that, teaching the apprentices, fighting the battles of the Dyclonic Circle, but otherwise never leaving my tower. All I did in my spare time was study every tome of magic I could find for a way to bring my love back to me, but I never succeeded. The apprentices heard the tale and passed it around among themselves, and ever afterwards they called me 'Gratinrelon' behind my back, which means 'he who weeps inside' in my language, and they bothered me little with their incessant chatter for fear of my temper. And I must admit, my temper became *quite* short in my later years, though I think it was because Dyarzi and I had planned to have children of our own, and the silence of my chambers in my tower were sometimes more than I could bear," I said, and sighed before I continued.

"Finally, I felt my death approaching. I told the High Master my life was at an end, and he and I shared a cup of *byallar* in friendship before I left to enter my tomb. He knew I would not simply wait there until I died of old age. He knew I would kill myself before I spent an eternity in mourning. I'd hidden my tomb deep in what was then known as the Southern Wilderness, safe from the plows of farmers and the explorations of grave-robbers. I used my Spell of Returning to enter my tomb, laid myself down in my sarcophagus, closed the lid and lay there quietly until I suffocated to death. At the last moment of my life, I had a brief glimpse of Dyarzi, happy and carefree in the afterlife. I reached out to her, but the pull of my animuary was stronger. I entered the Dreamless Sleep, and awoke in the body of a half-elf female, raped and bleeding from a blow to the head which caused her spirit to fly and prevented me from reshaping the body with the power of the Hidden Life spell. Had she not been so near death, the power of the enchantment would have allowed me to reshape her body as I took it, making it my own again. Unfortunately I lost consciousness beforehand, so that part of the sorcery transpired with no effect, lacking my will to shape it. I found my memories were scattered and lost from the blow to the head, and so I could remember little of my life at first. It's taken weeks for it to return, gradually and a bit at a time, like the sun slowly dawning in the east. Anyway, after I sealed my tomb I met Darian, and the rest of my tale you already know," I finished, and fell silent.

We sat there quietly for a moment, the only sounds being Arella's sniffles. Finally, Darian spoke. "Yours is a tale of woe far greater than I could have imagined. I'm sorry, my friend," he said quietly.

I opened my mouth to say something reassuring and then tell Darian and Arella I wanted to discuss my first lessons, then shut it again. The last three times I'd said something like '*alright, let's discuss your education to become a king, Darian*', something *bad* had happened. First, we were press-ganged and I was gang-raped. Next, we were forced to flee an invading army. Next, a giant showed up, ready to fight. '*Once is accident, twice is coincidence, but three times is enemy action,*' as Master Frarim

used to say, ' I thought to myself. "Darian, Arella, does your god Yorindar have any enemies in your pantheon?" I asked.

Darian looked at me in confusion for a moment, as did Arella. "Yes, he does. The greatest foe of wisdom and life is chaos and death, so Yorindar's greatest enemy in our pantheon is Morgar, god of chaos and death," Darian replied, and there was a rumble of thunder in the distance which spooked Darian, Arella and Swift-wing badly.

'Great,' I thought. 'It looks like our two pantheons merged, and not all of my gods sleep. Morgar is still awake, and in the modern day, he's a god of evil. I'm caught in a struggle between two gods for the future of the world, and Darian is at the crux of the matter. Morgar is probably very angry, as he considers me to be his worshiper. Unfortunately, the Morgar I knew was a god of war and death, not chaos and death. War, by definition, is the controlled application of force to accomplish a military objective. Chaos is a part of war, but a good general strives to minimize it, not maximize it. Death also is a part of war, but it also is something a good general tries to minimize, not maximize. Morgar has changed, but I have not. It appears I'll have to oppose my old deity, the deity all the battle-mages of the Dyclonic Circle paid homage to, in order to secure the future of the world ,' I thought silently, then spoke. "Darian, Arella, Swift-wing, there are windows at each of the four walls. I want each of you to take one side and I'll take the remaining one. Do it now," I said, and waited until they complied. "Good. Now each of you keep an eye out your window, regardless of what we talk about next, alright?" I said, and they all nodded.

'Well, here's where we put my theory to the test,' I thought. "Darian, I think we should now discuss exactly what kind of training you'll need to regain your throne from your brother. Logistics, economics and military science should be at the top of the list," I said.

Darian opened his mouth to reply when Arella interrupted him. "Something's coming from the east! Something big!" she yelled.

I sighed again. "I thought that's what would happen. I'll explain it to you later, but for now just sit down and relax," I said, and opened the door to step out onto the parapet.

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

"Mortals war with sword and spell across bloody battlefields. Gods war with souls and paradoxes across the Arc of Time. A general sees the enemy massing to a flank, and shifts his troops to counter it. A god sees an enemy event occurring in the future, and reaches to the past to begin a counter-event. Like the story of the nail that cost the shoe that cost the horse that cost the

messenger that cost the message that cost the battle that cost the war that cost the king his head, through a chain of events so long no mortal can comprehend it, the gods make the tiniest, most infinitesimal adjustments to the past to cause the largest changes in the present - all to insure the future they want will come about. The position of a grain of sand on a lonely beach. The fall of a leaf. The death of a butterfly. And history is made."

- Eddas Ayar, The Mathematics of Magic, Chapter 12, Date Unknown, presumed 17th century NCC

What Arella had spotted flying through the air resolved itself into a large black dragon, flying lazily ahead of the storm. It spotted the tower, then turned to head towards me. I simply stood on the parapet, waiting. The creature approached, swooping low over the trees and spooking Darian's horse below, who tried madly to escape being hobbled and flee - it failed, falling to the ground and screaming a cry of pain and fear that sounded like that of a woman. With an enormous flap of its gigantic, leathery wings, the dragon landed next to my tower. Standing on its hind legs as it folded its wings, it raised its head to look me in the eye. Its head was four cubits wide, and its fanged maw was fully large enough to swallow a horse at a single gulp. The dragon regarded me with its blood-red, cat-like eyes, an expression on its ebon-scaled draconic face I recognized as dragonish curiosity. *"Who are you, little half-elf, that builds a tower on the lands of my old friend, Eddas Ayar?"* he rumbled in his own language.

"I am he, returned from the void through my animuary. The half-elf who originally owned this body was trying to rob my tomb. How are you, Karg?" I replied.

"Eddas? Is it really you? Hah! If this is true, tell me what treasure you recovered for me, the one that little thief stole, and tell me what happened to that thief."

"A crystal goblet that refilled itself each time it was emptied. I recovered the goblet and returned it to you so you'd stop your rampage of the area surrounding Dohbari city. The thief's life of crime didn't stop there, as well you know - for her final and greatest deed of thievery, she stole my heart. We were to be married, but she fell to an assassin's knife a month before our wedding, and I still mourn her to this day. Incidentally, I wouldn't go 'round Dohbari nowadays, there's a giant called Dragonslayer living there. You may have heard of him, he's built quite a reputation in these parts for stomping lizards," I replied dryly.

"I'll ignore your insult, friend, since I earned it by disbelieving who you were. I'm sorry about that little thief. I had no idea she'd been killed - you hid your grief well at the time, and never told me before. Please accept my condolences. Did you at least hatch a young-one or two beforehand?" Karg the Terrible replied.

"No, I'm afraid not. We planned on doing that after we were married."

"A true pity. She angered me more than I'd been in three millennia when she stole my treasure, yet she had to be as brave as a dragon herself to risk my cave - certainly she was as sneaky as a mouse, anyway."

"Would you like to meet my friends? They're hiding inside - they're not quite used to meeting dragons."

"Please. Any friend of yours is a friend of mine," Karg replied, nodding his massive head.

"Arella, Darian, Swift-wing, come on out, please," I called. Eventually they did so, and all three looked petrified. It didn't help that Darian's horse was still screaming in agony below us. "Darian Vencrior, Mage Arella-tor, Swift-wing the raven, meet Karg the Terrible; destroyer of the goblin horde at the battle of Selim Pass, hero of the battle of Chorim Keep, the oldest, wisest and most powerful dragon I know, may his scales gleam like the night sky forever," I said, making a proper introduction for the prideful dragon.

"Um, pleased to meet you, noble sir," Darian replied nervously.

"I also am pleased to meet you, noble sir, as is my familiar, Swift-wing," Arella said, struggling to keep from yammering in fear. Swift-wing merely hid his head under his wing and trembled violently.

"Ah, Arcadian. I know that language," Karg said, not bothering to tell them what I already knew - dragons had an innate power of language equaled only by magic items like my ring of translation. "So what brings you and your friends to Hyperborea?" Karg asked me.

"I seek to train Darian to be a king so he may reclaim his rightful throne, and to train Arella as the newest

apprentice of the Dyclonic Circle. My efforts have been opposed at nearly every turn, unfortunately."

"Really? By whom?" Karg asked, curious, tilting his enormous, horned head slightly.

"The gods, apparently. My guess is Darian is at the crux of some struggle between Yorindar and Morgar - though he's not the Morgar I knew any longer."

"No, he's not. He's insane now, seeking only chaos and destruction. Half of what he does helps his enemies more than himself. I suppose the death of the Hyperboreans did it to him," Karg rumbled.

"You have met the gods?" Darian asked, amazed.

"No, I am a dragon. There is much a dragon knows that mortals will never grasp, and how we come upon our knowledge is for us to know, not you," Karg replied smugly, and Darian wilted at his rumble.

"Karg, I would appreciate your help in this matter, if you can give it," I said.

"What do you offer me, Eddas Ayar?" he rumbled, his baleful red eyes glittering greedily.

"First, a snack. That horse down there. It looks like it's broken its leg trying to escape you anyway, so you may as well eat it," I said, leaning over the parapet and pointing.

Karg nodded, then dropped down to the ground and snapped his jaws around the screaming horse, cutting off its cries in mid-shriek. He then stood up again, chewing to crush its bones, and swallowed the beast easily. Gore dripped from his fanged maw to the ground, and I could tell by his expression he was quite pleased with the snack. "Very nice. A virgin mare. You still know a dragon's tastes, Eddas Ayar."

"Of course. You taught me well. For the second part, I offer this," I said, and pulled off my glove and emptied out the two grimoires from the container in my right thumb ring. I'd already copied those spells I didn't have into my own grimoire days ago, so after I put my grimoire back and pulled my glove back on, I held Tatter-Robe's grimoire out to Karg. "This is a grimoire I took off a Vilandian mage I defeated. I estimate it's worth around two thousand gold pieces."

Karg reached up with a claw and gestured, lifting the grimoire from my hands with a draconic spell of telekinesis. He paged through it silently for a few moments, then chuckled. "There's an interesting spell here beginning on page three hundred and ten. It conjures an invisible barkeep from the same dimension the other invisible servants, steeds, boats and other things come from - the barkeep fills your request for any type of drink, then is gone. Very amusing. I'll have to see if he can roll out a couple barrels of Elf-wine. The formula's valid, so it's no mere theory on the writer's part, but true sorcery. I like it. I accept your offer, Eddas Ayar," he said, closing the book. He drew a glowing circle in the air with another claw, then tucked the book inside it and closed the circle with a gesture.

"Where did it go?" Arella asked.

"The magic of dragons is powerful in the extreme, Arella. It's sitting back in his cave among his other treasures, to be perused and experimented with at his leisure over the next few centuries. Dragons are the greatest and wisest of beings, and their power is matched only by that of the gods," I replied calmly. Arella and Darian gaped at such bald-faced flattery, but Karg simply accepted it as his due.

"What is it you wish me to do, Eddas Ayar? Help you fight another rogue battle-mage as I did at Chorim keep?" he asked.

"No, actually. I'd like you to give Arella a few spells that in *your* opinion might both be useful to a battle-mage and yet still within her ability to cast. With these spells copied into her grimoire, she can study and master them over the next few months while I work with her and Darian."

Karg nodded. "Let me examine her for a moment," he rumbled, and his nictating membranes slid over his eyes as he gazed at her. Finally he blinked, then spoke. "She is untutored and somewhat weak, yet has great potential. I believe the Spell of Mental Domination I gave you would be useful, as would the Spell of the Elemental Explosion of Lightning you gave me in return for it. Also a simple Spell of Protection

would probably be useful to a battle-mage. Would these do?" he asked.

"Those would be a perfect beginning for me to build upon," I replied.

"Good. Girl, go fetch your grimoire, and be quick about it," Karg commanded. Arella hastened to obey, then Karg turned to Darian. "Boy, you stand beside one of forty-six mortals I have learned to respect; three humans, twenty-four elves, four half-elves and fifteen dwarves are in this number. Listen to him well, and learn. Your life is a mere flicker, a brief moment of time compared to his age, as his is to mine. He was old by your measurements long before your puny civilization rose from the ashes of his, and his civilization stretched back three thousand years before him. I remember it, as I remember everything that has happened in the fifty millennia of life that I have experienced since the day of my hatching. The civilization that destroyed his was like you - young and inexperienced. Yes, they had mastered the arts of war, and were even greater at warfare than the Hyperboreans. Even so, they had yet to master the arts of peace. This is why they were in turn destroyed by the last of the Hyperborean battle-mages. Remember this as you try to learn from him, and remember it as you try to apply your lessons and retake your kingdom; you cannot win the war if you cannot win the peace."

Darian, having finally regained his composure, bowed regally. "I shall remember your words of wisdom all the days of my life, noble sir," he replied. Karg seemed pleased with Darian's response, and nodded slightly.

Arella came back out, and Karg held out his claw to the edge of the parapet. "Come, girl. Standing like this gets tiresome on my old bones. Let us sit together at the base of this tower and we'll begin," he rumbled. Arella nervously stepped off the parapet and into Karg's claw, and he gently lowered her to the ground. Once she was safely there, he curled up around her, struck a spark of magical illumination so she could see in the growing gloom of evening, then began speaking to her in his low rumble.

"Will she be alright?" Swift-wing asked, nervously pacing on the parapet.

"She'll be fine - there's no better tutor for sorcery than a dragon. Go down there and join them - you're her familiar, so Karg won't mind."

"I'm sorry, Raven, but he frightens me *terribly*," Swift-wing replied with a shudder.

"Of course he does, he's a dragon. Now go down there, sit on Arella's shoulder and show him that the noble ravens can conquer *any* fear."

Swift-wing nodded, puffed himself up with all his feathers fluffed out to make himself look as big as possible, then swooped down to land with a flutter on Arella's shoulder.

"Gods, Raven, that was incredible! You *know* this dragon?" Darian asked.

"Yes, fortunately. Apparently now that the Hyperboreans are gone, Karg's territory today is larger than it once was, and now overlaps my lands. Even if I hadn't known him, we only would have been in trouble if I tried to attack him. What have I told you about dragons and giants?"

"They're usually only dangerous when you threaten them or irritate them," Darian replied, nodding.

"Correct. Look, I know you find dragons and giants terrifying, but try to remember that very large creatures like them instinctively don't fight much unless it's absolutely necessary or they're sure there's no way they can lose. The reason is that when the creature gets the size of an oiliphant or a dragon or a giant, things that don't bother lesser creatures suddenly become a problem. If you trip and fall, the worst that'll happen is that you'll break a bone. If a giant trips, the fall may kill or mortally wound them. If you break a bone in your leg, it's incapacitating but rarely fatal. For a giant, their muscles are so powerful that the bone almost never heals right without magic, and so a broken leg is usually crippling and often fatal. If someone swings a sword at you, you can often dodge out of the way. Dragons and giants are so huge they simply can't move out of the way of any attack, and they get wounded as a result. Sure, a giant won't immediately die from a two-handed sword through the thigh - on a human, an equal injury would be like being stabbed with a stiletto. Even so, the hole is so large that the wound almost always becomes infected, turns gangrenous and results in death. No, unless they've got a reason to fight you, giants and dragons often talk before they fight. That's why I keep telling you that they're usually only dangerous if you threaten them or irritate them. Keep in mind that screaming and running in fear is something they sometimes find irritating, though usually they're only amused. Unless it's obvious that they intend to attack, you stand your ground and simply talk to them. Not only will it give them pause, as a man who stands firm might be able to inflict a mortal injury on them, but they respect bravery. As a side-benefit, it also gives you a reputation as being fearless," I said, and Darian and I exchanged a grin for a moment before I finished my explanation. "Of course, you still *must* avoid the obvious things - don't trespass on a giant's territory, don't steal from a dragon, don't speak disrespectfully, and so on," I concluded, and Darian nodded.

"Ah, I see. Is there anything else I should keep in mind about dragons and giants?" Darian asked, stroking his chin as he considered what he'd learned.

"Yes. With giants, they tend to be slow of wit but will fly into an unstoppable rage if they think you've tricked them or are treating them like an idiot," I said, and drew Darian close so I could whisper quietly into his ear - there was no need to risk Karg overhearing. "With dragons, they tend to be vain, greedy and arrogant, and they'll ravage an entire countryside in revenge for a single insult or the theft of even a single coin of their treasure," I said, then leaned back and continued. "While a giant that can cast spells is as rare as hen's teeth and their *Talent* is usually weak at best, dragons are all excellent spellcasters with a powerful *Talent*, a titanic will, bottomless reserves of strength and millennia of experience behind them. Dragons also support their spellcasting with their natural abilities; they can fly swiftly and effortlessly, their thick scales are tougher than platemail, their strength is equal to a giant, and their claws and teeth can rend steel. Black and red dragons can breathe a blast of flame that can char flesh in an instant, while white dragons can breathe a blast of frost that can freeze a man solid in a heartbeat - they live mainly in the frozen wastes of the far north, however, so you're unlikely to ever see a white dragon. That's why I told you to treat Dragonslayer with great respect - I'd be willing to bet that among his people, he's a legend in his own time. Normally when a giant and a dragon decide to fight, the dragon ends up having lunch afterwards."

"What about ogres and cyclops?" Darian asked.

"Huh! Ogres and cyclops are smaller cousins of the giants, and you should avoid them whenever possible. They both enjoy the taste of human flesh, and both are also stupid and vicious - though Ogres are generally the smarter of the two, and sometimes have ogre-magi among their number," I replied.

"Hmm. Speaking of that, what do giants and dragons *eat*, anyway? People?" Darian asked.

"Usually not. Giants by and large are vegetarians, though some augment their diet with cattle and sheep that they raise. I heard of one evil and possibly insane giant that developed a taste for human flesh, but King Lothar assembled his army and killed it at the battle of Neloi forest. Dragons are meat-eaters, and they prefer flesh that is untainted. Most dragons limit themselves to eating horses, cattle and other large animals, and they consider virgin animals the tastiest of all. They usually avoid consuming domesticated animals, as that often causes problems with kings raising armies to kill them. Karg, like most dragons who aren't evil, only eats intelligent beings if they're his enemies. Evil dragons, however, are a completely different matter. They almost always enjoy snacking on intelligent prey from time to time, and they find

the taste of virgin females particularly enjoyable. Dragons like that will often find a remote village, terrorize it for a few days, then agree to leave it alone if the villagers will provide a virgin female sacrifice once a year and allow them to graze on their cattle from time to time. Of course, the poor villagers are often surprised to discover the dragon will leap to their defense when they're attacked by bandits, goblins and other vermin - they look upon the village as their personal herd of cattle, and will actually defend it."

"Ah, so that's why you offered the horse to Karg. As a virgin mare, he was sure to have found it particularly tasty," Darian said, nodding.

"No, actually, I offered the horse to him because the animal had a broken leg and needed to be put out of its misery. The fact that he found it tasty was only an added bonus," I replied, and grinned.

Darian grinned back, then spoke again. "Raven, I was interested by Karg's reply when I asked him about the gods. How do dragons really know the things they know? Why, he seems to know as much as you do."

"More, actually. Karg is about fifty thousand years old or so, and he's the oldest dragon I know of - though he told me once he has a sister who's still alive that's a few thousand years older. Dragons aren't like giants, Darian. Giants live about as long as humans do, and reproduce at about the same rate or a little less - typically, a giant couple will have three to four children. Dragons, on the other hand, are immortal, and reproduce very slowly. Once every two or three thousand years or so, less sometimes, they have an enormous mating flight. Nobody knows what calls them together or how they determine their mate, and I've never asked - I figured it was none of my business. The last I know of was a few years before I died - all the dragons from thousands of leagues around gathered high in the skies above Wilanda Forest. It was an astounding sight... Their mating flights were like an aerial dance, and quite beautiful to behold - if one could get over the thought that one was watching thousands of dragons, of course," I said, and winked. Darian grinned as I continued. "Anyway, the females then return to their caves and lay about three to six eggs, which produce hatchlings about the size of ponies. During their time with their mother, she educates them in everything she's learned over her life, using magic to produce food and water for them so they never have to leave their caves for a couple centuries. After that, each young dragon finds its own cave and establishes its own territory, builds its treasure pile from the hoards of its enemies, and accumulates the rest of their knowledge the same way dragons always have; they dream it."

"They *what*?" Darian asked, surprised.

"That's the best way I can explain it, since I'm not a dragon myself and I don't really understand it. The knowledge a dragon has is immense and all encompassing, Darian, and they know what they know because they're very old, they were educated by parents who were ancient, and all the rest of the knowledge they gain from their dreams. They don't know *everything*, but they know *nearly* everything that's important, anyway. As far as I can tell, their dreams don't let them see the future, but that's the only limitation I've ever found. Of course, with their great intelligence and vast knowledge, they can often accurately predict the future simply from an educated guess."

"Amazing. Dragon dreams the source of knowledge beyond man's imagining," Darian said, shaking his head.

"Correct. And as many would-be treasure hunters have found out in the last few moments of their lives, dragons have extremely keen senses and they sleep *very* lightly, indeed."

Darian and I leaned against the parapet and watched Karg working with Arella for awhile, his enormous body curled around her protectively. The storm clouds passed by harmlessly, and after a while, the moon came out. "How long do you think they'll be?" Darian asked idly, yawning.

"Knowing Karg as I do, probably until just before dawn. He'll want to be away before then, so as not to irritate the giants unnecessarily. He'll conjure some food and drink for Arella during the night, and her fear of him will keep her awake and alert. Come, let's get some rest. While Arella and Swift-wing sleep tomorrow, I'll work with you on logistics. If they need us, Karg will call," I replied, yawning myself.

As we walked back into the tower, Darian grinned and spoke. "It's still amazing to see how calmly you handle dragons and giants," he said with a chuckle.

"That's one of the things Arella will learn as time goes on - when you have an animuary, you tend to lose your fear of death, and you only fear your animuary being found and destroyed," I replied, and Darian nodded.

My animuary was concealed inside my sarcophagus in a sealed compartment that's padded to protect it, and my sarcophagus is enchanted to be invulnerable to harm. It couldn't be moved without sorcery or serious physical labor, it's quite difficult to damage because you first have to either extract it from the

sealed compartment (impossible without being able to get at the underside of the sarcophagus), or bash the sarcophagus around hard enough to break the vial inside it's padding (extremely difficult without sorcery or the aid of a giant's strength to lift it). Of course, I didn't tell Darian this - it's not wise to speak of the exact location of your animuary and how to destroy it, even to friends. My animuary is virtually impossible to find unless you have the aid of a mage or know where to look. Not only is my sarcophagus carefully concealed within my tomb, but my tomb itself is carefully hidden - and, even if you knew where to look, you'd still have great difficulty finding it without sorcery. Even so, it still pays to be cautious with one's soul. I spoke up again, continuing where I left off. "Besides, it's like old Master Walak once said - *'after you've died once, death loses its power to frighten you,'*" I finished with a smile.

A few hours later I was curled up in bed, asleep, when I heard Karg's low rumble. "Eddas," he called quietly. I yawned and looked around, realizing by the dim light that dawn was only an hour or two away. I climbed out of bed nude, padding over to one of the four doors that led out to the parapet. Shortly I stood before Karg's massive head again, and he looked me over. "You looked far more regal in your black robe and hooded cloak, Eddas. This body looks soft and weak when naked, and my nose says that not only has it been brutally raped at least twice, it's experiencing its menses at the moment. You must be miserable in it," he said in his own language.

"A bit, but I'm getting used to it. How did it go?"

"The girl knows only the basics of mathematics, and you'll need to work with her there before she can master the more complex spell formulas. She has an innate grasp of sorcery, however, and I think you'll find her an excellent student. She reminds me in many ways of the White Witch of Iolo Mountain, do you remember her?"

"Yes, I do. An excellent mage in her own right, as I recall, and a specialist in healing spells. Whatever happened to her?"

"Killed by an ogre about a decade after you died. It happened in my territory, so I ate the ogre to teach him a lesson. I still have the White Witch's grimoire and all her items, however. Perhaps I'll bring her grimoire by one night when you're done helping the boy regain his throne. She'd developed a few spells I think you may find interesting. Farewell, my friend. May your scales always gleam and your treasure-pile always grow," Karg called, extending his bat-like wings.

"May the road always rise to meet you, and may the wind always be at your back," I called in

return. A mighty blast of wind buffeted me briefly as Karg lifted himself into the air with a flap of his enormous wings, then I stood and watched for a several minutes as he flew up and out of sight.

I turned to the eastern side of the parapet, and knelt facing the rising sun. I knew what I had to do. Morgar would continue to interfere so long as I refused to accept Yorindar, and there was only one thing I could do about that. Since I knew Yorindar was a god of wisdom, dawn seemed the best time. I also knew that Karg would almost certainly awaken me before he left to bid me farewell, and he had.

I bowed my head and clasped my hands. "Yorindar, I know little of you. Even so, I *do* know that you need Darian, I know you need me to help him, and I realize that this is a matter whose importance goes far beyond one king, you struggle for the future of the world somehow. Perhaps you need one of Darian's descendants, someone who will do something of critical importance to the world decades or even centuries from now. No matter - Darian is at the crux of your battle with Morgar, and you need me to help him. So be it. I shall do as you ask. I accept my new name as being equal to my old; Raven. I shall be your raven, Yorindar. I shall advise Darian Vencrior as your own raven would. I shall pluck out the eyes of Darian's enemies, defeating them and destroying them as your own raven would. I accept my new name, I accept my new body, and I shall strive to fulfill the destiny you have laid out for me," I said quietly.

There was a small tickling at the back of my neck, and when I checked, my hand drew away a small black feather. One of Swift-wing's, surely, fallen from him yesterday and blown on the back of my neck by a stray morning breeze. Even so, I knew enough not to ignore a sign from the gods. I went back inside and brushed my hair, pulling it back into a ponytail. I shrunk my silver hair-ring around it, then tucked the feather into place beneath the ring.

Arella had come to bed while I was speaking with Karg and praying to Yorindar, and she was already fast asleep. Swift-wing was on his perch, also sleeping quietly. I knelt beside the mattress, gently brushed aside a strand of Arella's hair, and gazed down to her sleeping face. "Thank you, dear Arella. You've taught me how to walk in the body of a woman and be content. Now, I'll do my best to teach you to fly," I whispered, and then turned to get ready for the dawning day.

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

"Mathematics is the soul of the universe. Anyone who tells you otherwise is a fool."

*- Eddas Ayar, The Mathematics of Magic, "Introduction", Date Unknown, presumed 17th century
NCC*

Over the next month, I worked with Arella and Darian every day. Arella was a bright and eager student,

and rapidly learned the basic axioms and theorems crucial to the mathematics of magic. There were times I sighed in frustration with Darian and Arella's culture - here was a brilliant and powerful mind, perhaps fully equal to my own, relegated to a secondary role in their society simply by virtue of the fact that the body that housed it was female.

Darian did well in the first three weeks of his studies, enjoying the theoretical lessons of military science, logistics and economics. Unfortunately, his studies slowed as we began to delve into the mathematics that formed the basis for these theories, especially in logistics and economics. Finally I decided to try a different tack. I searched around the locations I knew the houses my employee/tenants used to live in were located, and eventually came up with a steel axe-head from the dirt. I cast a spell of repairing to bring it back to usable shape and sharpness, then spent a day fitting it to a haft I'd carved from a small sapling. "Come, Darian," I called, once I was finished.

"Where are we going?" he asked, looking up from the flat stone I was using as our 'chalkboard'. He'd been staring at the economic formulas I'd given him for an hour, his expression sleepy and bored. His expression cleared up into one of curiosity, as he saw I'd changed out of my cloak and robe and borrowed one of Arella's loose skirts and blouses.

"You and I are going to clear out the trees that have overgrown the road. Pull off your cloak and tunic and leave them here - it's going to be hot work. Let's go," I replied, handing him the axe.

As Darian hacked at the trees I indicated needed to be cut, I began talking. I spoke soothingly, calmly, trying to get him to relax. *byallar*-wood is soft and the trees are easily felled, and even the largest of them had a bole of only half a cubit thick. After a few minutes, he fell into a rhythm - chop down one tree, lop off its branches, step to the next one I'd point to and start all over again. While he worked and his bare chest and arms sweated freely, his mind finally relaxed and began to float. As for my part, I was sweating, too. I was using my ring of telekinesis to pull the stumps, lift the debris out of the way and line the roadway with logs, and it was hard and tiring work (which was why I'd borrowed a light, breezy blouse and skirt from Arella). When I saw he was in the correct frame of mind, I then started my lesson for today over at the beginning, speaking calmly and quietly as he worked. He seemed to be paying me no attention at all, simply concentrating on felling the trees. By noon, I stopped him so we could head back to the tower for lunch. "So, Darian, what do you think of my *byallar*-plantation?"

"Unfortunately, sixteen centuries of neglect has reduced its market value. With the trees growing wild the way they are, harvesting the seeds would be pretty difficult. Your investment of time and energy in developing a hardy strain of tree has paid off, since they're still here, but I think *byallar* is going to have to make a damn good drink before anyone will consider this place worth more than anything other than as a source of firewood," he replied absently.

"I see. Well, the king estimated my lands were worth about five hundred gold pieces when he gave them to me, and I'd had them appraised at ten times that a few years before I died. What would you say their value has depreciated to today?"

"Assuming people today learn to like *byallar* as much as the Hyperboreans did, I'd say around half that. If we clear out the excess trees and get a decent road going here again, I'd say you'd get your full value in maybe a decade or two."

"Spoken like a true accountant," I said, and grinned.

Darian looked at me in confusion for a moment, then grinned in return. "That's what you were trying to teach me today! How to value land!" he said in appreciation.

"Indeed. I realized that your body likes to work hard, and when you're sitting there trying to use your brain, your body keeps wanting to get up and walk or run or fight or do something physical - comes from having spent your youth hunting, riding and engaging in other physical sports, I imagine. As a result, I decided to try this. We'll work again like this tomorrow morning, and we'll give you each afternoon to rest and work around here cleaning up. I found the axe-head in one of the ruins of the old houses, maybe you can find other things we might have a use for in the afternoons," I replied, smiling.

That afternoon, I got cleaned up in the small stream that runs by my plantation and began teaching Arella the same Spell of Telekinesis that I use. When she finally grasped the formula, she smiled. "I see. This spell doesn't just allow you to use your body's strength at a distance like the usual formula for telekinesis spells, it allows you to use the strength of your *will* at a distance," she said.

"Indeed, which is why it's more complex and harder to learn. I've managed over the course of the last couple months to build the strength of this body through the *Mana*-energy flowing through me to where it looks a bit more athletic, but is actually nearly as strong as Darian. Even so, this body could never have pulled a stump out of the ground, it's simply not that strong. As such, any normal telekinesis spell would be useless. This spell there, the same one enchanted permanently into my ring, allows me to use the strength of my will instead, and that's more than enough power to pull a stump from the ground - though I'm a bit tired after working all day, however. I appreciate the loan of the skirt and blouse, as well. I think

I'd have fainted from heat prostration if I tried to work like that in my robe and cloak, and I certainly didn't want to distract Darian by standing next to him nearly naked in Dyarzi's 'dancing outfit,'" I said, chuckling.

"I wish there was something we could do about that. I'm sure he must be very frustrated by now," Arella said, stroking Swift-wing's feathers as she frowned.

"Hard work will help ease some of it, but as for the rest, I'm afraid I'm still not interested. I've managed to accept this body as my own for the moment, but I'm still a normal man in the body of a woman. I'm simply not interested."

"Unfortunately, neither am I. I'm just afraid that in a few more months he's going to *explode!*" Arella said with a giggle.

"No, he won't - though he'll sure *feel* like it after a while. I don't have a solution at the moment, unfortunately. Well, let's return to this spell. I think both you and Swift-wing should try to master it as a skill so you can cast it 'on the fly', rather than from your grimoire - especially you, Swift-wing."

"Me? Why?" Swift-wing asked, looking up from the page in Arella's grimoire.

"For the same reason you don't have a grimoire of your own - ravens are wise and brave, but they don't have hands. It's nearly impossible for you to manipulate a quill, and extremely difficult for you to turn a page. With this spell, you could solve that problem. Come, let's begin. As you can see, the formula for this spell is $(T/C)^r + (R * VH / (C - x)) - Ng$. Now; if the caster exerts three stones of force as T, how much weight will they lift?" I asked, and Arella began scratching on the stone slab I'd given her for a 'chalkboard' with a piece of charcoal while Swift-wing assisted her in doing the math.

We spent the next month working in this manner, Darian sweating during the day alongside of me, and Arella, Swift-wing and I working together in the afternoon. By the end of that time, the road was clear again, and Darian and I turned to the task of harvesting the *byallar*-seeds. Swift-wing wanted to try eating them, but I told him to be very careful - they're a powerful stimulant raw, and could make one sick. I split one in half then half again with my knife and let him try it, but he thought it tasted horrible and he was dizzy for an hour afterwards. I simply pointed out the fact that most birds simply don't eat them

raw - though after they're roasted, birds and mice ate them like candy and ran around like crazy afterwards, so you had to keep the roasted seeds under lock and key. Arella studied the seeds for several days, and determined they had some medicinal properties. I gathered a few of the raw seeds and she sealed them up in one of her herb-jars, then she sealed some of the roasted seeds in another jar.

Grinding the seeds took awhile, since my mill had long since fallen to ruin. Darian came up with a small hand-mill, two circular stones half a cubit across with a hole in the center, the top one having another hole near the edge. I carved some *byallar*-wood to fit them together properly and give the top stone a turning-handle again, and we began to grind the roasted seeds in our spare time. Arella made the *byallar* according to my directions, and one afternoon we sat down in the shade of a tree to enjoy the final result.

"Ah, perfect," I sighed, sipping my first cup of strong, black *byallar* in sixteen centuries or so.

"It's a bit bitter, but interesting," Darian commented.

"I rather like it. It's especially good with a drop of honey. Here, Darian, try it," Arella said, handing Darian the small mug of honey we'd managed to collect from some bees nearby.

"Tasty, tasty!" Swift-wing cackled, dipping his beak into his cup for another sip.

"Don't drink more than what's in that little cup, my friend. Raven was right - it's a strong stimulant, and it wouldn't be good for your tiny little heart to have more than that," Arella warned.

"Don't worry, I learned my lesson with the raw seeds - if Raven says don't do something, don't do it!" he cackled.

I looked up at the sound of slow thumping, and spotted Dragonslayer walking towards us down the road Darian and I had cleared out. We called to him in greeting and he came over and knelt beside us. "*Is that byallar I smell?*" he asked.

"Yes, it's fresh-ground, too. The seeds are gathered from these trees, a breed I developed myself when I lived here last. I used to make pretty good money off of them back then. Would you like some?" I asked politely, translating for Arella and Darian.

"I'm afraid you couldn't possibly have enough for me. We usually make it by the barrel," he replied, grinning.

"Here, take what's in the pot. At least you could have a sip, and we can always make more," I said, holding the teapot up to him.

Dragonslayer looked down to the tiny teapot and shook his head. *"I'm afraid I'd squash that little thing trying to hold it. It smells good, though."*

"Pick me up and I'll pour it into your mouth," I said. Dragonslayer shrugged and picked me up gently, and I poured the teapot out into his open mouth. He ran the liquid around his tongue as he put me down, getting the flavor of it.

"Best I've had in years, better even than what we grow. Do you have much more?" he asked, grinning broadly.

I waved to the acres and acres of unharvested trees. *"More than I could possibly harvest and brew in a millennium."*

Dragonslayer looked around, thinking. A giant's thought processes are fairly slow, so while we waited, Arella and I brewed another pot. By the time we were done, Dragonslayer turned to us and spoke. *"You know, we giants could help you out. I can see you must have worked hard to make that road - and I appreciate it, by the way, as I didn't want to accidentally crush you by not seeing you beneath the trees when I came to visit. Anyway, we could come by and pull out the excess trees you have, re-build your irrigation system, re-build your mill, and help you harvest the rest of the seeds. In exchange, we can take the seeds you don't want and use them ourselves. If you don't mind, we'll*

just plant them and grow your breed ourselves."

"That sounds good, but I don't really need my mill re-built. What I really need is things like furniture and other items for my tower. Also, I'd have to have full say over which trees are pulled and which trees are left behind, and you'd have to promise to harvest gently so as not to damage the trees. As far as you giants growing my breed, I'd have minded sixteen centuries ago when I was actually making money off them, but today I think that's a reasonable exchange for you helping me clean up my plantation and harvest for me."

"Don't worry, we're used to moving carefully, and we know how to harvest byallar without damaging the trees - we spread out hides beneath them and brush them gently with our fingers to make the seeds fall, the same way we gather apples and other fruits we use in making wines and brandies. As far as you having full say over reclaiming your fields, that goes without saying - they're your fields. Believe me, for a chance to gather these seeds and grow them on our lands, we'd even work with the trees spaced closely together like the legends say humans used to like them. As far as the other things you want, I don't think that will be much of a problem. We have a dollmaker in my village, and she makes tiny little furniture and things that I think will be just your size."

"Good. I think that having you giants walk down my road will also help pack down the road-bed, too. A good exchange all 'round, I'd say. It's a bargain, then," I said, sticking out my hand. Dragonslayer held out a massive forefinger, and we shook on it while I translated for Darian and Arella.

Over the next month, several male and female giants came by and helped me straighten out my lands and harvest the *byallar* trees. The giants were dressed in enormous cowhide breeches, tunics and boots, while the giantesses wore long cowhide dresses and moccasins. They greeted us warmly when they arrived, then got to work. They carefully pulled out the excess trees while leaving the remainder so that the branches of each were nearly touching their neighbors, all in nice, neat rows. The giantesses then carefully gathered the seeds from both the standing and the felled trees, then borrowed my millstones and made an enormous hand-grinder out of them. Meanwhile, the men carefully stomped the road-bed hard and flat, then worked on my disused irrigation system, even digging me a new well near the tower with their hands. The womenfolk chatted among themselves as they roasted the seeds in gigantic pans over a large fire they'd built out of the excess trees, then ground the seeds with their grinder.

When the harvest was nearly done, the giantesses began to brew enormous barrels of *byallar* for themselves and their menfolk, each merely a large mug for them, and gave me five sealed barrels of raw seeds, five barrels of roasted seeds and five barrels of ground and roasted seeds. This didn't even touch a tenth of what they loaded into the large boxes they carried with them, however, and we agreed that the

giants could come by and harvest from my fields every year until their own trees were producing for them (since they had several barrels of raw seeds they'd gathered to plant in their own fields). Towards the end of the month, Dragonslayer showed up again with a giantess he called Felicity, who turned out to be their village dollmaker. She carefully measured how tall we were with a rod she carried in an enormous work-box as big as a hut, then began carving various items of furniture. Darian, Arella and I asked for out of the harvested *byallar*-wood. Their main fabric appeared to be cowhide, but they had some hides they'd softened especially for baby giants' clothing that she used for our furniture. Felicity talked while she worked, telling us she was very excited about making doll-furniture for us. After all, neither she nor any of the Hyperborean giants had even *met* one of the 'Little-People' (as the giants called humans), and they had always wondered what the people who used to live in the tiny ruined cities and occasionally frightened the giants as ghostly encounters had *really* looked like when they were alive.

I noticed one day as Dragonslayer and Felicity were getting some water from the stream that he had to lead her around by the hand. When I asked, Felicity explained that working up close with tiny little things had shortened her vision, so she could hardly see beyond her fingertips. "*Dragonslayer, have Felicity kneel here so she can see me, please,*" I called, pointing to a spot in front of me. When she'd knelt, I spoke again. "*Can you see me now?*" I called.

"Yes, though you're a bit fogged. Are your little friends nearby? Do you need something else made?" she asked, her voice pitched somewhat higher than a male giant's voice, but still a low alto rumble.

"They're over there sharing some byallar with your friends. Felicity, I'd like you to pick me up and hold me near your face, please," I called. She did so easily, as I was only about two hands tall for her, then spoke again.

"Now I can see you clearly. You are so terribly cute," she said, grinning. Dragonslayer chuckled behind her.

"Thank you. Now, hold me right in front of your nose and close your eyes. I have a spell I'd like to try that might help your vision," I said, and she complied. I cast a Spell of Healing on her eyes, hoping that the enchantment could repair the strain of using them for years with tiny, close things. Most of the masters of the Dyclonic Circle had the same problem develop as they got older, and a standard healing spell usually fixed it right up unless there was some underlying disease as the problem. *"Alright, now open your eyes and tell me what you see."*

Felicity opened her brown, saucer-sized eyes and looked around, her expression one of growing amazement. *"I can see!"* she bellowed with joy, her roar causing all the nearby heads to turn.

"Argh! You're squeezing me too tight!" I gasped, trying to pry her hand open with my arms. Felicity, in her excitement, had tightened her grip.

"Oh! I'm sorry. Here, let me put you down. There, are you alright now?" she asked, her face a mask of concern.

I lay there, gasping, unable to speak for a moment. Arella ran over and knelt beside me. "Raven, are you alright?" she asked. Darian trotted up behind her, but held his tongue - Arella was far more experienced at medicine than he was.

"Yes. Felicity got a little excited when I healed her vision, and she squeezed me a bit. I think I'm alright, just help me up," I gasped.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you, I just got excited when I realized I could really see! I mean, I can see those clouds, I can see the mountains in the distance, I can even see how handsome Dragonslayer really is. Please forgive me, I'm really very sorry!" Felicity said, sniffing. I looked up to Dragonslayer and nearly laughed - I might have, if I could only catch my breath. By human standards, he was huge and ugly. Besides being nearly eighteen cubits high, his eyebrows nearly met in the middle of his hairy, bearded face. He had jutting cheekbones, an enormous brow-ridge and a broad jaw that in a human would all be symptoms of late acromegaly, a disease of uncontrolled bone growth that is eventually fatal, but in giants was simply the normal appearance of the adult male skull. Yes, by human standards, Dragonslayer was ugly as sin - but by giantish standards, however, he was healthy, half a head taller than the other male giants around him, and quite handsome. Felicity was absolutely gorgeous by giantish standards, with a large round face and sparkling brown eyes. By human standards, though, she was plain in the extreme.

"I'm alright, Felicity. Nothing seems broken, you just squeezed the breath out of me for a moment," I replied, smiling weakly.

"Oh! You look so cute when you smile. Are you sure you're alright?" she asked wiping her eyes and

smiling in return.

"Yes, I'm fine. I'm glad I was able to help you. The cure I gave you is permanent, but only if you take care of your eyes from now on, alright? I want you to try to take a few minutes' break every hour of working, and remember to spend at least an hour or two every day looking at things that are far away, like the night stars or a distant mountain, so you don't strain your eyes always looking at things just in front of your nose, alright?" I asked, and she nodded. *"Good. For now, I think I'll go sit over there and rest for a little while. Why don't you have Dragonslayer show you around? After all, it's the first time you've really seen my lands, and I'm sure he'd be happy to show you ,"* I said, and had Arella help me into the shade of the tree she and Darian had been resting under.

"Are you sure you're alright, Raven?" Darian asked as Arella helped me sit. The two other giants they'd been sitting with looked on in concern, so I smiled to ease their minds.

"Yes, Darian, I'm fine. I've been nearly squashed by an excited giantess because I was too stupid to realize she might lose her composure for a moment once I healed her vision, but I'm fine. Nothing feels broken, but I'd like to rest here for awhile before I try my next stupid stunt. The moral of this story is *always* think before you act, even with things that don't appear dangerous - if I'd thought about it for a minute, I simply would have asked her to bring her head down to the ground," I replied, chuckling weakly.

Chapter Twenty-Five

"Human women belike to Dwarven women as Water belike to Wine"

- *Dwarven proverb*

"A thirsty Dwarf will yet betimes drink Water"

- *Dwarven proverb*

A month later, the weather started turning chill, and the leaves on the trees started turning golden colors. The giants had left a few days after my experience with Felicity, as the harvest and all the other work was done. I was doubly pleased, both with the furniture Felicity made (which was a little rough-hewn, but quite comfortable), and with the fact that Felicity and Dragonslayer seemed to be developing a friendship before they left. We had enough supplies of wood in the enormous woodshed the giants had built for us to last a couple years, much less a single winter, and my lands looked virtually the same as they did when I last lived on them. Arella greatly enjoyed being able to place her mattress on a real bed again, and we slept together and enjoyed each other's company during the cool fall nights.

Darian's studies proceeded apace, and shortly he had mastered the basics of economics and logistics, and understood how to manage a small area like my lands - the same principles could easily be applied to running a kingdom, though he'd need a lot of practice before he was as good at it as his brother apparently was. All that remained was to teach him to be a general - he already knew how a king should act, having watched his father over the years and also having grown into a fine, honorable man himself. As for Arella and Swift-wing, they decided they'd still share a single grimoire, and their studies also were proceeding well. It had become apparent early on that I'd have to teach Swift-wing as well as Arella, so that they would still be able to function as a team. There were times I marveled at how much Arella knew, and other times I marveled at the enormous gaps in her knowledge. I learned as we went along that Arella's mother had been married to a mage, and had secretly studied his grimoire to master a few spells that would help her as a fortuneteller - apparently the profession ran in the female side of her family, though Arella was the first true mage her line had produced in the last few generations.

Three or four times a month, one of the giants that patrolled this part of their territory would come by to check up on us and find out how we were doing, as well as to share their gossip about the goings-on around us. We found out that they had always been checking on us, though they hadn't entered the valley for fear of accidentally stepping on us as we slumbered beneath a tree. We even met their het-man, a large, gray-haired giant called Strider. He wanted to ask if I would teach him the healing spell I'd used on Felicity - giantish spells simply weren't up to the task, being more suited to healing and sealing wounds and curing infections and other diseases. After a few minutes of study, I was relieved to find that his talent was just barely up to the task of mastering the spell, so I agreed. Strider's grimoire was a massive tome that was two cubits long, a cubit wide and half a cubit thick with pages of soft cowhide pounded thinner than vellum. For him, however, it was a small book that sat easily on one hand held flat, and could be conveniently tucked into his belt (with any reagents he might need for spells he couldn't cast 'on the fly' simply being contained in small pouches he also tucked into his belt - each a sack big enough to stuff a cat into). I copied the spell into his grimoire, then spent two days making sure he understood the basics. Even if he had to cast it out of his grimoire for lacking the time to truly master it, he needed to be familiar with it beforehand. Judging by how interested he was in it, I could tell he really wished he didn't have to return to his village and instead could spend four or five months as my student, mastering the spell and anything else I could teach him. Strider wanted to repay me with what little gold the giants had, but I waved off any thought of repayment. Having giants regularly patrol was *more* than enough payment for me, even though they did that before I ever returned.

It was about the middle of winter that our first bit of real excitement occurred. Dragonslayer came down the road, carrying a giantess in his arms - judging by the pattern of the cow-hides in her dress, it was Felicity. Darian, Arella and I were at the top of the tower having lunch when Swift-wing spotted them from the window and called me over. "Looks like trouble. Come on, we'll meet him at the base of the tower," I said, and we all grabbed our cloaks and headed downstairs.

Dragonslayer laid the giantess on the ground before us, and Felicity lay there unconscious with one leg twisted beneath her skirt, as though crossing her legs. "*She slipped on a patch of ice and fell sometime*

yesterday, and I found her in the fields this morning. My het-man is helping another village quell an outbreak of black-tongue, and by the time he returns she'll be dead. Help me, Eddas Ayar. I love her, and cannot live without her," he said.

I nodded. Black-tongue was a serious and often fatal disease of giants, and Strider was probably quite busy using his spells to try to cure each patient one by one. *"I'll do what I can,"* I replied, and got to work.

The slow puff of frosted breath in the cool air revealed she still lived, so there was still hope. I tried to clamber under her skirt to examine her leg, but it was hopeless - all that cowhide weighed hundreds of stone, at least, and I simply couldn't move it. Of course, a giant's hide was thick enough and tough enough to allow them to go naked even in winter's chill, but they had a sense of modesty.

"Dragonslayer, I can't examine her with this dress on - it's in the way. Can you pull it off over her head, please?" I asked. He looked taken aback, but nodded and complied.

Once the dress was off, my suspicions were confirmed - her left leg was broken above the knee, and there was a massive bruise across the knee itself wider than I was tall. The power of her enormous muscles had twisted the leg to one side, and only Dragonslayer's careful handling of her had prevented a compound fracture. *"That looks bad,"* Darian commented.

"It is bad, Darian. For a giant, it's usually fatal. They can't move around to get food, relieve themselves or anything. Also, the bone usually ends up penetrating the skin, the wound becomes infected, and they die in agony from gas gangrene. It's a dangerous enough injury in a human, but for a giant, it's universally fatal. When they break a leg like this, they usually just lay down and die. That's why Felicity's asleep now - she laid down yesterday for what they call the Last Sleep, and she's dying," I replied, then turned to Dragonslayer. *"Alright, I'll need you to pull the bone straight so I can mend it. Stand over there, move her right leg aside, and sit on your buttocks. Take her left ankle in your hands and place your left foot on her groin across her pubic bone, then pull the leg straight and hold it there. You'll have to pull hard, as her leg muscles will be twice as strong as your arms, but try to pull smoothly and without jerking. Make certain you're holding the leg perfectly straight, the toes pointed up to the sky. Do it now,"* I commanded, and had Darian boost me up on top of her nude form.

"No, put your foot a little higher, so the arch of your foot rests just here," I said, summoning my staff to my hands and pointing with it, and Dragonslayer shifted his foot atop Felicity's gigantic pubic mound. *"Good. Now pull!"* I yelled, then knelt, touching my staff to Felicity's thigh as I began chanting the incantation to the spell and gesturing with my free hand. The ends of the broken bone in Felicity's leg ground together with a noise like a tree snapping, and Arella looked queasy at the sound. I worked quickly, knitting the massive bone together and healing the internal damage, spreading the effect across

hundreds of stone of cut muscles and damaged blood vessels.

I drained my staff completely before I was done, then spoke up. *"Alright, you can let go. The bone's knitted, though the wound's a bit beyond my ability to completely heal - only Strider has that much strength. I need to check the rest of her and make sure there weren't any more injuries from the fall,"* I said. Dragonslayer gently placed her foot down and adjusted the enormous cow-hide moccasin she wore (it had nearly come off while he pulled on her ankle). I crawled up her abdomen and paused, listening at various spots to her internal noises and examining her skin carefully for any signs of injury.

It was about the time I knelt between her massive breasts, each the size of a small haystack, pressing my ear to her sternum so as to listen to the slow beat of her heart, that it dawned on me how this must look to Darian. Here he was, probably not having lain with a woman for the better part of a year, and now before him lies a woman the size of an oilphant, nude and breathing quietly as she lies in the snow. Granted, she was a giant, and by human standards she was *very* plain, but her nude body was still at least *interesting* by human standards, and Darian hadn't had *any* woman in quite a while. I kicked myself mentally for not simply having Darian remain inside, and proceeded to Felicity's head. I couldn't see any damage there, and I guessed she was simply unconscious from pain and shock - giant physiology works like that. When they're mortally wounded, they tend to just lay down, fall asleep and quietly die. I cast a simple cantrip of awakening, and her enormous eyes fluttered. *"Where am I?"* she called.

"You're alright, Felicity. You fell and broke your leg, and Dragonslayer brought you here so I could heal you. Don't move right now, just lie still. Your leg's mostly healed, and the bone's knitted. You'll need to stay off your feet for another week or two to completely heal. You also need to eat a soup made with greens, some finely-ground bone-meal and cooked, sliced beef for a couple weeks while your bone and the damaged muscles finish healing. Can you do that for me?" I asked, stepping across her breast and hopping down onto her arm, then to the ground.

"Alright," she replied, sitting up slowly now that I was off of her. *"Where's my dress? I can't sit here before a man and three Little-People naked!"* she asked, blushing. Dragonslayer handed her the enormous cowhide garment, and I cut off his fumbling explanation in mid-stammer.

"We had to take it off, Felicity. I'm too tiny to climb around underneath it and examine you - it's so heavy it squashes me. You remember how delicate I am," I said, fibbing only slightly - I wasn't *that* delicate, but I certainly couldn't crawl around under her enormous and heavy dress and do anything useful. Besides, a simple explanation was best for her giantess' brain to work with.

Felicity smiled after she'd slipped her dress back on over her head, and carefully worked it over her buttocks to cover herself. *"Thank you. I thought I was dead. I felt the Deep Pain, I knew my life was over, so I laid myself down for the Last Sleep. You saved me. I owe you my life,"* she said, bowing her head to me.

"No, actually, Dragonslayer saved you by bringing you to me," I replied, then was struck with sudden inspiration. I raised my hand and crooked a finger to draw her head close to me, then stood on my tiptoes and whispered into her enormous ear as her cascading black hair hid us. *"He loves you quite dearly, and didn't want to see you die. He found you in the field this morning, and picked you up and carried you all the way here by noon, then he helped me pull your leg straight so I could heal you. If you want my advice, woman-to-giantess, I think you should marry him. Snap that handsome devil up before some other giantess does. Hell, if I was a giantess, I'd go after him myself,"* I hissed into her ear. It was an adept lie, as I'd never go after Dragonslayer even if I was a giantess, but I figured that their relationship looked like it needed a little push. Who better to provide a little push than one of the 'little-people'?

Felicity cupped her enormous hand to her mouth, almost concealing my entire body. *"Do you really think so? I mean, I love him very much, but I've heard that good warriors make bad husbands,"* she whispered, quoting an old giantish saying.

"Yes, but that's only true when the giantess tries to get him to stop being a warrior and tries to turn him into a farmer or herder. You have to let him be himself, and love him for who and what he is," I replied, basically encapsulating my own experience with Dyarzi as briefly and simply as possible.

Felicity sat back up again, thinking. I turned to Dragonslayer, and spoke. *"Dragonslayer, you can carry her back now whenever she's ready to leave. Make sure she gets plenty of the soup I described, and help her stay off her feet for the next couple of weeks so she'll have the time she needs to finish healing. Can you do that for me?"*

"Of course, Eddas Ayar. I owe you a debt far greater than I could ever repay. Whatever you need, no matter what it may be, simply ask. Are you ready to go, Felicity?" he asked.

"Yes, actually. I wanted to talk to you on the way back, too," she replied. Dragonslayer gently scooped her up in his arms, standing carefully. We then bid the two giants farewell and re-entered the tower. By the time we'd sat down to our lunch again, Felicity and Dragonslayer had long since gone over the hill and down the king's road, heading homeward. A few minutes later, an enormous bellow was heard in the distance.

"What's that? Oh, no! You don't suppose that now *Dragonslayer's* slipped and fallen, do you?" Arella asked.

"No, that was a shout of joy. Felicity's just asked Dragonslayer to marry her," I replied, and explained what I'd told her.

"Good for him. He seems a brave and noble warrior, and he deserves a beauty like her," Darian commented, looking off into the distance. Arella raised an eyebrow, but didn't comment. I could tell by Darian's expression he was thinking about how Felicity had looked nude, and wondering what coupling with a giantess might be like (since they were the only females around these parts other than Arella and I, and neither of us was even slightly interested in him). I decided not to tell him that it wouldn't work - I once knew a mage who was friends with a giantess, and in a moment of curiosity, they tried it. My friend said that unfortunately, neither he nor she could actually feel much of anything, she being so huge in comparison to him, and they both ended up laughing at how silly the experiment was. No, I figured telling Darian that would only compound his frustration.

Over the next week I searched through my grimoire carefully and Arella tried to use her fortunetelling spells to determine a course of action, but it was all to no avail. There simply wasn't a solution readily at hand. The snowdrifts were piled deep around the tower by the end of the year, and Arella, Swift-wing and I had noticed that Darian's temper had grown quite short. Finally, I went out onto the parapet early one morning, my breath frosting in the chill air. I looked to the dawning sun, and spoke. "Alright, Yorindar. I can help him with everything else, but I can't sleep with him. I may have the body of a woman, but my soul's still that of a normal man. This is going to interfere with his studies eventually - hell, it already is. Unlike his brother, who learned much of what I'm teaching Darian before he even really reached puberty, Darian's a man. He needs some kind of sexual outlet, even if it's only temporary. I can't lie with him, and neither can Arella - certainly *Swift-wing* can't, either. We need a solution, and only you can provide it. I leave it in your hands - I've run out of solutions," I said, then went back in to wait. I knew I wouldn't have to wait long. Darian was apparently of *critical* importance somehow, and Morgar had responded *instantly* every time I mentioned training him. Yorindar should probably respond equally as quickly if Darian really was *that* important.

"Raven, someone's walking down the road towards us," Swift-wing called, glancing up from his perch

near the window.

"Naturally. Let's go meet them, you two," I replied, drawing my cloak around me with a gloved hand.

Chapter Twenty-Six

"Love - the one universal gift. Every living thing experiences love, from the lowliest ant to the most ancient dragon. Even goblins fall in love - but don't say that to their face, they find it insulting."

- Elven proverb

The figure that came down the road was quite tall, perhaps five and a third cubits, and wore a long, hooded cloak made of cowhide that they held tightly against themselves. I could see they had fur boots that were little more than circles of fur strapped around the foot by leather wrappings - the simplest and crudest of footwear. Dressed as they were and as tall as they were, I'd have guessed our visitor was a young giant, perhaps a toddler. Their gait and body shape suggested otherwise, however - toddler giants, like toddler humans and elves and dwarves, are very broadly built and walk unsteadily. Toddler giants also walk with a considered, deliberate gait to avoid a fall. No, this creature walked with the steady gait of an adult. As they drew closer, I could also see they shivered slightly in the cold, as did all of us (except for me, as my ring of adaptation protected me from it). No, this was no giant. Giants would ignore this weather, as their hides were too thick to be affected by it.

Our visitor walked up to us and stopped, looking down on us. A female, by the look of it, with pale blue eyes and blonde hair - a virtually unknown combination among giants. Her face was fair to behold, though careworn and tired. *"Are you the mage Eddas Ayar?"* she asked Darian in the guttural tongue of the giants, her voice a clear alto tone. Darian turned to me, not understanding her words, and I spoke.

"I am Eddas Ayar, risen from the void and inhabiting the body of this half-elf for the nonce. My friends here know me as Raven. What can I do for you?"

"Word has it among the giants that you are a healer as well as a battle-mage. I come here to beg you to heal me, Eddas Ayar. I will do anything you ask, even be your slave for the rest of my days, if you will only heal me."

"What seems to be the matter?"

"Can you not see? I'm tiny! I'm twenty-four years old, and almost as small as you!" she yelled.

I suddenly understood. I was looking at a giantess who by her people's standards was a midget, being as she was only as large as a toddler. Of course, she loomed over Darian even as he loomed over me.

"Come inside with us and I'll examine you. I can't promise anything, but I'll see what I can do," I said, then turned to Darian. "Darian, she's come here for healing. I need you to light the fire in your room and wait there until we call, alright?"

"What's the matter with her?" Darian asked.

"I'll explain later. Don't worry, I'll have Swift-wing come down and get you in a while."

A few minutes later, Arella, Swift-wing and I were back upstairs in my room at the top of the tower, and I was carefully examining our visitor. I had her strip out of the cow-hide dress she wore and carefully examined her limbs and spine, as well as carefully examining her head. There was little doubt of it - she had reached her full growth. *"When did you stop growing?"* I asked.

"At about age two. I grew a bit more between the ages of thirteen and eighteen, but only a little. My village is by the ruins of Tholonir city, and my mother was once frightened by a ghost when she was carrying me. The people in my village say that is why I am so tiny, but my het-man says it is something else again, something he does not understand and cannot cure. My mother birthed me late in life, and he says that may be the problem. Both my mother and father are dead, now. They once named me Faith, because they had faith that if they worked hard and prayed devoutly, the gods of the giants would grant them a child. The people of my village do not call me that. They call me Thumbelina, as I am so small. Can you help me, please? I so want to be normal, and live a normal life. No giant will even consider me as his mate, as I am barely bigger than a two-year old and very ugly. I am always being teased by the younger children, who quickly tower over me by the time they are four. Please, Eddas Ayar. Please help me. I cannot live like this. I want to live a normal life. I want to be a normal giantess, settle down and have babies. Please help me."

I looked her over. *"Perhaps by giantish standard you are ugly, but by the standards of the smaller races, you are quite beautiful. Your face is careworn and tired, you could use a bath, a hot meal*

and some sleep, but you are still quite attractive by the standards of the Little-People. Please relax for a moment while I continue my examination," I replied, and reached out with my will to examine her *Mana-flow*. It looked like that of a mundane, but there was an odd kink that I spent several minutes examining before I finally understood it. *"Faith, tell me something; did your mother ever enter one of the Dead Zones?"*

"My mother told me once that when she was younger, her village was by the dead zone near Nyalot Mountain. She and three other children were playing nearby it when a ghost frightened them, and she ran into the zone to hide behind some rocks. She stayed there only a moment before a Mana-storm blew up, the first one in centuries in that zone. She managed to escape unharmed, though."

I Nodded in understanding. *"Not quite unharmed. Her germ plasm was altered slightly by the storm, and that is why it was so difficult for her to conceive. It is also why you are so small. I'm afraid there is nothing I can do to heal you - this is as big as your body will ever naturally grow, and magic cannot heal when there's nothing wrong. Yes, you're small, and share more in common with the Little-People than you do the giants. Even so, there's nothing wrong with your body - you are perfectly healthy."*

Faith dropped to her knees and burst into tears, and I took a moment to explain to Arella what had happened. "Raven, that's *terrible!* Isn't there *anything* you can do?"

"Not really. There's spells that make one larger or smaller, but they're only temporary, and she's a mundane anyway. I'm sorry, Arella, but for better or worse, she's a midget. Certainly Faith is very large compared to us, but to her people, she'll always be known as Thumbelina."

Faith suddenly rose to her feet, ran to the door to the parapet and yanked it open. I reached out with my will, using my ring of telekinesis just as she stepped to the parapet and leaped, holding her in the air and bringing her back inside. "Arella, close the door, please," I said dryly.

As Arella complied, I turned to Faith, who I was still holding aloft. Faith kicked and screamed helplessly. *"Let me go! I want to die!"* she wailed.

"No. You are young, healthy, and should live seventy to eighty years or more, as most giants and Little-People do. I will not let you destroy yourself because you cannot be happy among your own people. Come and live with us, Faith. You giants call us the Little-People, and hold us in respect due to our wisdom and sharper wit. As possibly the oldest Little-Person you will ever meet, I say to you this; join us, and live with us. The gods had a reason for you being born the way you are. If you will stay with us, live with us and become one of us, someday I may tell you what that reason is," I said, trying to speak to Faith the way I remembered being spoken to by dragons and elves. They always spoke from the viewpoint of great age, and couched their words in numinous phrases that implied I *might* understand were I only as old as they. Well, now I *was* as old as they. In fact, I was older than the oldest elf, and older than some dragons. I decided to play on that, and try to get Faith to accept herself as she was. Of course, before I could tell her the real reason she had been born tiny, I'd have to discover it myself. I knew Yorindar intended her for Darian, but beyond that, I knew nothing. I knew it couldn't be so simple as a one-night fling, there had to be more to it than that.

"How could you accept me? I'm ugly and tiny!" Faith wailed.

"No. To us, you're large and beautiful. I am over sixteen centuries old, and I have seen many women in my life. I believe I am a good judge of beauty, and I find you beautiful. I'm going to put you down, now. Please don't try to kill yourself again," I said, lowering Faith to the ground. She collapsed on the floor and simply lay there, sobbing.

"Arella, let's help Faith back into her dress. Swift-wing, fly down the stairs and tell Darian he can come up now," I said, and as Swift-wing flapped down the stairs, Arella and I struggled to calm Faith down and get her to dress again. By the time Faith was dressed, Darian came into the room. He saw Faith sobbing uncontrollably, and I could see he was moved.

"Raven, what's wrong? Why is she crying?" he asked.

"Darian, this is Faith. Her people call her Thumbelina," I replied, and Darian interrupted with a laugh.

"Thumbelina? Why would anyone call a woman as huge as her something like that? Why, she must be over two heads taller than I am!" he asked, chuckling.

"Because she's a giantess, Darian. Unfortunately, she's also a midget. This is as big as she will ever get. She came to me in the hope that I might be able to help her, but I can't. Magic can't cure when there's nothing wrong with you. She's suicidal, Darian. She desperately wants to be normal and to be accepted, and that simply can never be among her people. She's miserable because she thinks she's tiny and ugly - and by giantish standards, she is. As such, she wants to die."

"She's not ugly, she's beautiful!" Darian objected.

"Not to her eyes or the eyes of any other giant. To them, she's a little runt who's ugly as a pig. We're all ugly to them, Darian, though we're so small we end up being thought of as cute, like a piglet. Everyone thinks a piglet is cute, but nobody wants to have a face like one. Faith wants to kill herself, Darian. She's miserable, and she can't live like this. Arella and I can't help her - only you can."

Darian blinked in surprise. "Me? How?"

"I need you to be her friend, Darian. I need you to teach her your language, and to make her feel accepted. She can't live with the giants anymore, Darian. She's a miserable outcast in their society. She needs to live with us, and learn to be happy among us 'Little People'. She needs to feel good about living with us and being our friend, and only you can do that. I now leave it up to you, Darian; Will you help her, or do I simply let her throw herself off the parapet like she tried to do a few minutes ago?"

"She really tried to kill herself?" Darian asked, and Arella and I nodded. "Well, alright. I'll do as you ask, but I don't know how successful I'll be. I can't see as we have much in common, and I've never tried to teach anyone anything before, much less a language."

"You'll do fine, Darian. We've got the rest of winter to work on it," I said, smiling.

Faith didn't want to do much of anything at first except mope, but eventually I got her to understand that Darian would be teaching her his language so that she could communicate with someone other than me. I could tell that Darian was *very* interested in her, but he controlled himself well. For her part, Faith was only mildly interested in him, or anything else for that matter. She apparently had put a lot of hope into a cure from me, and her despair was evident. All I could do was trust that Yorindar knew what he was doing, and simply let nature take its course.

By early spring, the last of the snows were just beginning to melt and the first of the buds were beginning to appear above the ground. One morning, Faith came upstairs to my room shortly after Arella and I had finished breakfast. I was actually quite pleased that day, as I'd discovered that my new body had grown strong enough to easily conjure food and drink with only a minor strain. As Faith came to the top of the stairs, I smiled again. Faith had improved quite a bit in the last few months, and was looking much happier. "What is it, Faith?" I asked.

"I learn much Little-People-talk from Darian. I now want talk to you. Want talk 'woman-to-woman,'" she replied, smiling wryly.

"Well, Arella's a bit more qualified at that than I am, but I'll do my best. What did you want to ask about?"

"I like Darian very muchly. He nice Little-People. You think Darian like me muchly too?" she asked, sitting in the chair beside Arella and I.

"I think so. Why do you ask?"

"I twenty-four. I want mate before I am 'old maid'. Darian make good mate. He strong for little-people, he smart, he very nice," she replied.

"Okay, but why do you need to talk to Arella and I?"

"Not know if Little-People mate like that. You and Arella happy together, like mate. Maybe Little-People all like that. Maybe Darian not like me for mate. I little giantess, him Little-Man. Maybe him want Little-Man for mate, not little giantess."

Arella burst out giggling while Swift-wing cackled, and I had to explain to Faith that my soul was that of a man trapped in a woman's body. I was fortunate that Arella was a sapphite, as I found myself only attracted to women, but Darian was a normal man. Sapphites and sodomites were virtually unknown among the giants, so it was understandable that Faith should be confused. The Giants had no cultural taboos against them, however, they simply thought sapphism and sodomism was strange - unlike Darian's culture (and, to a lesser extent, my own), where sapphites and sodomites were often shunned as outcasts.

"So Darian might want make me his mate? That wonderful! I so want be giant-wife!" Faith said, beaming with joy.

Arella and I figured that would be the end of that, but that afternoon, Darian came to talk to me. I was working with Arella on polishing her battle spells, having her cast them at small stones I tossed at random into the air off of the parapet (which also gave her the opportunity to practice limiting the area her spells affected to just hit the stones and nothing else), when Darian came out to speak to us. "Um, Raven, can I talk to you for a minute?" he asked.

"Certainly, Darian. What's on your mind?"

"Well, um, it's kind of personal. I need to talk to you 'man-to-man.'" he replied, and Arella burst out giggling.

"I'll be inside. Call me when you 'boys' are done chatting," she giggled, and she and a cackling Swift-wing left the parapet.

"Okay, Darian, go ahead," I said, smiling.

"Well, I find I'm really falling for Faith. She's very beautiful, and I love her laugh and her smile, and I haven't been with a woman in a long, long time, but I'm really worried."

"What's the problem?"

"Well, she's a giantess, for one thing. I don't know exactly how she'd *take* an invitation to have a casual relationship. In fact, I don't even know if I *want* a casual relationship. Sometimes I feel that I just want to lie with her once and relieve the pressure, but other times I feel like I want to make her my wife. I just don't know what I really feel, and I sure as hell don't know what I should really do. You're a man - well, you're a man on the *inside*, anyway. You're also a hell of a lot older than I am, and my best friend. What should I do?"

"Well, in answer to your first question, I think she might take the idea of a casual relationship poorly. She's wanted to marry and be a true giant-wife for a long time, and the idea that you would only want her for a brief coupling might be *very* disappointing. Also, giants mate for life. If you marry her, it's forever. I think she'd be thrilled if you asked her to marry you, and I think you'd find she'd make a fine wife. Of course, she's also *much* smarter than most other giants I've met, at least your equal mentally if not your superior - after all, she speaks your language fairly well, and it's only been a couple months of you teaching her. The gods may have shorted her in height, but they made up for it with her brains. The decision you have to make is 'can I live with this woman for the rest of my life, forsaking all others?' If you can't, then don't."

Darian nodded, clapped my shoulder in thanks, then left the parapet. Arella came back out and smiled at me. "So, what happened?" she asked.

"Yes, yes! Tell us! Are they going to mate?" Swift-wing cackled.

"Well, as far as I can tell, they both feel the same way about each other - they both feel physical desire, and they both also want to marry. As far as what they'll do, I don't really know. We'll have to wait and see. Now; have you been studying that flight spell I taught you?" I asked, looking to Arella.

"Yes, and I'm *really* ready to try it out!" Arella yelped excitedly.

"Alright. Now remember; follow Swift-wing's advice closely. He has more experience at flying than I have, and he *definitely* has more experience at flying than you have. Also, don't fly more than a hundred paces away from the tower for now. I'll be watching here on the parapet so I can catch you with my ring

of telekinesis if there's any problems, but my range is limited. Swift-wing will also be watching you and he can try to catch you with his telekinesis spell if you fall, but his will and endurance is limited. Be careful. Swift-wing, I leave the rest up to you," I said, and bowed to our little friend.

"Thank you, Raven. Harumph!" Swift-wing squawked, fluffing out his feathers to make himself look large and important as he began his lesson. "There's four important rules about flying, mistress. First, *always* know where the ground is at *all* times. Forgetting where the ground is usually leads to a sudden, painful stop. Second, *always* watch where you're going. Remember; trees and buildings *always* have the right-of-way. Third, *always* land when you're tired. Getting a cramp in mid-air also usually leads to sudden, painful stops. Last, trees *aren't* as soft and cushioning as they look, they have sharp branches that can poke out your eyes. Always land slowly and gently in a tree, not quickly and suddenly. Mistress, cast your spell, please," Swift-wing called. When Arella had done so, he spoke again. "Alright, now flex your knees and leap into the air!" he cried, flying off her shoulder. Arella did so, and squealed with joy to discover she was flying.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"Marriage - The public admission by a man that he needs a keeper."

- Vilandian proverb

Little seemed to happen between Faith and Darian, though they did seem to spend much more time with each other in the afternoons and early evenings. I was beginning to wonder if their relationship needed a little push when two weeks later, Darian and Faith came into my room to speak with Arella and I. "We've decided to get married," Darian announced with a grin.

I stood and exchanged a handshake of congratulations with Darian as Arella and Faith hugged each other. "Now must make ready. Must have het-man come. Must have wedding dress. Must have many things. Arella, Raven help? No giantess friends, no giantess family to help. Must have Little-Women help, or no can marry."

Arella and I talked to Faith for awhile, and discovered that she needed a dress made of either white cow-hide or sheepskin, and moccasins to match. Unfortunately, I didn't *have* any cattle or sheep, much less white ones (I'd been conjuring food and drink for everyone every day to build my strength and endurance). She also needed a dowry, and didn't have one. Finally, Darian needed to build a home that was acceptable to the het-man. Even when all that was done, the het-man may impose tests on either or both of them to prove that they really *did* want to marry, and weren't just in lust with each other.

The word that Faith was living with us had gotten around through the giants that patrolled this area and came to visit with us, so the first problem I handled fairly easily - I simply asked the next giant that came by to check up on us if he could ask Felicity to visit. When she arrived the next day, I explained the

situation to her. Felicity was very happy to help, given everything I'd done for her, and happily provided four tanned and softened sheep-hides for us to use (she commented that it usually took over a hundred for a young giantess). Arella was better at needlework than I was by far, so she handled the task of sewing together the dress and moccasins for Faith, taking the place of her mother or sister.

The second problem was a little more difficult - Faith had to have a dowry, and it could *only* come from her parents. Unfortunately, they were dead. I thought about this one long and hard, when suddenly the answer struck me. I pulled Faith aside and told her my answer, and she smiled. It might not work, but it had the best chance of working that I could see. We'd have to wait for the het-man to arrive to find out.

The third problem was insoluble, unfortunately. Darian had absolutely no idea what a 'proper' giant house should look like until I told him - a gigantic dome made of thin tree-trunks, carefully carved so they fit together end to end and made a frame that was a series of arches about fifty cubits wide and thirty cubits high, then connected together to form a barrel-like structure a hundred cubits long. Once assembled, the frame is then covered with an enormous sheet of cowhide with a large flap on the front as a 'door' that's stiffened with a wooden frame and held closed with a leather strap. Holes in the top of the house let in light and let out the smoke from cooking fires. The giants of Ilbarsi mountain built enormous homes of stone that resemble the homes humans build (though on a *much* larger scale), but we didn't have the tools to make one of their homes, anyway. Besides, everyone knew Faith wasn't an Ilbarsi giant, and it wouldn't be appropriate for Darian to build a home like that for her. Unlike the other giant-tribes, the Ilbarsi giants were smiths. They dealt with dwarves for the various metals all giants needed, working these metals into tools, weapons and other useful items and trading their products for the crops, hides and wood other giants produced. Some of these trade-goods were then traded to the dwarves for more metal, repeating the cycle. These were the only two types of homes the giants ever built, and neither was within Darian's capabilities or our collected resources. Darian finally decided to build a log cabin, as we had *plenty* of logs in the barn the giants had built. He carefully selected a sight near my tower that was relatively flat, then got to work.

I watched helplessly as Darian struggled to manhandle the first log into position so he could shape it with the axe. Normally, you used a horse to drag the logs, but we didn't have a horse anymore. He started early in the morning, and by noon he had it where he wanted it and then sat down on it to rest. I wanted to help him, as I could lift the logs with my ring of telekinesis (though the logs Darian wanted would have easily had me sweating in a few minutes), but that wasn't allowed. Darian had to build the house himself.

Faith came out during the process to show the finished costume Arella had made to me. It was an excellent job, and she looked quite the proper little giantess. She looked up and saw Darian sweating and panting as he struggled to muscle the log around. "What he do?" she asked.

"He's trying to build a log cabin for you two. Unfortunately, at this rate it's going to take him the better part of a year," I replied with a sigh.

"I not want wait that long," she said, then walked back into the tower. A few minutes later, she came out dressed in her original clothing, walked over to the wood-barn, picked up a log, balanced it on her shoulder and walked over to Darian. "Where you want this?" she asked, easily holding the log up in one arm.

Darian goggled as he replied. "Over there, along that flat line I made for the base," he replied, pointing. Faith placed the log where Darian had indicated, then went over to get another. Darian grinned and picked up his axe to begin shaping the ends of the logs.

Arella and Swift-wing came out as they were working, and they gaped at Faith's strength. "She's *incredibly* strong!" Arella remarked, and Swift-wing nodded on her shoulder.

"Well, she may be tiny, but she's still a giant. I'd say she's got about half the strength of a full-grown giantess. That makes her about as strong as an ogre, and only three-quarters as tall. She's *much* more powerful than even I was in my old body - I had about the strength of three full-grown men, and my will focused through my ring of telekinesis gives me about that level of power, but this simply doesn't compare to her," I replied.

"I'd *love* to be that strong, and never have to need help moving something heavy," Arella commented.

"Well, you're getting there. We mages are lucky - the power of *Mana* flowing through us allows us to be incredibly strong without appearing that way. For example, I've managed through months of constant spellcasting each and every day, especially summoning meals for us three times a day, to build my strength up to about that of Darian, perhaps half again as strong as a normal man. Of course, I had a long way to go, too - this body was quite weak when I first got it, though it was fast and agile. You started off with the strength of a normal woman, and now you've managed to build it up to where you're almost as strong as Darian. If you use your spell of telekinesis, however, you'll find you can lift much more, as your will is significantly stronger than your body. I'd say with your spell, you'd find you have about the power of two grown men available to move heavy things. As for me, my will is about half again as strong as that. Of course, all of this is *nothing* compared to a dragon. For example, Karg's will is almost twice as strong as my own, and as a dragon who's fifty thousand years old, his body is four times as strong as that of other dragons or giants, and he's also four times their size."

"That's incredible! How could you possibly overcome something that powerful?" Arella asked.

"Simple - never meet strength with strength when you know your opponent is stronger than you. When you're facing a dragon, matching it blast-for-blast is foolish and stupid. Instead, you use spells of invisibility and flight to move away from your previous location so it can't simply blast you with a spell or its breath, then you fly around it and strike it from behind, constantly remaining behind it and attacking it without it being able to strike back. With a giant, you simply draw them onto firm, hard ground, preferably stone, throw a spell of earth-to-mud on the ground they're standing on, then drop the spell to lock its ankles in stone. You can also simply fly up out of its reach and blast it with spells until it falls. My friend that was killed by a giant only died because he tried to match strength with strength. Yes, he managed to blast it unconscious, but then it fell on him and killed him anyway. The moral of this story is that you never match strength with strength when you know your opponent is stronger."

With Faith helping him move the logs and position them, Darian managed to finish the cabin in six days. He was just finishing plastering the last of the mud in the walls when we heard the distant thumping of giants' feet approaching. Faith ran into her room in the tower to dress while the rest of us greeted our visitors. As it turned out, four giants came to visit; Dragonslayer, his giant-wife Felicity, Strider, their het-man, and a fourth male I didn't recognize. He introduced himself as Grayeye, Faith's het-man. It appeared that we had been 'adopted' by the local village, and as such Strider felt it necessary to attend, yet Grayeye was the het-man who normally would perform the ceremony, since he was from Faith's village. I could see there was some animosity between the two regarding who really would be performing the ceremony, and just hoped they could work it out between them. Unfortunately, it didn't look like it would be that simple.

"This is a good house," Strider commented, kneeling to peer inside the cabin Darian and Faith had built.

"No. It's not a proper house. It's made of logs," Grayeye replied, his arms crossed.

"It's a proper house for one of the Little-People, and that's what Faith's marrying," I interjected.

"Thumbelina is a giantess, and should live in a proper giant-home," Grayeye replied, eyeing me

closely with the pale blue orbs that gave him his name.

"Perhaps, but Darian is a Little-People, and only knows how to build the homes of Little-People. A few allowances must be made," I replied, smiling.

Grayeye thought about it for several minutes while Faith came out from the tower in her wedding dress. Finally, he spoke. *"You are right. Some allowances must be made. Even so, I will not let all our traditions fall by the wayside. Let us now examine her dress and her dowry,"* he replied, turning to Faith.

Strider simply glanced at Faith and grinned - his approval was obvious. Grayeye, on the other hand, picked her up carefully and examined every stitch closely. *"Who made this? You were never this good with needlework, Thumbelina,"* he asked.

"My friend the Mage Arella-tor made it with her hands, acting in the stead of my mother and sisters, which I do not have," she replied bravely.

"She is not a giantess. That is not proper," Grayeye replied, setting Faith down again.

"The traditions do not say the white raiment must be made by a giant-wife, only that it be made by the friends or family of the bride. I once married a giantess whose mother had died birthing her. Her father made the dress and moccasins. Do you say that his love was less than that of a sister never born or a mother dead two decades? Do you say that the marriage was wrongly done?" Strider growled.

'Damn,' I thought, *'these two might fight about this. That would definitely be bad - they might crush us wrestling around.'*

Grayeye thought about the question for a long while, then shook his massive head. *"No. The father's love cannot be less than that of a mother who is dead or a sister not born. His sewing the bridal*

garments was proper. The Little-Woman obviously cares for Thumbelina, or she would not have bothered to help her. Her compassion cannot be less than that of a dead mother or unborn sisters. That means the Little-People's work was proper. I withdraw my objection," he said, and I breathed a sigh of relief alongside Faith. Unfortunately, his next comment then made us tense again.

"Let us now see the dowry," Grayeye said, glaring down at Faith.

"Grayeye, I propose that as a dowry is something her mother gives to her that shows her value to her husband, then her mother has given two things to Faith that Darian values highly; first, her beauty," I said, and Grayeye and Strider interrupted with a chuckle.

"You find Thumbelina beautiful, Little-Man?" Grayeye chuckled, and Faith blushed deeply and hung her head.

"Yes. She much much beauty. You rude insult. Her name Faith, not Thumbelina. Me love her. If we in Little-People land, I duel you for rude insult," Darian said, surprising all of us with his grasp of giantish, then surprising us again by drawing his sword and assuming an 'on-guard' stance. I suppose it made sense that they would teach each other their languages, I just hadn't expected it. Well, I'm only fifteen or sixteen centuries old, I can't know everything.

Grayeye glared fiercely at Darian, but he didn't back off. Finally, he smiled. *"You are right. I am sorry. We have all called her Thumbelina for so long, it did not occur to me to call her by the name her parents gave her today. You are a warrior among the Little-People, I see. This is good. She deserves a strong husband who will protect her when others laugh at how tiny and weak she is. I am glad you also find her beautiful. To us, she is quite ugly, and I worried she would never find anyone who would accept her. I approve of you, Little-Man,"* he said, then turned to Strider as Darian sheathed his sword. *"Do you also approve of the Little-Man? He lives in your territory, and you know him better than I,"* Grayeye asked Strider. I realized he was trying to make up for having been insulting earlier by being polite now.

"I do approve of Darian. He is not only brave, he is also wise and sharp of wit, like all the Little-People are. If all his plans go well, he will regain the kingdom that was stolen from him. Then a girl of your village will be married to a king of the Little-People. This brings great honor to your village, and may help appease the ghosts even more. This is good from both sides of the hill," Strider replied with a smile, using an old giantish cliché.

Grayeye nodded, then suddenly turned to me. *"Wait. You said there were two parts to her dowry, two things of great value to Darian that were gifts from her mother. What is the second?"*

"Her brains. Of all the giants, she is the smartest I have ever seen. She is as smart as Darian, maybe smarter. For every cubit of height the gods shorted her, they gave her ten cubits of wisdom."

Grayeye nodded. *"That is true. She is the smartest in the village by far, and I have always thought that is the real reason the children tease her so, not her size. Is she truly as smart as one of you?"*

"At least. She learned most of Darian's language in just a couple months, and no giant in Dohbari village has yet learned more than 'hello' and 'goodbye'. Darian, meanwhile, can barely make himself understood in your tongue. She is certainly at least as smart as we are, probably smarter," I replied, and Strider nodded in agreement.

"I believe this is a good dowry, a gift of great value only her mother could have given her," Strider said firmly.

Grayeye nodded. *"I agree. It is not a proper dowry of good hides and steel knives, but it is a good dowry even so. This is acceptable,"* he said, then pointed a finger at Darian, who had sheathed his sword in the meantime. *"You, I approve of. You are brave and you obviously love her, or you would not have drawn your little needle and threatened me with it when I spoke insultingly. I was wrong, and you were right to tell me so. You also did not back down, even when I gave you the same look that makes other giants quake in fear of me to test your commitment. This is more proof of your bravery and the depth of your love. Yes, I approve of you,"* he said, then pointed his massive digit at Faith. *"You, I do not approve of. Everyone in the village knows that you have always wanted to be a full-size giantess and marry and have children. We all knew you came here for a cure, and we all know from the word that has been passed that a cure was impossible. I think you only wish to marry him because of your strong desire to be mated and have children. In a year or two, you will be fighting. Marriage cannot be based on lust. It must be based on friendship, respect and mutual attraction if it is to last. You must be tested,"* Grayeye said, and Strider, Dragonslayer and Felicity nodded in agreement.

I sighed. This was common for giantish weddings - the het-man often tested either or both the bride or groom (usually both). Faith spoke up bravely, though. "*Test me, Grayeye. I am not afraid,*" she called.

Grayeye sat down carefully to consider the test, and the other giants joined him. "Come, Darian, let's get some chairs. This is going to take a while," I said.

Darian and I emerged a few minutes later with four chairs, and Arella, Darian, Faith and I took seats to wait. After a while, Darian spoke. "Why is it taking so long?" he asked idly.

"Grayeye must think carefully. I small and weak. Most women's tests kill me easy," Faith replied calmly.

At Darian's shocked expression, I nodded. "It's true, Darian. Most of the tests they apply to a giantess to test her love for her mate will simply kill Faith outright. Like those for the men, they're all painful, most are extremely humiliating because they're performed in public, and they can be stopped at any time simply by the giantess deciding that she wants to stop. If all that's attracting her is lust, then she'll usually either give up immediately, or simply change her mind about being married. Grayeye has to think very carefully about which test he'll apply, since the point is to make sure she's in love and not merely in lust. If he's not careful, the test will simply kill her."

"Well, what kind of tests do they apply?"

"The most common test for both men and women is usually a simple beating. They get a long strap of leather about a hand wide and about ten cubits long, have the giant or giantess strip and kneel in the center of the village with their forehead on the ground, then simply have every member of the tribe whip them one at a time. Each giant and giantess delivers three strokes, one for each of the three virtues of the giant's religion; patience, humility and bravery. Their hide is so tough it's merely painful and extremely humiliating, only rarely does it actually draw blood. Of course, if it *does* draw blood and the giant or giantess still endures it, it's considered to be a show of how deep their love and commitment is. Unfortunately, that test would probably kill her in a minute or so," I said. Darian looked deeply shocked, Arella blanched, and Swift-wing shuddered. Faith, of course, simply nodded as I continued my explanation.

"Another one is where the woman agrees to be branded with the man's name on her buttocks - many females actually request this test, as it shows the depth of their lifetime commitment to their man. Making the brand takes about a week, and the female can change her mind at any time prior to the point where the brand is applied. Once the brand is made, they're made to kneel naked in the center of the village with their forehead on the ground, and the het-man slowly heats up the brand to give them plenty of time to be stared at by the entire village, be horribly embarrassed and humiliated and back out of the whole thing at the last minute. If she doesn't tell the het-man to stop, he has four giants hold her down, gives her one last chance to change her mind, then brands her - usually on the right buttock. Unfortunately, that test would also kill Faith, as each letter of the brand is about two hands high and a hand wide. It's a small scar for a giantess, but a fatal burn for someone Faith's size. Hold on a moment," I said, and spoke up to the giants. *"Felicity, which test did you take?"* I asked in giantish.

"Strider wanted the test of suspension, but I asked for the brand, and he agreed. Why, are you asking to see it?" she asked, blushing.

"No, I was just curious. I'm sure it must be quite beautiful," I replied, smiling.

Dragonslayer nodded. *"It is. The Ilbari mountain smiths did an excellent job, and the letters are very elegant. She's quite proud of it, and greatly enjoys showing it off to me in the privacy of our home, the little vixen!"* he said with a smile, and Felicity playfully swatted him on the shoulder (the same blow would have squashed me flat, but Dragonslayer merely grinned and blushed). *"I took the test of the whip, myself. Let me tell you, Eddas Ayar, that was the hardest thing I've ever done. Stripping naked and kneeling before all the members of my tribe and having them all whip me? I thought my pride would never recover, but it was worth it to prove my love for Felicity,"* he said, and he and Felicity exchanged a kiss.

"Damn. I was hoping Felicity's test might have been one Faith could survive, but it wasn't," I said, sighing.

"Well, what was that test of suspension she mentioned? That didn't sound too bad," Darian asked.

"Well, they strip the giantess naked, tie woven leather ropes to her ankles and wrists, then four giants grab one rope each, hoist her into the air and hold her there until they get tired, which usually takes about an hour. Again, the whole village is assembled as witnesses. For a giantess, it's very painful and extremely humiliating, thus they consider it a perfect test. Unfortunately, Felicity would probably be ripped apart by

that. The test of the stone is out, too - she'd just get squashed."

Darian stood, his face showing shock. "You mean she's going to have to suffer pain, possibly even agony, as well as have to be horribly humiliated, all just to marry *me*?!"

"Yes. Such is their ways," I replied calmly.

"That's it, then. I won't stand for it. The wedding's off. I won't see her suffer and maybe even die. No," Darian said, and turned to walk away.

Faith leaped to her feet and grabbed Darian's arm. "Please, Darian! Please! I want marry you! Please! Pain nothing! Shame nothing! I take anything for have you! Please!" she begged, weeping.

"*What is happening?*" Grayeye asked, looking up.

"*Darian doesn't want to see Faith suffer. He doesn't understand your ways as I do. He loves her deeply, and cannot stand to see her in pain,*" I explained.

Darian grabbed Faith's arms while I was speaking. "No, Faith! I won't do it! I won't marry you if it means you'll have to suffer! They may kill you trying to test your love, and I simply can't live with that!"

Faith dropped to her knees, bent over and wrapped her arms around Darian's legs. "Please! I want this! I want you! This our way, way of giant-folk! Pain nothing! Shame nothing! You everything! Please not go! Please be my mate! Please!" she wailed.

"Raven, what do I do?" Darian called to me helplessly.

I looked to Grayeye's and Strider's faces, and suddenly had an inspiration. I turned back to Darian and spoke calmly and clearly. "Do nothing, Darian. You've already proven yourself as far as they're concerned. Just stand there, cross your arms and do nothing," I replied, then translated Darian's question and my response to Grayeye. He nodded silently, watching.

Faith was too upset to listen to me, and continued begging Darian as I translated for Grayeye. Darian stood there, unmoved. Finally she got up, ran over to Grayeye and threw herself to the ground before him. *"Please, Grayeye! I beg of you to test me! You can make a small brand that will not kill me, and I will gladly take it! If that is too much trouble, you could make a small whip for me, a tiny one for tiny Thumbelina! Please, Grayeye! You could find a small boulder for the test of the stone, or perhaps use very young children for the test of suspension! Please, please, Grayeye! I love him! I want to prove that love so you may marry us! I beg you! Please don't say no!"* she wailed, sobbing uncontrollably.

Grayeye reached down and gently picked the tiny giantess up, delicately brushing the dirt off her wedding dress and stroking her blonde hair. *"Shhh, Faith. It's alright. Don't cry. You don't need to be tested. I am satisfied your love is true. I also believe you have earned a new name this day. Your parents called you Faith, for through faith and hope they finally had you. Your tribesmen all called you Thumbelina because you were so small. We shouldn't have, but we did. Even I did it, and I'm sorry. You are no longer Faith or Thumbelina. Henceforth, you shall be known as Joy, for I truly believe that you will be joyful and happy with Darian and the Little-People for all the rest of your days. I only wish we giants could have given you what the wise Little-People have. I, your het-man, have spoken."*

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" Joy wept, weeping tears of joy rather than tears of misery as she reached out and hugged the fingers of Grayeye's free hand, the one he was stroking her hair with. Grayeye gave her a moment to compose herself, then gently placed her back on the ground next to Darian again.

"Join hands," he called, and Joy happily took Darian's callused hand in her enormous one. Grayeye extended a finger to lift up their hands, then spoke. *"Each of you has proven their love for the other. I now say to both of you this: Remember the three virtues of our faith; Patience, Humility and Bravery. Remember to treat each other in honor and friendship all the rest of your days. Remember to aid and protect each other from the hardships that may lie ahead, and remember to share in the joys that may also lie ahead. Remember to hold each other deep within your hearts and forsake all others, as you would have your partner and mate do for you. So long as you remember and follow these commands, may you have the eternal blessing of the gods of both the giants and the Little-People. Should you forget or fail to follow these commands, may you have their eternal curse. I have spoken,"* Grayeye said, then sat up again and grinned broadly.

There were several moments where we all exchanged grins and congratulations with the newlyweds. Arella and I hugged Joy, and I spent a few moments clapping shoulders with Darian. Dragonslayer, Grayeye and Strider all patted Darian's shoulder with an enormous finger, and Felicity stroked Joy's hair gently with her gigantic digit. After a while, Strider turned to Grayeye and spoke. *"You added the gods of the Little-People to the blessing,"* he commented.

"What, you say the marriage was wrongly done?" Grayeye retorted.

"No. I say it was well done, better even than I would have done it. She marries a Little-Person. Their gods should have been included, as excluding them may have made them angry. I did not think of that, even though I am ten years your senior. You did. The marriage was very well done, my friend," Strider replied, and they exchanged powerful grips and friendly shoulder-blows for a moment as they grinned at each other.

Finally, Darian turned to me. "Well, in Larinia, we'd have a reception at this point. What do giants do?" he asked.

"Well, usually they have an enormous feast at the groom's expense. Unfortunately, we can't do that. They already know that we don't have enough food and drink for four full-size giants, much less an entire village of them, and they're well aware that we couldn't possibly entertain that many without major damage to my lands, so they're just going to go home. If you were a giant, this would be a major embarrassment for you, but since you're one of the 'Little-People', as they call us, it's not. They understand that some allowances must be made. As for you two, I expect you to go into that cabin you've built and enjoy yourselves for a day or two, then we'll resume your studies. If you need anything, just ask. I took the time to conjure enough food and drink for two days for you in there, so you should be alright," I replied, and we spent a few minutes bidding farewell to the departing giants before Darian spoke again.

"Raven, I appreciate everything you've done more than I can possibly say," Darian said, clapping me on the shoulder.

"I very happy! Thank you, thank you, Raven!" Joy said, leaning down to kiss me on the cheek.

"Think nothing of it. Now go on inside your little house, you two, and have fun," I replied with a grin, and Arella and I returned to the tower as Darian and Joy went to their cabin, grinning from ear to ear. I'd noticed during the construction that the only pieces of furniture Darian had put into the cabin was his bed and a table for the food, so I figured they already had the next two day's activities scheduled.

I grinned as Arella and I re-entered my room and took off our cloaks. "What are you thinking about?" Arella asked.

"Joy. I mean, She's blonde, blue-eyed, beautiful, and Darian's about four cubits tall, but he only comes up to about her breasts!" I replied, chuckling.

"What difference does that make?" Arella asked as Swift-wing flapped over to his perch and began to nibble at some seed in the cup attached to the side.

"Arella, if you were a man, you wouldn't ask that question!" I replied, laughing.

"I see. It's a 'man'-thing," Arella replied, giggling.

"Yes. Well, shall we get back to your studies?"

"Not right now. I really want to lie with you and hold you for awhile. Is that alright?" she asked, reaching over to brush my pointed ears as she smiled.

"Certainly. We're in no rush. You know enough so that you'd be considered nearly ready to assist in a battle, and by the time Darian's training is finished, I'm sure your days as an apprentice will be numbered," I replied, slipping off my robe.

Arella looked me over, gazing at the gloves, boots and chainmail garment I wore beneath my robe. She shivered for a moment. "Ooh! I still find the thought that you're nearly *naked* under that robe *deliciously* naughty!" she giggled.

I chuckled and helped her out of the layers of clothes she wore, and finally we cuddled beneath the blankets. A little while later, she lay on her side, stroking my ears. "Raven, I have something I really need to say."

"What?"

"Well, I know that this body you have now is that of a half-elf woman, and you'll live for centuries. Someday, I'll just be a pleasant memory for you. Even after this body dies, you can rise again, and next time you'll probably be a man when you do. You'll be known as Eddas Ayar again, not Raven. As for me, I'll move on to the afterlife. Maybe I'll become a master and you'll teach me the Spell of Hidden Life, and perhaps someday I'll live again and meet you again. Even so, our relationship will never be then what it is now. You love someone else, and you're going to spend the rest of this life trying to bring her back to you. That's true love, Raven, and I respect that. I know that you only think of me as a very dear friend, and I accept that. I *don't* want you to forget your love for Dyarzi, because that's too much of who you are. Even so, I want you to know that I love you, Raven. You've given me so much, I can't help it," she said, then sniffled for a moment. I looked into Arella's eyes, and could see she was near tears. I gently drew her to me, hugging her and stroking her back, and she began to quietly weep.

I pondered what to say in return for a long time. I couldn't say '*I love you too*', because we both knew that would be a lie. Arella was right - I cared for her deeply as a close friend, but that was all. My one true love was Dyarzi, and she was dead. Someday I might be able to bring her back to me, and it was that hope that kept me going. She was also right about another thing - I may be called Raven now, but when I next arose from the void (if I ever did), I'd almost certainly be my old self again, and go by Eddas Ayar. Yes, someday my time with Arella-tor would be only a happy memory. Even so, I'd never forget what I'd learned about what it was to be female, and my actions towards them would always reflect this knowledge. *'The real problem is I don't really love her, and I'll outlive her easily, like an elf. What would an elf say to this?'* I wondered, wracking my brain for something to say in reply. Finally, a fitting response occurred to me.

I drew myself back from her for a moment, took her chin into my hand, and looked her deeply in the eyes. "Arella, the Hyperboreans had a saying in my day; '*Life is like a cup of byallar.*' Do you know what we meant by that?" I asked, and she shook her head. "Then I shall tell you. It takes great effort to

produce even a single cup of *byallar* - the seeds must be planted, the trees take years to mature, and then the seeds must be harvested, roasted and ground before even the first pot can be brewed. The pot itself represents several hours of work by a tinsmith, the cups a few more hours of work by a potter. Even the water represents someone's effort in drawing a bucket from the well and lighting a fire beneath the pot. This is like life - life takes effort. A cup of *byallar* is sweet to the scent, but somewhat bitter to the taste. This is like life is sometimes. Love and laughter are the honey we add to sweeten the flavor of life, just as we sweeten a cup of *byallar*. A cup of *byallar* starts out hot, then cools. This also is like life. In our youth, the blood sings hot in our veins. In our old age, the blood cools. Many people drink *byallar* differently. Some drink it fast while it is hot, risking burning their tongue. Some let it sit for a little while, letting it cool a bit and only taking the occasional sip while it is hot. No matter how they drink it, once the cup is empty, it's empty. To truly enjoy a cup of *byallar*, you must savor each sip you take. Yes, life is like a cup of *byallar*, Arella. Let us share our cup of life together," I said, and hugged her for a moment before I continued.

"Arella, you will always be my special friend, and you will always occupy a place near and dear to my heart, even when you are nothing more than a memory. I will share our time together in gladness, and bask in the warmth of your love in happiness. I will stay with you as long as I can, even to the end of your days, so long as you wish me to stay. Darian's training will be complete soon, and we will then head southwards to help him regain his kingdom. After that, we will stay on as his court wizards. This special moment we have between the two of us will not last, as soon our lives will change forever. Let us savor these moments, these quiet days we have together here. Please don't cry, Arella. Let us laugh and rejoice in these moments, instead," I said, then kissed her and hugged her close.

"Thank you, Raven," she said quietly, and we lay together in bed and watched the sun slowly drift westwards towards afternoon.

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

"Aye, the Hyperboreans did know war. Towards the end, they did yet know war as well as we. Better, mayhap. Oh, they did know war, indeed. They did learn well the lessons we and the elves did teach them at axe-edge and arrow-point upon many a bloody battlefield."

- King Gunim IV, Commentaries on History, 1348 NCC

By the middle of spring, Darian had completed the training I thought was necessary. He now understood the basics of Hyperborean battle-strategy and military science. It was with a heavy heart that I informed Joy and Darian one day that we would now be heading south to try to help Darian regain his kingdom. I had grown used to our quiet, gentle life of training and relaxing on my lands. Of course, I wasn't alone.

When I'd informed Darian and Joy that the time had come for us to leave, Joy wept. She looked at the quiet little cabin she and Darian had built, surrounded by *byallar* trees, then hugged Darian as she sobbed. "We'll never see our little home again, will we?" she asked.

"My love, if I regain my kingdom, then we'll live in Steelgate, the king's castle in eastern Larinia. You'll like it there - it's very beautiful," Darian replied.

"But I'll miss our little home, Darian. We built it with our own hands, and filled it with our love. How can we fill a cold castle with our love?" Joy asked, sniffing.

I stood on tip-toe, reached up and patted Joy's shoulder. "Joy, this part of our lives has come to an end, as the gods intended. Come, sit under the shade with Arella, Swift-wing and I. I have much to say before we begin our journey."

We sat together and shared a cup of *byallar* as I spoke. "Darian, Arella, you may recall that I once said I would explain to you how I knew Karg would come to visit that night last year. Arella, Swift-wing, you may also recall that I once said I would explain how I expected Joy to arrive. Joy, I once said I would explain to you why the gods made you so small. Now I shall tell you all my thinking in these matters," I said, and my four friends leaned in close as I began my explanation, their faces showing interest.

"For some reason I have not yet determined, Darian is at the center of a conflict between two gods; Yorindar, the god of Wisdom, and Morgar, which to Darian's people is a god of Chaos and Death. Morgar once was a god of the Hyperboreans, but when Darian's people and mine joined after the great war, our two pantheons apparently merged. To the Hyperboreans, Morgar was a god of *war* and death, not *chaos* and death. Darian, you should clearly understand by now that chaos is an undesirable element in war. This means that Morgar, the god I and the other members of the Dyclonic Circle all paid homage to ages ago, has changed. Well, I have not. As such, I must oppose him, and side with Yorindar," I said. My companions looked fearful as I continued - the idea that the gods were directly involved was a frightening thought. Of course, I found it frightening, too - I was just a little more experienced at controlling my fear than they were.

"Yorindar came to me in a dream that night I slept in the captain's cabin of the Vilandian ship. He asked me to accept my new name and my new body, to be his raven. This I have done, which is why we have not had any more interruptions in our training. He also asked me to aid and advise Darian, and to help him defeat his enemies. This I shall do. One day last winter when Darian's frustration at being alone came to the surface, I prayed to Yorindar, telling him that I still could not lie with Darian to relieve his concupiscence. I knew that Yorindar, like all the gods, had long-range plans, and I was simply asking him to bring the next phase of his plan to bear. A few minutes later, Joy came walking down the road. Joy, the gods wanted you and Darian to be together, though I do not know why. Perhaps some child you shall birth in the future, or some great-grandchild will be important. I do not even know if it is possible for

you and Darian to successfully have children, being as you are a giant and he a human, though I suspect that you will. I suspect that Yorindar has made some deal with the gods of the giants to receive you into his plan, and I as such I suspect that the giants will play a role in Darian's future kingdom and vice-versa, should we manage to secure it. Joy, all your years of suffering and misery were to harden you, to forge your soul like the smith forges the blade of a sword by beating it with his hammer against the anvil of life. You are the perfect mate for Darian, as he is for you," I said, and while Joy and Darian hugged, I turned to Arella.

"Arella, Swift-wing, Even you were part of Yorindar's plan. Darian's giving me the name of Raven was no mere coincidence, it was divine inspiration. He has told me since that time that the idea for the name first occurred to him in a dream. When Darian brought me to you, I despaired of life. You gave me the hope and companionship I needed to survive, and still need today. There are many times my heart is weary, and I long for my beloved Dyarzi. You help me through those times with your compassion and tenderness. That is why I shall always hold you close to my heart for the rest of eternity," I said, and Arella and I hugged for a moment before I continued.

"Now is the time when we shall head south to reclaim Darian's kingdom. I had worried about how we shall assemble the necessary troops to do so. It occurred to me this morning that it may be easier than we thought. First, we have the giants. Dragonslayer alone is easily worth a company of men, and five more like him would easily give us the fighting power of a battalion of warriors. Next, we have the dragons. Darian, Karg will be more than happy to fight for you if you agree to pay him, and he himself is worth another battalion. We can also talk to the elves and dwarves. They may be willing to help in exchange for treaty and trade agreements. With the might of the mithril-mailed elven army and the raw power of the dwarven war-machines behind us, we can easily defeat the army your brother has assembled, scattering it to the four winds. After that, your castle can be retaken, and your crown restored to you. What do you think, Darian?"

Darian thought about it for a few moments, then shook his head. "No. I simply cannot condone the wholesale slaughter of my own people to regain my throne. My brother's army would oppose us if they knew of our plans, but they are still my people. Even the death of a single one must be prevented if at all possible. Karg said that I must not merely win the war, I must also win the peace. I do not want to have a kingdom of people who remember me as someone who killed their brothers and sons to save them, someone who burned their villages to free them. You taught me the Hyperborean theories of war. One of these was as follows; a chasm may be held against an army of a hundred thousand by as little as five hundred defenders, if there be but a single wooden bridge to cross. The chasm may also be held by one man with a torch who simply burns the bridge. I believe we must use the strengths we have and attack my brother himself. We must find that single bridge which is his weak point and burn it. Between us, we have the makings of a perfect team. You, our leader, are skilled in battle, and a powerful and deadly mage. Arella, your apprentice, augments your strength. Swift-wing is our scout, and as a raven he can travel quickly and is virtually invisible to the enemy. Joy and I can be your warriors, for she surely is as powerful as five men. We five form the basis for a strike-team, and we five have the ability of accomplishing the task, were we to only come up with a plan to allow us to do it. Our plan must be

devised so as to cause the minimum casualties among my people, and reclaim my throne as bloodlessly as possible. I have no idea how that may be accomplished, as I am not as skilled in war as you. Even so, that is what I think must be done."

"But Darian, Joy can't fight, she's never been trained how!" I objected.

"I can teach her, and I will. Even so, it probably won't be necessary for her to bear arms at all. Simply having her strength available to us is a great asset as it is," Darian replied.

"I can fight. I don't know much about swords, but I learned to wrestle against the giant-children that sometimes wanted to beat me because I was different and ugly. I also learned to use a staff because I am so tiny, wolves and other little predators were a danger to me. I had to burn my staff for firewood to keep warm when I came here, and even had to burn my tinderbox. Even so, I survived. I may be tiny and weak, but I never give up," Joy commented.

I looked at this enormous woman, a woman with easily the strength of five men, and nearly laughed. "No, Joy. You're tiny and weak only for giants. You married a Little-Person, and you're one of us, now. For a Little-Person, you're huge and incredibly strong. You're also beautiful and smart. Get used to thinking of yourself as one of us, as one of the Little-People. The giants of your village saw only little tiny Thumbelina trudge away down the snow-covered road. Many days later, we saw an enormous, beautiful, blonde goddess striding towards my tower. To us, that's what you are - enormous, powerful and beautiful."

"And that's why I tell you that all the time, my dear," Darian added.

Joy blushed, then bowed her head. "Thank you."

"So how can we five reclaim Darian's throne?" Arella asked.

I shrugged. "I don't know yet. Give me a few days to think about it."

"Well, whatever plan you come up with to defeat Dorian and his army, it better be good. Even I can see that ninety thousand is greater than five," Swift-wing cackled, and we all chuckled for awhile in the shade of the tree.

I spent the next three days thinking about the problem while Darian, Arella and Joy planned what we'd take for the trip. I let one of the patrolling giants who passed through know we were planning on leaving soon, and he expressed his sadness at the news. Other than that, I spent three days fruitlessly struggling with the problem. Finally, I gave up. One morning as the sun was rising, I again knelt on the eastern parapet of my tower. "Alright, Yorindar. I'm stuck again. I simply can't see how it can be done. Even if we snuck up to the king's castle and entered by magic or stealth, Gorlon-mak surely has some kind of preparation against that. The likelihood that Darian or Joy would be killed is quite high, yet I simply can't do it alone. I leave it up to you. I am once again out of answers," I said, then went down to the base of my tower to wait.

A few minutes later, I heard giant footfalls approaching. Shortly, three giants stood before me; Dragonslayer, Strider and Felicity. *"We have come to bid you farewell, and to give you something,"* Strider explained, holding out a small leather sack. *"Dragonslayer found this when he stomped some goblins that had moved into one of the ruins. We do not know where they got it from, but we decided that since it was an item of the Hyperboreans, you should have it."*

I opened the sack, withdrawing a small silver skull, shaped like that of an adult human but sized about like that of a child. It was attached to a silver chain with a clasp, and was apparently intended to be worn around the waist like a belt. I reached out with my will and felt its *Mana-flow*, and was stunned. *"The Skull of Hyarlanoth!"* I realized, astounded.

"You know what this item is?" Strider asked, seeing my face.

"Yes. it was ancient even in my day, its origins lost in the mists of time. It has great power to aid us. Thank you very much, my friends," I replied. I didn't bother to tell them that the legends associated with it say that the Skull is also cursed, though its *Mana-flow* didn't indicate that to be true. More likely the 'curse', as such, is merely the result of people's natural reaction to the powers of the skull, once they see it used. I could only hope Yorindar knew what he was doing. I took the chain and wrapped it around my waist, clipping the clasp to one of the links so the chain formed a belt. My waist was so slim, the skull hung low on my left thigh, almost at my knee. *"I thank you for bringing this to me. I also thank you for being my friends, and helping me as you have. Someday, I shall return to my tower, and we*

shall live together in friendship and peace. Until my return, I would appreciate it if you would look after my lands. In exchange, you may continue to harvest the byallar seeds each year."

"How long will you be gone, my friend?" Dragonslayer asked.

I shrugged. "I cannot truly say, for I simply do not know."

"We will await your return, Eddas Ayar. Even if it takes you a hundred years to finish your tasks in the south before you can return to us, we giants will remember you and wait for you. We may not be here, but our children will be," Felicity said, weeping enormous tears of sorrow.

After Arella, Darian and Joy had joined me for a tearful farewell, the giants trudged away, heading homeward. The others looked to me, spotting the silver skull and chain I now wore. "What's that?" Darian asked.

"A parting gift from the giants," I replied, and repeated Strider's explanation of its origins.

"It's in *extremely* good shape for its age! Raven, it *has* to be enchanted! Have you examined its *Manaflow* to determine what it does?" Arella asked.

"Yes, I have," I said, then looked at her to let her know that was all I wished to say at the moment.

"Ah, I see. Well, let's return to packing for the trip," Arella said, and while Joy and Darian went back to their cabin, Arella and I went back into the tower. Once we were back in my room at the top of the tower, Arella spoke again. "Alright, we're alone now - it's just us three spellcasters. Can you tell Swift-wing and I what it does?" Arella asked.

"Well, there's much about it I'd rather not speak of. I will say it's an artifact, and one of great power. As

for the rest, when the time is right, I'll tell you. For now, I think its secrets are safer unspoken - powers greater than you and I listen in on our every word," I replied, and Arella nodded. "Come, let's take this downstairs and finish loading my Hidden Sanctuary," I said, and we picked up the last of our things and headed downstairs.

Once I had finished attuning the last of the items to my sanctuary and dismissing it, I turned to my four friends in the late afternoon sunlight. "Come, all of you join hands. Swift-wing, cling tight to Arella's shoulder," I called. When they had done so, I took Arella's free hand, gesturing with my staff as I cast the Spell of Returning. The world blurred for a moment, then we stood at the site of our first campsite when Arella, Darian and I had first fled the city of Greenhaven last year. Joy opened her mouth to say something, but I held my finger over my lips to silence her. I drew Darian close to me, then whispered into his ear. "There may be troops nearby. Look about carefully with all your hunter's skills," Darian stepped away into the forest, and it was nearly half an hour before he returned.

"We're alone for the moment," he called.

"Good. Swift-wing, I want you to fly over to Greenhaven and take a look around. Make sure you avoid attracting any attention to yourself, and make sure you have your Spell of Protection up when you're near anyone with a bow or crossbow, just in case a bored soldier decides to take a pot-shot at you."

"I'll be careful," Swift-wing replied, then flapped away.

"Now; Darian, we'll have a cold camp here beneath these trees, just as we did before. We've got plenty of cowhide blankets, so let's bundle up warm and wait. I want everyone to stay alert, and don't speak unless you hear something. Once it's full night, we should be alright. Human soldiers aren't going to patrol the woods at night - they'd get lost," I said, and laid down the coil of rope prior to summoning my Hidden Sanctuary.

As night fell, the air grew chill. Darian and Arella huddled against Joy for warmth, but I simply stood guard quietly (my ring of adaptation allowed me to ignore the cold). I waited for Swift-wing's return, but as the stars came out, he was still missing. "Arella, where's Swift-wing?" I whispered, kneeling next to her.

Arella's gaze unfocused as she established her mental link to her familiar. "He's lost. He can't find his way back here in the darkness, and he's very frightened," she replied quietly.

"Tell him to use his spell of returning if he has the energy in reserve in his staff. If not, I'll think of something else."

A few moments later, Swift-wing appeared on the ground next to Arella. He flapped up to her shoulder and nuzzled against her cheek. "Oh, mistress! I was so frightened! I didn't even think of using my spell!" he squawked.

"Hush, now. It's alright. You're a good boy," Arella cooed quietly, stroking his feathers.

"Keep your voice down, Swift-wing. Sounds carry farther at night," I whispered.

"Sorry, Raven," he hissed in reply.

"Good, now tell me what you saw."

"The city has three walls now, many towers, many wells inside the city, a large moat fed by the river. They built a lighthouse, and ships dock day and night. Not just Larinian ships, but Vilandian ships, as well. There were many spikes along the outer wall, and almost all of them had heads on them. Many ravens were there, eating the flesh from the heads, and they said the eating had been good since the middle of last winter. That was when I first became afraid. I realized I wanted to join them, and I knew that wouldn't be right. I'm no longer just an animal, I'm a familiar, and I knew my mistress would be horrified. *I* was horrified. Even so, I wanted to. I looked around and saw a huge mound of dirt outside the city. Very large, maybe ten cubits wide, two cubits high and half a league long. Wild dogs were digging at it, and they pulled up corpses before the soldiers drove them off and reburied the corpses. It's a mass-grave, and the smell of food was unbearable. I tried to count the soldiers, and couldn't. Thousands outside the city, maybe ten thousand inside it. Still a few of the people who lived there, but they worked as slaves. All men. No women, no children anywhere. I wondered where the women and children were. I looked and looked. Finally I found some women. They were being loaded into a Vilandian slave-ship. No children, though. I never found them. Wagons loaded with women came into the city all day. No men, no children, only women, most young. Empty wagons went out of the city. Oh,

mistress! Everything you said would happen has happened, and worse!" Swift-wing hissed, trembling.

"Hmm. Looks like Dorian has made a deal with the Vilandians to sell them Arcadian women as slaves. Arcadian men are probably too independent for that, so they're slaughtering those that fight and keeping the rest here as forced-labor to maintain their defensive fortifications and farm the fields. Two curtain walls and a river-fed moat will make the city tough to take, even if we had an army. Sneaking in is out of the question, too - too many soldiers, all on alert," I muttered, thinking aloud, then turned to Darian. "Darian, it's time I tell you what I've figured about Gorlon-mak."

"What does he have to do with this?" Darian asked.

"Darian, you said once before that Gorlon-mak had once explored the 'Hyperborean ruins'. I believe Gorlon-mak has obtained one of our textbooks on warfare by digging through a ruined library, probably while looking for grimoires or tomes discussing Hyperborean magic theory. With a Spell of Translation, he could simply sit down, read it, and become the best general in several centuries simply because he knew how to command and supply a massive army, where the people of today don't. The information might have lain unused for years until Dorian made his offer of wealth and power in exchange for Gorlon helping him eliminate you. Judging by the defenses they've built, I'd say that's what happened. I've trained you to be able to raise and command an army of equal or superior ability, but there's no place for you to get them from. They're systematically eliminating any possibility that an army large enough to defeat them can be raised from Arcadia. I'm willing to bet anything that the elves and dwarves are too busy gearing up their defenses to consider an attack at the moment - this kind of warfare they understand, and they know that if they're not ready, the Larinian war-machine may turn on them next. There's only one place to get the troops, Darian. From that mass grave."

"Walking dead! Ghosts!" Joy yelped in fear, her bright mind instantly grasping what I was getting at.

"Joy, relax. You're in no danger. I'll protect you, as will Darian. Relax, and keep your voice down," I replied quietly.

"Raven, using undead is disgusting and horrific. I can't possibly condone it," Darian said, making a face.

"Ah, I see. So you can't condone giving the people of Greenhaven a last chance to avenge themselves,

but you can condone taking the women of Arcadia and selling them as slaves, to be repeatedly raped by their new Vilandian masters," I said, looking down on him coldly.

"No! I can't condone *that*, either."

"Then we do it my way."

Darian looked to the ground for a long while, thinking. Joy looked up while Darian was silent, and spoke. "You really can give the people of this town a last chance to avenge their deaths with this?"

"That's how the Hyperboreans looked at it. I know you find it frightening and Darian finds it disgusting, but a Hyperborean battle-mage is made of sterner stuff."

"This just seems so wrong to me. If only I could know what was right," Darian said, still looking at the ground.

"Perhaps I can bring someone who will convince you," I said, hooking the chain for the silver skull with my thumb and extending my arm to draw the little skull to my hand. "*One recently-dead ghost is required. An Arcadian, preferably a woman,*" I said in my own language, activating the first of the skull's four powers. The eye-sockets of the little skull glowed with a blue light briefly, then were dark again. A few minutes later, a glowing white figure floated into view from among the trees.

"A ghost!" Joy shrieked.

"Joy, calm down. You're in no danger. Darian is here, and he'll protect you. Now hold your tongue, or I'll be forced to throw a spell of silence on you," I called firmly, and Joy huddled beneath the blankets, trembling in fear. Darian hugged her to comfort her, but it did little good.

The ghost slowly drew near, and I saw it was a young female, perhaps nineteen or so, give or take a couple years. It's torn dress and long hair seemed to blow in an unfelt breeze, and its expression was blank and unseeing. As it was made purely of ectoplasm, its form was all white, even down to the fingernails on her hands. A typical ghost of a violent death, the mortal wound to her chest was visible beneath a rent in her torn dress. It didn't bother me - I'd seen worse, and with the Skull of Hyarlanoth, no ghost could possibly harm me anyway. My three companions, however, were petrified. "Your attention, woman. I have called you to speak with this man," I said, and the ghost's face turned to Darian. Slowly, her face changed to one of fear.

"Noooooooo! He is a Larinian! He will hurt meeeee!" she wailed eerily.

"You are beyond pain, woman. The Larinians killed you. Now this man, the *true* king of Larinia, wants to crush their armies and bring an end to all this. No more killing, no more pain, no more death. Tell him what you think of that."

"My baaaaby is deaaaad. I want revennnnng!" the ghost wailed.

"I can summon the bodies of the slain to fight the Larinian army. With them, I can defeat the Larinians and restore him to his rightful throne. Tell him what you think of this."

"Dooooo it. Pleeeeease," the ghost replied, her expression clearing somewhat.

"I can't, it's horrible!" Darian said, his face white.

"Then yooooou are no better than those who killed meeeee!" the ghost wailed, her expression showing anger. The ghost then turned to me. *"Releeeeeease me, mage. Let meeeee go! I won't be neeeeeeear this muuuuurthering Larinian piig aaaany loooooonger!"* she wailed.

"Go, spirit. Not back to the place of your death, but on to your eternal reward. By the power of the Skull of Hyarlanoth, I command you to move onward to the afterlife," I said, and the ghost faded. Joy fainted

at that, going limp in Darian's arms.

"Gods, Raven, that was *horrible!*" Darian said.

"Yes. What's more horrible is that she begged you to avenge her, and you refused. If I hadn't forced her on to the afterlife, she would have spent the rest of eternity hating you and haunting you. Darian, I can't help you anymore. You're weak. Your brother is strong, and deserves to be king. You do not."

"I'm not weak, I just find the whole idea of undead disgusting and horrifying!" Darian yelled, waking Joy.

"And I *don't?! I'm* such a disgusting, evil person that I *enjoy* having to use this method? Goodbye, Darian. I won't stand here and be insulted. Come, Arella. Let's return to my tower," I said, and held out a gloved hand to her. Arella reached out a trembling hand to mine, and I pulled her to her feet.

"Wait, dammit! I never said that! My amulet says you're still a good and honorable person, and I believe it!" Darian yelled, jumping to his feet and grabbing my arm.

"*Take your hands off me,*" I said coldly, and Darian complied with an expression of surprise. "Darian, I'm no little woman you can simply grab and manhandle. I am a Hyperborean battle-mage of the Dyclonic Circle. The only reason I never became the high-master of the Circle is that I was too busy trying to find a way to bring Dyarzi back to me, and simply didn't want to put my name into consideration. Yes, my soul occupies the body of this half-elf woman for the moment. Even so, that doesn't mean you can treat me as though I'm weak, evil, disgusting or cowardly. I am possibly the most powerful and deadly battle-mage my circle ever produced, and I know more of war and death than you can ever *possibly* imagine. And Darian, this is *war!* People are *dying!* Your people, Arella's people, and anyone else that gets in the way! If you think this is going to stop here, *think again!* Gorlon-mak *knows* what treasures lie in Hyperborea! Once Arcadia is secured, the Larinian army will cross the Southern Dead-Zone and raid Hyperborea! *All* of Joy's people will *die*, Darian, and it *still* won't stop! The elves have treasures that are millennia old, and the dwarves are rich with gold and silver! With what Gorlon-mak can dig out of the ruins of Hyperborea, things like this skull and the war-machine we found, the elves and dwarves will fall! *Millions* will die, Darian, and all because you can't handle one of the simplest of Hyperborean battle strategies - the use of the undead!"

"You're right, I'm sorry. You taught me of their uses and their limitations, I just didn't ever want to have to use them," Darian replied, hanging his head.

"Darian, make up your mind; do I leave now and let millions die because you're upset about having to deal with the realities of war, or do we regain your kingdom and put a stop to all this?" I asked coldly.

"Do what you need to do, Raven. Only, do it with respect, do it with honor."

"We Hyperboreans always treat our dead with honor, Darian. The greatest honor we know is to allow a slain warrior one last chance to revenge himself on the enemy. Yes, it looks horrifying. That's why it's so effective in war, Darian. The ghosts of these people cry out from beyond the grave for vengeance, Darian. I'm going to give them what they want," I said, and turned to Swift-wing, who sat on Arella's shoulder. "Do you have enough left in your staff to take Arella and I to the mass grave?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied, shuddering.

"Then do so," I said, and took Arella's hand.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

"To be honest, when I first met her, I had no clue as to her true nature. At first, I only saw a beautiful maiden, clean-limbed and graceful. Her voice was gentle and sweet, and the face revealed when she lowered the hood of her black robe was breathtakingly beautiful. Yet her eyes... There was something about looking into her eyes. At times I seemed to catch glimpses of the soul behind those eyes... The soul of a being beyond my understanding, an ancient being as alien to humanity as a dragon. My father said he understood her, but I never did."

- King Noril, Autobiography, 1729 NCC

A moment later, I stood beside the mass grave of the murdered citizens of Greenhaven. It lay in the middle of a field near the city walls, a long, low dirt mound. The lights of the torches mounted along the city walls clearly illuminated the untold numbers of heads they had mounted on spikes along the top of the walls. Two spear-armed soldiers, one also carrying a torch, were walking within a few paces of us, guarding the grave from scavengers. They gaped at our sudden appearance, and I lashed out with a Spell of Slumber. I conquered their feeble wills easily and they collapsed on the ground, snoring, their spears and the torch falling uselessly by their sides. I looked around, but saw no other guards nearby. I raised the small silver skull, then activated the second of its four powers. *"Arise, dead of Greenhaven. Arise*

and serve me, Eddas Ayar," I called in my language.

Swift-wing trembled in fear, burying his head in Arella's hair. Arella, for her part, managed not to shriek. The whole of the grave burst into movement as the corpses struggled from it, and the sudden stench of death brought bile to my throat. I waved Arella back and stood beside her, giving the walking dead room to stand before the covered pit. The results were pathetic, compared to the amount of corpses that I could see remaining in the pit - barely five thousand skeletons and rotting zombies, by my rough estimate, most in extremely poor shape. Most were headless, many were hacked by weapons and trailed rotting entrails and dried gore. At least twice that number of corpses remained in the pit, too badly mangled to move.

"Th-their ghosts now animate their flesh?" Arella asked, trembling.

"No. Their flesh is animated by UnLife energy, drawn from the Plane of UnLife. When their lives were ended, the connection between their body and spirit was permanently severed. It is this loss of connection that prevents me from bringing back Dyarzi. In our universe, each soul is created from a bit of the souls of both the mother and father, just as the body is created from the man's seed in the mother's womb. Upon death, the connection between body and spirit, the Silver Cord, is severed. Normally, the spirit moves on to the afterlife, but sometimes it remains as a ghost. Skeletons, zombies, barrow-wights, vampires, nightstalkers and all the other corporeal undead are manifestations of UnLife energy embodied in a corpse. Of these, skeletons and zombies are called 'Walking Dead.' A fresh corpse is animated as a zombie, a being that is very slow but possessed of incredible strength. As it decays and loses this flesh, becoming a skeleton, it becomes swifter and swifter, though much weaker and more fragile, as well. They're nearly mindless, rotting corpses that serve me, their creator, yet while they have movement and UnLife remaining, they whisper silently to me for instructions and to tell me how they're doing. They beg me to command them even now," I replied, and Arella shuddered as I continued my explanation.

"I command them with my voice, and they can hear my slightest whisper even were I in another dimension. This artifact is the Skull of Hyarlanoth, a powerful device made so early on in Hyperborean history we know little more than its name. It has several powers, but the one I've used now allows me to turn an entire battlefield of corpses into my servants. Normally, a mage can only create one Walking Dead at a time, and each is a significant drain on one's endurance. It would have taken me years to animate all of these corpses were it not for this artifact. We Hyperboreans thought it lost ages ago, long before I was ever born. Apparently the goblins found it, and from their hands it fell into those of the giants, and from them to me. I believe Yorindar provided it expressly for this purpose. Now, please, let's let all other explanations wait until later. I see by the torches in the distance that our activities have not gone unnoticed, and I must command these creatures now so we may be away," I said, and Arella nodded as I turned to the corpses.

"Go hence to the city of Greenhaven. Slay all those who oppose you, taking their weapons as your own. Hold the city thereafter," I ordered in my own language. The line of corpses then turned and moved towards the city. The zombies, those corpses still having flesh, staggered slowly. The skeletons ran forward, unencumbered by several stone of rotting flesh, and we heard the distant screams of the soldiers as the first wave of skeletons overwhelmed them.

"But how will they get into the city?" Arella asked as I took her hand.

"They do not eat, sleep or breathe. They will simply walk into the moat, then climb out the other side. The skeletons will then climb the city walls while the slower zombies pull down the drawbridge with their enormous strength and bash down the city gates. They will never stop, and they will never give up. Only total destruction can stop them, and the zombies will be the hardest to stop of all. They know what to do because I am their creator and I know what they should do. Should they have any problems or questions, they will simply ask, and I will instruct them. Now we return to camp," I said, and cast my spell of returning.

Darian and Joy jumped at our sudden appearance. "That's it? That didn't take long at all," Darian said, amazed.

"No, it didn't - such is the power of the Skull of Hyarlanoth, which Yorindar apparently has provided for this purpose, Darian. There are now five thousand or so undead trying to storm Greenhaven, the corpses of those murdered by your brother's army. You asked me to come up with a plan, and I have. Now I must ask you to follow through on it. You can still refuse, and if so, I will leave you to your own devices. You said you wanted the minimum amount of Larinians to die. This is the only way I can see to do it. You've learned Hyperborean battle strategy. You should know by now that to us, war is not a game. We take warfare very seriously, and we fight to win. You, the king, have defined the parameters of this campaign; Defeat your brother's army at minimum loss of life, recapture the throne and restore your crown to you. There is only one way to do that - your enemies must fear you. Not just fear in that they worry about you, but *fear*. That cold, bone-chilling emotion that makes a man scream like a woman and wet himself before he runs away from you," I said, and looked down imperiously at Darian as I continued.

"This is war, Darian, and it's not a game. This isn't some kind of *chatto* match where you're trying to get your opponents to say 'well, I guess I'd better not challenge him, because he's a better player.' This is *war*! The only way we can save the lives of the men in your brother's army is to make them *fear* opposing you, because opposing you means *horror* and *death*. Later they will learn that I am the source

of this, and when I am gone you will be viewed as a wise and benevolent leader who sent the horrible, evil, black-robed witch away. Only *you* will know the truth. For ages afterward, men will spit at the mention of my name, and I will be cursed forever. Only you will know the sacrifice I have made. *That* is why Yorindar wanted me to have a different name, and a different body. So I could at least go to my grave knowing that my real name, Eddas Ayar, was not being cursed by those who still lived, and the honor of my name was still intact. *That* is why he wanted me to have a different body. So that when or if I ever rise again, I won't be attacked as a horrific monster that's returned from the void. There is only one way to help you regain your throne, Darian, and that is to take my honor and trample it into the ground for you. I can only hope you'll appreciate how much I am giving up for you. To a Hyperborean, Honor is everything. When I am done, you will be king, and history will remember you as a hero who led a victorious army to restore your kingdom. I, on the other hand, will be honorless and despised, and history will remember me as nothing but a monster that you kept at the end of a leash," I said, and climbed up the rope into my Hidden Sanctuary while Darian stared in mute shock.

I sat there in the darkness of my sanctuary, trembling with rage and sorrow. I'd known what Yorindar intended the minute I realized I held the Skull of Hyarlanoth in my hands. Every mage who had ever wielded it in battle before me was remembered as a villain, even when they aided good kings in fighting their battles. Its power was simply too fearsome. Yorindar had given me the mask of Raven to wear as I wielded the skull, so that my honor would be intact. I sent a silent word of thanks heavenward to him, then returned to my melancholy thoughts. The results of this were obvious, and my next steps were plain. Darian would have his army, that was certain. Even so, I would command the legion of undead Arella had prophesied. Darian would be the hero-king, I would be the rabid dog he held at the end of a leash, ripping and tearing his enemies. When I was no longer needed, I would have to quietly disappear. Yorindar had not lied, I would see Dyarzi again. I could use the skull's fourth and *ultimate* power. I would never rise again, but it would be worth it. My tomb would eventually be looted by grave-robbers, but even that disgrace and dishonor would be worth it. My arms ached for Dyarzi even now, and I was tempted to use the skull's ultimate power *now* and simply abandon Darian to his fate. I knew I could not, however. Darian was my friend, and I owed him my best effort. My threats to abandon him earlier had been just that - merely threats. Now, I had to sit here in the dark, alone. The legends said the bearer of the skull was always alone. It was how they had to live, and how they had to die.

I could hear my friends below me through the opening to my sanctuary. Darian let out a weak chuckle, and tried to make a joke of my outburst. "I guess it's Raven's time again, eh Arella?"

"No, Darian, it's not, and I don't know how in the world you could say something like that! She's *right up there*, and can hear every word you say! That was a horrible and cruel thing to say about someone who's sacrificed the most important thing in their lives for *you*, their best friend!" Arella snapped. A few moments later, she climbed up into my sanctuary and peered about in the gloom. "Raven?" she called quietly.

"Please, Arella. Don't touch me just yet. The bed's to your right if you want to lay down. Just leave me be for a moment, please," I replied quietly.

Swift-wing apparently attuned himself to see in the astral so his mistress could gaze through his eyes and see inside the darkness of the sanctuary, as after a few moments, Arella's gaze became unfocused and she shuffled over to me. She then blinked and peered about in the gloom until she spotted me, then sat quietly next to me. My half-elven eyes could see her clearly, and she was quietly weeping.

Joy spoke up from below, her voice coming up to us through the hole in the floor. "Husband, you were very cruel to Raven."

"What? How?"

"The giants know much of the Hyperboreans' culture, though little of their history - we were fascinated with who they were, but little interested in what they'd done. My husband, our legends tell us much of what they were like. They were a very honor-bound people, even more than we giants are. You asked her to come up with a plan, and she did. Then you fought her and resisted that plan. When she completed the first part of it and explained what that plan meant, the total destruction of her honor to restore your kingdom to you, you then joked about her having her menses, which you know is a painful subject since her soul is that of a man. About the only thing you could do now that would hurt her more would be to find some way for her never to be able to recover her beloved Dyarzi again. As your wife, I am obligated to try and help you any way I can. Unfortunately, I simply can't see any way for you to be able to deny Raven her beloved. I suggest that since you obviously want to hurt Raven as much as possible, that you simply taunt her about being helpless in her desire to recover Dyarzi. Three or four times a day ought to make her properly miserable, I think."

"Joy, that's *not* what I want to do!" Darian yelled.

"Really? Well, I'm sorry, I guess I misunderstood. I'm just a little giantess, I don't know much about how you Little-People here in the south treat each other. Perhaps then you should try apologizing to her, and asking her to explain her plan more fully," Joy replied calmly.

"How? I can't go up there, they might be undressed and in bed already," he replied.

"Then I shall have to go for you."

"You can't even fit *in* there - your shoulders are too wide."

"Then we shall have to sit here and wait for them to come out. If you have an objection to that idea, then I simply don't know what to do."

"No, I have no objections. Hell, I don't have any better ideas."

After a few moments, I spoke quietly to Arella. "You should join them."

"Why?" she asked quietly.

"I know how you and Darian now see me. I am a horror, a thing. All the bearers of the skull in Hyperborean history were viewed that way. No-one can watch thousands of the undead rise from their graves and ever look at me the same way again. Please, Arella. I know what you and Darian feel. The legends say that those who wield the skull shall live their lives alone. Now I know why. Don't torture me with false endearments. I know what I look like to you. Leave me be."

Arella reached out to my voice, touching my face. She wrapped her arms around me and drew me to her, then hugged me gently. "No, Raven. You're wrong. I love you, and I'll always love you. I know what your heart is like. You used that artifact to help Darian, and you will continue to do so. People forever afterwards may look upon you in fear because of that, but I never will. I see your plan now. I understand it. Darian must not only win the war, he must win the peace. The horrors you must do to make his brother's army fear to fight, creating the fear that will save their lives, are all a part of this plan. He must be remembered as the brave, heroic king. You must take all the fear and loathing his people will have. This will allow his people to look upon him as a hero. I think Darian understands it, as well. Come down, Raven. Talk to him. He's still your friend."

"I don't think I can. I don't think I could take it if I saw that look of horror and loathing in his eyes even once more."

"Raven, I don't feel that way, and I know he doesn't. Please, if you care for me even a little bit, give Darian another chance."

I sighed. The classic woman's argument - *'if you love me, you'll do this for me.'* It was old in my time, and it was ancient now. She didn't say 'if you love me' because she knew our relationship didn't work that way, but it was essentially the same thing. I had no choice.

I muttered a short cantrip to produce a small light for Arella to see by, placed it on the bed, then climbed down. Once Arella and Swift-wing were safely down behind me, I dropped the cantrip, dousing the light. The moon was up outside, and Arella could dimly see around her. She sat down next to Darian and Joy, and I simply stood there, waiting. Finally, Darian stood and came over to me.

"I'm sorry, my friend. I wish I could be more eloquent, but I can't - I am who I am. You're right. The night air does carry sounds better, as all the day animals are silent and asleep. I heard you and Arella speaking. I know how doing this hurts you by wounding your Honor and your reputation. I, too, understand your plan for winning the peace for me. Raven, your sacrifice will not be ignored by me. Even now men are fighting and dying at the hands of the creatures you have summoned, and here I am hurting you. I should be thanking you, and praying that as few men as possible are killed. Please, you said I would lead an army. This obviously has been a part of your basic plan from the beginning, and now it seems you know how I shall assemble one. Please, tell us how this will happen."

"Darian, it would be easier to show you," I sighed.

"Then go ahead. You are my friend, and I trust you."

I grasped the silver skull in my hand again, and spoke. *"The ghost of King Priam, king of Arcadia, recently slain by the Larinians, is required,"* I said in my language. The skull's eyesockets glowed blue for a moment, then darkened. Shortly, the ghost of a man floated between the trees, approaching us. Joy

couldn't contain a shiver of fear, and she and Arella hugged each other for comfort. Swift-wing fluffed his feathers out bravely and simply watched.

King Priam looked terrible (though that was understandable, since he was dead). His ghostly white body was covered by a score of gaping wounds, and his head apparently had been cut off at one point, as he had a single wound that traversed his entire neck. *"Who calls me to this place?"* he asked, his voice clear but soft. I was impressed. His manifestation was strong and clear, his voice lacking the wailing moans of the weaker-willed. He must have had a powerful will when he was alive.

"I do. You may call me Raven, King Priam. I need your help. Your people are defeated, your men enslaved in their own lands, your women being sold to the Vilandians. If you do not help me thwart their plans, your people are doomed."

"You are here to help?"

"Yes."

"Then speak, and I shall answer. Command, and I shall obey," he replied, bowing. His head didn't fall off, which was fortunate. I didn't need Joy screaming in fright at the moment. I guess ghosts did things like that only when they were *trying* to frighten you.

"Does any of the royal line of Arcadia yet live?"

"No. Gorlon-mak, the general of the Larinian army, had my son executed. My line is extinguished."

"Does anything remain of your army?"

"Two hundred men hide in the foothills of the Granite mountains, north of the Myrmidon forest, and many smaller groups are scattered about the countryside. I have been watching over them, trying to exhort them to gather together and fight, but I can do nothing. They cannot even see me."

"Darian, tell the king your story. Tell him who you are, and why we are here," I said.

Once Darian was finished speaking, King Priam spoke up. *"So the King of Larinia is really the twin Dorian. As I remember, he was a little bastard. I went to visit Darian's father one year to sign a trade agreement, and the little brat kicked me in the shins. He's grown true, I'll give him that. What would you have me do, mage?"*

"I have raised a small army of walking dead from the mass grave of those murdered in Greenhaven. Even now they assault the city. They whisper to me that the gates have been breached, and they now run freely among the streets, slaying those they run across. Soon, Greenhaven will be mine. I serve Darian Vemcrior, the rightful king of Larinia. He wishes to regain his throne. He feels his brother's attack on your nation was wrong, and as such he wishes to restore your kingdom's independence. When I have taken Greenhaven, he has taken it. The skull shall grant you the power to appear to these men at night, adding to your ectoplasmic form enough material to allow this - you would probably be able to do it yourself in a few years, but we hardly have time to wait for that. Seek these men out, appear to them, tell them Darian's story. Tell them that the true king of Larinia seeks men for his army. Tell them that Darian seeks to right the wrong that has been done to your nation and to himself, to regain his throne and restore peace to this land. While Darian shall lead your former troops against his brother, gathering his army of light and justice, I shall continue to raise the slain from your battlefields and harry the Larinians night and day with my army of the dead. Tell them that Darian's pet witch shall help them destroy the enemy."

"But why should they believe that you would help Darian if you are this powerful? Why should they not believe that you would not simply take the kingdom for yourself?" the king asked, curious.

"For two reasons; First, because *you*, the ghost of their dead king, shall be telling them this. Second, because you will also tell them that even though I am an evil witch, I am also still a woman. Darian has stolen my heart, and I am insane with my love for him. I will do anything he asks, even ride through the fires of hell naked, just for the lightest caress of his whip. Now go," I replied.

"I go then, mage. Farewell," the king called, and faded away.

"Arella, Joy, Swift-wing, remain with Darian here. Over the next two to three weeks, troops will begin to assemble about Darian's banner. I need you three to guard and protect Darian, assisting him while I am gone," I said.

"But Raven, where are you going?" Arella asked.

"First, I must return to Greenhaven. I must use my battle-magic to assist the undead in rooting out the last pockets of resistance. I must then animate all those who were slain, and make many other preparations. Our two armies must only join together on the battlefield. Were they together all the time, your own troops would desert you in fear. I also must sink the Larinian vessels which my servants whisper even now are attempting to escape. Then there is the matter of the stolen women to be attended to. No, I must ride alone for this. I need you three to keep Darian safe. I knew this was what would happen the moment I realized the Skull of Hyarlanoth was in my hands. I could not tell you, because I didn't want to leave you. Now, the truth is out. I will only be able to see you infrequently from now on - I'll use King Priam as an intermediary, so as to further cement your right to command his men and to pass messages between us. I shall leave the Sanctuary here with you that you may use it, I am strong enough to maintain it's daily presence, now. Darian, please don't forget to find someone to give Rhane's twig-ring to. Now; is there anything else I've forgotten..." I wondered aloud.

"Yes, you've forgotten that you are my advisor. I am the king," Darian said firmly.

"Yes, I know. What of it?"

"I don't want you to go. I need you."

"Darian, I *have* to go, and afterwards stay away forever. There isn't any other way."

"You're wrong, Raven. I have another way," Joy interjected.

"Alright, tell me," I replied, exasperated.

So she did.

I marveled at Joy's wit and wisdom. "Truly, Joy, you *are* a woman of Hyperborea. Your brains are far superior to my own. Your plan will work, and work well. Still, I must be off to finish my work at Greenhaven. I *will* be back, however. You should see me sometime next morning," I replied, and cast my Spell of Returning to take me back to Greenhaven.

By dawn, the last of the Larinian troops were either dead or fled - most had fled, fortunately. Two ships lay sunk at anchor (I later had several hundred zombies walk into the water and shove them into the harbor mouth to block it off), and I'd managed to catch four more offshore. I managed to keep the fires produced by my blasts of fire and lightning under control, and only small sections of the city had burned. By using the third of the four powers of the Skull of Hyarlanoth (a spell of repairing attuned to work only on the bodies of the Walking Dead, but able to do so with no strain to the user), I managed to swell my ranks to a little over ten thousand by reclaiming those adult corpses that remained in the mass grave and those that were hacked inanimate during the battle. The rest, mainly the corpses of thousands of small children that had been interred in the mass grave, I let go and re-buried. Useful though they may have been to terrorize the enemy, even I shuddered at the sight of rotting, maggot-ridden babies crawling out of their grave, whispering eagerly for my command. After animating those soldiers that the undead killed, the total number of undead at my command went up to slightly more than twelve thousand.

As my standing orders had been to kill only those who opposed them, there were about a hundred and thirty prisoners - five were Larinian soldiers who had thrown down their weapons and tried to flee with the rest, only to trip and break a leg or otherwise cripple themselves. After careful interrogation, by noon, I had the whole grisly picture. All of the children of Greenhaven had been slaughtered out of hand, and the women sold into slavery (those that survived the night of pillage and rape that followed the fall of the city last year). Those men who bore arms were simply executed upon capture, with those who agreed to work for the Larinians being allowed to live as slaves - after they'd been castrated. The eunuchs feared my undead, as many recognized friends and neighbors among their ranks, but they managed to steel themselves to it once I told them I was a witch in the service of the true king of Larinia and gave them the rest of the story I'd told King Priam's ghost. Of course, I spent several minutes mooning over the thought of my 'beloved Darian' ('His lovely eyes! His lips! Oh, his strong arms! Would that he would consent to lie with me, I would die happy!', etcetera, etcetera, *ad nauseam*), so that the eunuchs would get the idea. As for the Larinian soldiers, I carefully interrogated each of them for any information that might be of any military value, then turned them over to the eunuchs for disposal. Their screams didn't last long, and soon their mangled corpses joined the ranks of my army. After finding the skeleton of a horse that had been killed when the Larinians initially took the city and buried along with the rest of the animal corpses, I

animated it, tied a saddle to its bones, then rode it at the head of the eunuchs towards Darian's camp. Each of the eunuchs wore a smattering of captured armor, and bore various spears and polearms as weapons.

I made a fine picture when we finally arrived near sunset. The eunuchs were exhausted from the forced march, but my actions soon had their full attention. I dismounted from my grisly steed, stripped off my cloak and robe (being careful not to remove the Skull of Hyarlanoth from my waist), then crawled on my belly at Darian's feet dressed only in my boots, gloves and Dyarzi's 'dancing outfit', moaning my 'love' for him and begging him to at least spit on me - the perfect portrait of an insane witch. Darian reached out his hand and pulled me to my feet, and I squealed in the ecstasy of being touched by *him*, and capped it off by pretending to nearly faint with joy. Afterwards, Arella gestured as though enchanting me, and drew me into my Sanctuary. After a pleasant interlude, I came back out, apparently in her power, and she 'released' me in front of Darian again. I slipped on my robe and cloak, remounted the skeletal horse, then rode away shrieking with insane laughter. Once I was out of sight, I ordered the horse to return to the city and simply cast my spell of returning to make it there sooner. I was glad I did - the Larinians had sent in a battalion of men to try to find out what these confused and babbling reports from the fleeing survivors could be, and my forces were already fighting them from the walls.

I cast the Spell of Missile Turning and flew above the enemy ranks, letting their own archers kill themselves with volley after volley of arrows as I blasted their ranks with explosions of lightning and fire. Those that turned to flee found themselves surrounded by ranks of vengeful undead. By midnight, the numbers in my ranks had swelled to near thirteen thousand as a pitiful handful of survivors fled into the countryside. I then had my 'soldiers' work on the next phase of Joy's plan, gathering all the barrels of stored food and drink they could find, loading up wagons with them, and hitching the animated carcasses of horses and oxen to them to pull the wagons. I sent them off to Darian's camp, their orders being to unload the wagons after they arrived, then head back. Darian's men would need plenty of provisions, whereas mine would need none. I kept these shipments up every day for the next three days until the city was stripped of provisions, having the wagons traveling only in the dead of night (if one can excuse the pun).

I knew what *I* would do if faced with an assault of this nature, and I reasoned that Gorlon-mak had read enough of Hyperborean strategy to realize what his next move should be. As such, I had the skeletons kill every animal they could lay their hands on inside the city walls and nearby the city (except for ravens, as Swift-wing might need to contact me), piling the corpses of thousands of birds, cats, dogs, horses, mules, oxen, pigs, chickens, and so on in an enormous stack outside the gates where most of the other animals had been buried, then animated the whole pile. All the horses and mules I mounted my soldiers on, armed with spears, lances and other suitable cavalry weapons. The rest I scattered around the city and in the nearby woods to keep an eye-socket out for enemy scouts. By the end of a week, my ranks had swelled by another fifty horses and men, ripped apart one at a time by the beaks, horns, hooves, claws and fangs of my patrols.

By now, it should have become apparent to Gorlon-mak that some immensely powerful witch had taken over the city of Greenhaven, cutting off their supplies. Two simultaneous efforts would be made - first, an attempt to use another port city to reestablish their supply lines. As they had conquered virtually all of Arcadia, this would only take a few days. Second, he would gather ten or twenty thousand of his troops and attempt to deal with me himself. As his men would most likely run gibbering with fear at my troops, he'd probably have to ride in the lead, blasting my patrols to show his men that the undead *could* be defeated. I placed my weakest troops, the birds and squirrels, at the extreme edge of my patrol zones, then waited. Soon they were whispering about approaching troops, and being quickly annihilated by blasts of sorcery. I called in the rest of my patrols, and sent my troops out across the repaired drawbridge to meet his troops in battle.

If Gorlon-mak expected me to lead my troops at the front, he was sadly mistaken. I commanded them from one of the towers that lined the city walls, where I had a good view of the entire battle. I couldn't see him too well, all I could tell was that he had a full head of gray hair and a long gray beard, wore a blood-red long-sleeved robe, and rode a fine black charger. I was sure that up close he would have cut quite a commanding and impressive figure, but at a distance of a quarter of a league, he wasn't much to look at. His spells were *very* impressive, however. He easily held back wave after wave of my troops with explosions of fire, and quite possibly would have won the day if I didn't have cavalry. His own cavalry was brave, but their horses simply wouldn't fight my rotting troops, and fled the battle whinnying in fear. This left only his footsoldiers to face my foot and mounted troops, and I had a better view of what was happening and a simpler method of controlling them - I just spoke. Gorlon-mak had to flee the battle, vanishing with what looked like either a Spell of Teleportation or a Spell of Returning, abandoning his horse and his troops to their fate.

I had a sudden inspiration at that point, and ordered my troops to all step back from the enemy. I then had all my troops pound their shields with their weapons simultaneously while those that still had enough flesh left to speak chanted "Gorlon-mak is dead! Gorlon-mak is dead!" over and over. The roll of thunder produced by the thousands of my troops beating their shields in time and the eerie, groaning chant of the dead could easily be heard by me, a quarter of a league away. All this apparently terrified the enemy greatly (I was sure to someone who'd been fighting ranks of rotting zombies and skeletons all day to have them suddenly step back and do this *would* be fairly terrifying, especially when combined with the stench). I then had some of my troops give the enemy an opening to flee through, and when they tried to drag the bodies of the slain with them, I simply used the Skull of Hyarlanoth to animate them, have them join my ranks and take up the chant. This had the effect of making the enemy flee even faster, as well (I suppose having a dead comrade you were trying to drag off suddenly pull away from you and join the mass of chanting undead warriors nearby *would* be a bit too much to take).

By nightfall, I'd managed to repair most of my damaged troops and my ranks had swollen to near twenty thousand foot and five thousand cavalry. The process was tedious, examining each of them to determine which would be alright and which would need to be repaired by the skull before they fought again, but there were bright moments.

There were several hundred female corpses in my army, most those of women who were too old or too ugly for the Larinians to bother shipping them off to be slaves so they'd simply killed them, though a handful were apparently those who'd been killed when they tried to fight. As I worked, my eye caught upon a one of these female corpses, and I grinned. She was easy to recognize, what with the hideous curse I'd laid upon her face. Judging by the corpse, Penelope had either slit her throat when the Larinians took the city, or the Larinian soldiers had done it for her once they saw her face. Yes, I grinned when I found Penelope's corpse - but an hour later, I laughed. When I finally found the badly hacked, mangled corpse of a large, burly blonde man with a scar on his rotting cheek, wearing the tattered and bloodied remains of a red doublet and green hose, I burst into roaring laughter for several minutes. "Justice!" I laughed. "You disturbed the peace of the dead and robbed them during your life, Corwin - and now, in death, your own corpse shall have no peace."

The carrion birds had become a great nuisance at this point, and were constantly degrading my troops' strength by ripping at them when they stood there idly. I decided to order all my troops that remained outside the city to march in a circle, pounding their shields in time, while my troops inside the city were ordered to attack any animal that tried to eat them. My patrols reported more scouts in the area, and I pondered what to do only for a moment. I decided that my troops looked so impressive that I told them to let the scouts through, and had a large bonfire assembled in the middle of them so it would look like they were celebrating their victory. I was sure Gorlon-mak was trying to reassure his troops that the moment I was dead, all these corpses would fall to the ground, inanimate (which was true), and that they were nearly mindless things that only responded to my will (which also was true). His scouts, on the other hand, would pass tales of a completely different nature. The rotting corpses of my troops were celebrating, not waiting mindlessly for their next orders. About the time my troops reported that some of the scouts were within sight of the city, I was struck with another inspiration. I had all my troops who still had enough flesh to speak begin a new chant, groaning and moaning in Darian's language.

'Woa-oh! We grow and grow!'

'Woa-oh! We grow and grow!'

'Gorlon-mak, send us more!'

'Each time you do, we grow by the score!'

'Very soon now, only we will remain!'

'Then all will be death, and all will be pain!'

'No more life, no more laughter,'

'No more breathing men hereafter!'

Then, of course, all twenty thousand of them that marched around the enormous bonfire began the chant

again at the beginning.

It was at about this time that Swift-wing flew down from above, landing next to me on the parapet I was using to observe my troops. He watched them in silence for a little while, then spoke. "That is absolutely horrifying. My mistress thinks so, too."

"Thank you. Let's hope the Larinians have the same opinion, as it will save their lives. My patrols say there's three scouts about two leagues away, hiding over there by that small bridge that crosses the river. When they pass the word around about what they saw, it will completely ruin Gorlon-mak's efforts to calm his troops," I replied with a smile, pointing at a distant spot in the darkness.

"Darian says he's got about as many men as he's going to get. All told, he's got about eighteen thousand light and heavy footsoldiers."

"No cavalry?" I asked.

"No. You've got all the horses in this area, and I don't think that any of Darian's men wants to ride them," Swift-wing replied with a cackle.

"They do stink a bit, don't they? Fortunately, we ravens are made of sterner stuff," I chuckled in return, and we shared a look of friendship for a moment.

"What will happen to them when you're done?" Swift-wing asked, preening his feathers.

"I'll have each of them dig a proper grave and get in it, then have the animal-troops I control bury them. Then I'll just let them go, and they'll all simply collapse. The animals will become food for scavengers if there's any meat left on them by then, and the humans will simply lay there, returned to their proper rest. If I'm killed in this war, they'll all just collapse right then."

"They really *are* mindless, or nearly so, aren't they? I mean, looking at that, I could *swear* they were intelligent, and really wanted to slay all the living beings they can find, like some frightening 'Army of Darkness' or something."

"Yes, they really *are* quite stupid, about as smart as a chicken or a snake, but I'm having them do that both to make the enemy fear them more and to keep off the carrion-eaters. Our brother ravens really rip them up if I don't keep them hopping," I replied with a grin.

"Huh! Not *my* brothers! I'm sorry, but I just can't bring myself to eat the flesh of an intelligent being, even if they *are* dead!" Swift-wing replied, fluffing his feathers.

"Of course. As Arella's familiar, you share a part of her soul. Certainly the call of the wild was strong when you first encountered all these corpses and the sudden pull of it on your mind was frightening, but as you said; you're more than a mere animal, now. You're a mage's familiar, a special being. Incidentally, though, don't go nibbling on my patrol animals, as they've all been ordered to defend themselves against animals that try to eat them."

"Thanks for the warning - I was just thinking how a couple of those rotting pigs I saw in the forest looked tasty. Ah, well. I'll just nibble a few of those maggots they keep dropping. Well, what's the next step? My mistress is listening and watching even now, and she's waiting to pass the word on to Darian and his troops."

"We march on Larinia. Darian's troops take the western flank and mine take the eastern flank, as mine are more capable of cutting off any escape into the mountains. There's also more towns and villages towards the western flank, as that's the Bright Sea. Darian can provision and recruit as he goes along, and any casualties he has can simply be left for me. My troops will continue doing things like this as we go along, and that will tend to drive game Darian's way so he can use it to feed his troops. Remind him to leave the carcasses behind, however, as I can animate them and increase my own troop strength with them. Darian knows more of the lay of the land than I do, so I'll simply follow his lead, helping him when he engages the enemy and claiming the corpses of the dead. With any luck, we should be at the king's castle in a few weeks to a couple months. By then, Darian's troops will be *very* battle-hardened, especially fighting alongside mine, and virtually nothing Gorlon-mak can do will deter them. We lay siege to the castle, capture it, and the job is done. Remind Darian that he'll have to keep a tight rein on his troops when they pass near or through Larinian towns and villages - the eunuchs especially. He has to keep them focused on the real enemies; Gorlon-mak and Dorian. One slip and he'll have a massacre on the hands of his 'army of light and justice'."

"Darian says he'll be careful, and the commander of the eunuchs says that he'll carefully instruct his men to remember who their real enemies are."

I sighed. "I really wish I could be there with you instead of occasionally visiting and playing the 'mad witch'. Tell me what the camp is like right now, at least."

"Well, my mistress sees the inside of the headquarters tent. Darian is seated before her, and Joy is seated next to him. Everyone knows she's his wife, and they all think he's playing a dangerous game by toying with the heart of a witch as deadly and as crazy as you. That performance you had two days ago where you brought a whip and groveled nearly nude at Darian's feet, begging him to beat you if he wouldn't at least kiss you was *particularly* effective. Then when you pretended to faint at his kissing your hand - *well! Everyone* is convinced you're *totally* in love and *completely* insane. Of course, my mistress has told them that she not only has you thoroughly under her spell, but she also has a way of dealing with you quietly if you ever get out of hand, though she won't say how. Current scuttlebutt is that you have some hidden weakness, like raindrops or silver arrows. Anyway, also sitting in the tent is Falorim, the commander of the eunuchs; Thorval, commander of the first brigade, and Tybalt, commander of the second brigade. My mistress is pretending to be speaking through me in an attempt to calm you down and relay the battle-plan to you, but what she's really doing is relaying your battle-plan to Darian and the commanders. Darian's now telling my mistress to have me tell you that at the conclusion of the campaign, once he has his throne, he may be willing to do more than simply kiss your hand. What shall you have her say your reply is?"

"Tell them that the witch screamed with joy and said if he doesn't want to make love to her, she'll be happy if he simply whips her to death," I replied.

Swift-wing paused a moment, waiting while Arella repeated what she'd heard through his ears, then spoke again. "The commanders are all shaking their heads at that. Commander Tybalt is asking Darian to please be careful, as you are totally and completely insane. Commander Falorim is saying that your love will hold your loyalty even through your insanity, so long as you never find out that Darian is married to Joy and loves her very much. Joy is saying that this will never happen, as between herself and my mistress, they know women better than Darian's whole army put together. My mistress is saying that her enchantment over you is far too powerful to be broken anyway, though it does need to be regularly repeated, hence your visits with her alone. Now Darian is telling his commanders not to worry, because Arella has kept you in her thrall for the better part of a year with no problems. He's now dismissing the commanders. My mistress asks if there's any other messages you wish me to pass on."

"Yes. Tell her I miss her company very much, and I will be glad when this is over so I can be with her more often," I replied, smiling.

"She says the feelings are mutual. Farewell for now," Swift-wing called, and flew away.

I sighed as I watched his tiny form retreat into the night sky and disappear. Yes, I *would* be glad when this was over. My visits with Arella were limited to once every few days at most, and we couldn't share more than half an hour or so together. I was very lonely, as rotting corpses make for poor companions.

Chapter Thirty

"...the Ancient One was, first and foremost, a Liche, an undead being, returned to life through stealing the body of another. All their actions must be viewed in this light - to deny this is to ascribe humanity to a creature who was, in the end, not human at all."

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

We proceeded southwards according to the plan, Darian's troops on the western flank and mine on the east. My troops encountered only sporadic resistance until the Black River, but Darian's troops fought several battles. Apparently Gorlon-mak intended to try to kill Darian, though he always fled by the time my troops approached. Darian acquitted himself well, and there was little my troops had to do other than beat their shields and groan to frighten off the last of the enemy soldiers. The morale of Darian's troops soared, and I could see he was well on his way to being the hero-king. After all, his troops had defeated the enemy time and time again, without any assistance from mine. He didn't bother to tell them that these battles might just be delaying actions as Gorlon-mak tried to mass his army for something big. No, Darian was smart enough to briefly bask in the accolades of his troops and then push on.

Finally, we reached the Black River, where the Larinian army had set up in the woods on the other side. It didn't look like much of a river to me - more like a creek with a very wide, muddy bed. Darian's troops were held back by a rain of arrows, and it was obvious that I'd have to send my troops in to disperse the archers. As I was about to give the order, Swift-wing flew up to me. "Raven! Don't advance! It's a trap!" he cawed, landing on my outstretched arm. I told my troops to hold their positions, then turned to him.

"You took a great risk coming to me now. You could have been hit with an arrow."

"I was, but it didn't get through my spell of protection! Raven, listen to me! Darian says that the river should be much wider this time of year. He thinks it's been dammed upstream, and they only await your

troops to enter the riverbed before they release the waters!"

I looked, and realized he was right. "That's a stupid idea. At most, they'll wash away a few hundred, and they'll rejoin my ranks in a day or two as they march back from downstream."

"Perhaps, but it will give their troops hope that your troops *can* be defeated! What few prisoners we've managed to capture will tell any secret they know, so long as we promise not to add them to your ranks. They're afraid of you, Raven, *deathly* afraid. They look at your army as being some horrific mass of vengeful dead, risen from the grave to annihilate them all. Darian thinks we can't afford to let them even have *this* much of a victory!"

I nodded. "He's right. Use your spell of returning and rest on Arella's shoulder the rest of today, my friend. You've earned it," I said, and as soon as Swift-wing disappeared, I cast a spell of invisibility and approached the front ranks of my army. Peering out from between the ranks of rotting corpses, I muttered the incantation for the Spell of the Bridge of Stone. With a brief gesture, the eight cubit wide stone arch shimmered into existence. I then ordered my troops to advance across the bridge one unit at a time as I moved to the rear again. A few minutes later, a wash of water came down anyway - a vain attempt to cause the granite bridge to collapse by washing away its underpinnings. '*Huh! Impossible, my friends. I've used that spell for ages, and both ends are on dry, solid ground,*' I thought to myself.

The archers in the woods rained arrows down on my troops as they advanced, but to no avail - The zombies and fresher skeletons were completely unaffected (though the zombies rapidly began to resemble pincushions), and the drier skeletons suffered minor damage as an arrow would break a bone here or there, but that was all. Once my troops approached the edge of the forest, the enemy simply fled. As my troops crossed, I had them gather the arrows they'd been hit with and those that were abandoned on the ground with the enemy's bows, distributing them to the swiftest skeletons among my mounted troops. Now I had about five hundred horse-archers among my troops, and plenty of ammunition. I had my troops quietly move aside for Darian's men, then resume pounding their shields and chanting as they moved back to their position on the eastern flank. I sighed as they did so - my troops' decay had reached the point where most lacked the flesh to chant, and the sound was rather weak.

When we emerged from the southern edge of the Black Forest two days later, we found Gorlon-mak had assembled about fifty thousand troops to meet us on a large, flat grass-covered area Darian called the Yulidian Plain. Gorlon-mak had prepared this battle carefully and well. His troops were well-arrayed across the plain, cavalry to the flanks, pikemen at the fore and archers in the van, and at least a thousand musicians in the rear of their formations played martial music to build their spirits. The sound of rolling drums and the drone of blaring pipes wafted across the field of battle to us, and I was quite impressed. The pipes turned out to be an instrument Darian's people called *fistulo-culeon*, and it was a large, sack-like arrangement with several pipes coming out of it that produced an eerie, droning wail intended to stir the spirits of one's allies and chill the blood of one's enemies (and it did a good job of it, too,

judging by the faces of Darian's men and the faces of the Larinian troops). The instrument was apparently only used by Darian's people in war, and I deeply wished I had a few - after several weeks, most of my troops were of necessity silent, as they lacked enough flesh to speak. Of course, even if I had some, only a handful of my troops had enough flesh remaining to possibly use them. The Larinian's drums were also impressive, ranging from enormous kettle-drums on the backs of large draft horses to small snare-drums worn at the musician's hip. Their music put the pounding and chanting of my own troops to shame (especially since the chanting had become weaker of late as my troops decayed), and I decided I *had* to have some musicians after this battle.

Their troops were about half a league away, well out of spell range. I could see Gorlon-mak riding across the lead ranks of his troops, exhorting them to be brave, and telling them he'd handle the undead for them. *'Oh really? Well, let's just see what you can do,'* I thought. We decided to form up at the edge of the woods so that if Darian's men needed to retreat, they could easily do so into the trees. It was at that point Gorlon-mak did something that surprised me.

Gorlon-mak raised his hand and shouted an incantation in my language, and an earth elemental arose from the ground.

I was flatly stunned for a moment. This was no mere Larinian wizard who'd read a Hyperborean text on warfare, but a true battle-mage. Perhaps he was a battle-mage from one of the other circles, risen from his animuary and possessing the body of Gorlon-mak. Of course, he could also have simply found an old grimoire among the ruins, as well. Either way, he'd have to be dealt with.

I quickly dismounted and drew a circle of protection around me in the ground with my staff (a precaution Gorlon-mak hadn't bothered with, I noticed), then drew deeply on my staff. There were four possible responses to an earth elemental. One was to summon an air elemental and let the two annihilate each other when they came in contact, a net gain of zero. The second was to summon a water elemental to destroy the earth elemental and move on to crush Gorlon-mak's troops, but I didn't have a river or lake handy. The third was to try to dismiss his elemental, but again that was a net gain of zero. I chose the fourth option.

Chanting the incantation to a spell I hadn't cast in over a millennia and a half, I gestured. As Gorlon-mak's troops approached, I sighed in frustration. Before me stood a tiny creature, perhaps a cubit tall, with a barbed tail, claws, fangs and horns. I braced myself for the struggle of wills that would ensue, and was shocked when the little demon nearly overcame me in the first few moments. Mustering my will, I finally dominated it just as Gorlon-mak's troops came within arrow-shot. *"What do you want, mage?"* the tiny demon asked in its language, spitting fire and stomping its little feet in frustration. Demons had an innate ability with languages like that of dragons, but it was so angry at losing the contest of wills it didn't even

bother to try to speak in my language.

"Destroy that elemental, first. Next, those troops that face mine there. Kill as many of them as you can, but those that flee, let them escape. Oh, and capture their drums and drumsticks for me," I replied, gasping from the battle of wills.

"As you command," the little demon replied. It then leaped over the ranks of my troops, landing before them, then took a deep breath that seemed to go on and on and on. As it inhaled, it inflated until it was the size of a giant. Still it inhaled, growing larger and larger. *'Well, I guess I can still summon useful demons after all ,'* I thought to myself with a grin, pleased to see that my skills hadn't slipped. Once the demon was fifty cubits tall, over twice the size of a giant, it finally stopped. Gorlon-mak's troops stopped in their tracks, moaning in fear. The earth elemental plodded on, unafraid. The music from the rear of the enemy troops wavered, then died. The demon then reached out, grabbed the earth elemental, popped it into its mouth, and began chewing. After a few moments, it swallowed it down. Of course, this only destroyed its corporeal form, sending it back to the elemental planes. Even so, it had the effect the demon desired - they *love* to horrify mortals.

"MMMMM! YUMMY!" it chuckled in Darian's language, its voice an ear-shattering, titanic roar of amusement intended to frighten. It worked - about the only troops on the battlefield who weren't frightened were mine.

Gorlon-mak's troops screamed, and many turned to flee. Gorlon-mak tried to dispel the demon, failed, then teleported away, abandoning his horse again (I could see he was going to run a high bill at the royal stables unless he mastered the Spell of Sorcerous Linkage, allowing him to take the dumb beasts with him). The demon then walked among the enemy troops, stomping hard on the ground with enormous, earth-shattering blows that caused many of my troops to stagger and fall. I was sure Darian's troops were having the same problem. I sighed as I realized I should have told the demon I wanted to animate the corpses of the dead. Unfortunately, after his titanic stomps, they'd be little more than paste at the bottom of a clawed footprint in the ground a few cubits deep. After a few moments, the demon stopped. It then strode off for a bit, grabbing the musicians' draft horses one by one as they tried to flee. It stripped the horses of their drums and tossed the animals aside, sending them flying hundreds of paces through the air as they whinnied in fear, their screams cut off suddenly as they slammed into the ground. It then hunted down the fleeing drummers and killed them, taking their instruments, and gathered up all the drums that had been dropped. The demon strode back, dropping all the drums and drumsticks before my troops.

"Here. What else?" it asked.

"Nothing, and thank you very much. You've done an excellent job, and you're truly a credit to your race. Go in peace."

The demon did a double-take, then peered down at me. *"Ah. You're the Hyperborean human Eddas Ayar, Master battle-mage of the Dyclonic Circle. That explains it. Go in peace, Eddas Ayar. Oh, and I hope you don't get pregnant in that crappy little half-elf body you've stolen! Hahahahaha!"* the demon roared in its own language, then faded away.

It wasn't surprising the demon would know me - they were immortal, and we of the Dyclonic Circle were always trained to be polite to those beings we summoned. It probably had heard of me through another demon I'd summoned ages ago. Of course, its ability to recognize me was just another one of their powers. Gorlon-mak's failure to cast a simple spell of dismissal reinforced my first impression of him - he was a damn Larinian hedge-wizard who'd managed to get lucky when he looted the Hyperborean ruins and came up with a text on warfare and apparently a grimoire, too. If he *was* a Hyperborean battle-mage risen from the void, he'd have to be a master or high-master. No master would *ever* fail a simple Spell of Dismissal, and demons were particularly easy to dismiss, since they were summoned and enslaved against their will in the first place.

Swift-wing flapped over to me as the last of the drums and drumsticks were being distributed. I placed the kettledrums on a few of my own undead draft horses, and the rest of the drums I distributed among my better-looking skeletons. I thought they made an impressive and grisly array of skeletal musicians, and was just finishing giving them the last of their instructions when Swift-wing landed on my shoulder. "Darian says 'good job, and thanks.' His own troops were afraid, since they'd never met an enemy who massed that large and their numbers are down to fifteen thousand. They were worried they'd be wiped out."

"Not possible. I'd never let that happen. Besides, my own troop strength is up to a little under thirty thousand. Once the elemental was eliminated, I could have battled his troops all day and eventually won. Of course, that would have entailed massive casualties."

"My mistress asks what was that thing, a demon?"

"Yes. A rather effective one, at that," I replied with a grin.

"I'll say. Raven, I was wondering; why did you have the demon gather the drums?"

"Because most of my troops are too decayed to chant anymore. I wanted them to still be able to intimidate the enemy, and I figured that having their own musicians would do it. I'd have taken the pipes, too, but most of them don't have enough flesh left to play them. Besides, I also figured it'd be such an unusual act, it'd reinforce the idea that I'm insane."

"But do they know how to play them?"

"Humanoid Walking Dead can use any tool you put in their hands. It's part of the powers granted to them from the UnLife energy, along with the ability to move, fight and even think a little bit. Now go back to Arella, my friend. Gorlon-mak's army is scattered. He'll have to try subterfuge next, and you don't want to be around me when he does. Stay next to Darian, and help Arella and Joy protect him." Swift wing nodded, then flapped away.

I sighed, deeply wishing I could have traveled and fought with Darian instead of my rotting, maggot-ridden army. Darian's men already were telling and re-telling stories of great bravery and courage, and I was sure their battles were a wonder to behold. From what Swift-wing had told me, Arella's battle-magic had come in handy on a couple of occasions, and I dearly wished I could see her in action. Darian's skills at woodcraft and riding had also come in handy, as I had known they would, but also his powerful thews, strengthened by months of chopping wood, made him a deadly and tireless warrior in his own right on those few occasions he'd been in personal combat with the enemy. Swift-wing had even told me of the exploits of the eunuchs and their commander, Falorim. They fought fearlessly, as they felt they had nothing more to lose but their lives, and halberds had become their standard arms over the course of the campaign. Dorian's troops in turn had learned to fear their screaming, unrelenting charges as they smote the enemy again and again, their rage and hatred over what had been done to them boiling over into berserk fury. Yes, I was sure that if I rode with Darian, my impressions of this war would be ones of glory and thunder, instead of silence and the stench of decay. I sighed again, then gestured for my musicians to begin. The footmen let out a long drum-roll as I re-mounted, then all the drummers began a slow, booming march-beat as I led my troops off to hold Darian's eastern flank again.

Two nights later, we were in a forest north of Steelgate. I had already encamped, and had my usual patrols about and my troops marching and beating their shields while my musicians played. My

patrol-animals whispered that Darian was approaching, and I told them to let him through. I rose to meet him by the bonfire my troops had made in the center of camp (helps keep the wolves away), and I spotted him riding towards me, carrying a long spear in his right hand. "Darian, what are you doing here alone? It's dangerous - you could be killed!" I called.

Darian spurred his horse and rode towards me, lowering the spear. I tried to dodge aside, but my surprise slowed my reactions. His spear took me just below the ribs on my left side, slamming me down and pinning me to the ground. His grip slipped from the spear as he pinned me to the ground, and one of the rear hooves of his horse narrowly missed my head as he galloped by. My ring of protection had managed to prevent him from disemboweling me, but that was all. *'Why?'* I wondered in shock and pain, and ordered my troops to try to grab him. Darian wheeled his horse and tried to close with me to yank his spear loose and finish me. My troops were faster now, however, since they'd had more time to rot, and quickly stepped around me, reaching for Darian. Realizing his danger, Darian turned his horse and spurred it to a gallop, riding away into the forest. My troops staggered after him for a moment until I ordered them to stop. It was pointless - my mounted troops weren't in position to give chase, and my foot troops couldn't possibly catch him. I grunted in pain as I whispered my recall orders. This was either a trap of Gorlon-mak's devising, or Darian had decided to betray me. I could only hope it was the former.

Dazedly, I tried to pull the spear out, and found I couldn't. I was simply too weak from pain and shock, and it was too firmly rammed into the hard-packed earth. I felt around beneath me, and realized it was barbed, anyway. I could have my own troops pull it out, but that would finish me. *'I need to summon help,'* I realized weakly. Unfortunately, none of my own troops who could still speak could possibly make it to Darian's camp in time for them to return before I died. Besides, there was little that could be done - the blood that I saw on my fingertips from feeling the wound was dark red. My liver had been pierced. I was mortally wounded. *'I am going to die here,'* I realized in irritation. The sounds of marching and pounding and drumming were even more irritating to me, so I ordered all my troops to stop everything they were doing and just stand still.

I looked up to the stars in the silence that followed. "I'm sorry, Yorindar. I tried my best. I guess I've failed. Perhaps Darian decided that the bearer of the skull has outlived their usefulness. No matter. As with all the previous bearers, I die alone," I said to the night sky above me. Slowly, the stars and the firelight faded, then all grew dark.

Chapter Thirty-One

"I don't know if I'll survive this war. I've been wounded twice already. But if I live, so long as I live, I shall never forget those drums. Endless. Maddening. It's just too much. I can't imagine what it must be like for the enemy."

- Commander Javan Tybalt of the Second Brigade, Personal Diary, 1635 NCC

I felt the pull of my animuary on my soul, then slowly felt it ease. I opened my eyes, and saw that I was

back in my tower in Hyperborea. "This isn't where I want to be. Darian has betrayed me. I want to die," I muttered, walking onto the parapet.

"I'd really prefer it if you didn't," a voice said from behind me. I turned to look, and saw a grey-robed, balding, white-haired elderly man step around the eastern corner of the parapet and walk over to me. His beard was long and full, and he carried a weight and power in his frame I'd never encountered in a mortal before. He stood before me, and stared at me with the eyes of an owl. I felt no fear in his presence - I knew my soul was well beyond his reach, and didn't care if he killed me. Hell, I didn't care if he crushed my animus. I just wanted this to be *over*.

"You lied to me, you bastard," I said, wagging a finger at him.

"Only once, to help you escape and slay your enemies. I lied to you then, telling you it was hopeless so that you would grow angry and struggle with all your might. Other than that, I have never lied to you," he replied, his voice calm and commanding.

"Then why didn't you tell me the truth about my people?"

"You never asked," he replied, a wry smile lighting the corner of his mouth.

He had me there. "Okay, you're right. I'm sorry. Even so, this is *it*. You want me to help you, and this is my payment. I don't know why I should even bother. Tell me why, Yorindar. Tell me."

"I cannot. The universe has rules that even the gods must follow, else the Arc of Time shall break and the universe dissolve into chaos. I can talk to you, but I cannot answer your question at this time - it would create a paradox. It's actually very difficult to talk to you, incidentally. It's very tiring, and can't be maintained indefinitely."

"So even the gods are limited?" I asked, amazed.

"Of course. We are merely gods, we are not the Creator," he replied, chuckling.

"Alright, I'll accept that. Even so, I want to know why in the hell I should help you. Darian's people are murderers, and they destroyed my race. Darian himself betrayed me, and now I die."

"All I can say is this; Darian is not your enemy, he is your friend. The war your people and his fought is over, and has been for many centuries. You must be able to forgive him for his ancestor's deeds, and be his friend. Arella is also your friend, and you will also need to be able to forgive her for what she will do. Your forgiveness is the key to all. The future of your beloved Dyarzi and the Hyperborean people depend on your ability to forgive. I cannot say more, as that would break the Arc of Time. Perhaps afterwards, you will understand and thank me," he said, beginning to slowly fade away.

"The future of my beloved and my people? What future? They're *dead!*" I yelled.

"Exactly," Yorindar's voice replied from nowhere.

I awoke to see Arella's face looming over mine, the roof of a tent behind her. "Where?" I croaked weakly, realizing I was abed.

"Hush, now. Don't speak. You were near death, and even now you are not far from it. I've used bloodmoss unguent to heal your wounds, and I even used that spell in your grimoire to remove the scars. Even so, you lost a lot of blood, and you're very weak. Rest now, and give yourself time to recover. In a few days, you'll be ready to travel again," she said quietly, stroking my face.

"Darian betrayed me. He tried to kill me, Arella," I said, irritated at the fact that I was still alive and still trapped in the body of a woman.

"No. That was his brother, Dorian. He dressed in green and rode to your camp, certain that he could get close enough to slay you. He nearly succeeded. We only knew something was wrong when the drumming of your troops stopped. That had been going on night and day ever since you got those drums, and it had begun to *really* bother Darian's men. When it finally stopped, they let out a cheer, not realizing what it really meant. Darian, Joy and I rode here as quickly as we could, and once Joy had snapped the haft of the spear off and lifted you from it, I got to work saving your life. Darian has ordered his men to keep the scavengers away from your troops so they don't get destroyed, but it's been very difficult for them to do so and still protect themselves against Gorlon-mak's army. He has spread the word that you are dead, and uses the silence of your drums and the stillness of your troops as the proof he needs to gather them together again. You need to order your troops to move again, Raven. Our morale is at its lowest ebb ever, and Darian fears our men may begin to desert."

"It wasn't Darian?" I asked groggily.

"No, it was his brother, Dorian. His move was bold, for he shares Darian's bravery. Order your troops to move again, Raven. The army of light and justice needs the army of the vengeful dead to win."

I reached to my side with a trembling hand, and felt that my gloves were still in place, as was the Skull of Hyarlanoth. In fact, it seemed that all Arella had done was remove my robe and cloak. "*Resume standing order number twenty six,*" I whispered in my own language.

There was a brief pause, then a scrape and a rattle like thousands of sticks brushing together, then the booming thud of my drums resumed.

I realized from the volume of the drums and the stamp of rotting feet nearby that I must still be in the middle of my camp. '*I was probably to badly injured to be moved,*' I thought. A ragged cheer went up, which shortly became a roar of joy. "What? I didn't tell them to do that, I simply told them to resume their patrols and defense against animals while the ones in the center of my camp resumed the marching and the music," I wondered aloud.

"That's Darian's men. I told you - they've been trying to protect your troops. You've been unconscious for over a day while I struggled to keep you alive. Your *byallar*-seeds made the difference, I think. I was able to grind the raw seeds into a paste and mix it with bloodmoss to try to stimulate your heart while your flesh healed. I told you they had medicinal value, didn't I?"

"Yes, but we always roasted them to reduce the power of the stimulant. It's enough to make a grown-man's heart flutter otherwise," I replied, grinning weakly.

"When you're well enough to walk, you need to do something to convince the commanders that you're not angry with Darian. Gorlon-mak has spread the word of Dorian's brave deed, how he tricked you because he's Darian's twin. The commanders feel you'll want to kill Darian in revenge, thinking he betrayed you. This is especially true considering how you muttered this several times while you were unconscious."

"Then they don't know this crazy witch very well, do they?" I replied with a weak chuckle.

Gorlon-mak's troops made several thrusts at my perimeter over the next two days, each of which were spotted by my scouts. I warned Darian of each attack through Arella, and his men fought them off. He captured about fifty men in the process, and I asked him to tie them up and place them near my bonfire where my troops could dance around them for awhile to get them into the proper mood. By now, the story of the insane, love-struck witch had reached the enemy's ears, and they believed the same things about me as Darian's troops did. Of course, their stories were far more inflated - according to the prisoners Darian captured, I greatly enjoyed being tied up nude by him and whipped until I bled.

Under Arella's watchful and gentle care, I was able to walk after two days. I put on my robe and cloak again, grinning at the enormous rent and the huge, dark bloodstain on it. Arella had healed my flesh, though you couldn't tell it from my clothing. I was only weak now because I simply had lost so much blood. I told Arella to have Darian meet me by the dried bloodstain on the ground, and had Joy simply carry me to him. Joy laid me down on the ground, and in full view of the prisoners and Darian's commanders, I crawled over to him and lay on the large splash of dried blood that stained the ground at his feet. I reached out with trembling hands and kissed his boots. "Thank you, my love. If it please you to spear me again, you may do so anytime. I live only for your caress, be it in gentleness or in pain."

"Raven, that was my brother, not me. He was trying to kill you to keep you from consummating your love with me. As for me, if you continue to serve me faithfully and well, some day I may consent to lie with you."

"Oh! The rapture of that moment! I live for your touch, my love. As for your brother, I will have to kill him for impersonating the man I love. Perhaps he shall join the ranks of my army. Yes, that would be fitting," I said, kissing Darian's feet. The prisoners blanched at the thought of joining my ranks of dancing, drumming undead, and I had to suppress a grin. Darian then reached down and placed his hands under my shoulders, lifting me to my feet. "Oh! He touches me! I shall swoon!" I cried, though I wasn't too far from the truth - my head swam from lack of blood and my limbs still trembled with weakness. Joy caught me and helped me over to the coil of rope that still lay on the ground near my bonfire. I drew on my staff to summon my Hidden Sanctuary, then tossed the end of the rope into the air where it hung there to the amazement of the prisoners. "My love, I must rest for awhile in the spirit realm. Afterwards, I shall take those prisoners you have and add them to my army. Look at the strength of their muscles, the youth and vigor! Oh, yes. They'll make fine zombies. When you're ready, simply call me and I shall appear," I said, and clambered up the rope, then pulled the rope up behind me.

Darian's prisoners immediately began screaming and begging for mercy. After days of watching my troops dance around them, what little courage they might have been able to muster was totally gone. My disappearance and idle threat was far more than they could take, and I watched out my small window and listened with a wide grin. Darian raised a hand for silence, then spoke. "I am not my brother, who kills without mercy and strikes down an insane, love-sick woman from horseback. These men shall *have* mercy this day. Raven lives at my beck and call, so I shall simply tell her that I decided to release you instead. She'll accept this, as she accepts anything from me. Guards, cut them loose and escort them away from here," Darian said, and strode away as the prisoners wept their profuse thanks.

I drank some of the wine stored in my sanctuary and slept for awhile on the bed. Once I felt better, I climbed down again. Darian and his men had left, as had Arella and Joy. Only Swift-wing remained, perched in a nearby tree. He flew over to me and landed on my outstretched arm. "You had me worried, Raven. I thought you would die," he squawked.

"We ravens are a little tougher than that. Of course, Arella helped a bit, too," I replied with a grin, and Swift-wing and I shared a chuckle for a moment.

"Well, my mistress, Darian, Joy and the commanders are assembled, and my mistress is listening and watching through me. Now what?"

"Now we move on the castle. It's been several hours, so the news that I am not only still alive but also even more deeply in love with Darian than ever will scatter much of what little Gorlon-mak has been able to gather of his army. He'll have to take the remainder and retire to the castle for defense. Come the dawn, we'll move out. We should be there by tomorrow evening, and we'll lay siege to the castle then. After a few months, we'll simply starve them out," I replied.

"My mistress says to tell you she still loves you very much, and she's glad you're alright," he said, then cocked his head at me, gazing at me carefully with one beady, black eye. "Are you alright now?"

"Tired, but fine. Tell her I said 'thank you'. Go now, my friend," I said, and Swift-wing nodded, then vanished as he cast his spell of returning.

Dawn two days later rose with our forces surrounding the king's castle. I had the majority of my troops simply march in an endless clockwise circle around the castle, completely cutting it off. My cavalry stayed outside the circle to intercept any attempt at rescue from outside, while Darian's men stayed inside the circle to stop any breakout attempts. I spent most of my time in my hidden sanctuary, surrounded by five hundred drumming musicians and five hundred bone-dry skeleton-soldiers who were ordered to slay anyone and anything who approached other than Darian, Joy, Arella, Swift-wing or Darian's three commanders. This not only protected me against assassination (which obviously had now become a strong possibility), it also allowed me to stay close in case I was needed, and I could keep an eye on the castle simply by looking out my window. Another bonus was that my 'bodyguards' were all bone-dry, and didn't have the stench of death about them. I'd hoped Arella would choose to spend time with me in my sanctuary, but she told me that she found the pounding of the drums maddening when they were that close. As for me, I'd gotten to like it. My musicians changed their rhythm and music at a word, and I easily instructed them in some old Hyperborean marching-beats which made me feel right at home. Many times I found myself resting or reading one of Arella's books we'd taken with us when we first fled Greenhaven, only to notice I was tapping my toe or bobbing my head to the familiar, ancient rhythms the musicians played. The music was loud, stirring and also recalled many fond memories of old battles and old friends.

At the moment, my musicians were playing one of my favorite beats, one we used to call 'Forward March'. They'd been playing it for the last eight hours (undead don't eat, sleep or breathe, they don't get tired, they don't get bored, and they don't take *byallar*-breaks).

'Rat, tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat, BOOM-tat-BOOM.'

'Rat, tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat, BOOM-tat-BOOM.'

'Rat, tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat, BOOM-tat-BOOM.'

'Rat, tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat, BOOMBOOM.'

'Tat-tat-BOOM-tat-BOOM-tat-tat-tat-tat-BOOM-BOOM.'

'Tat-tat-BOOM-tatBOOM-tatBOOM-tatBOOM-tatBOOM.'

'Tat-tat-BOOM-tat-BOOM-tat-tat-tat-tat-BOOM-BOOM.'

'Tat-tat-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM.'

This then repeats.

Great music, I thought. Unfortunately, few others seemed to share my love of martial drums. Darian's camp was several hundred paces away, and his men who were camped farthest from my drums seemed the happiest. The men inside the castle apparently didn't like it much, either. After the first couple weeks, a few of them tried to slip away, only to be hacked to pieces either by Darian's men or by my circle of marching undead. After the fourth week, a couple of Gorlon-mak's men actually threw themselves off the castle walls and drowned in the moat rather than listen any longer to the incessant beat of my drums. I guess that's the problem with young people these days - no appreciation for fine music. Of course, I'm about sixteen centuries old, so just about everybody's young from my point of view.

I looked up through the window at my guards' silent, mental whisper and noticed Darian approaching my musicians in a short-sleeved tunic. My skeletal guards examined him carefully with their hollow eye-sockets, looking for the scars he had on his arms that his brother didn't have (courtesy of the Vilandian bastards we'd killed). Satisfied, they let him pass. I threw down the rope and came down at his call, and we stood among my musicians. *"RAVEN, I KNOW YOU LIKE THIS, BUT CAN WE CHANGE IT?! IT'S STARTING TO DRIVE A FEW OF MY MEN MAD!"* he roared, trying to be heard over five hundred drums. I raised my hand and whispered. All my drums instantly fell silent, all my troops instantly stopped marching and pounding their shields.

"Why yes, Darian, we can. I think we can spend an hour or two each day just taunting the hell out of them. Look at the castle, Darian. Just my halting the music has most of their men peering over the walls, wondering if this silence means we're about to attack. From now on, at random times, I'll stop everything like I have now. When your men then hear this sound, then they know it's time to jeer at the enemy," I said, and all my skeletons that circled the castle began to pound on the center of their shields twice, then the edge once.

'Boom-boom-CRACK. Boom-boom-CRACK. Boom-boom-CRACK. Boom-boom-CRACK.' echoed from my troops that surrounded the castle.

"While they're doing this, your troops are free to pretty much do anything they want, and the drums will be silent. Tell them to stay out of arrow range, but other than that, be creative. When jeering time is finished, my troops will stop, then resume marching and pounding in rhythm, and the drums will also resume. This will give *your* men a respite, but not *theirs*," I said, and had my troops stop pounding their shields.

"I'll go pass the word. Thank you, Raven," Darian replied, grinning in the silence that followed.

"Don't mention it. If you remember from your training sessions, we Hyperboreans used to call these kind of tactics 'Mind-War'. You slowly drive the enemy mad with it, but you have to be careful not to do the same to your own troops in the process. Undead and the fear they generate are an important part of many 'mind-war' tactics. Anyway, as long as you're here, how's work proceeding on the catapults?"

"My men are nearly done with the first three. I figure they'll be ready sometime tomorrow," he replied.

"Good. We can then start battering the walls a bit with stones and tossing some of my animal troops inside the castle. They probably won't survive it, but their corpses should give the defenders a few interesting diseases to think about."

Darian was about to bid me farewell when we heard Gorlon-mak's voice roll out from the castle walls - apparently he was using the Spell of Voice Amplification. *"So, your stupid drums have finally fallen silent, eh? Maybe you've finally realized that we'll NEVER GIVE UP!"*

I activated one of my rings and roared back at him, causing Darian to jump back and stuff his fingers in his ears. *"WELL, WE THOUGHT WE MIGHT GIVE YOU A CHANCE TO ANNOUNCE YOUR SURRENDER, BUT SINCE YOU PUT IT THAT WAY..!"* I yelled, then whispered my commands to my troops. The troops in my outer circle rattled their weapons against their shields, and those that still had voice let out a low groan that built up to a throaty roar as they *veery slooowly* did an about face. Meanwhile my musicians started a drum-roll that *veery slooowly* built in volume to match the roar of my other troops. When my troops had finished their about face they resumed marching and pounding their shields, this time marching in the opposite direction, while my musicians began playing a martial rhythm we Hyperboreans used to call 'Long March'. I could see Darian's men a few hundred paces away rolling with laughter, and I climbed back up into my sanctuary and glanced out the window at the results. I grinned as two more of Gorlon-mak's troops tossed themselves from the walls in despair, then returned to reading a book of Arcadian poetry Arella had left behind for me.

After a couple more weeks, I noticed Darian's men had begun making up interesting chants during 'jeer-time', and they would stomp their feet and clap their hands in time with my troops as they repeated

their chants. At first they were short and simple, but as the days progressed, they became rather intricate and prolonged. The theme was more-or-less the same, though; *you're going to lose, you're all going to die, you're all cowards*, etc. Those that weren't as musically inclined simply limited themselves to baring their buttocks at the enemy, making interesting finger gestures and otherwise insulting them. A couple weeks after that, I noticed that a few of my drum rhythms had inspired songs to go along with them. 'Long March', especially, had inspired a song that told of Darian's exploits as the brave hero-king on the long march to get here. By the end of the second month, just having my musicians break out into the long drum roll that preceded 'Long March' would cause hundreds of Darian's men to gather wherever they were and sing the song they'd invented, jeering the castle and building their own morale in the process. Meanwhile, we tossed the occasional undead animal into the castle. The larger ones just splattered, but the skeletal chickens and turkeys managed to land relatively intact and run around the castle, greatly unnerving the enemy until they were finally stomped and smashed to powdered bones.

Finally, about the middle of the third month, it became apparent that Gorlon-mak's men had had enough. A dozen of them threw a rope down one of the walls one night and climbed down, running towards our men as they waved a white flag. Darian ordered his men to capture them once they were out of arrow and spell range of the castle, but before they could make it, Gorlon-mak blasted them with an explosion of fire. I instantly ordered all my troops to halt everything, and dead silence fell. I went up as close as I dared, then used my ring of telekinesis to recover their bodies, laying their charred and blasted remains before Darian's feet silently, then returning to my sanctuary. Darian had the remains buried, and my troops remained silent throughout. No words needed to be spoken, as our message to the troops inside the castle was clear. They were on the wrong side of this war, and we pitied them. Once the last shovelful of dirt had been laid over the slain, I had my musicians break out into the long drum-roll that preceded 'Long March', and returned my other troops to their previous activities. The whole of Darian's army sang at the castle, and I knew that the siege would soon be over. There was no way Gorlon-mak or Dorian would be able to hold their men's loyalty now.

The next dawn, storm clouds threatened. I had my musicians cover their drums to protect them from the rain, and for the first time in months the only sounds that could be heard was the pounding of my troops encircling the castle and the quiet conversations of Darian's men as they made breakfast over their cook-fires. It was eerily quiet, and we could all sense the tension in the air. Today would be the day.

The drawbridge to the castle slowly lowered, and five hundred men walked out into the beginnings of a drizzle. They were unarmed, approaching under a white flag, and at their head was Gorlon-mak and Dorian. I wanted to simply blast them to bits and get it over with, but I couldn't - Darian not only had to win the war, he had to win the peace. If I slaughtered these men, then in the eyes of Darian's men and all the people of Larinia, he'd be no better than his brother. Darian, Joy and Arella stepped over to join me as I came out of my sanctuary, but I waved them back. "Darian, let me handle this. You're the king, and you're too valuable to lose," I called, and they nodded and stood back. I had my 'bodyguards' step forward around me as I ordered all my other troops to stand quietly.

I split off the enemy soldiers with my bodyguards, sending them towards Darian's troops to be taken prisoner. After a few moments, it was only Dorian, Gorlon-mak and I, standing alone in the middle of the field, the rain beginning to fall. "We come to make a deal. Dorian and I go free, and in exchange we never bother you again," Gorlon-mak said.

I was stunned at the audacity of the statement. Surely he knew I'd kill him just for being so stupid, so challenging. I wondered what game Gorlon-mak was playing at as I looked him over, then I spotted his staff. In a flash, I recognized it.

It was the same staff that had sat in the main hallway of the Dyclonic Circle for decades, an apprentice always assigned to watch it. It was also propping up a large bell, should the apprentice fall asleep. I looked to Gorlon-mak, and finally knew the truth.

"Vayanar," I said, and spat.

Vayanar blinked, then looked at me. "You know me?"

"Oh, yes, Vayanar. I know you. I even know how you came to be here today. Gorlon-mak decided to explore the Hyperborean wastes, probably seeking arcane knowledge. He found your tomb, and you stole his body and crushed his soul. You probably then used the little hair-doll spell to find out who he was and assume his identity, since your will was too feeble to re-shape his body before the enchantment of Hidden Life transpired. You'd stolen a master's spells, but couldn't steal his training and years of experience. You arose in this body, determined its origin, came back to Larinia, convinced Dorian you could make him king, and turned him against his brother. Oh, yes, Vayanar, I know you. You're a pathetic little mage who never should have been promoted above apprentice. You're the greatest scandal the Dyclonic Circle ever had, and we never found you through all the centuries we looked before the Great War destroyed us. Certainly your talent is strong, but your rash ambition has apparently left gaps in your training, as you've concentrated only on those spells that led to raw power. I once thought you skilled, a great asset to the Circle. You *were* skilled, but you were *no* asset to us. We should have spit on you the day you first knocked on the door to the Black Tower."

"I am *not* pathetic! I am the most powerful mage ever to have joined the Circle, and the masters were too blind to see it! Besides, I didn't turn him against Darian - that was all his idea."

"Why you-" Dorian began, but Vayanar silenced him with a withering glare.

"You've mastered the use of that body quite well, Vayanar," I said, watching him silence Dorian with merely a look. "I suppose the soul that once lived in it was powerful and mature when you crushed it - it must have been, for apparently by the time you finished the battle of wills, the spell's effect had faded and you couldn't re-shape the body into your own," I growled, taking a guess as to why Vayanar had the form of Gorlon-mak instead of his own. Vayanar stared at me in shock, and I knew I'd guessed right. "I wonder what Dorian would think if he knew that you were only twenty-five when you died, just about his age?" I said, and Dorian looked at Vayanar in surprise.

"How do you know so much of me?! Who are you?!" Vayanar yelled.

"I'm not surprised you don't recognize me, Vayanar, just as I'm not surprised you couldn't use meditation to restore the strength of your body, even on a fast enforced by our siege. You never did attain the rank of master, and never learned the mental disciplines that come with it. Perhaps I can refresh your memory by reminding you of the time I struck you down with my staff in front of the High Master? Or how about the time I defeated you at Chorim keep? Or perhaps you'll remember who I am when you recall that you hired the Flame-Knives to kill me, and ended up killing my beloved instead? You *always* failed when your plans ran afoul of me," I said, clenching my fists around my staff.

"*You!*" Vayanar hissed in realization, his face darkening with anger and hatred.

"Yes, you bastard. It's me."

He began to incant a spell to blast me, but I simply rammed my staff into his teeth, knocking him to the ground. "I see you didn't learn your lessons very well, Vayanar. You definitely never should have been promoted above apprentice. When in close, a battle-mage always uses *short* spells!" I said, smashing him in the sternum as he tried to begin another spell.

Vayanar lay there, gasping for breath. "Now I'll kill you, Vayanar. You've done enough harm in this world," I said, and raised my staff to strike as he spat out broken teeth.

"Go ahead! Kill me! My animuary is buried in this field! I'll take another body and simply blast you before you can find it! If you kill that one, I'll take another, then another! You'll never defeat me, and eventually I'll kill you!" he gasped, struggling to his feet by leaning on his staff. "Come on, do it! This body is tired from lack of food, and I can't even use my magic to escape. I *need* a new body! Kill me, if you dare! Hah! You can't, can you?! I've outwitted you again, as I did before!" he chortled, blood streaming from his mouth.

I lowered my staff, then raised the Skull of Hyarlanoth. I spoke a long string of syllables, and Vayanar quickly began his own spell as I did so. Dorian, fearing he'd be caught in the middle of a magical duel, leaped back. I finished, and I felt a brief tingle rush up my spine as the skull's eyesockets flared with a brilliant white light. A heartbeat later, it crumbled to dust ineffectually. Vayanar finished his spell, a complex but only slightly draining spell known as the Spell of the Telekinetic Bolt. A blast of force smashed me to the ground, and I lost my grip on my staff. I was stunned, groggy, but still conscious - my ring of protection had saved me. Vayanar was gasping with the effort of casting the spell, even with the minor drain it imposed. "Hah! None of you can touch me! I'll cast my most powerful spell, draining this body to death, and then take a new body and continue killing all of you!"

Joy handed Darian his bow and an arrow, already knocked. "Joy, I can't! He'll simply take another body!" Darian objected.

"Do it, Darian! Kill him! He may finish me, he may not! Either way, kill him!" I called groggily, slipping in the mud as I tried to struggle to my feet while summoning my staff to my hand. I needed it in my grip so I could draw upon it for the energy I needed to slay Vayanar with a spell.

Vayanar ignored my groggy attempts to rise and slay him. "Go ahead. Shoot," he called, sticking out his chest and grinning. He had passed up a perfect opportunity to slay me. It would be his last mistake.

Darian looked to me, then nodded. Drawing the arrow back, he sank it into Vayanar's chest. Vayanar grinned, then coughed blood. "I'll be right back, and then I'll kill you for that!" he chuckled. Darian's shot hadn't been immediately fatal, as his bowstring was wet and had stretched a bit, throwing off his aim.

I looked down to Vayanar in disgust. "No, you won't, you bastard. You never made it to Master, and as

such you never learned of the more powerful Hyperborean artifacts. This pile of dust washing away at my feet was once the Skull of Hyarlanoth. I've used its fourth and *ultimate* power, and destroyed it in the process. Its ultimate power is to cancel the Spell of Hidden Life, linking the soul to the body it is in and destroying the animuary along with itself. You're dying, you bastard, and for the last time. Your animuary is just a bit of dust in an iron box somewhere in this field. My only regret is that I couldn't have found it and destroyed it myself, crushing your soul forever. Unfortunately, with all these undead around, I'd never have spotted its *Mana*-flow. So long, Vayanar. If there's any justice among the gods, you'll spend your afterlife in hell."

"No! It's not possible!" he said, then fell to coughing. Joy handed Darian another arrow, and Darian sunk it in Vayanar's throat. He clawed at it spasmodically, spurting blood, then collapsed.

Silence reigned, save for the sounds of the falling rain.

Now only Dorian and I stood in the middle of the field. Darian, Joy, Arella and Swift-wing stood twenty paces away, Darian's commanders behind them. Darian's troops gazed on behind them, peering through the falling rain as they tried to see what was happening.

Dorian looked around, then smiled at me and stepped up, his arms wide. I looked at Dorian as he approached. He was dressed in a similar green garment to Darian, but the fabric was of fine silk - obviously another attempt to fool me was in the works when they'd finally decided to give up. He was soaked to the skin, dripping wet in a garment that couldn't keep the slightest bit of moisture from him. Two and a half months of siege hadn't done him any good - he was thin. Of course, Darian led a much more active life, so perhaps this was how Dorian usually looked, just a little hungrier than usual. I probably hadn't noticed the first time I saw him. "That's far enough. What is it you want, Dorian?"

"Raven, you love my brother. I say I'm a far finer specimen of man than he. I have the same face, the same eyes, everything you find attractive in him. He won't touch you, Raven, but I will. Join with me, and I'll make love to you every night. No tricks, no lies. See? I am unarmed. I love you, Raven. Please say you'll be mine," he said sweetly, holding out his arms.

"*Ooooh*, Dorian! You're *so* brave to come here and say that to me! Come over here, Dorian," I replied, batting my eyes in the way I'd remembered Dyarzi doing and leading him away from the others until we were out of earshot. I then stopped and turned, and as Dorian stepped up to me, I held my hand out when he was just out of arm's reach. "Close enough. I just want to make absolutely certain we're not

overheard. Are you truly unarmed? Do you really love me?" I asked in a whisper, pretending to be excited.

"Yes, my dear. I've heard how you love my brother, but he refuses to lie with you. I won't refuse, my dear. Join with me. Turn your army against my brother's army and crush him. When we're victorious, I'll make you my queen. I won't refuse to lie with you like my brother does," he replied, smiling wickedly.

"Dorian, you're a complete fool. All that was a lie. I don't love Darian anymore than I love any other man. I'm a sapphire, you idiot. But, since you've offered me your heart, I think I'll take it," I said, and as his face changed to an expression of shock and fear, I drew on my staff as I spat out the incantation to the Spell Of Evisceration. Dorian screamed in pain as his chest burst open, his heart leaping out to fly to my hand, still beating. He staggered for a moment, then collapsed. I squeezed his heart until it trembled, then stopped. I then looked down on him, dropping his heart disdainfully and walking back to my sanctuary to climb back in.

Darian's troops picked up Dorian's body, and Darian stood below my sanctuary and called to me. I climbed back down as the rain began to pour hard. "What is it?" I asked.

"Dammit, Raven, did you have to kill him?!" Darian asked, his face a mask of sorrow and rage.

"Of course, Darian. He was a threat to your throne. He already usurped it once, pretending to be you. He tried to get me to turn on you, turning all thirty thousand of my troops against you. Darian, he was evil. If I'd let him live, he would have eventually killed you to regain the throne again as the only rightful successor. I knew you wouldn't be able to do it, so I did it for you," I replied calmly.

"But he was my *brother!*" Darian yelled.

"And he also was responsible for the deaths of thousands of innocent Arcadian children, the castration of their men, and the enslavement of their women. He was a rabid dog, Darian. He needed to be destroyed."

"Dorian didn't do that, Gorlon-mak did!" Darian objected.

"Darian, one of the last and most important things I can teach you about being a king is this; the king is responsible for *everything*. You can't just shrug your shoulders and say 'well, my advisor told me this was a good idea' or 'but, I didn't do that, my general did.' When you're the king, *you're* responsible. He was the king, he could have ordered it stopped. He chose not to. He was responsible, Darian. The fact that his lackey Gorlon-mak did the job doesn't change that. Look at your men, Darian. The eunuchs are celebrating. Go tell them that you're sorry your brother's dead and see how long they stay by your side. They know who castrated them. Gorlon-mak may have ordered it, but Dorian ordered him."

Darian thought about it for a moment, then sighed. "You're right. It's just that I loved him once."

"And you always will. Now take me in your arms and kiss me on the forehead so your men will see you're rewarding me for having done the right thing, not griping at me. After that, send Arella over to kill me," I replied. Darian nodded, reaching out to take me in his arms, then kissing me on the forehead. I suppressed a shudder of revulsion, instead pretending to faint. Darian held me up for a moment and patted my cheek until I pretended to awaken, then turned and walked away while I groveled in the mud behind him. I dropped my Hidden Sanctuary spell, then lay there in the mud as the rain fell, moaning my joy and rolling around in ecstasy. Arella sloshed up to me, then knelt down in the mud beside me.

"Goodbye, my love," she said, kissing me. As she sat back up, I vanished.

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

"...and thus did Eddas Ayar deceive the people of that day, taking all the fear and hatred the war had generated upon themselves, and then dissipating it through shamming death. It has been theorized by some historians that this was done to insure Darian's smooth ascendance to the throne, and that the Ancient One's honor was preserved through the artifice of a false identity, and finally that the later revelation of Eddas Ayar's identity as the first Raven of Yorindar was an accident, a mere quirk of fate. I would argue in return that this presumes the Ancient One first would even care what mere mortals might think of them - a patently false assumption."

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

"No, no, no! You tell Arella to tell Darian that you *cannot* levy a tax like that on millers! If you do, the cost of bread rises, and some of your poorest people *starve*. If you *have* to levy a tax on wheat, then make it a share that each miller gives to the crown - say one stone of flour for every twenty he grinds. Then the crown sells the flour back to the people at a discount, undercutting the miller. People will want to buy the king's flour because it's cheap, but there won't be enough of it to harm the miller's business. In

exchange, each miller is allowed to set their own prices instead of being regulated by the crown," I said to Swift-wing as we sat on the western parapet of my tower, watching the sun set.

"My mistress says that Darian says that won't work; the millers will buy the wheat for next to nothing, then sell the flour at an insane price."

"At which point those millers who charge more reasonable fees will be the ones the farmers take their wheat to, and they'll also be the one the villagers buy their flour from. Those that try to gouge the people will very quickly find themselves out of business. Yes, many areas won't have mills close enough to compete in this manner. In those places, you help new mills be built so that there *is* competition, such as by funding the construction with the king's treasury."

"More money out of the treasury instead of in, Darian says."

"Initially, yes. In the long run, no. You can't harvest *byallar* in the first year of planting, you have to let the trees mature first. After Darian's done this, in a few years he can pass anti-monopoly laws, too."

"It'll never work, Darian says."

"Fine! *He's* the expert, *I'm* only sixteen centuries old, obviously I don't know a *damn* thing! He asked for my advice, I've given it, and if he doesn't like it, you tell Arella to tell him I said he can go straight to hell!" I roared, irritated to hear my voice come out as a woman's screech.

Swift-wing was silent for a moment, then spoke again. "Darian says he's sorry, he says he knows you trained him well in Hyperborean economics, he's just a little worried that the Larinian economy won't be able to make the change over to a Hyperborean 'free-market'."

"Well, we Hyperboreans argued about that for a long time, and we found out it works. And *if* he'll follow the lessons I gave him, it *will* work! I don't *care* what the traditions have been for a millennium, I don't *care* what all his other advisors say, *I'm* the one that knows what he's talking about!"

"Darian laughed and said that's what *all* his advisors say."

"Oh *really*? Well perhaps he should keep in mind that none of *them* is over sixteen centuries old, and none of *them* restored his crown to him, helped him find a distant cousin of king Priam to run Arcadia as a satellite state until it's back on its feet again, helped him intimidate the Vilandians into returning most of the women they'd bought in exchange for not declaring war on them, *and* got him the most beautiful woman in Hyperborea as his queen! *He's* the king, not me, and he can overrule me if he wants to, but when his entire economy comes crashing down around his ears, he *damn* well better not come complaining to me about it!"

"Joy asks what about combining the two ideas? Start off with a tax for immediate income, then phase it out and replace it with the program you talked about?"

I thought about it for awhile, then nodded. "Tell them the evil witch danced in celebration of Joy's wit and wisdom. Once again, her idea will work perfectly - *if* Darian doesn't tax more than one share of twenty!" I said, wagging a finger at Swift-wing.

"Don't point that thing at me! I'm just passing along the messages," Swift-wing huffed.

"Sorry, I'm just a little tense. I really wish Arella could find the time to visit me again."

"She'd love to, but her duties as court wizardess are really keeping her hopping. She says she's sorry it's been a month since she last visited, but after all, it's only been a year since you vanished with your Spell of Returning and Darian took the throne. She could visit you tonight with her Spell of Returning, but she's afraid all she'd do is sleep until morning, then have to go right back. She's very busy, and all she really does in her free time is sleep. It doesn't help that she discovered the evil witch Raven's secret weakness, one *nobody* would have guessed - the kiss of a woman!" he cackled. "Now she's considered the wisest mage in the land, and the king's witch gets many requests for advice in matters of a thamaturgical nature."

I nodded. Arella's constant work in helping Darian *was* time consuming, but she'd become a better

thinker and a better mage for it. Arella's skills had improved to the point where I felt she was no longer an apprentice, and promoted her to the rank of full mage in the Dyclonic Circle a few months ago, skipping the rank of journeyman entirely (and I was certain she'd probably become a master in the circle as soon as her work with Darian was complete, and she could return to my tower to resume her training and study). Even so, I could barely suppress a sigh as I replied.

"Meanwhile all I *have* is free time. I can't leave here and search the ruins for anything useful to help me bring Dyarzi back because Darian might need to consult with me. I could have the giants look, but they don't even know what to look *for*. Sure, Dragonslayer, Felicity, Strider and all the other giants of Dohbari village were *overjoyed* to see me - they didn't expect me back for at least a century or two, and to be frank, neither did I before I left. I figured I'd probably get killed fighting that war, and have to rise again from the void - I nearly did, too. Even so, they've got their own lives to lead. They can't sit around here all day and keep me company," I grumbled. I supposed I shouldn't complain. Joy's plan for Arella to be able to visit me in my seclusion and me to advise Darian through Arella and Swift-wing *did* work, and it was certainly better than my original idea of simply disappearing and spending the rest of this life alone. Just as her visits during the war had helped me make it through then, her visits now helped me make it through this period, too.

"What about Rhane the dryad?" Swift-wing asked.

"What about her? She's still with Tybalt. Darian gave him the twig-ring since he seemed the best candidate and he was more than willing, and it may be *two decades* before she's done with him."

"Well, there's always me!" Swift-wing squawked brightly.

"Yes, on the three or four nights a week that you visit, in between handling Darian's questions."

Swift-wing sighed. "I wish there was more I could do, my friend, but I'm afraid things are going to get even busier in the future. Think about all the advice Darian's going to need when he tries to change the laws to where women have more rights!" he said, finishing with a small cackle of amusement.

I smiled slightly. "Yes, Darian's *really* going to have his hands full then. Well, if there's nothing more, I guess I'll be saying goodbye for now."

"No, nothing tonight. Farewell," Swift-wing called, then muttered his spell of returning and vanished.

I took a seat on the edge of the parapet, then sighed as I looked at the setting sun. I missed Arella, I missed Darian and Joy, I missed their friendship and companionship. Hell, I even missed my musicians. Of course they, like all my other undead troops, were now buried outside Darian's castle. As soon as I'd 'vanished', transporting myself back to my tower in Hyperborea, I'd whispered my last instructions to my troops. I had each of them dig their own grave, climb in, then buried them with my animal troops and simply let them all go. Now, in the silence of my tower as I looked over my lands, I dearly missed my musicians. I could use some familiar music to remind me of good times and good friends.

I looked to the setting sun, and spoke. "Yorindar, I really hope you have a plan to help me, as well. Like I said before, I'd hate to find out you're up in heaven or hell or wherever it is that you Arcadian deities live, laughing up your sleeve at me. After all, Darian's kingdom is won, and all he really needs me for now is advice. I've done everything I've done in the hope that I'd be rewarded with my beloved. Yes, I was hoping that I'd have her again, yet there are times I think I'd be happy with just a brief glimpse of her in a dream. Please tell me that the destruction of the skull breaks its curse, and I won't die alone."

The sun sank quietly in the west, and no answer was forthcoming. I watched as the stars came out, then went back into my chambers.

Ten years later, in the middle of the fall, Swift-wing visited me again as I sat in a chair on the parapet, watching the leaves of the trees on my plantation turn various shades of brown and gold in the sun. I was surprised to see him, as it'd been a month since his last visit. Darian's kingdom seemed to be running smoothly, and even his passage of laws that forced the guilds to admit women had gone well. After all, it was known throughout the land that three women helped Darian regain his kingdom; Joy, Raven and Arella-tor (though Raven was insane, and had to be destroyed by the mage Arella-tor once Raven's job was complete). Women probably would never be completely equal to men, but they no longer lived in thrall. The Arcadians were nominally independent now, but the Larinian and Arcadian economies were so closely interlocked that it seemed very unlikely they'd ever go to war again. For its part, Arcadia was still the same totalitarian feudal state it had been, but Larinia was slowly turning into an imitation of the Hyperborean economy and government I remembered. It probably would never be *completely* as I remembered Hyperborea being, especially considering so *much* of what we knew had been lost, ranging from pane-glass and sewage systems to magitech and battle-sorcery. Also, the Larinians were different people and would apply our ideas differently. Even so, they'd be happier and freer for having learned from our dead civilization.

I smiled and reached out my gloved hand for Swift-wing to perch upon. "What is it this time, my friend? Darian has another question about establishing a Royal Bank?" I asked. Swift-wing shook his head and

didn't perch on my hand, and after a moment I lowered it. "What's wrong?"

"My mistress asks me to ask you if a mage can leave the Dyclonic Circle. She doesn't want to leave the position of Court Wizard, as she not only enjoys it, but she has realized that as she is the first sorceress to hold this position in the entire history of Larinia, she is a great role-model. No man can claim women are lesser than he when the king himself has a woman as his closest advisor. Even so, she also knows that no mage of the Dyclonic Circle can be the vassal of a king," Swift-wing replied quietly.

I was shocked and hurt. "The scandal...!" I began, then stopped. After a moment, I hung my head. "No. There's no scandal. My people are dead. The rules of the order allow a member to leave at any time before they become Master and learn the greatest secrets. It's just never done. We considered it a great shame to lose a member that way, as they joined freely and stay freely. Yes, she can leave the Circle if she wants."

"Thank you. Darian wanted to tell you he had a plan for helping the Arcadian and Larinian economies thrive. He intends to build a wall fifty cubits high stretching from the foothills of the Granite Mountains all the way to the Bright Sea - such a project would employ many. The dwarves have approved of this plan, and they will be sending several thousand craftsmen to help cut the stone and put it in place. The wall would be built along the Wailing River, which marks the southern edge of the Great Southern Dead Zone. The wall would be manned by both Larinian and Arcadian troops."

"Alright, but *why*? What purpose would it serve?" I asked.

"The public has been told it is to protect them against the fearsome giants and dragons of the Hyperborean wastes, as well as the raging *Mana*-storms that occasionally arise. The truth is that there are many devices of power in Hyperborea that the giants guard, not even knowing what it is they guard. This would help them by blocking off fifty leagues of open land. The dwarves already patrol the mountains thoroughly for intruders, as they hate goblins and bandits as much as anyone."

"But Darian *knows* that the giants are no danger to him - hell, he *married* one! Why would he perpetuate the myth that they're a threat? Aside from that, there hasn't been a real *Mana*-storm in Hyperborea in centuries, as far as I can tell from talking to the giants. Well, there was that one that affected Joy's mother, but that's it."

"Yes, but we must do what we can to keep treasure-hunters and power-seekers out. The war-machines of the Invaders and the mighty artifacts of the Hyperboreans must be kept safe. Joy has already said that the giants probably won't mind - they don't have any interest in leaving their territory anyway, and their territory is now all of Hyperborea from the wall north to the snowy wastes. Since dragons fly, Darian assumes they won't even notice the wall or even care."

I nodded. "He's right. His plan has merit, and I believe it will work. That wall combined with the patrols of the giants will keep Hyperborea safe. Only, have him lay down strict rules for the soldiers on the wall so that they won't shoot at any giants they may see, as this may spark a war."

"Darian has already thought of that. He only asks that you tell the giants the plan, and ask them to occasionally make an appearance far in the distance so that the soldiers can see there *are* giants in Hyperborea. No one knows Joy is a giant, and Darian's afraid that if the truth be known, his people will no longer accept her as his queen."

"That shouldn't be much of a problem. The giants can head around the eastern or western edges of the Great Southern Dead Zone to make an appearance once a year or so. They won't be terribly happy with humans fearing and hating them, though."

"They'll still have you," Swift-wing replied quietly, and I nodded.

"That they will. Is there anything else?" I asked.

"Yes. Darian wishes to reinforce this fear of the Hyperborean wastes by leaving condemned men there to die. He asks that you pick them up invisibly, take them away and quietly execute them. Their disappearances will reinforce the idea that the Hyperborean wastes are deadly. If this is not feasible, then perhaps you could come up with an alternate method of making an impressive show of their final punishment anyway."

"I am *not* an executioner of common felons and murderers!" I snapped. I was disgusted - to a Hyperborean, the profession of Executioner was the lowest profession that could possibly be called

honest.

"These aren't common felons and murderers. These are war-criminals. Men actually responsible for the eunuchs, the rapes, and the pillage of Arcadia. The last of them has been captured, the last of their trials is complete, and they sit in prison awaiting their fate. Some have waited nearly ten years. Darian feels that since their lives served no purpose except evil, their deaths should serve the cause of good, protecting Arcadia and Larinia from the dangerous weapons that lie buried in Hyperborea."

I ground my teeth - I couldn't expect Swift-wing or Arella or Darian to understand, but Joy should know better. "Did Darian consult with Joy on this?"

"Yes. Joy said that you would probably be deeply insulted by it - though Darian and Arella don't understand why. Even so, it's the best way to reinforce the notion that Hyperborea is deadly, and shouldn't be entered. We have to keep people out of here, for the sake of the future of the people in the Southlands, Darian says."

I ground my teeth again. "How many are there?"

"Darian says enough to provide one a week for five years. They intend to start once the wall is finished, in about twenty years."

I didn't want to say 'yes', but I could hardly see any other choice. Darian was right - it was a good plan to keep the people of the Southlands out of here. I sighed. "Alright. Just let me know when the first is to be picked up."

"Good. Farewell, my friend."

"Wait! Stay awhile. It's been a month since I saw you last, and nearly six months since I saw Arella. I'd like to chat awhile with you. Also, when does Arella plan to visit me next?" I asked.

Swift-wing was silent for a long time before he replied. "She doesn't plan on visiting you anymore, my friend. I'm sorry."

"What? Why?" I asked, stunned.

"She's getting older, Raven. She sees the gray hairs in her head, the wrinkles around her eyes. You are not. It shames her, and makes her feel uncomfortable to be around you. She loves you dearly, but being near you causes her to feel shame and pain. Also, over the years of talking to you through me, hearing only your words without hearing your voice or seeing your face, she realizes that what you told her a long time ago was correct - you aren't a woman, and you aren't a sapphite. You're a man trapped in a woman's body. You're also an old man. You were over ninety when you died, and you were crotchety, cantankerous and set in your ways. You still are, to some extent. You don't like it when people disagree with you on subjects you consider yourself to be an expert in, and you're very vocal about it. She's no longer a young woman who'll bend to your temper. She's nearly forty, and she's developed a temper of her own. I'm sorry, my friend. She won't be coming again."

"Please, my friend! Tell her I'm sorry! I can't help getting angry at times, it's just that I'm so lonely here! I've stayed in or near my tower for ten years, waiting to help Darian when he should need me! As such, I haven't been able to do anything about trying to find a way to bring Dyarzi back to me, and my loneliness has at times made my temper short. Please ask her to forgive me!"

"I'm sorry, my friend, but that's the final reason she won't be back. She has loved you for over a decade, knowing that you love someone else, someone who's dead. It hurts her to have to compete with the dead for your affections, knowing she can never win. Now she sees her youth has faded, and knows she can never win your heart. She asks you to remember the good times you shared together, and simply let her go. She will always be your friend, and she will probably always love you, but she can never be with you again. It hurts her too much."

I looked away for a moment, tears brimming in my eyes. A gentle breeze moved over the trees of my plantation, and I watched them ripple like a golden ocean of leaves. I wanted to snap out something cruel, like *'Tell the bitch I said she can go to hell,'* but I suppressed it. If I had learned anything about women, I had learned that Arella wasn't trying to be cruel to me. As such, I shouldn't be cruel to her. She was right - I didn't love her. My one true love was dead. She was right. Even though I had adapted to and accepted this body as my own, deep inside I was still my old self. She was right about everything. "Tell her I said I understand. I am sixteen centuries old, after all," I replied quietly.

"I'll still visit you, my friend. Darian still occasionally needs your advice, and I enjoy your company," Swift-wing croaked quietly.

"I appreciate that. In fact, I wish you'd been here yesterday. Dragonslayer and Felicity came by to show me their new baby. That brings them up to three, now; a boy, ten, a girl, six, and this little baby girl they have now."

"How does the little hatchling look?" Swift-wing cackled.

"She has her mother's eyes, that's certain. Unfortunately, she also got her father's nose," I chuckled.

Swift-wing looked over the *byallar* trees, their golden leaves waving in the breeze. "How was the harvest this year?" he asked.

"The giants managed to gather two hundred barrels of seed. They refused to take all of it, and left me fifty barrels of ground and roasted seeds. It's been like that for years, and I now have more *byallar* than I could drink in five or six centuries. Thank the gods the elves like it. I traded five barrels for a book on elvish magic theory last year, and they came by this year to trade me a whole wagonload of fine furniture, thirty reams of fine vellum, five hundred quills and ten gallons of ink for the fifty barrels the giants left me."

"Did you find the book useful?" Swift-wing asked.

"Not really. The elves don't have any way to bring Dyarzi back, either. They know about as much about magic theory as I do," I sighed.

"What about the dwarves?"

"As far as magic theory is concerned, I know more than they do. Their magic is that of the miner, the smith, and the craftsman. Certainly, in their areas of expertise, they outshine me *easily*. Overall, however, their knowledge falls somewhat short of mine. As far as the *byallar* is concerned, they like it, but they don't really have anything I need to trade for it - money is essentially useless to me since all the merchants of my people are dead, and I conjure my own food and drink whenever I need it. About all I need is paper and ink, and the elves gave me plenty of that. A dwarf-merchant came by four years ago and tried some, and agreed to bring a work-crew to dig me a new tomb here on my lands in exchange for fifty barrels. I had him throw in the fine flintlock blunderbuss he was carrying, a barrel of powder and three stone of shot so I'd be able to liven up my diet with wild game (as well as try to break the tedium of my life with a little hunting), and we had a deal. I figured with the giants patrolling regularly, this area is safer than where my tomb used to be, and safer even than it would be in Darian's lands. Of course, I didn't tell the dwarves whose tomb it was going to be. I spent a few months moving my tomb, and now Dyarzi sleeps over there, beneath those trees," I said, pointing.

"I'm sure when the dwarves think of something else you might be interested in, they'll come back," Swift-wing offered.

I looked to him. I could tell he was stretching for things to talk about. "You want to go home, don't you?"

"Well, my mistress isn't listening in now, so I can speak freely. If it was up to me, I'd have her move here and live with you forever. I understand her feelings, I just think that she should put them aside and be with you until she grows old and dies. You're a good friend, and you deserve companionship, not loneliness. I want to stay with you. I like it here. Unfortunately, she wants me to wrap up my conversation and come home as soon as I can. She only wants me to visit when Darian needs your advice. I say that after everything you've done for her, she should repay you with her company. Ah! I've said too much. I should go. Will you be alright? I mean, can I leave you and know you'll still be here when I visit again?"

"I'll be fine. Go, my friend. I'll see you the next time Darian needs some advice. Tell Darian I'll pass the word of his plan onto the giants, and I'll handle the condemned men for him. Don't worry. I'll be fine. Farewell," I called.

"Farewell, my friend," Swift-wing replied, then vanished.

I didn't see him again for another three years.

Swift-wing only stayed briefly then, simply coming to tell me Darian's announcement that not only was the wall well under construction, Joy was pregnant. I extended my congratulations on both successful projects, and he left again. Swift-wing visited again nine months after that to announce Joy had birthed a strapping son.

After that, I didn't see him for another four years.

At that time, he visited to announce that Joy had birthed a daughter and to ask my advice on a few matters (primarily questions on economics). It didn't hurt much when he left again, though. I found that after nearly two decades of isolation, the pain of loneliness eased to a dull ache, like a bad knee that sometimes twinges before the rains come. I spent my time studying magic theory, trying to find a way to bring Dyarzi back to me. It was all I had left.

Ten years later it was the middle of winter, and the snows this year fell deep. A blizzard covered my lands in a blanket of white, and then slowly moved south. I ignored the cold with my ring of adaptation, and simply sat there in my room, studying my books and making notes on possible spell formulas I could use in my quest. Winter's chilling fingers drew intricate patterns of frost both inside and out on my windows as the blizzard moved on, but I cared not. Study and research had become my entire life, now, and nothing else was important. Indeed, I had stripped my life down to the barest of essentials, even going so far as to simply remove the hood from my cloak and sew it directly to my robe so that I wouldn't have to bother wearing the cloak anymore - this simplified the process of dressing and undressing, as the only reason I wore the cloak was for the hood to shield my eyes from the sun when I occasionally went outside. Suddenly, as the shadows of evening fell and I had just finished striking a spark of magical illumination to keep working into the night, I looked up at the ominous sound of stupendous, leathery wings, and the low sound of a rumble.

"Eddas."

It was Karg the Terrible, come to visit. I smiled and closed my book, then strode out through the door onto the parapet. *"How are you, my friend?"* I asked, grinning broadly.

"I am fine, thank you. I've come to ask you if you're still interested in the grimoire of the White Witch of Iolo Mountain."

"I'm afraid I don't have anything to offer you for it, unless you've developed a taste for byallar," I replied with a chuckle.

"Bleah! That vile black concoction you Hyperboreans used to drink? No, thank you. I can't understand what you see in it. Just the thought of it curls my teeth," he replied, and we shared a chuckle. "I'm surprised you got the elves and dwarves interested in it, though. I even had Durin, the king of the dwarves, come to my cave and ask me my advice. He paid me a fine golden goblet to tell him what I thought they might offer you for another two hundred barrels - the giants of Dohbari village drink most of what they grow, and the dwarves say the byallar the other giants grow isn't as strong as yours. I told him I'd ask, and after they'd left and I sealed my cave with sorcery, I came. I reasoned that I owed you the White Witch's spellbook anyway, and it was as good an excuse as any to visit."

"Why would you owe me her grimoire?"

"That little bartender spell you gave me was far more valuable than it first appeared. For a human, they might manage to produce a mug of ale or two, so I figured I might be able to squeeze a barrel of elf-wine or so out of it. I have little need for drink, but I found my greater strength and will allowed me to produce quite a bit from it if I concentrated - ten to twelve barrels at a time, if I tired myself. I then wondered if I could develop a vintage of my own, one more suited to my own tastebuds. It seemed an interesting challenge that would occupy a few years, so I toyed with the spell, producing a barrel a day of various flavors until I hit on one combination I liked. I called it "Karg-Wine", and was quite pleased with myself. I then worked on a slight variation of the spell that wouldn't take as much effort to produce drink by the barrel. I used it to produce two thousand eight hundred and fifty-three barrels of Karg-wine over the course of the first few months I had it. Very tasty and quite amusing to produce, but after awhile I decided I'd gone a bit overboard," Karg said with a rumbling chuckle.

"Your cave must have been overflowing with barrels!" I said, chuckling with him.

"Indeed. Even after I threw out all the empty barrels, my cave was still packed with thousands of full ones. Well, I pondered what to do with all of these barrels for quite some time, and finally

ended up calling on the king of the dwarves. After I made their hastily-summoned army realize I only wanted to talk, I traded all my wine in exchange for a chest of gold. I reasoned that with my new variation on the spell, I could now produce a barrel or two of it easily should I ever find I had a yen for it, so I sold all I had to the dwarves. Their reaction to my wine was a bit more than I expected, however. Suddenly I found I had not only made an ally, but I also was in the winery business," he said, and we chuckled for several moments.

"Karg, I know of no other dragon that's managed to befriend the dwarves, and I certainly know of no other dragon that's had the king of the dwarves come to him and ask for advice," I said, shaking my head in disbelief as I chuckled. *"So, you told him you'd ask me what I might want, eh? Well, I can't think of anything I really need. The elves have been trading me grimoires and treatises on magic theory, but I'm really not interested in works by the dwarves - their magic isn't really what I'm looking for. It's not that they're bad spellcasters, far from it. They've just specialized in areas I'm not interested in. They just don't have anything I want, as far as I can see,"* I finished, shrugging.

"I agree. The one thing you really want lies beneath my feet," Karg replied.

"What? Oh, that's right. I forgot you can sniff out a gold coin a league away."

"Indeed. It doesn't take the brains of a dragon to realize that where your treasure is, so is your tomb and your beloved little thief. Has she still stolen your heart, my friend?"

"Yes," I replied quietly.

"Well, I hope you bring her back to you. Here;" he said, drawing a glowing circle with a claw and using a spell of telekinesis to extract a thick grimoire. *"Perhaps you'll find something useful in this, perhaps not. Either way, it's the least I can do to repay you,"* he finished, and nodded as I took the book. He started to spread his wings, then stopped. *"Wait. The king said the merchant's list of items he'd traded included a blunderbuss. How do you like it?"*

"I've always liked dwarven firearms, and it's a good example of their craft. Last fall, I hunted many game-cock with it. It's a fine weapon," I replied.

"Perhaps then I shall tell him that you might be interested in the finest blunderbuss they can produce. The better the weapon, the more byallar you might be willing to trade for it. Also, you might appreciate more powder and shot."

"Ah, thank you. You're right, I do need more powder and shot, and a weapon as you describe would certainly be interesting to me. Yes, I think that would be a worthwhile trade."

"Good. Farewell, my friend. May your scales always gleam and your treasure-pile always grow," Karg called, extending his bat-like wings.

"May the road always rise to meet you, and may the wind always be at your back," I called in return. The blast of wind from his mighty wing-beats buffeted me briefly, then he was away. I stood and watched for several minutes as he flew up and out of sight, disappearing into the darkness of the star-filled winter evening's sky.

After a few more minutes of staring at the twinkling stars, I bowed my head and wept.

Dragons aren't like humans. Dragons could live millennia in solitude, never speaking to another soul, never touching anyone. It had been seventeen years since I'd been touched by anyone, seventeen years since anyone held me in their arms. My best friend was building a wall fifty leagues long, cutting off Hyperborea from the lands to the south forever. He'd already banned tomb-robbing, the punishment for it death by being buried alive. He'd even passed a harsh new law against rape - it was now punishable by castration instead of a simple public flogging. In the absence of witnesses, sorcery was used to determine the rapist's identity. Unfortunately, I simply couldn't move to Larinia to take advantage of all this and see my old friends more often. I had to stay away, so that Darian's legend would be assured. Except for the occasional elf or dwarf who came by to trade for *byallar* and the occasional giant that dropped by to visit, it appeared that I would be alone for all eternity. My ring of adaptation protected me from the winter's chill, but still the tears froze on my cheeks as I wept. I ached for the touch of another person. A friendly clap on the shoulder given in male companionship, a woman's tender caress.

I went back inside my tower and laid the book on the table. After I'd wiped my face, I sat down and opened it and began to read. I had to concentrate on my work. It was all I had left to sustain me.

Chapter Thirty-Three

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

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

After three days of study, I closed the White Witch's grimoire with a sigh. It was chaotic, disordered; part diary, part spell-book, part notebook of things she didn't want to forget. The spells she had in it were good ones, mostly healing magic. I copied the ones I didn't have into my own grimoire, but that was only three. My own grimoire contained nearly three hundred spells, and I'd have to bind in some more pages if I was to be able to add more than two or three spells to this list. Of course, that didn't seem likely. I knew I now had the largest single collection of spells in the history of the Dyclonic Circle, probably more than any single mage in the entire history of my nation had ever gathered. Even so, none of them could raise the dead. The only truly interesting thing I'd learned from her grimoire was that the White Witch was the High Mistress of her own secret circle of witches. They all practiced healing magic, though, not battle-magic. They used the Spell of Hidden Life for their Mistress-ranks and for the High-mistress, in imitation of the battle-circles (though it appeared that their requirements weren't as strict; most of the Masters of the Dyclonic Circle reached their rank between age thirty and forty, but they appeared to attain Mistress rank between age twenty-five and thirty-five). There was even a map of the locations of their tombs - like the high-masters of the other circles, they kept careful records of where each tomb was located. Even so, this wasn't helpful to me. They were dead. All of my people were dead, save for me.

I decided I should join them.

To hell with Darian and his convicted war-criminals. To hell with Arella deciding I wasn't worthy of being touched anymore, leaving me here to go mad with loneliness. To hell with all of them.

I looked down to the robes I wore, grown threadbare over the years with none to care how I looked. In a fit of rage, I ripped them from me and tossed them aside. I strode over to the door and yanked it open, then stepped out onto the parapet. Stepping up on the crenelated edge, I looked down forty-two cubits to the ground. "That should be far enough to kill me, even with the snow on the ground," I muttered.

"Raven, what are you doing?" a voice asked from behind me. I turned, and saw Swift-wing had used his magic to appear on the parapet. "What are you doing? Where are your robes? You'll freeze to death in just those little strips of chainmail and those gloves and boots!" he squawked, obviously forgetting my ring of adaptation. I sneered at him as I replied.

"And what would you care, corpse-eater?! You and your mistress have abandoned me! I've spent *years* here *ALONE!* Not a living soul touches me! *How can I live the rest of eternity with no one to even touch me?!* Your king builds a wall to separate me from the Southlands, as he fears and despises me as a *monster!* Your queen suggests I spend more time with the giants, people who hesitate to touch me for fear of *crushing me!* You all left me here alone because you didn't *need me anymore!* I've done my job, Darian has his kingdom! You're only here because Darian, your mistress' liege-lord, still needs me to act as executioner for him. *Executioner!* The lowest profession that can still be called honest, a job that to a Hyperborean is only a step above *shoveling manure!* I was a great man, once. I had honor and respect! Now I have *nothing, not even my manhood!* *I'm just a lowly executioner, a feeder of ravens and other carrion-eaters!* *Why in the hell should you care, eater of maggots?!* *You only come here to torment me and make me want to die so you can feed on my flesh!"*

"No! I care for you! You're my friend!" Swift-wing squawked in objection, flapping his wings. Suddenly Arella appeared on the parapet beside him. She wasn't dressed for the cold, she was wearing only a silk mage's robe that she apparently wore inside Darian's castle nowadays. Obviously she'd been listening and watching through Swift-wing, her familiar, as she usually did when he visited to ask me a question. Her hair had gone completely white, and her skin looked aged and wrinkled. Of course, she was near sixty, now. Her appearance was a bit of a shock, and I hesitated.

"Raven, please don't! Swift-wing and I can easily stop you with our spells of telekinesis, but I beg you to not force us to! Please, Raven. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you," she said, shivering with the cold as Swift-wing flew up to perch on her shoulder.

"Go away, bitch," I replied, my mouth full of bile.

"No. I made that mistake once. I shall not do it again. You spent ages alone in your previous life, and ended up suffocating yourself in despair. Now you despair again, and it's all my fault. If I truly loved you, I should have helped you recover your beloved, not abandoned you. I'm sorry, Raven," she said, her teeth chattering.

"Go to hell," I replied, and spat.

"I'm already there. Please, Raven. Come inside," she replied calmly, trying to control her shivering.

I stepped off the parapet, then walked inside. Arella followed, closing the door behind her. I didn't want to even look at her, I was so angry. I simply sat in a chair next to a window on the western side of my room, and watched the wind blow flurries of snow about outside through the frost-covered windows. I could hear them moving around behind me for a while, then they were silent.

Eventually, my anger faded a bit, and I decided to at least talk to them, even though I was angry. She was my friend and my lover once, and I owed her at least that. I turned and saw an old woman and a raven trying to warm themselves by a fire they'd lit in my fireplace - it was a heartbeat or two before I realized it was Arella. Somehow, I still had the mental image of her as I'd first known her - young, flame-haired and beautiful. Now she was old and grayed. Her face still had a sense of regal and commanding presence, but her beauty had faded years before. "Why are you here? Obviously Darian needs some advice, so what is it this time? Some twist of economics or law he can't resolve? Ask away, Arella, then leave me. Never fear, I'll still serve your master. It's obvious you still need me as your royal executioner, too. Such was my agreement - I'll serve 'till the bastard no longer needs me."

"You had no firewood in the tower, and this fireplace looks as though it's not been used in decades. We had to bring firewood up from the kitchen," Arella replied quietly.

"Of course, woman. I have no need of a fire, what with my ring of adaptation. Since I have no friends or loved ones to feel the chill, I have no need of a fire to warm myself. I have a fire in the kitchen in the fall to cook gamecocks on occasion, but that is all. Is that all you came to ask? Darian's interested in my *firewood?!"* I screamed.

"No. I was merely curious. I had to carry up firewood from the kitchen. It's very cold in here."

"*Well, you're the first to complain in seventeen years!"* I hissed angrily.

Arella sobbed, an old woman's weeping. "I took the warmth from your home and your heart. I took the fire of friendship and love from you. I'm sorry."

I looked at her, huddled under my black cloak with the shreds of my robe wrapped about her shoulders, sobbing into her wrinkled and spotted hands. I thought about it, and realized she was right. "Yes, you have, Arella. My heart is as empty and cold as my tower. Now; what is it Darian wanted to know?"

Arella only sobbed louder. Swift-wing spoke up for her. "Darian wanted to ask you how the Hyperboreans stored winter crops. He was wondering if what they knew might improve our methods. That was why my mistress sent me," he replied quietly.

"We stored our crops in silos, just as you do. The only difference was that we used sorcery to eliminate vermin like mice, rats and bugs. We had spells that affected large areas, killing them instantly. Of course, you had to repeat the spell every now and then to prevent re-infestation. The spell is in my grimoire beginning on page two hundred and six, and my grimoire is right there on the table. There. Now you know. Now copy the spell you need and leave," I said, standing.

"No! I can't leave you now!" Arella sobbed.

"No, of course you can't. You can't afford to risk losing your Hyperborean executioner," I replied with a sneer, and Arella sobbed louder.

"That is not why my mistress is here," Swift wing said, fluttering off Arella's shoulder and flying over to my table to stand before me.

"Then what is it, then? I tire of this."

"Tell her, mistress."

Arella sobbed for a moment, then spoke. "I love you, Raven. I know you can't accept that now. You can't see yourself through my eyes, but to me you look like some powerful, beautiful, immortal being who said she'd hold me close to her forever, if only I would *let* her! Instead, I rejected her, and now she stands before me, full of hatred. I'm so sorry! Please let me prove my love for you! Please!"

"Prove it? How?"

"Raven, I know now that if I truly loved you, I should never have left you. I should have proven my love by trying to help you recover your beloved Dyarzi. I was wrong, Raven. Please allow me to help you. Perhaps together, we can come up with the answer," she begged, weeping.

I sighed. "Do whatever you want, Arella. I no longer care. I simply want this life to be *over*." Arella rose from the floor and came over to me, her arms outstretched. "No! Don't touch me, Arella. I begged for your touch years ago, and you refused. For you to touch me now, after seventeen years of refusing me? No. Your touch would be like the sting of a whip, since I know you'll only leave me again once you're satisfied I won't kill myself anytime soon. My grimoire is on the table, my notes and other papers are there, and all my works on magic theory are there. You say you want to help me? Then help me, don't hurt me. Please, just don't hurt me anymore. I really can't take it," I said, then returned to my seat by the window.

Arella sobbed for several more minutes, then finally the sounds died down to sniffles. Eventually, I heard the pages in my grimoire being carefully turned behind me with quiet crackling sounds.

Arella had Swift-wing report my answer to Darian's question and tell him she'd be staying with me for awhile, then she stayed on. Two weeks passed, Arella and swift-wing poring over my work carefully. Three times each day, I summoned food and drink for all of us. I'd built the strength of this body through years of daily spellcasting in this manner, and now it was nearly equal to my old one, and was as powerful as it could possibly be. Arella had apparently also improved her strength, and was much stronger than her age and gender implied - she could easily carry a full armload of firewood up from the kitchen. Such is the effect of *Mana* flowing through the veins of a sorcerer.

Arella and Swift-wing reviewed every page of every book I had, making notes as I'd taught her to do when researching. I spoke to them little, as I felt I'd said all that I had to say. They, in turn, concentrated

on their research and let me be. I let her have one of the other rooms in the tower to sleep in. She didn't complain, though sometimes I heard her sobbing late at night. Other than repairing my robe with a Spell of Repairing, I did little other than look out the window in silence.

One day, the sun was shining right and I was standing just so, and I caught my reflection in the pane of a window in my room. At first I was startled, then I pulled out a full-length mirror the elves had traded to me a few years before, along with the other furniture I'd said I wanted to put in my tower. I looked myself over, and nearly whistled. My body was hard, muscular, and beautiful - my years of daily spellcasting had hardened and forged this body well. For nearly forty years, each morsel I fed this body had been conjured with sorcery. For nearly forty years, I'd lived the life of an ascetic mage. For nearly forty years, I'd cared for this body as I had my old one, carefully building its strength so I could cast my spells as I once did. Now, I gazed upon the results. My eyes flashed like twin pieces of jet, and my ebon hair drawn back into a ponytail accentuated my aquiline features, making me look beautiful and dangerous. At twenty-three, the age I'd first taken this body at, it had been soft and beautiful; agile, but weak. Now, it was hard, fast, deadly, and astoundingly beautiful, with an alien cast to the features. Dyarzi's black gloves, boots and elf-chain garment only enhanced this effect. This body had lain hidden beneath my threadbare robes as it hardened, and now at sixty-one it was bared and glorious, in the prime of its half-elven youth. With care, it would look like this for another three centuries or more before the rapid aging that strikes all elvenkind near the end of their days set in. Its appearance sent an immediate ache to my loins, and I knew that if a woman with this body had come to me in my previous life, Dyarzi would never have had a chance. It dawned on me that this is what Arella must see when she looks at me - a beautiful, sensual, powerful, terrible being full of sorrow and anger at her for having been abandoned. I looked to Arella, and saw her gazing back at me longingly as she sat at my table, the book before her forgotten.

"You yearn to lie with me, to feel my caress, don't you?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied, lowering her eyes.

"Now you know how I felt for seventeen years, Arella. You had Swift-wing tell me years ago that you were embarrassed at growing old while I did not. Arella, I would have gladly caressed each wrinkle, and kissed each gray hair. I was an old man when I died, Arella. The touch of age would not have repulsed me," I said, and slipped the mirror back in my closet while Arella wept.

Three weeks later, over lunch, Arella spoke to me in frustration. "I wish this was like making a cup of *byallar*, like this one you made for me. *byallar* is like making tea - you put the ground *byallar* in the tea-ball, place it in the pot with water, boil the water for a few minutes and it's done. I just wish figuring out this spell formula was that simple. Instead, it's more like fitting a pig through a finger-ring," she said,

sipping at her cup.

"Arella, you've not listened to *anything* I've *ever* told you, have you?" I snapped.

"What do you mean?" she asked, shocked at my anger.

"*byallar* is not simple to make, like life, it takes *work!* First, you plant the seeds. Then, you let the trees mature for a few years. Then, you harvest and roast the seeds. Then, you grind the seeds. Now; are you done at that point? Is that all the effort necessary?" I asked.

"Uh, well, I guess so," she replied nervously.

"Wrong! Where did the wood for the fire come from? Someone had to chop it and bring it in. Where did the teapot come from? Someone had to make it. That means someone else had to mine the tin, smelt it, and sell it to a tinsmith. That smith had to have a forge to work the tin - more wood being chopped and gathered, as well as bricks to make the forge. He had to have tools - more metal to be mined and forged, more wood for the grips. The smelter himself had to have tools and men to dig the mine and smelt the tin. A teapot alone represents the combined labors of *thousands* of people. *Now* are you done?!"

"Um, well, yes, I suppose," she replied, very nervous.

"Wrong *again!* Where did the water come from? Someone had to dip a bucket in the river or in the well. Where did the bucket come from? Someone had to make it - more wood, more tools. Where did the well come from? Someone had to dig it. Where did the fireplace you hang the pot in come from? Where did the iron hook inside the fireplace that you hang the pot on come from? Where did the cups come from? No, Arella. Making a single cup of *byallar* takes great effort. You've lived in Darian's castle so long, living the life of a court wizard, you've forgotten that each morsel of food you ate and each stitch of clothes you wore came from the effort of hundreds or even thousands of people. This is why life is like a cup of *byallar*. Life takes effort, even when you're fortunate enough or wealthy enough to where the effort is done by others," I said, and sat back to sip at my cup as she pondered my words.

"Stages!" she yelled suddenly.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Everything you just described comes in *stages!*" she said excitedly, her wrinkled face breaking out into a grin.

"Of course, but you miss the point. The point is about how *life* takes *work!*" I replied hotly.

"No! I mean that *that's* the solution to your problem! You've been trying to come up with a single formula to repair the body, draw the spirit from the afterlife and restore the silver cord! That can't be done - the formula's impossible!"

"I know that, I spent forty years in my previous life and forty in this one figuring out that same thing."

"Do it in *stages!* One formula for each step, three separate spells for one final effect!"

I nodded, understanding what she meant. "Let's do the math," I replied.

Two days later, we had the first formula finished. "There! This will restore the body to the same condition it was in at the peak of health."

"Your palliations are extremely specific, and your drain is extremely high. I'd die trying to cast this. Try again," I replied, looking at the result. We spent three more days re-working the formula, and I nodded. Its drain was steep, but not beyond my ability to handle. "Alright. Let's move on to the second formula."

A week later, I looked over the result. "That will do just fine. Drain is minimal, and the palliations aren't as tight. Now let's work on the last formula."

A month later, Arella finished it. "Your palliations are *extremely* tight, and the drain's a bit high. I'd be staggering after I cast this one, and I'd only get one shot at it - after that, the spell could never be tried again on the same subject."

"Should we re-work it?" Arella asked.

"No. Loosening the palliations would make the drain unmanageable, and tightening the palliations would run the spell up against the Law of Tativity. This is as good as it's going to get and still conform to the Law of Tativity. Karg might be able to tweak this down to something easier to cast in a few centuries, but I don't think I've got enough treasure to pay him for that long a job. This will simply have to do. Now; let's calculate the total drain and the time factor."

An hour later, Arella looked at the results and shuddered. "I'd *die* trying to cast these three spells in succession."

"No, not if you used your staff. Even so, you'd pass out before the third was complete."

"And look - your time frame is extremely short. Once you begin the first spell, you have a window of only three seconds to begin each of the two following spells to make the whole effect work!"

"True," I replied, nodding.

"I don't think it can be done. I know I couldn't do it. I guess I've failed you again," Arella said, crestfallen.

"No, Arella. You never attained the rank of master, and so you simply never learned how to do things like this. Trust me, I can do it. It'd be easier with a Spell of Transference from you or Swift-wing, but that's not really necessary. I can manage without it."

"You mean it *will* work?!" Arella asked excitedly.

"Yes. It'll be difficult, but no harder than summoning a greater demon," I replied calmly.

"Well, what's the matter, then? I thought you'd be thrilled!" Arella asked.

"Arella, this spell will work. Dyarzi can be brought back to me, so long as I don't slip and so long as her spirit is willing to rejoin me in the material plane. Once she's here, just what exactly am I going to *do* with her? She wasn't a sapphire, Arella," I said dryly.

"Well, can't you, um, kill yourself and return to your animuary, then take another body?" Arella asked.

"No, Arella. Even if I could, whose body would I take?" I asked in return, grinding my teeth.

Arella drew herself to her full height and rolled her shoulders back. "Mine. I'd make the sacrifice. I love you, and I want you to be happy."

"No, Arella. Even if I could, your will is too strong. I'd never be able to re-shape your body into my own. Aside from that, you'd be gone forever, your soul destroyed. No. Even if I still could, I couldn't."

"I can take an herb that will weaken my will, allowing you to do whatever you want. You'd be able to crush me easily. I'd gladly give my life and my immortal soul to make you happy," she replied calmly.

"No! Don't you understand? I *can't!*" I yelled.

"Why not? I'm willing."

I went over and laid down on my bed, depressed. For a long while, I didn't reply. Finally, I decided to tell her. I at least owed her that. "Because you're my friend. I wish I could say it was because I love you, but I don't. Even so, I forgive you for having abandoned me. You're my friend, I forgive you, and I don't want to do something like that to you. Besides... I can't anymore. It's just not possible," I said quietly.

"Why not?"

"Arella, what allowed us to kill Vayanar was my use of the fourth and *ultimate* power of the Skull of Hyarlanoth, which destroyed it in the process. Its ultimate power is to cancel the Spell of Hidden Life, linking the soul to the body it is in and destroying the animuary along with itself."

"Well, yes, I know that - you explained it to me before. What of it?"

"It's not a targeted effect, Arella. It's effect area was a radius of about two leagues, and it works if either the animuary or the target is in the area."

"You mean..." she said, realization dawning.

"Yes. I don't *have* an animuary anymore. My soul is now locked into this body, and has been for forty years."

Arella stared at me in shock for a long moment before she found her voice again. "But... But can't you

just cast the spell again?"

"No, Arella. *This* is now my body. I've looked at my spirit while astrally projecting - my soul is still the same, and separated from my body, I still look as I always did - a Hyperborean male. Even so, it is now permanently tied to this body, as though I was born in it. If I cast the spell again, then when I return from the void I won't return as my old self - I'll return as what you see now."

I heard Arella move up behind me, and felt the delicate butterfly-caress of her fingertips on my ears, then down my back. She gently wrapped her arms around me, then hugged me softly. I suddenly found myself weeping. Arella gently rolled me over, pulled me up to a sitting position, then hugged me for a long while, stroking my bare back. I hugged her in return, sobbing. "Gods, how I've wanted this for so long. I've so missed being touched by someone. I'm sorry, Arella."

"No, Raven. I'm the one who's sorry. It's all my fault. I never should have rejected you," she replied, weeping herself.

"Please, no more words. Just lie with me as we used to. Touch me, caress me as you used to, and let me do the same for you. Please. You don't have to if you don't want to."

"Oh, Raven, I *do* want to. Please, I know you've waited so long, but please don't rush it. I want this moment to last as long as it can."

I drew her face close to mine, and kissed her gently. "I'll go very, very slowly," I said, and we shared a smile.

Several hours later, Arella and I lay under the blankets, wrapped in each other's arms as we once used to like to when sleeping. Arella was fast asleep, but I simply found I couldn't fall asleep at all. Arella had given me a gift I couldn't simply repay with a single night of sapphire lovemaking. I gently disentangled myself from her and arose from the bed, slipping on my gloves, boots and chainmail garment. Swift-wing waited until I had seated myself at the table, then flapped over to me from his perch on the fireplace mantle. "I have a solution," he said quietly so as not to awaken Arella.

"To what?" I asked.

"To a lot of things. Your loneliness, and the loss of your people. The condemned men. Use them. You can't use them for yourself, but you could use them for others. Their wills can't possibly match that of any highly-trained mage. I have been studying this grimoire you left here. It lists about a hundred tombs with the animuaries of female mages. You could use the convicts to bring them back. You can also use them to bring back mages from your own circle. Then the two groups mate, and your people will be reborn."

"What? How could I do that? I don't even know where the tombs of my own circle's members *are!*" I replied, trying to keep my voice down.

"Raven, you once told me your entire story. I remember what you said the little hair-doll you made said. It said a mage named Arlon-hap of Greenhaven once had a map of your tomb, and Ellysande Northstar had stolen it. The only way he could have that was if he came to Hyperborea, found the Black Tower in Wilanda city, found the High-Master's files and took them back with him for later study. You have here a spell that can summon *any* named spirit from the afterlife. Summon him, and ask him to write out copies of his maps."

"How is he possibly going to remember the details?"

"You have a memory spell here beginning on page six hundred and forty-three of your grimoire. Cast it on him."

"Alright, but how is he going to manipulate a quill? Ghosts are insubstantial beings, made of pure ectoplasm."

"A spell of telekinesis. Come now, Raven - I've already done your thinking for you, please don't ask me to do your spellcasting, too!" Swift-wing cackled.

"Alright, but what of me? Even with the spell Arella helped me create, I can't bring her back with me still a woman. She wasn't a sapphire, my friend, and there simply aren't any spells I know that I can cast on myself to permanently transform this body into my old one. I could have someone else transform me with one of the spells I have in my grimoire, but how would they know what I looked like? How would they be able to match my old body?"

"I don't know - but I do know that you are the greatest mage I have ever heard of, perhaps the greatest ever," Swift-wing replied, fixing his gaze to mine. "If anyone could invent a spell to fix this, if anyone could invent a spell to restore you to your old form, it would be you. Give yourself a chance. You have that which you have been seeking forever - the spell to bring Dyarzi back to you. I think compared to raising the dead, this would be child's play."

"Well, perhaps not child's play. I think this might be just as difficult, if not more so, but..." I replied, my voice trailing off as I suddenly had a realization.

Yorindar had once said that the future of my beloved and my people depended on my ability to forgive. Now I understood. Arella had given me the key to bring Dyarzi back, and Swift-wing had given me the key to rescuing my race from extinction, and rebuilding my civilization. Yorindar had said this would happen, and it did. He also said that someday I might understand and thank him. I closed my eyes briefly and sent a silent prayer of thanks heavenward. If Yorindar was going to be on my side and actively helping me, the least I could do was not be ungrateful. Yes, the last few years had been painful to endure. Obviously Yorindar knew it would take Arella's mind to conceive of the answer, but she wouldn't be able to do it until she had matured and increased her understanding of magic *on her own*. Understanding magic theory as *I* did wouldn't help - *I* hadn't thought of the solution, and if *she* was taught to think about magic the same way *I* did, then *she* never would have, either. Yes, all this had been according to Yorindar's plan. Well, most of it anyway - I don't think the Vilandians press-ganging me, Dorian nearly slaying me or my nearly committing suicide was according to Yorindar's plan. Of course, it's like he said; he's only a god, he's not the Creator.

I looked to Swift-wing. His life was linked to Arella's, and hers was drawing to a close. In ten to twenty years, she'd be dead. I needed to not only repay Arella, but Swift-wing as well. I opened my grimoire, and leafed through it until I found the spell I was interested in. I'd originally found it when I'd researched possible ways to bring Dyarzi back to me sixteen centuries ago, though I'd discovered that it was useless to my quest. Today, it may finally find a use. "Thank you, my friend. Wait here," I said, and went downstairs to get a few of my reagents.

Arella mumbled when I gently shook her shoulder to awaken her. When she finally opened her eyes, she looked me over. "Where are your gloves and boots? Your hair's all loose, too. Where's your hair band?"

she asked sleepily.

"On the table. I don't need them at the moment. I've built a large fire, so it's nice and warm in here for you. Come. Don't bother to dress," I said, drawing her out of bed.

Arella arose, and I looked her over as I took her to the table. Her breasts sagged, her belly was slack, and her skin had the appearance of faded parchment, with many little broken veins just below the surface. I sat her down at the table, placed my full-length mirror next to her, then sat next to her. She smiled as she gazed at my nude body, and I smiled back. "You are very beautiful, Raven. I know you may not want to hear that, but..."

"It's alright, I understand. And thank you," I said, and smiled back. "Now; I'm going to give you a gift, and that gift is in a spell I'm going to cast from my grimoire. I give this gift in payment for what you've given me - friendship, and four decades of love. The spell can only work if you're willing, so please don't resist. Promise me?" I asked.

"Alright. Will it hurt?" she asked, remembering the wax-spell.

"A bit, yes," I replied.

Arella steeled herself, then looked to me. "I'm ready."

"Close your eyes, then keep them closed until I say to open them. Swift-wing, I want you to do the same, so she can't peek through you. This will take a while, so just relax," I said, and as she and Swift-wing closed their eyes, I began.

I read the incantation from the page in my grimoire, picking up the daub of clay that was the first reagent. It vanished with a puff of smoke as I completed the first part of the spell. I then took up the bits of eggshell I had, continuing to read, and they vanished in a puff of smoke, as well. I then concentrated on the incantation as I completed the gestures. This took time, and a great deal of it. It was no simple matter

to cast a spell from one's grimoire. You had to work slowly and carefully.

Arella twitched slightly in pain as the spell began to take effect. She didn't cry out or open her eyes, which was good. What she saw might have frightened her. I watched quietly, observing the effect as I finished the incantation. Her hair darkened, shifting to its original copper-red shade. Her loose, sagging flesh writhed and crawled over her bones, for a moment looking like a bed-sheet being fluffed before being drawn tight again. The myriad little blood vessels broken beneath her skin, the liver spots, the wrinkles, and all the other signs of her true age smoothed and faded.

As I completed the spell, I felt weakened from the drain, even in this body, which was nearly as powerful as my old one had been. I finished the spell an hour after I'd begun, and was panting slightly from exhaustion. "Alright, you can open your eyes."

Arella opened her eyes and smiled at me. "I feel great - much less tired than I usually do. What did you do?" she asked.

"Mistress!" Swift-wing gasped, flapping his wings excitedly, fluttering over to land nearby her at the edge of the table.

"What? What is it? What happened?" Arella asked, startled.

"Look at yourself in the mirror, and you'll understand," I said, gesturing to my left.

Arella did so, and gasped. She then stood and looked herself over in the mirror. "I'm *young* again! Young and *beautiful!*" she squealed, leaping to her feet and gazing at herself in the mirror. "And *strong!* I feel like I could wrestle a giant!"

"You'd get squashed. That body's not *that* strong," I chuckled. "All the strength you built over the years is retained - I've merely removed the weakness of age."

Arella twirled, testing her agility, and grinned. "This is wonderful!" she yelped.

"I'm pleased you like it. It's a spell I copied from the White Witch's grimoire. They apparently had the ability to keep themselves as young as they wished," I replied with a smile.

Arella looked at me, and ran over to me nimbly, then knelt by my chair. "Oh, Raven! I'm so happy!"

"I'm glad. I felt I owed you a debt. Now, I've repaid it. Live in peace, my friend."

"Raven-" she began, but I interrupted her.

"Please, Arella. Don't call me by that name any longer, please - at least, not when we're alone. Call me by my real name, Eddas Ayar. The giants know that a name reflects who you are, and what you have done. I never want to forget who I really am - Eddas Ayar, Master battle-mage of the Dyclonic Circle. I may be trapped in the body of a woman, but I still am who I am inside. I am not a sapphire, and I am not a woman, nor will I ever really be. Pretending I am something I am not will only lead to another form of madness, Arella. You said once that I must accept the fact that I am a woman for me to be happy. I now realize that this isn't true. Instead, I simply must accept myself for what I am - a man, trapped within the body of a woman. That is the only way I will ever really be happy," I said, then smiled. "Now; send Swift-wing home first so he can explain your new appearance to Darian, then dress and go home to Larinia. Live as long as you can in this body I've given you, and be happy, my friend," I said, rising to go sit on the bed.

"I'll go, but I *won't* stay away! I'll never make that mistake again! I'm going to stay with you, and comfort you."

"Arella, Darian needs you. His children are going to need you, as well. What would he do without you?"

Arella looked deeply saddened. "Can I no longer even visit?" she asked quietly, sitting beside me on the bed.

"Of course you can, Arella. Please do - I *need* your company. I need your touch, and I need your companionship. I told you once - you'll always be my special, dearest friend," I said, and explained what Swift-wing and I had discussed. She nodded in comprehension, and I continued. "Yes, someday I will be able to bring Dyarzi back to me, thanks to you. And when that day comes, I'm sure now that I will be able to restore myself to my old body. I don't know *how* yet, but I'm sure that Yorindar has some kind of plan in mind. Even so, I now can see that day may be many years off - perhaps even centuries. In between then and now, I will need your company, your friendship, to keep from going mad with loneliness again. Please, Arella - I never want to lose touch with you again. Please come and visit me often; I *need* you to come. I would also like Darian and Joy to visit, if they can find the time to spend a few hours with me. I'd like to see their children, too. All of them you can bring, so that we may share some time together in friendship. You can also come alone, and we will sit quietly and share a cup of *byallar* together, hold hands and talk of old times," I replied, hugging her. "And... Perhaps more," I added, and chuckled.

Arella hugged me back for a moment, then suddenly swore. "What is it?" I asked.

Arella made a face. "I'm young again. I hadn't thought about it because I went through menopause years ago, but now that I'm young again, my menses are going to start up again. I'd gotten used to not having to be bothered with it. And not having had to deal with it for years, I'll bet it's going to be quite difficult to get used to again."

"Don't worry, Arella. I'll help you get through it. After all, between the two of us, I think I'm the most experienced at sudden, radical changes in the body," I said, and grinned.

Arella burst out laughing, and soon was rolling on the bed as I began gently tickling her. For the first time in years, true, loud, sweet laughter echoed in my tower and out across the trees on my lands.

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

"I've read your histories, where you present Eddas as being a cold, emotionless being, some black-robed wizard who casts spells all day without growing tired, blasting his enemies to bits without feeling remorse, and acting solely in response to the will and plans of a god equally as distant from humanity as he is. You see him as some kind of creature, so far removed from his humanity that he becomes some sort of incomprehensible, alien being. You're wrong - so wrong. He is more man than you will ever be, Caladis, in more ways than you will ever know."

- High Mistress Pelia Cydalion of the Order of the Mountain Healers, Letter of Rebuttal to the Sage's Guild of Greenhaven, 1820 NCC

Three years later, the Great Wall was complete, and the Day of Reckoning for the first of the condemned men had finally arrived - the Day of Rebirth for my people. Dragonslayer and Felicity, now aged and white-haired, smiled as they saw me come forth from my tower. Strider's son, Longtooth, grinned, and Dragonslayer and Felicity's children (adults in their own right, now), greeted me happily. Darian and Joy also looked on, smiling, as did seventeen-year-old Prince Noril and thirteen-year-old Princess Dawn, their children. Noril was already taller than his father, nearly as tall as I had once been in my old body, and Dawn was about as tall as her father - both were still growing, as well. Arella and Swift-wing were also there, and Arella smiled as Swift-wing preened his feathers. Arella looked magnificent in her blue silk dress, her flame-red hair being tugged by a gentle breeze. Her restored youth had been a little difficult for Darian, Joy, their children and the royal court to get used to at first, but she had eventually managed to get them to adapt. I greeted them all, and we exchanged pleasantries for several minutes.

"I only wish my father could have lived longer, that perhaps he could see what you really look like, whenever you manage to succeed in restoring your own appearance," Longtooth commented sadly. His father had died five winters before, of old age. I had attended the funeral, summoning an earth elemental to dig the pit and seal Strider into the ground for his eternal rest. It was a great honor for me to do so. I'd been the first Little-Person to attend a giant's funeral in many centuries - even in my day, few Hyperboreans were invited.

"Your father already knew what I looked like. Like all experienced het-men, he could see into the hearts of others. You, too, will gain this ability as you grow older - it is a thing of the heart, not a thing of magic or reason, and you have the same good heart as your father. A priest of Yorindar, a Little-Person's het-man, once said something to me many years before you were born. He said 'The body is merely a garment for the soul'. Your father understood this, and could see into the heart and soul of giants and Little-People alike. You, too, will come to have this sight. As the oldest and wisest Little-Person you will ever meet, I can assure you that this is so. You are your father's son, and I know his spirit looks upon you from the afterlife and smiles with pride," I replied.

"Thank you, Eddas Ayar," Longtooth said, bowing his head.

Our conversation was not lost on the others. Through Joy's patient and excellent tutelage, her two children as well as Arella had learned the tongue of the giants, and Swift-wing knew what we were saying since he could read the translation from Arella's mind. After Longtooth had given me his thanks, I spoke up. "My friends, I thank you for being here today. I now go to fetch the first of the condemned men from

the guards at the Great Wall. All the condemned shall be used to raise those Hyperboreans whose tombs I have found. In a few years' time, we shall number slightly more than a hundred and sixty men and women. A pitiful handful, I grant, but in time we shall grow. Someday, you shall no longer need the Great Wall and the patrols of the noble giants to protect us from bandits and grave-robbers. Someday, we shall protect you from what threatens you, as you have protected us all these years. Someday the things you lost in the Great War will be common again. Ornithopters, wing-boats, pane glass, firearms and all the rest will be common again. We shall even study the magitech of the Invaders, so that we may have equal or superior devices, should they ever be needed. In time, we Hyperboreans will help the Larinians and the Arcadians live in peace with their neighbors. They'll *have* to live in peace with you - if they don't, they'll have to deal with *us*. Someday I will find a way to restore my old body again - I know it's theoretically possible, so there is at least hope. And someday, Yorindar willing, you will finally be able to gaze on that which has driven my every waking thought for sixteen centuries - my beloved Dyarzi," I said, and smiled to their polite applause.

Of course, I didn't tell them what else I knew - the implications were simply too great, and I thought it was wisest to keep *this* thought to myself for the moment. Decades ago, I'd sat in my tower with Darian and Arella and Swift-wing, and explained to them why the Dyclonic Circle used the Spell of Hidden Life to preserve their members from the grave. Aside from the benefits of retaining a repository of age, wisdom and power, another advantage of being a liche was that the senility of age clears up. I'd told them that if I'd allowed my self to expire naturally instead of suffocating myself in my tomb, I'd have realized that as a *liche*, I had *thousands* of years to find a way to bring Dyarzi back to me. Liches don't eat, they don't sleep, and they don't get bored. I'd have found a way. Once I'd discovered how, I could have easily asked the king to give me a condemned man, and the High Master would have happily brought him to my tomb. I could then destroy my liche-body and possess that of the condemned man, my will easily crushing and destroying his soul as punishment for the crime he'd been condemned for. The enchantment at the same time allows me to re-shape my new body into a duplicate of my old one at age thirty, when I made my animuary. I'd have lived again, young and strong. I then could have brought Dyarzi back to me, and we could have married as we'd originally planned and lived our lives again. Of course, there was only one small problem:

That never would have happened.

If I'd been a liche when the Invaders first stepped upon our shores, I'd have fought in the last war against them as part of the Dyclonic Circle's forces. Even if I had somehow survived, my civilization was in ruins. There would be no king to get a condemned man from, no supplies of reagents to do spell research with save what little I might be able to gather myself, nothing. I'd have been alone - a muttering liche picking through the shattered bones of his civilization for millennia. I'd probably have gone mad from loneliness and despair, as I had during the many years Arella had left me alone. Of course, I now was glad she had, as this was also part of Yorindar's plan - she needed to develop and mature as a spellcaster, learning and increasing her understanding of magic *on her own*, rather than at my tutelage, to be able to help me accomplish my dream. Yes, all of this - from my sealing myself in my tomb to Ellysande's being raped and stuffed down the hole through my experiences with Darian and Arella and Swift-wing - all was

according to a plan. That plan was probably laid down millennia ago by Yorindar, and it all focused around Darian. Or apparently one of his offspring, as Darian's throne and his posterity were assured - but of course, this implied something even more important:

Yorindar wasn't through with me yet.

There would still be more to do - much more, as the years progressed. All that I had mentioned to my friends - rebuilding my civilization, restoring the lost magitech both of the Hyperboreans and the Invaders, building an alliance with Darian's civilization that would benefit everyone involved - all of this needed to be done. And yet there was still more. Morgar and Yorindar were locked in a struggle for the fate of the world. It was a matter whose importance went far beyond one king. Perhaps Yorindar needed one of Darian's descendants, someone who would do something of critical importance to the world decades or even centuries from now. Either way - my job was not done. No, in fact, it was only just beginning.

Joy's voice snapped me out of my brief little reverie. "Eddas, I know you said that you could use the condemned men to bring your people back from the void, but isn't there a risk that you'll be possessed by the mages from their animuaries as you take the condemned men into those tombs?" Joy asked.

"A good question - the same thought occurred to me, as well. The Spell of Hidden Life doesn't affect those who have an animuary, but I no longer do. Yet, I have entered the tombs of my fellow members of the Dyclonic Circle, and have found that I am in no danger. Their spirits reach out to me, but can find no purchase. There isn't even a battle of wills. It is as though I still had an animuary - even though I know I do not, as I have examined my own animuary and found the effect of the Skull of Hyarlanoth did indeed reduce it to dust. I do not know why this is so, however. My best explanation is that I am an exception to the rule, created by the effect of the skull. Perhaps the reason why I am an exception will lead me to a way of restoring my original body - I do not know. I'm still trying to research this," I replied, shrugging.

"I see," Joy said, nodding. "But isn't there a danger that the mages you are trying to awaken will kill you, though? After all, how will they know what is happening? They will only know they have awakened, and see a stranger in their tomb - perhaps they will fear for their animuaries, and lash out to destroy you."

"There is the risk, yes. I plan on limiting myself to men I knew in life as my friends, that I will have the greatest chance of convincing them who I am. Also, if necessary, I can use an illusion to alter my appearance long enough to speak to them - but it shouldn't really be necessary. We of the Dyclonic Circle had ways of recognizing each other, never fear. For the mistresses of the White Circle, it will be

easier - their offensive spells aren't dangerous enough to put me at risk. If you remember, I said before that they were specialists in healing magic, not battle-mages."

Darian smiled at me. "Well, I am old, my friend, and though I am happy knowing the description you gave of yourself in your previous life, it doesn't seem likely I'll see you raise your beloved. Could you tell me what she looks like?"

"Do you remember Rhane?" I asked in return.

"Vividly," Darian replied with a grin, then chuckled as Joy gave him an ungentle nudge in the ribs.

"Like her, save with black hair and dark brown eyes," I answered with a grin. We chatted for a bit more, then I bid them a farewell before casting my Spell of Returning.

In a moment, I was several hundred paces away from the lone gate of the Great Wall, standing near the edge of the Great Southern Dead Zone. It was here, at this gate, that I was to pick up the first of the condemned. I looked across the barren, blasted earth to the enormous stone edifice that lay before me in the distance, stretching as far as the eye could see east and west. Atop the battlements, I could see the guards pointing - they had spotted me. I looked up to the blue sky above. *'Alright, Yorindar. It begins.'* I then looked ahead to the gate in the distance, and strode forward to meet my destiny.

[About the Author](#)

In J. Farris' words..."I am thirty-seven, happily married for thirteen years, no children, and live in a small college town in Southeastern New Mexico famous only for the production of Valencia peanuts. I am self-educated with a smattering of military and college experience of no real consequence or importance. I write novels, and compose and perform music for my novels in MIDI and Mp3 format, but otherwise live the life of a hermit. That is probably all I want the public to ever know about me, as my life is really so incredibly *dull* that knowing more about me actually detracts from the reading enjoyment of my work."