



# **The Game of the Gods**

**(Book VI of Mage)**

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# The Game of the Gods

(Book III of the Wench of Woe Trilogy)

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Jim Farris

Prologue I - The Ocean

*"Sister... Help me..."*

A dream... I could feel it... The world was dark fog, swirling about my feet, clouding my mind... Whispers... Endless whispers in a language I did not understand...

*"Sister... Please..."*

Someone called... A vague memory... A memory of a demon, a monster from hell. Glowing red eyes, breath of smoke and fire... I felt my heart pound in fear.

"Are you alright, my dear?" a man's voice called.

The sudden snap of awareness. I blinked, wiping my eyes. The comforting familiarity of the cabin surrounded me, the gentle rocking of the ship reassuring me. I shook my head. "It was the dream, again, master. The terrible, frightening dream..."

Master stroked his beard as he gazed at me, then nodded, gesturing over me as he murmured quietly. Again, the warmth of his sorcery filled me with softness. "There. Can you remember it now?"

"No, master. It is gone. Thank you," I replied, and smiled.

"Good, good. We've only a few more weeks until landfall, my dear, let's not have you drifting off again."

"I'll try not to, master," I replied, then looked to him hopefully. "Master, do you think I truly can be cured of these terrible nightmares?"

My master smiled kindly. "Oh, yes, my dear, I most certainly do. In time, you will forget you even had them."

I smiled broadly. "Thank you master."

"You're welcome. Now, rise, Sasha, and get to work on breakfast for us."

"Yes, master," I replied, bowing my head.

## Prologue II - Hammer and Forge.

"Mungim, I do yet smell flowers again," I said, my hands to the wooden sides of the tiny palanquin. A stout box of wood, borne by four of my nephews, there was a small cloth window to each side to let air flow freely through. I could not see it, of course, and for that I was very glad. The blindfold I wore protected me from the worst of it, but not all.

"Aye," Mungim replied. "We be yet quite near the lands o' Eddas Ayar, and the wind do shift to bring the scent o' his trees to us. It be late spring, most o' the flowers be gone now, but some do yet remain."

"I do feel a shift again... We do yet go down?"

"Aye, we did take the turning some minutes past, we be 'pon the road that do lead to his tower. The road do yet go down into the valley along the hill-slope, then it do make a bend and then it do run past the door o' his tower."

"And there be those sounds again... More birds?"

"Aye. There be many birds 'pon these lands, they do nest and frolic in the trees. Wait, now... There. Did ye yet hear that?"

"Aye," I replied, hearing the call of a bird.

"That be what Eddas do call a *jiki*. There be no other name for it I do know of, it be not known in the lands o' the elves nor to the humans o' the Southlands, it be yet found only in Hyperborea. Ye do yet hear the male sing. The female be brown and tan, so she may yet hide from hawks and such. The male, howe'er, be a brilliant crimson, his feathers like blood, and his eye be like the black o' pitch. It be a small creature, but two palms high or so. At night, ye can yet hear the hoot o' owls what live in the forest nearby, and near dawn and dusk, ye can yet hear the call o' the mourning dove."

"Husband?" I called.

I heard the sound of a hand passing through the cloth that covered the window, and a hand gripped mine. "I be here, wife," Karadin replied. "Thy brother be on t'other side, an ye do need his hand, as well."

"Be it... Be it as beautiful as me brother did say?"

"Oh, *aye*, love. Aye. And a thousand times more, besides. The ground be yet dusted with a million million flowers, as small as the nail on thy smallest finger. It do look like snow, in spots. Would ye have some?"

"Ye can fetch them?"

"Aye, a moment," Karadin replied, his hand leaving mine. I heard his footsteps dart away as my nephews continued on. Shortly, he was back, his hand thrusting something feathery and soft into mine. "A handful I did yet take from the top o' a pile near the bole o' one o' the trees."

I lifted the strange, feathery handful to my nose. "They do yet smell wonderful..." Tucking them into a pocket of my dress, I smiled. "I'll yet look later."

"Aye, love. Do yet call if ye do need, we be nearly there," Karadin replied.

"Aye," Mungim agreed. "We do yet round the bend in the road, now."

I waited quietly. It had taken three weeks to get here, all my brothers, my four sons and all my nephews coming along. A single wagon carried food and water for the journey, and what little my husband and I would need thereafter. Save for the dangerous places where I rode upon the wagon, for the most part, I rode in the palanquin carried by my nephews. The palanquin was far better than the wagon. On the wagon, I could feel the emptiness around me, and it chilled me to the pit of my soul, even blindfolded. In the palanquin, I could feel the wooden walls. With the blindfold and the touch of the walls in easy reach, I could push the terrifying thought of the endless, empty sky above out of my mind. Soon, however, the pleasant comfort of the palanquin would come to an end. How I would endure, I did not know. I only knew it was something I had to do. For myself, for my husband, and for my people.

Suddenly, I heard the call of a woman's voice, and my heart skipped a beat.

"Mungim! How are you? How was the trip?"

"I be fine, Eddas Ayar, and the trip were yet easy-like. Ye were yet right, once ye did tell the giants what we were about, they did patrol the lands with a fierce and watchful eye, we did see nary hide nor hair o' aught dangerous. We did meet a good score o' giants coming here, and all did wish us luck on this adventure."

A moment later, the palanquin stopped, and my heart pounded.

"And how is she, in there?"

"I be fine!" I replied, my voice a tiny squeak of fear.

"You don't sound fine, but we'll soon fix that. This way - there we go," Eddas called, and the palanquin began to move again.

"Oh, my," a deeper woman's voice called. "That is a tiny box!"

"It be yet large enough for her to sit, legs tucked in," Mungim replied. "We did yet experiment with a larger box before we did try this, and she did say it were too big. She did need to feel the sides easy-like, ye see."

"The door, Joy?" Eddas called.

"A moment," the other woman's voice replied, and there was a sound of a door closing.

"Thank you. Alright, let's put her down and get her out of there."

I trembled, terrified as I felt the palanquin being lowered to the ground. "Ooooo... Eddas Ayar, I do not think I be yet ready!"

"You'll be fine, Jhumni. You can take your blindfold off, too."

"Aaaah! I do yet not think I could, Eddas Ayar! Were I to see the sky, this far from the caves... I would yet faint!" I replied, hearing the latches being pulled back, and feeling the sides of the box being lifted away.

"Jhumni, trust me. You won't see the sky. You'll see stone and wood. You're inside the base of my tower, the window shutters are closed and latched, and we've hung heavy curtains over the inside of the windows. It's really quite dark in here, I've had to spark a light for Joy. It's a lot larger than the home of a dwarf, yes. The ceiling is perhaps eight cubits above your head, not counting the beams. But, that's no worse than inside a large hall or building of your people. My tower is solid marble and oak, I built it myself with sorcery over a century and a half ago, it will not fall, and you will not see sky."

I felt gloved hands touch the sides of my face, then lift the blindfold from my eyes. I blinked for many moments, trying to clear my vision - weeks of wearing a blindfold left the world blurry. When I could see again, I realized Eddas Ayar knelt beside me, my husband standing beside him, and my brother standing behind. Eddas held his staff in one hand, the butt to the oaken floor and a glow of light at it's tip. I looked into Eddas' face. It was, of course, the face of a dark-elf, our mortal enemy. But, at that moment, it was the most reassuring face I'd ever seen in my life. "Oh, Eddas!" I yelped, and hugged him tight, my eyes squeezed shut.

Eddas hugged me back. "You'll be alright, Jhumni, really."

It was many moments before I could let go, and truly look around. Eddas was right - it was much like being in a large hall of my people. There were several bunk-beds and dressers placed around the room, as well as a few doors here and there. The doors were enormously large, easily twice as tall as doors of my people. Still, I could see stone and oak. Stone walls, oak beams. Flesh and bone, a proper home, as the old dwarven song went. There was no terrifying sky hanging above me. "Well... Aye, this be not too bad..."



"Jhumni, this is Joy, my mate. I believe I told you before she's a little giantess," Eddas said, waving a hand to a tremendously tall woman behind him.

"Aye, Eddas, that ye did, and me brother Mungim has yet spoken o' her many a time," I replied, and curtsied politely. "It be an honor to meet ye, Joy."

"Likewise," she replied, and curtsied in return.

Eddas then pointed to a door behind him. "Over there is a closet I've cleared out and made into a small room for you and your husband. There's a nice bed there, it's the one I had before Joy and I became mates, and I've put one of the children's dressers in there for your clothes and things. That's where you'll sleep, and you can also go there if you get frightened. You won't be alone, here - Sasha and Marilith sleep here, in those bunk-beds over there. They're back home visiting their mer-folk clan, today, but you'll meet them tomorrow when they return," Eddas said, then reached out to take my hands, and squeezed them gently. "We'll work slowly, Jhumni. You can explore the tower and see the other levels as you feel up to it. Each day, we'll be going outside, you wearing your blindfold, and sitting in the sun for awhile. Lunch is a good time for that, you can get used to the idea that nothing bad will happen. In time, we'll have you looking out the windows. And, with luck, we'll have you walking around outside, and maybe even standing on the parapet. That you were able to come this far is a good sign, however. With care and work, we may get you walking in the sun and exploring my lands with your husband."

I smiled. "Aye, Eddas Ayar. I have yet spent many a time at the entrance to Iron City, and did stare at the sky as long as I could, hoping I might one day be able to come to your lands. I do think that did help on the journey, ye see. I can yet look at it for nearly two minutes, now, before I do yet have to flee," I said, and laughed.

Eddas smiled back. "We'll go slowly and carefully, Jhumni. One of the largest questions we need to answer is if *latrao* is something you can overcome yourself."

I shook my head. "That I do not know, Eddas Ayar. I only know I did yet have to try."

Karadin grinned. "I did tell ye that this plan would yet work, wife."

I blinked, surprised, then rolled my eyes at him. "Ye did *not!* Ye did fight me plan *tooth and nail*, ye were so afeared I would yet get eaten by some monster or such-like along the way!"

Karadin bowed his head. "Well..."

"Husband, love ye I do, but *thy* plan were yet the height o' silliness! Thy plan were to yet have me brother yet tell the king o' what he did learn, mayhap to yet have ten thousand dwarves do dig a tunnel a hundred and fifty leagues from there to here! There be *eight* folds o' granite and *four* rivers betwixt here and there! *That* silly plan would yet have taken a good *century* to do, e'en with the best o' steam-driven mining machines! I'd have yet fallen out o' me bearin' years, and it would yet have fallen to another to yet go through with it! Nay! Husband, Eddas Ayar did say that if he be right, I may yet bear a girl for ye - and that, husband, I shall yet do! If I be afeared, then that be yet too bad for me!"

I looked to my brothers and sons, who were all bearing blunderbusses - all to defend me along the trip. My nephews who'd carried me bore only short-axes at their belts, as that was all they had needed. But now, none of it was needed any longer. "Enough! Ye be done, I be here, ye've all yet done well. I be right proud o' all o' ye. Now all o' ye, do yet head home! Come the fall, when Mungim do return to do trade with Eddas, I will yet ride back with him then. If I cannot, then he can yet take me home with sorcery, or such-like! I be in the hands o' the most powerful mage in all Hyperborea, mayhap in all the world, and me husband will yet be at me side! I shall yet be safe, and that be fact! I do love ye all, and I do thank ye. Now all o' ye, get home!"

Mungim grinned. "Aye, sister, that we shall," he said, and leaned in to kiss my cheek.

"Thankee, brother," I replied, kissing him back.

Each of my brothers, nephews and sons took a moment to give me a kiss, then stood by the door. When the last was done, Mungim nodded. "Do yet close thy eyes, sister, beyond be the outside."

"I will yet endure it, brother, now do scat!"

Mungim nodded, smiling. "An ye do say, Jhumni," he replied, opening the door.

The blue sky I could see from where I stood was bad, but no worse than standing near the entrance to Iron City. I turned to my husband, trying not to shiver. "Do get our things from the wagon, husband, and ye and I will yet set up house for us for these next few months."

"Aye, wife," Karadin replied, kissing me, then trotted outside.

When he was gone, I shuddered, closing my eyes. I felt a hand rest on my shoulder. "Are you alright, Jhumni?"

"Nay, Eddas Ayar, I be yet petrified. But I will yet not allow them to know. They be men-folk, Eddas Ayar, and it be their way to do care for us with a gentle hand, and do guard us with their very lives. Were they to truly know how afeared I yet was, they would yet take me back double quick," I replied, and forced my eyes open, turning to look at Eddas. "That cannot be yet allowed, Eddas Ayar. This be far too important. If ye be right and ye have learnt a trick to yet make me bear a daughter, then I will yet do it, no matter the cost. That would yet be a boon immeasurable to our people - a gift beyond measure, beyond price, beyond repayment. And as for me, I do yet have four sons and no daughters, Eddas. I *will* yet bear a daughter for me husband, afeared or no, and that be that!" I said, stamping my foot.

Eddas grinned at me. "I think you will, Jhumni. Yorindar hinted to me that it was a possibility, if you were strong enough to persevere."

I nodded, firming my jaw. "I be a dwarf, Eddas Ayar. I be strong enough to endure aught that do yet fail to break me, and aught which do yet fail to break me will yet only make me stronger. That be Moradim's greatest gift to our people - the soul of iron," I replied, and clapped my hands, hammer to anvil.

Joy smiled down at me. "In his day, Eddas' people had a similar saying. I think now I see why he loves your people so much - you and he have much in common."

I nodded. "Aye, Joy. Eddas Ayar were yet not born o' our people, yet he be one o' us, in spirit - this, we dwarves have yet always known," I said, glancing at Eddas, then smiled at Joy. "Now come - do yet show me this closet, please. Eddas do blush so much, I be yet afraid that an we did continue, his cheeks may yet catch afire."

Joy laughed, taking my hand and leading me to the closet while Eddas chuckled behind us. I did not know if this would succeed. Even Eddas Ayar did not know that. But, I felt in my heart that this just might succeed, and this just might be the beginning of something truly wonderful.

I shook my head. "I'm afraid I don't understand. I mean, if they've been gone a week, why not just check their island? Perhaps the mer-folk know where they went."

Eddas gazed at me calmly. I wondered what he really looked like, behind the mask of the elf-woman's body that the gods had made him wear. Like Frarim, they'd told me once - tall, brown skin, brown eyes, black beard, shaven head... It was difficult to picture it, looking at the ethereal beauty before me. And even harder since Eddas was currently giving me one of his 'no-nonsense' looks.

"Corvid, I *can't*. I busy here with Jhumni, and that is a project I *cannot* abandon no matter *what*. It's of critical importance to Moradim, the god of the dwarves, and Yorindar has been working on building alliances with them for thousands of years. Even if I could somehow take time off from this project, I *still* can't get there. I have two spells that could take me there, one a spell of returning and the other a spell of teleportation. The spell of returning I can't use because I've never been there before - it can only return me to a place I have once visited. And as for teleportation, that's simply impossible. I can't see the destination, and I've no idea precisely how far away it is. All I know is the compass directions and rough distances Marilith gave me, which I've given you. That's not enough to succeed, I'd spend years at it and still never make it there. You have the map she drew for me, and you're a skilled sailor who knows how to navigate by the sun and stars. If anyone can find Round Island, it's you. And, in that ornithopter you can fly non-stop, so the trip should take you about two days." Eddas then narrowed his eyes sharply - which on that surreally-beautiful half-elf's face was quite intimidating. "Corvid, this is something only *you* can do."

I smiled. "I suppose it's much as you said before - I'm actually important to Yorindar's plans, possibly as much as you are."

"*Exactly*," Eddas replied, his voice echoing hollowly, and I felt a chill pass down my spine as he said it.

I shuddered, then grinned. "Alright, alright, I get the message, no need for the heavens to open or something."

Eddas smiled. "Good, as that *would* rather be a waste of Yorindar's energies better spent elsewhere," he replied, and chuckled. "Have you enough food and water for the trip?"

I nodded. "Easily."

Eddas nodded. "Alright. Good luck, Corvid."

"Thank you, Master Eddas," I replied, and we clasped forearms for a moment before I turned and trotted away, heading to the stone bridge that crossed the river. I grinned, thinking about the exchange of forearm-grips - it was actually *much* easier to deal with Eddas Ayar if one just imagined you were speaking to someone like Frarim and ignored what you saw. Frarim had suggested imagining an actress on a stage, reciting a man's lines - he suggested listening for the man's thoughts behind the words. I supposed that was a *far* more pleasant picture to keep in one's head than the truth he had explained - that of a long-dead, ancient sorcerer arisen from the grave as a liche, their spirit possessing that fabulously beautiful body. *That* just raised the hackles on my neck, even though Frarim was a liche, himself. Eddas Ayar was already intimidating enough as a Great Mage and the Raven of Yorindar without imagining some sort of skeleton or ghost in the bargain.

The ornithopter awaited where I'd left it, in the small cleared area on the other side of the stream that Eddas had made for it. My two crew waited patiently, watching my approach. In truth, far more than patiently - they'd stand there until they fell apart with age in a few centuries if I told them to. Ancient suits of articulated orichalchum armor that Eddas Ayar had animated magically, they were filled with cork in case they should somehow manage to fall into water or something. I hadn't even known what any of that was, not even orichalchum - Eddas had to explain to me it was a type of brass with a bit of silver added, to ease enchantments. Golems, Master Eddas had called them, and though he said he'd used a spell to imbue them with a modicum of intelligence, I found that they were both mute and singularly unimaginative. Of course, as I'd dealt with many a hand at sea whose brains were hardly better than the cork-filled helmets that the golems had to suffice with, this wasn't a problem for me.

"Make ready to fly, we're going to be heading to Round Island," I called, climbing up the ladder. The two golems nodded, pulling up the ladder after me once I was aboard. Over the course of the month I'd had them, I'd worked out a simple series of signs with them - a nod for 'yes,' a shake of the head for 'no,' a shrug for 'I don't know' and a tip of the head for 'I don't understand.' In theory, Eddas said, I shouldn't be able to accidentally order them to do something self-destructive or otherwise stupid, since they didn't hear my words to begin with, but rather heard the meaning of what I was trying to say. Still, he cautioned, it was best to be clear with my orders, just in case.

The ornithopter was boat-like, and had a flat spot about in the middle of its keel to sit atop the ground, that spot being covered in a layer of copper. Otherwise, it was much like a longboat, or perhaps a very long skiff - though without a mast or any provisions for a belowdeck. A racing vehicle of the Hyperboreans, Frarim had explained - ancient magic of a long-gone people. Made for speed, not cargo capacity, it was quite fast in the air, easily out-stripping the speed of a galloping horse when not loaded down with cargo. I'd opened its single hatch and peeked below, and seen a complex assemblage of gears and levers that drove the four wings, powered by the enchantments that drove it. Unfortunately I'd been looking to see if there might be even a small hold, and there wasn't one - so among the crates and boxes I'd secured to the deck was a tent for me to use in foul weather. A semi-golem, Eddas and Frarim had called it, and they'd explained it could not be enchanted to be invulnerable to damage, so I'd have to bring it by to either of them on a somewhat regular basis for sorcerous repairs or it would wear, like any ordinary vessel. Compared with the ability to fly, however, this seemed a very minor limitation.

I sat in the simple padded chair that was the pilot's seat, about where the rudder would be (if it had one, which it didn't). Flicking the smaller lever to my left, I watched as the wooden wings unfolded. Magnificent, really, each of the four wings was much like a bird's wing - even down to having individual socketed feathers, carved of wood. They were quite large, however, each easily half the length of the ornithopter, itself.

At last, with the wings unfolded, I drew back slowly on the left-hand control lever, and the wings began to flap. Moments later, the ship began to slowly lift into the air, and I grinned.

I once thought that there was nothing that could compare to being the captain of a ship, sailing the ocean, a crisp breeze driving your ship on through the ocean spray. Now, however, after months of working with Frarim, I knew there was something far, far better - to ride the air like a bird, to sail the *sky*. That the ancient Hyperboreans had vessels like this amazed me. That they were once so common they had racing vessels boggled the imagination. My people, the Arcadians, thought themselves the descendants of the Hyperboreans, following the destruction of the Great War of Devastation. And, from what Frarim had told me over the last few months, I supposed this was true. And each time I sent the ornithopter into the air, it seemed I could feel the blood of my ancestors in my veins - it was a vast and powerful feeling, a connection with a mysterious past that both fascinated and excited me.

Gently pulling back on the right lever, I sent the ship tilting backwards and rolling a bit to turn to point west, then tipped it forward as I pulled up on the left lever to gain altitude, sending the ship zooming forward and upward. There was quite a bit of land to cross, then the sea beyond. Even now, as I flew half a league above the ground, I could see one of the blasted areas, the Dead Zones that dotted the Hyperborean landscape. But, surrounding it was green - and, Eddas had said, in time the green would

eventually fill in those blasted areas, and the land would be healed. I liked to think that the trading routes I would be following with this ship would help in that, somehow... Linking the strange and often mysterious races of this ancient land to the peoples around them, helping them build a new civilization from the ruins... Linking ancient past to unknowable future... Helping many to have a better life...

I laughed, the wind of the ship's swift passage whipping through my hair. The truth was I just loved to fly.

### The Raven - One.

I was nearly done shaving when I lifted my gaze from my mirror at the ringing sound of one of my crew rapping rapidly on his brass head with his metal knuckles - an 'alert' I'd taught them for if they saw land, storms, or anything else that needed my attention while I slept or was otherwise distracted. They were sufficiently bright enough to keep the ship on course once I had it airborne, since that required no decision-making, and could even maneuver and take off from the ground. Landing, however, was something I hardly entrusted to them, as Frarim had explained that one usually only made one mistake in landing an ornithopter - and it was usually the last mistake one ever made. Looking behind me, I saw the brass golem standing next to me, pointing forward. I lifted my head from where I sat behind the forward rail, the wind whipping my hair, and looked - we were swiftly approaching a somewhat round and densely-wooded island about five leagues wide with a large lake about a league wide in the middle of it.

I smiled. It was near noon and the island was perhaps no more than half an hour away. It seemed likely I'd arrive for my first visit to Round Island just in time for lunch.



I finished shaving, then cleaned my razor, ditched the soapy water over the side and began to pack away my strop and shaving kit. As I packed the kit, I looked to my crew. I'd decided weeks ago to give each of them kerchiefs tied about their upper left arm, just so I could tell them apart - one red, and one blue. Red was currently at the controls, while Blue stood waiting, watching me. "No problems or change in the gear sounds?" I asked. Changes in gear sounds during flight might indicate trouble, Frarim had said. I had a small amount of oil to lubricate the gears with and a bit of linseed oil to tend to the wooden feathers of the wings, but little more. Blue shook his head, and I nodded, closing the lid to the wooden box of my shaving kit and handing it to him. "Good. Put this away for me, and I'll get the spyglass."

Awhile later I knelt at the bow, looking at the island with my spyglass. I could see what appeared to be bones on the beach - bones of a rather large creature, possibly a small whale. Nearby, where beach met grass, were several poles, with what looked like whale-skulls larger than horses' heads atop each. "That's definitely it," I replied, remembering the island's description I'd been given. There were several small platforms raised a few palm-widths above the grass, on which were dozens of creatures I assumed were mer-folk, and many more of them on the beach, watching the approach of the ornithopter. Most carried what looked like spears, but I could see several had small bows. I started to smile, then paused. Weapons in hand did not necessarily mean a friendly reception, and likely meant the opposite. They had almost certainly never seen an ornithopter before - certainly I hadn't before I'd seen this one the first time - and might assume they were looking at some kind of fantastic beast. Or, perhaps, some kind of sorcerous enemy. Either way, it seemed wisest to stay out of range of those bows.

"Red, bring us down to about a quarter league and bring us to a stop over the beach, then hover there while I chat with those people." A thousand cubits seemed a reasonably safe height, it didn't seem likely their self-bows would be able to shoot that high. Of course, if they could, I supposed I'd be in for a rather nasty surprise. They had some sort of bloodied beast up near the top of the beach that looked like they might have been butchering it - or, perhaps, preparing to cook pieces of it, as I saw they had a small fire nearby. It dawned on me I might have interrupted some sort of hunting party, perhaps. No matter, it seemed safest to stay at a decent altitude in case they thought to use those bows. I wasn't certain if the wings would react well to being peppered with arrows, and I wasn't willing to find out.

Sure enough, once I was over the beach, the mer-folk leaned back and tried to shoot at the ornithopter - fortunately, their arrows fell well short. They appeared to be simple straight-limb short-bows firing unfletched reeds for arrows - likely they were poisoned, but that was as may be, they couldn't possibly hit the ship this high up. I reached down for the speaking-horn. It was a simple device I'd used many times at sea, really just a stiffened canvas cone with a handle and a hole at one end for you to yell into, making one's voice easier to hear between two ships. "Hello, down there! My name is Corvid Hremn, I'm a friend of Sasha and Marilith, just here for a visit! I mean you no harm! Might I come down and chat with you?!"

"What?!" one of them shouted back - in Vilandian, interestingly enough. I was only glad it wasn't Hyperborean or something odd, at least I spoke Vilandian from my days as a sailor - though with an atrocious accent, or so I'd been told. I grinned, and repeated what I'd said in Vilandian.

There was a brief discussion among the mer-folk - several of them apparently talking to one of their females. The female had some sort of medallion or necklace, but it was difficult to tell what it was, at this distance. Finally, she nodded, then looked up, shouting back at me. "If you are truly a friend of Hair-like-sunset, then yes! If not, go away!" she shouted back.

"I truly am a friend - I'll be right down!" I replied, grinning, and put the speaking-horn away, then turned to my crew. "Alright, they seem a little nervous, so leave your weapons stored and... Err... Well, I'd ask you to smile, but you don't have faces, so Blue, just wave your hand hello a bit as we land. Red, stand by, I'll take over for you now."

Switching pilots in flight was a bit tricky. The right lever controlled pitch and roll, which controlled the ship's movement. If you let go, ship would level out and drift to a stop, and would hover in the air - it was held up primarily through sorcery that lightened it's weight. The left lever, however, controlled altitude, and if you simply let go, the wings would stop, and the ship would begin to fall. The trick, I'd found, was to poke a wooden wedge in the slot for the lever so one could let go while one's replacement quickly took the seat, then pulled the wedge out once you were in place. The two brass golems and I had practiced this maneuver several times, however, and we again managed it without incident.

Landing on the beach, the flapping wings kicked up quite a bit of sand. Frarim had told me that the ornithopter had enchantments to protect it from dirt, grit and damp, but apparently those enchantments didn't extend to any passengers. I flipped the lever to fold the wings, then grinned, spending a few moments brushing the sand off my clothes and out of my hair. Once I thought I was reasonably presentable again, I hopped down from the ship into the sand, then walked over to the female who'd yelled back a few moments before. She was quite an impressive creature - and rather attractive. From the waist up, she looked human, though her ears were pointed, her hair was green, and her skin was gray and shimmered, as though covered with very tiny scales. From the waist down, she resembled a fish, though with her fin oriented side to side, rather than top to bottom, and with recognizable hip and knee joints. About her neck, she wore what looked like a whale-tooth on a golden chain, and over her breasts she wore a garment consisting of two shells strung together with pearls. Beside her were several males, armed with spears and small bows, all of whom glowered at me. I smiled what I hoped was my most charming smile. "Hello, I'm Corvid Hremn. I was looking for Sasha and Marilith?" I said, in Vilandian.

"Hair-like-sunset is gone, taken. We know not where. Sea-stone is there," she replied, pointing.

I looked, then did a double-take, my eyes widening in shock, then horror. What I had taken for a bloodied beast of some kind, something that these people were perhaps butchering for food...

...was, to my utter horror, Marilith herself, whom these people were apparently very carefully trying to keep alive.

She was in her humanoid-equine form, with the head, tail and lower legs of a horse. Her wounds were so extensive, however, I simply had not recognized her. Her hands were gone, one amputated at the wrist, and one near the elbow. Both her lower legs were gone, amputated just below the knee. A tight leather thong had been tied around the ends of each stump, apparently as a tourniquet. A raw, ragged wound ran around her abdomen, held together with what was apparently very careful stitching. Worst of all, however, the end of her muzzle had been hacked off at an angle, removing her nose, mouth and lips and a good portion of her jaw. Blood oozed from each of her wounds, and the three mermaids tending her carefully fanned her with hand-made fans of long palm-fronds, apparently to keep the flies off of her. She still breathed, and blinked as she watched me. A soft gurgling sound came from her, and I watched the stump of her tongue move as she tried to say something.

"Oh, *Gods*..." I whispered, and ran to her side.

## The Raven - Two.

"I am called Pearl," the mermaid said, once she had dragged herself over beside Marilith. "I am the leader of my people. We have known Sea-stone for many years, and she has spoken to us about herself. She is not dead, and as she has lived a week like this, it seems she is not dying. But, what we know of her from what she told us is that it may take her centuries to heal this. We are willing to tend to her until she heals, if it takes that long. We live longer than you, it is within our reach."

"What... What *happened*?" I asked, shocked by the enormity of her wounds.

"Most of us were out hunting and doing other things, we were not here to see it. Only a child saw, who was resting on one of the platforms over there. A man came - a human, like you, but a sorcerer. He rode a ship, and had another man with him, who was a warrior. Hair-like-sunset and Sea-stone were returning from a swim in the ocean. The two men came ashore in a boat. There was apparently a conversation, which the child did not understand, as he has not learned the language of Hair-like-sunset yet. Then, they battled. The sorcerer cast a spell that incapacitated the two of them, then the warrior hacked Sea-stone until she lay still. Another spell caused Hair-like-sunset to stop fighting. She then stripped off all that she wore, and knelt in the sand before the sorcerer. He and his warrior then took her aboard their boat, and back to the ship. The ship then sailed swiftly away to the east, and was gone before any adult of our clan returned. We tended Sea-stone as best we could, using herbs to stop infection and sewing the larger of her wounds closed, but there is little else we can do. We feed her coals and embers, as we know she likes them greatly. She is not like us. Her wounds heal slowly, as slow as coral grows."

Marilith tried to say something, but all that came out was a gurgling, moaning sound as the stump of her tongue moved within the hole of her mouth. Blood flowed anew from the open wound, sunlight gleaming on the bared bones and glistening blood, and Pearl stroked Marilith's arm softly to comfort her.

I reached out, stroking Marilith's broad cheek. This close, I could see her glowing eyes were watching me. "We have to get her to help."

"She cannot be moved. The wound across her belly is too broad, and none of our herbs has any

effect on it. She would tear open should you try to move her, and that, we do not know if she would survive. How she lives at all, we do not understand. It was difficult enough to move her atop this blanket, she made sounds as though she was in great pain, and it seemed she would fall apart at any moment. We treat the edges of the blanket with an oil Hair-like-sunset showed us to make from plants, it repels ants. We fan her to keep the flies from her. That is all we can do."

I started to object, then paused, and nodded. I didn't have any ideas for *how* to move her, and even if I did move her, there was only one place to take her - back to the tower of Eddas Ayar, in the hope he could heal her. That was at least two day's flight back, more if I had to fly around a storm. I had thought that perhaps the ornithopter could simply fly over a storm, but Frarim had said the air above the clouds was extremely cold and so thin, one could faint and die even if the ship could manage to flap hard enough to get that high. Eddas had made me a ring that he said contained a spell of adaptation, which should allow me to survive things like that. Still, I had no such magic for Marilith, and I wasn't certain she could survive it on her own. I considered flying back to get Eddas and returning to here, but even that seemed unlikely. Eddas had made it clear that he could *not* leave where he was, what he was doing was critically important to the plans of the gods. Even if he could leave, that still meant Marilith would be lying here four more days. How she had survived so far, I did not know. But a better solution had to be found, if one was available, and applied immediately. "She seems conscious and alert, at least. What have you tried using so far?"

"Everything we have," Pearl replied. "Bloodmoss seems to stop her bleeding and ease her pain a bit, but that is all - it does not seal and heal the wounds as it does for us. And when she tries to talk she bleeds again, and sometimes faints from it. Even moving her head makes her bleed, and that, we can do nothing for other than to give her water."

"Alright..." I said, and stroked Marilith's broad cheek again, thinking. Her eyes were on me, watching me. An idea slowly dawned, and I met her gaze. "Marilith, I don't want you to talk, just listen for a moment. If you understand me, blink once for yes."

Marilith blinked.

I smiled. "Good. Now, I don't really know what can be done, but I've a feeling that someone who's three thousand years old just might, if we can figure out how to ask her without her hurting herself. Blink once for yes, twice for no. Alright?"

Another blink - *yes*.

"Alright. First, *is* there something we can do?"

Another blink - *yes*.

Pearl sighed. "We guessed as much, but how to find out what?"

"That's the part I'm working on," I replied, thinking. "Alright... Is it something we can do right now with what we have?"

Two blinks - *no*.

"Perhaps something we can find and use, like a plant or herb or something else we haven't tried?"

"She blinked *yes*," Pearl said, watching her, then looked to me. "But it's impossible, we've tried every healing plant on the island - and many from the sea, as well."

Marilith again tried to speak, and I laid a hand to the side of her face. "No, no, it's alright. Don't try to speak, just relax, we'll work through this. Now... Is it a plant?"

Two blinks - *no*.

"An animal?" I guessed, but the reply was 'no,' again.

"I doubt rocks or sand will help, and that's nearly all that's left," Pearl said.

"Perhaps..." I replied, thinking. "Was it something Sasha had, and dropped when she was taken?"

One blink - yes.

Pearl shook her head. "We have her gloves, boots and lance... But how could that help?"

I watched Marilith blink twice, then shook my head. "She says no... I'm guessing she means it's something else."

"She blinked yes," Pearl said, then looked to me. "But what could it be?"

"I don't know, but I've an idea as to how to find out," I replied, watching Marilith's eyes and thinking. After a moment, I looked up. "Can you show me where you found Sasha's things?"

Pearl nodded, chittering a sound that was much like the noise of a dolphin as she gazed at one of the mermen. He nodded, then looked to me. "I'm Yanar. Follow me, I'll show you where it was," he said, and began to crawl away, dragging himself across the sand on his hands. I rose and followed. Though he moved quickly, it was still just a crawl - it seemed to me very fortunate that these people weren't around when Sasha's abductors had arrived. Judging by all the skulls of the great beasts I saw on poles, in the

water they were quite deadly. Here on land, however, they were as helpless as a man with a broken back. If they'd tried to fight, even a child with a sharp stick could likely have killed the lot of them.

At last he stopped, then pointed. "It was about there," he said, indicating a smooth patch of sand below the high-tide level. "But there is nothing there."

"Not now, but there might have been then," I said, kneeling and looking at the sand. "Your people drag yourself across the sand, you might have accidentally buried it and not known."

"Ah - we can dig through the sand, then, and perhaps find it."

"No, that will take too long," I replied, rising and turning to the ornithopter. "Blue, come over here, please," I called.

The bronze golem which bore the blue kerchief on his left arm nodded, hopping down from the ship, then trotting over with a clank of armor. When he was near, he snapped to attention and saluted crisply, hand vertical and palm away from us - a naval jack-tar's salute, and something I'd taught them, of course. I grinned wryly as I looked to Yanar. "Eddas made these two for me, to help me fly the ship. They're golems, and he told me once they don't see the world the same way I do. Of course, I suppose that's not surprising, they don't have eyes to begin with. Either way, I'm guessing it's something magic, and Eddas said their vision would be able to spot magical auras and things... Well, he said a lot of things, most of which I don't understand, but it's worth a try."

Yanar nodded, and I looked back to Blue. "Blue, look around here, see if you can see anything unusual or magical. Point at it, and we'll dig where you point."

Blue nodded, then immediately pointed to the sand nearby.



"Alright, let's see what's there..." I said, and dug through the sand. It took a few moments, but eventually I came up with a small bracelet, apparently made of silver. "Any idea what this is?" I asked, looking to Yanar.

"I seem to remember Hair-like-sunset said it was a magic thing, given to her by the Great Mage, Eddas Ayar. It lets her understand languages she does not know."

"Useful, but not what we're looking for," I replied, and looked to Blue. "Anything else?"

Blue immediately pointed again, and I resumed digging. After a moment, I came up with a small chain bracelet, similar to Palomean jewelry I'd seen before. Dangling from it was a tiny glass bottle with a cork, the bottle being barely the size of the last joint of my thumb. Inside, there appeared to be several very tiny objects, though I couldn't tell what they were supposed to be. "How about this?" I asked, looking at Yanar again.

"A magic bottle, in which Hair-like-sunset keeps things," Yanar said after a moment. "I remember she said one touches something to the cork and thinks of things going inside it to put things in. To take things out, one touches the cork, and thinks of the thing one wants to withdraw."

I nodded. "Also useful, and might be what we're looking for. Unfortunately, I don't know what's in it, or what we might need," I replied, then looked back to Blue. "Anything else?" I asked, and he shook his head. "Alright, good work, Blue, there'll be an extra ration of grog for you tonight," I replied, winking at him. He didn't laugh, of course, but at least the joke made me feel better. "Get back aboard the ship, I'll call if I need you again."

As Blue trotted away, Yanar looked at me. "What now, Corvid Hremn?"

"Now, back to Marilith," I replied, rising and trotting back across the beach to where Marilith lay.

Marilith's eyes were wide, and I could tell by her expression I had what she wanted. I smiled, kneeling next to her. "Alright. It's something inside this little thing, yes?"

One blink - *yes*.

"Good. Now, I've no idea how this works, so I'm going to touch it to you and hope that you can make it work, and get what we need from it," I said, poking the little bottle to her shoulder. Marilith closed her eyes a moment, then a heartbeat later, several large crystals tumbled out onto the blanket beneath her, each of a different color, somewhat slimmer than my wrist and about two hands long. "Magic, I assume?" picking one up and holding it.

One blink - *yes*.

"Alright... Can one of them heal the damage to your mouth enough for you to speak?"

Another blink - *yes*, again.

"Alright, I'll pick them up one at a time. Just blink when I have the right one." She did so, and shortly, I was holding an orange crystal. "Hmmm... Now, how to use it? I can't see how I might even ask you with just 'yes' and 'no'..."

Marilith just gazed at me, a small tear forming in the corner of her eye.

I shook my head - I had to try *something*. Poking it to the raw wound seemed unwise - the contact

would likely just start her bleeding again. I tried holding it against her skin next to the wound. I waited, but nothing happened. "Any ideas, Pearl?" I asked, looking to the mermaid.

Pearl shook her head. "No, Hair-like-sunset never showed us these things before, I do not know how to use them."

I tried stroking it over Marilith's skin - but still, nothing happened. I began to grow frustrated at being so near to a solution, and yet so far. "Work, damn you..." I muttered.

Suddenly, I *felt* the crystal tingle in my hand. There was a strange crackling sound from her flesh, soft and quiet...

...and the wound of the stump of the end of her muzzle was visibly improved. Her muzzle was a tiny bit longer, the edges of the bone looked smoother, and the edges of the skin no longer looked so raw.

"It's working!" Pearl yelped, and the mermaids and mermen nearby let out an excited stream of chitters I assumed was cheering.

"Ah - it's like my sword. I have to *will* it to come back to my hand, it doesn't just happen," I muttered, and tried again. Slowly, over the course of several gentle strokes, I could see that each stroke was regenerating the missing end of her muzzle bit by bit. I worked it under her jaw, and on the sides, slowly building up her muzzle again.

It was tiring work - I quickly found that just *wanting* it to happen wasn't enough, I had to actually concentrate... *Will* it to happen. And while calling my sword to my grip was something I could do at a thought, this required far more concentration and effort.

Slowly, painstakingly, I re-formed the end of her muzzle. She tried to speak about half-way through, tears streaming from her eyes, but I calmed her by stroking her face. I didn't imagine this would be terribly pleasant to experience, it likely hurt quite a bit.

Nose, then teeth, then finally lips and the tip of her tongue... A final stroke, and her fur was smooth. It was done - and I was utterly exhausted. There was still quite a bit more to do for the rest of her, however, and I doubted it would all be done with this one crystal. I sincerely hoped the others would be less tiring to use.

*"Corvid..."* Marilith said, her hollow voice echoing.

I smiled, wiping my brow with a hand. "It's alright, Marilith. We'll have you fixed up soon - likely very soon, since now you can tell us what we need to do."

*"Oh, Corvid... I love you..."* she replied, weeping.

I leaned down, kissing her tears. I wasn't quite certain how I felt about her, myself. Marilith was sensual, exciting, mysterious... And millennia old. But, I knew in my heart what she needed to hear. "I love you, too, dear. Now - what is it we need to do next?"

### The Raven - Three.

It took days to heal Marilith. Once it became obvious that quite a bit of time would be required, I had Red and Blue sweep the ship to clear it of sand, then carry it above the beach and into the trees. Then, I had them cover it the large canvas tarpaulin we had stored for this purpose and secure it to the ground, in case a storm might be in the offing at some point. The ornithopter was, of course, actually very light due to its enchantments - one man could lift its weight without too much effort, it was only its size that made it difficult to move. Still, despite its light weight, it had quite a bit of mass and inertia - it was safer to have them move it as a team, then secure it carefully.

The mer-folk were, of course, elated to see Marilith healing - though, as I quickly learned, there was much more to be done than simply re-growing the body parts she had lost, and healing the vicious slash across her abdomen. Considerable internal damage had been done, and that took quite a long time to deal with. Once she was well enough to be moved, she asked to be taken to the cabin she and Sasha shared. I could see it from the beach - it was hardly the glorious castle I had envisioned the princess of my boyhood dreams living in, but then again, neither had my boyhood dreams included a mysterious, sensual, ancient demon as her sister, so there we were.

It was fortunate that only the orange crystal required any real effort of will - the pink crystal, a tissue-knitting device which I used hourly on Marilith, required no real effort at all, merely time. For her part, Marilith slowly related the events of that day while I worked with her. The wizard - he did not give his name - had been specifically looking for Sasha. Once he realized that he had actually found her, in a rather droll voice he announced that her choices were to come peacefully or to be taken - but either way, she was coming with him. Sasha and Marilith decided that neither choice was something they wanted, and attacked. The wizard then cast a spell that stunned the both of them - and, while Marilith was stunned, his henchman hacked her until she lay still. His first blow took off the end of her muzzle, apparently so she could not speak to do sorcery. Though Marilith explained this would not have stopped her from using sorcery (as she did not use incantations, her magic worked differently), it certainly took much of the fight out of her. The next blow took off her legs below the knee, dropping her to the ground. When she raised her hands to protect herself, he hacked them off one at a time, one above the wrist and one below the elbow. That, unfortunately, *did* stop her from doing sorcery, as gestures were necessary for her, for most things. Of course, by then, she was simply too stunned from the ferocity of the assault to really think to even try. When he further hacked through her abdomen with his sword, Marilith stopped struggling.

From there, Marilith knew very little of what happened. It took all her will to simply force her body to live instead of die. She was aware that Sasha went with her enemy, but that was all.

Days passed, Marilith struggling to maintain her will and force her body to live, and she slowly became aware that it was slightly easier, as the Mer-folk were helping. By binding off her stumps and stitching her back together as well as working with the herbs they had, they had reduced the effort it took her to force her body to live. By the time I had arrived, she was aware of everything going on around her, but could not speak to tell them what she needed them to do.

"Well," I said, holding a cup of water to her lips as I held her up slightly from the bed to drink, "it seems to me that when we catch up with this wizard and his henchman, I'll have to see if he knows more about swordplay than just hacking at helpless women."

Marilith drank, then smiled as I lowered her down to the bed again. *"I am hardly a woman, Corvid, I am a demoness - a nightmare. Still, I appreciate the thought. I suppose he thought himself some brave hero, defeating a demon."*

I shrugged, smiling. "Woman, demoness... I see little difference in your hearts," I said, then chuckled. "Err... Well, that didn't come out quite the way I meant..." I said, then chuckled again. "Although, I suppose that with some women I have known, that *would* actually explain quite a bit."

Marilith giggled, then grunted, clutching her abdomen. Though her skin had healed without a mark beneath the pelt, there was still much inside her that needed healing - and without using the crystals, that healing would take decades, possibly centuries. Wordlessly, I reached for the stack of crystals I had placed beneath her bed, and began stroking the pink one over her abdomen again.

Marilith sighed, shaking her head. *"Your touch is gentle and warm, Corvid... But we must try to catch them, and save my sister."*

"When you're fully healed, we shall. That wizard defeated you once, Marilith. You'll need to be at your full strength before you try him again."

*"No, Corvid... We must try now, as soon as we can. I can walk, I think-"*

"Marilith, if you truly love me, you'll lie there until you are healed."

Marilith paused, staring at me, then slowly laid back again. *"That was a truly terrible thing to say, Corvid. You know I could not deny you under those conditions."*

I smiled, resuming stroking her abdomen with the crystal. "Sorry - I learned it from a woman. My mother, in fact. She used it often against my father."

Marilith smiled back. *"Perhaps you're right, and there truly isn't much difference between a demoness and a woman - my brood-mother did the same to my clan-father. I never thought I'd have it used against me, however, that's supposed to be our weapon against you ."*

"I'll use whatever weapon it takes to protect you, Marilith. And Sasha."

Marilith sighed, laying quietly on her back. *"I can still sense her, through our link. She lives... But that is all I can tell. The wizard has cast several spells upon her... I cannot focus and see around her through our link, I can only see her through casting my perception to her - and my perception at this distance is a thing of essences, not vision. He is taking her somewhere, that is all I can tell. And they move slowly farther and farther from us, aboard a heavily enchanted ship."*

"Once you're fully healed, you can take us to her with sorcery, then."

Marilith shook her head. *"If only it were that easy. He is cunning and powerful. Were we to*

*simply appear aboard his ship, enchantments he has already prepared would be loosed upon us, likely to our doom. He has prepared for this for a long time, and he will not be easily thwarted."* Marilith blinked, a tear slipping from her eyes. *"With Eddas Ayar busy with Jhumni, it is only us. Eddas cannot abandon the work of the gods. This may, indeed, be part of a plan of an enemy god, to hopefully pull him away from the work he is doing. Yet, I do not have his strength. I am, at best, equivalent to a highly skilled sorceress. I am hardly the equal of Eddas Ayar - or the enemy who has taken my sister."*

I smiled, leaning in to kiss away her tears. "Now, now. Just because he beat you once doesn't mean he can do it again. Next time, you'll be ready for him, and that makes for quite a different fight," I said, and resumed stroking her abdomen with the crystal.

Marilith sighed, gazing at me. *"Oh, Corvid... You are so gentle and caring... Had I the strength, I would shape this body into something more pleasing to you, and make love to you with all my heart and soul."*

I smiled, my eye taking in her nude form for a moment. She was, truly, very attractively shaped - well-formed breasts, shapely hips, flat belly, lovely rump... I looked up again, gazing into her eyes. "Something to consider another time. Besides - who said that this shape is not pleasing to me as it is?" I said, and winked at her. "I knew a wonderful woman in New Solith City - she was a matron of a whorehouse. Sharp as a knife, wise as an owl, and the best rumormonger in the whole of the city. She was also about sixty. After one of her bits of information helped me snag a fat little slave-ship for King Parial and our hold was filled with gold and booty, I told her I'd repay her with anything she wanted. She laughed and said she wanted a night in bed with me. I reasoned that I owed her at least that, so, I gave her what she wanted. And during that time, I discovered two important things."

*"Oh? What did you discover?"* Marilith asked, her ears perked in curiosity.

"Well, the most important thing I discovered was that what's important in a woman isn't what's here," I said, waving a hand at her body. "It's what's here," I said, tapping a finger against her sternum between her breasts. "What's inside. The heart. That's what's important. Belana and I laughed and talked and shared stories and dreams and..." I said, and shrugged. "Well, I learned that it's what's inside that matters. The heart, not the flesh. As such, I don't want you to just pop into some form you think will please me once you have the strength. I want you to understand that I find you attractive as you are - and more importantly, I find you attractive for *who* you are, inside."



Marilith smiled. *"That's a wonderful thing to say, Corvid. Thank you,"* she said, then paused. *"Ummm... What was the other thing you discovered?"*

"That 'old' doesn't mean 'dead.' I was twenty-five at the time, but she'd been a whorehouse madam longer than I'd been alive. By the time she let me go in the morning, I felt a hundred years old and I walked bow-legged for almost two days," I replied, and winked.

Marilith burst into giggles, then grunted again, clutching her abdomen. I gently moved her hand aside, then resumed stroking her abdomen with the crystal again. *"Oh, my... Handsome, sweet, funny, brave, smart... Have I mentioned I love you?"*

I grinned. "Not in the last few minutes, no."

*"Oh, dear, then I think it bears repeating,"* Marilith replied, and grinned back.

Interlude I - Hammer and Forge.

"Do you think you're ready, Jhumni?" Eddas asked.

I nodded, squeezing my husband's hand as he sat beside me. "Aye, Eddas, that I do."

"It'll only be for an hour, just like yesterday, except now you'll be trying it without the blindfold for bit longer. Joy is inside now, making lunch. By the time you're ready to go in, it will be time to eat," Eddas said, reassuringly. I felt Eddas' hands to the sides of my face, and soon the blindfold was lifted. I could already see the light of the sky through my eyelids, and I steeled myself to not be afraid. It was *weeks* we'd been working on this, now. I *would not* fail. I forced myself to open my eyes, and look around.

Eddas Ayar knelt before us, the hood of his robe lowered. A quiet breeze ruffled the raven-feathers he wore - only two, today, and cocked at a jaunty angle. Eddas smiled, and I smiled back, looking around. My husband and I sat on wooden chairs in the shade of an ancient *byallar* tree, its bole as thick as an oak. Nearby was a small, rock-lined fire-pit with a metal tripod over it, from which a pot of *byallar* hung, warming. The tree was at the base of his tower, to one side - and the gleaming white marble of Eddas' tower stretched far above into the sky, many times my height. Surrounding us were the trees of his lands, standing in neat little rows, the *byallar* beans they bore now red and swelling with their summer growth. Nearby, I could see the old mill wheels that Eddas said the giants used as a hand-mill, grinding the *byallar* come the fall. Peeping around the far side of Eddas' tower, I could see the neat rows of Joy's garden. Behind us, I could hear the quiet murmurings of the stream that passed through Eddas' lands. "Aye, I do yet have to admit, it be very beautiful, here."

"And how is your *latrao*?"

"I yet can feel it, Eddas. It be yet there, lurking at the edge o' me thought, like a beast. The sky do loom overhead, and I do yet feel the tiny voice within that do yet say '*Run! Run!*'" I replied, and grinned. "It be yet not so bad as it once were, howe'er."

"Good, good," Eddas said, then reached for the cup at his side. "Drink - but drink slowly, and stop when your tongue tells you that you taste bile."

I made a face. "Yet *more* dandelion wine, again?"

Eddas nodded. "Drink slowly, and stop when you taste bile."

Karadin looked to Eddas. "Ye be *certain* it be alright for her, Eddas?"

Eddas nodded. "Very certain. I waited until I had managed to isolate the chemicals in question before I began, so that I could create a spell to detect dangerous levels of them in the blood, and another to neutralize them if needed. But, of the three chemicals I've found that are important, only one has a dangerous level to begin with, and dandelion-wine doesn't contain it."

I pulled my hand from Karadin's, and made a face at him. I would *not* have him taking me home out of worry for me. "I be *fine*, husband. Eddas did yet say I could do drink a whole bottle and do yet get drunk as a berserk, and would still suffer no bad effect! It be not liver, though the after-taste do remind one o' it."

Eddas nodded. "It's two separate chemicals, one comes from animals in their livers, one comes from plants. The chemical from livers I've named Opthamol. It goes straight to your blood, and if you get too much, you become ill. But the one from plants does not. I call that one Pre-Opthamol, because your body takes it and converts it into Opthamol in your blood. Humans and elves and most other races have to eat foods that contain Opthamol or Pre-Opthamol to maintain the levels they need in their blood - if they don't, they go blind. If they eat too much liver and get too much Opthamol in their blood, they can die. You dwarves produce Opthamol somehow, in a process I don't understand yet, which is why you can't eat any liver at all - even one bite gives you too much Opthamol. Yet, somehow, Pre-Opthamol is different. Like with other races, your body only uses what you need, bringing the levels of Opthamol in your blood up to a peak, and then you can't get any more into your blood no matter how much Pre-Opthamol you consume. You taste it as bile, just like liver tastes to you, but Pre-Opthamol is harmless to you. Meanwhile, in Jhumni, as a female dwarf, Opthamol interacts with a third chemical that all dwarves make inside themselves, and in the caves is needed to guard against rickets - I've named this chemical Ossinol, incidentally. Dark elves and goblins get Ossinol from a specific fungus they eat, but all other races seem to make within themselves by just being in the sun. Dwarves often don't go into the sun or eat enough foods to give them the Ossinol they need, so instead, you make it within yourselves through a process I don't understand yet. *Feddo*, the disease of wealthy dwarves who eat too much cheese, appears to be caused by small amounts of Opthamol in cheese - you can take a small overdose, but if

you eat too much cheese for years and years on end, it apparently damages your liver. But, more to the point, your body is different from that of your husband, and both of you are different from all the other races. In other races, it's the male's germ plasm that determines gender - in dwarves, it's the female's. And as a female dwarf, you need a precise balance between Ossinol and Opthamol to produce a female child. Most females produce a balance sufficient to maintain health, and to have one in four female births. But, if we tweak the balance of these two chemicals, we may be able to tweak the odds. With precisely the right balance, I think we can insure you'll have a girl. To do that, we'll need a high level of Ossinol during your four-month menstrual cycle, and what your body feels is an optimal level of Opthamol. And the safest way to get the latter is for you to drink that dandelion wine slowly until your tongue tells you to stop. It contains a small amount of Pre-Opthamol - that's what gives it the 'bile' taste, to your tongue."

Karadin shook his head, smiling wryly. "I be sorry to say I be no alchemist to yet ken what ye did say, Eddas Ayar."

"Nor I, but I do ken that it be safe for me, else were Eddas to have e'en the smallest doubt, he would yet not give it to me," I replied, lowering the cup at the taste of bile and holding it back out to Eddas.

Eddas nodded, taking the cup from me. "Yes. It's safe for you or any other dwarf because your body only converts as much Pre-Opthamol to Opthamol as you need," he replied, holding out another cup. "Water - rinse and spit to get rid of the taste."

"Aye, thankee, Eddas," I replied, and did so, trying to spit discreetly.

Karadin stroked his beard, thinking. "So, ye do say that a dwarf-wife may yet just eat a morth of cheese and such like to get this... Err... Opthasummat?"

"No - if they tried that, they'd end up with *feddo*, eventually, and die - a dwarf can take a small dose of Opthamol from cheese and milk from time to time and not be harmed, but do it every day at every meal for years and years and *feddo* is the certain result - liver damage, and death. And worse, a dwarf-wife who tried that would produce *no* extra girls because they aren't getting enough Ossinol to do the trick, what little they got from the milk in the cheese would be a mere fraction of what their body produces naturally. If my theory is right, the safest way to get the levels of Ossinol and Opthamol needed to produce a girl reliably is for a dwarf-wife to sit in the sun and to slowly drink dandelion wine until her

tongue tells her it tastes of bile," Eddas replied, taking the water cup back from me. "And not just once, either. Every day, building up slowly to an hour a day so she develops a tan instead of getting sunburned. Then an hour every day, for the entire length of their cycle. Of course, we've built up a nice tan on Jhumni, she should be alright. Very large amounts of Ossinol are needed, and there's just no safe way for a dwarf-wife to get that other than to sit in the sun - the one thing *latrao* prevents them from doing with any degree of ease."

I shook my head - then immediately regretted it, as that was the third cup of dandelion-wine I'd sipped at, all on an empty tummy, and all the wine was starting to have an effect. "I be yet curious... What do cause *latrao*, Eddas?"

"That, I don't know. I have a theory about the "why" of it, but unless Moradim decides to sit down and chat with me, it likely will remain only a theory," Eddas said, and winked as I giggled. "The story of Ovmala may be part of it, but like any of the stories of the time-before-time, it's hard to say what happened exactly, and the gods very likely played many parts that mortals do not know about. My guess, however, is that it may have been a gift from Moradim long ago, when you were fighting the goblins tooth and nail with little more than stone axes and clubs. A goblin-wife can have a litter of six, but a dwarf-wife has but one child at a time. The goblins have stories of the time-before-time that say-

"Ye do know the ancient stories o' the *goblins?!"* I interrupted, startled.

Eddas grinned. "You'd be surprised what I know," he replied. "In any event, their stories tell how in fighting *your* people, they received a gift from *their* gods. You see, from *their* perspective, you were producing warriors right and left - three quarters of your population is male. So *their* gods made goblin-wives very fecund, so they could keep up. And with litters of six, they about break even. The ratios vary, but typically about one in six of those litters is a kobold, and another one in six is a hobgoblin - both are always male, and always sterile, like mules. Another one in six is a goblin, and the rest, usually three in six, are goblin-maids. They have several stories that explain why all this is so, and why their caste system works the way it does - hobgoblins are always grunt warriors or laborers; kobolds are always smiths, merchants, scholars, accountants, craftsmen and miners; goblins are always leaders, warriors and wizards; and goblin-wives are always mothers and wet-nurses. Everything for them is divided up into specific castes, based on birth..." Eddas said, then shook his head. "But, no matter. The end of it is that in their stories, you dwarves were out-producing them in warriors. So, *their* gods made goblin-wives very fecund, so they could keep up."

Karadin nodded, stroking his beard. "That do yet make an odd sort o' sense, aye... It be like to gaze

in a darkling mirror, a bit..."

Eddas nodded. "Your two peoples go back a long way - just as do the Goblins and the Elves, who can interbreed."

I blinked, *profoundly* startled. "They *can*?!"

Eddas nodded. "Yes - but don't mention it to an elf, it offends them *very* deeply to think about it at all. Well... Except for Dark Elves, but they don't count."

"Oh, me lips be yet sealed on *that*, Eddas Ayar, ye can yet be certain o' it," I replied, shaking my head.

Eddas nodded. "Goblins enjoy abducting elf-maids from the surface lands and raping them until they get pregnant, they find it highly amusing. Afterwards, they usually keep them in the slave dairies, and... Err..." he said, then paused, seeing the look of disgust on my face. "Well, I'll spare you the details, other than to say the results are always hobgoblins. Regardless, the end result is that the Goblins, like the Dark Elves, need to eat certain fungi or they'll go blind from lack of Opthamol or get rickets from lack of Ossinol. You dwarves don't - but, the levels of Opthamol control the strength of a female's *latrao*, as the strength of *latrao* is based on the balance between Opthimol and Ossinol - the higher the Ossinol in comparison to the Opthimol, the more frightened they are. Meanwhile, the amount of Ossinol in the blood during a dwarf-wife's cycle determines her likelihood of bearing a girl."

Karadin shook his head. "Aye... As thy people did once say, Eddas, the more ye do learn, the less ye do yet know."

I nodded. "Oh, aye - but I do learn, ne'ertheless," I said, looking at Eddas. "An the tally be reckoned correct-like by me, I do see that ye do say Moradim did yet give us *latrao* so we might have enough men-folk to yet survive 'gainst the goblins. An we do stay below earth, the balance o' these strange chemicks ye do say we do yet have in our blood would then be balanced three-to-one - yet, an we did

dance and play with the elves in the sunlight and drink their wines as in the ancient story o' Ovmala and her vessels, it would yet be three-to-three?"

Eddas nodded. "If my theory is right, yes - *latrao* was intended by Moradim to give your people the numbers of warriors they needed to survive. But today, you have better weapons, better technology, better understanding of medicine, better sorcery... More of your men survive battle with their enemies, and produce more males of their own as children - and thus, the *akmaran* appeared."

"And how would we yet prove thy theory, Eddas?" I asked.

"Simple - it's been a few minutes, and all in all you've had about two full cups of elf-made dandelion-wine. Look up at the sky, and tell me how you feel about it."

I did so, looking up. The sky reached endlessly above, clear and blue, fluffy white clouds far, far above. It was an endless, open bowl, an expanse so vast as to boggle the imagination, and make the heart tremble with fear. The night-time sky was even worse, the ebon bowl of the heavens stretching infinitely above, with countless stars as points of light so distant as to snatch one's breath away. And yet...

...and yet, as I looked at it...

...it simply didn't bother me.

I blinked, amazed, and looked to Eddas. "It be *naught! I be cured!*" I yelled.

Karadin hugged me, but Eddas held up an ebon-gloved hand. "No, not quite. You're not *cured*, what's happened is the balance of Ophthalmol in your blood is high enough that your body doesn't mind you getting more Ossinol from sitting in the sunlight. Ossinol not only builds bones, in your body it also

has a strong influence on whether you will have a boy or girl when you conceive. It's impossible for you to get this balance any other way - if you eat eggs and milk and cheese like the other races do and try to eat enough of it to get the balance you need of these two chemicals, you'll get fat as a pig and end up getting *feddo* from too much Opthamol and dying. By having you drink dandelion-wine, however, you get Pre-Opthamol, which your body only converts to Opthamol as you need it. We could get the same effect from you eating a bit of greens for the Pre-Opthamol in it, but you're not used to digesting greens so it might give you loose bowels, so we're using dandelion-wine instead."

"So ye do say this will not last, and her *latrao* will yet return?" Karadin asked.

Eddas nodded. "In about a quarter hour or so, yes. Then, she'll have so much Ossinol from the sun, she'll start feeling nervous again. By the end of an hour, she'll be ready to go back inside - just like yesterday."

I laughed, feeling giddy from the dandelion wine. "I do care not! I will yet enjoy this while I may, Eddas Ayar, and on the morrow, I'll yet do it again!" I then looked to Karadin, and grinned at him. "And as for ye, husband, it be yet near to the time when ye should yet perform thy husband's duty, and give me get. I do think I would like to walk among the trees for awhile, then mayhap return to our little room in Eddas Ayar's tower, so ye may yet have an early start on thy labors."

Karadin blushed furiously, glancing to Eddas. "Ah... Well... An ye do say, wife..." Eddas, for his part, looked away politely, though I could tell he was struggling not to laugh.

"Aye, that I do say, husband!" I replied, and stood from the chair, grinning broadly. "Now - do show me the trees of these lands, husband, while this may yet last. Show me the little *jiki*-bird, and the squirrel, and the butterfly, and all that I may yet see! Show me the world, husband!" I crowed, and laughed, giddy from the wine.

Karadin grinned broadly, rising to his feet and taking my hand. "Aye, wife, that I will."



## The Raven - Four.

Thunder rolled overhead, and the rain poured down in sheets as I darted towards the cabin. At a run, I vaulted up to land on the elevated wooden platform the cabin was built on, then trotted through the open door.

*"How is the ship?"* Marilith called.

"Fine, fine - Blue and Red did a good job securing it, it'll be fine through the storm. They're hiding under the tarp on the deck so they don't get wet. A lot of worry for nothing," I said, and looked down at myself, chuckling. "And a lot of cold and wet."

Marilith smiled. *"Take off your clothes, and I'll clean and dry them with sorcery,"* she said, walking over to me.

I looked her over. She was wearing her black apodesmos and loincloth, the mer-folk having given them to her the other day, once she was well enough to walk around a bit and ask them. It was several days before she was strong enough to clean the blood off them with sorcery, but when she did, it seemed obvious she was almost ready. Unfortunately, she was still very shapely and attractive, and I wasn't certain her suggestion was a good idea. She'd asked to be courted, I should at least make an effort. I smiled, shaking my head. "I'll be alright."

Marilith put her hands on her hips. *"Corvid, you've seen me naked for weeks, now, I do think it's my turn,"* she said, and winked. *"Besides, you'll catch your death of cold, and then I'll have to take care of you until you recover, wasting more time. Come - take them off. Look - I'll turn my back, see?"* she said, turning around.

The view from behind was just as nice as the view from in front, I realized - she flicked her long horse-like tail, which only drew my attention to her perfectly shaped rump. Chuckling, I loosened the red sash about my waist. "Alright."

I didn't wear much, really - black silk tunic, black side-and-front-button trousers and black knee-high broad-cuffed boots, black duellist's sword-belt and scabbard beneath the red sash on my waist, and woolen stockings to keep from wearing my boots out too quickly or getting blisters on my feet. The last article I pulled off was a short set of braies - a type of one-piece loincloth popular nowadays. Fortunately for men's fashion, codpieces had gone out of style two generations ago. I still knew a few rough-and-tumble fighters who wore them beneath their trousers as protection against being kneed in the groin, but the best guard against that in my experience was not to get close enough to an enemy to allow them to do it. "Alright, now what?"

*"Towel,"* she replied, holding her hand up and behind her - a gray baize towel appeared in it, long and fluffy. *"Just put the clothes on the table, and wrap yourself in this."*

I did so, putting the clothes down, and heard a soft *"Oooo..."* as I did so. I looked up, and realized she was watching me over her shoulder. I chuckled, taking the towel from her and wrapping it around myself. "You know, it's somewhat cheating to take advantage of eyes that are more to the side of your head."

Marilith flicked her mane, looking away from me again. *"I'm a demoness, dear, certain things are expected of me."*

I sat in the chair, looking her over as she turned around to fetch the clothes. Her every move was a

gesture, her every look a message. And yet...

...and yet, as I looked at her, I saw something else behind it. Something softer, more quiet - something I remembered Belana mentioning, on that long night of warm talk and warmer touches. "And not just *any* demoness, either. An *equibranche*, you said. A nightmare. Dream-warrior..."

"*And dream lover*," she said, smiling as she spread my clothes out across the floor, then began to gesture over them, brushing away the water with sorcery.

And then, I saw it in her eyes. For a brief moment, I saw what Belana had told me of. And I knew I had guessed right.

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees and lacing my fingers together, then smiled at her. "Liar."

Marilith paused in working on my clothes, blinking at me. "*What?*"

"You're a liar. You come on like you're experienced and worldly, and you might enjoy a quick tussle between the sheets with me. But I can see it in your eyes. You may have made love in dreams, but you've never done so in waking life."

"*Corvid, I..*"

I grinned at her. "You, my dear, are a virgin."

"I-I-I-I..."

"Yes?"

Marilith sighed, turning her face from me and lowering her ears in what looked remarkably like a blush. *"How did you know?"*

I chuckled. "Well, I'm tempted to punish you by telling you something typical like *'I can smell a virgin a league away,'*" I replied, and chuckled again. "But, no, the truth is Belana again - the woman I told you about before. I told you - we talked quite a bit that night. Well, when she wasn't seeing if she had the strength to break me, that is," I replied, and winked. "I get the feeling that where *you* come from, being a virgin is a bad thing."

*"It's... Somewhat embarrassing, yes,"* Marilith said, then looked at me. *"But really, it wasn't my fault! I mean... Just about the time I was old enough and was done with my training and I'd gotten a few missions under my belt and I was considering maybe... Well, then I got captured and put in that damned magical cage for two millennia! I mean, I know I'm just an equibranche and we're not the prettiest, but I-"* Marilith said, then suddenly clapped her mouth shut and fell silent.

"Aaaah. That's what it is, for you. For *your* people, beauty is a different thing."

Marilith was silent for a long moment, then finally nodded. *"I chose my final metamorphosis, as we all do. And my choice was equibranche. I wanted to strike back against those that were summoning our people... Hurting us... Killing us. And I did. I was very good. But to my people... We're considered ugly."*

"And what's considered beautiful, to your people?"

*"Oh... A male bufotibranche is very handsome. So is a satyribranche, but not so much. Of all, a liquibranche is probably the most handsome."*

"And what do they look like?"

*"Well... That varies from moment to moment. They're really very lovely, the males are dazzlingly handsome. They're an absolutely darling mass of multi-hued flesh that constantly writhes and twitches, endlessly forming pseudopods tipped with eyes, claws, teeth, and other appendages they need at any given moment. Very handsome."*

"And you, perfectly balanced, perfectly formed, nothing twitching or flowing or unevenly shaped..."

*"Stop it. I know what I look like."*

I was silent for a moment, watching her. She, for her part, kept her face turned from me. "You're very old, here. An Ancient One. But I'm guessing that for your people... You're still a young girl."

*"Yes."*

"And you don't even couple like we do."

*"We can, those of us that have the equipment for it. Some do it for entertainment. But that's not how we have children."*

"So you said before," I replied.

Marilith turned her back to me as she sat on the floor, and wrapped her arms around her knees. I rose, drying myself quickly with the towel, then draped it over the chair. Walking over to the bed, I climbed in, then held the sheets open for her. "Come here."

Marilith looked at me, blinking away a tear. *"You mean it?"*

"Yes. Come here."

Marilith nodded, rising to her feet and stepping over to the bed, then slipping beneath the covers. *"Oh! I'm sorry, I'm so nervous! I guess I need to take my clothes off, I-"*

"No," I replied, stroking her face and laying her head down on the pillow. After a moment, she opened her lips, and sighed deeply. I wrapped my hands around her face, and breathed out gently into her mouth, inhaling through my nose.

It was an odd sensation, really. For me, there was nothing - just the strangeness of gently filling her lungs with my breath. Yet, for her, it apparently was far more. She trembled, and every once in awhile, she made a soft little sound as she exhaled, breathing only what I gave her.

She was, in truth, an alien being from another dimension. Her body didn't work like mine - not at all. Her body didn't even work like that of a human woman, really, or any other creature on this planet. She was unique, here, a being from another dimension. I had watched her eat hot coals and cinders, which to her were like pastries. She could eat ordinary food and drink ordinary things, but as she told me while she was healing, she could literally eat anything of this world she could chew, and drink anything of this world that was liquid. As I had discovered tending to her, though she had an anus where one would expect it to be, she never needed to use it for its ordinary function and never urinated at all. Marilith said

that excretion, for her, was carried out through simple breathing, as the *mana*-energy within her body eventually converted nearly everything she ate into light, invisible gas released into her lungs. By breathing ordinary air, it was converted to invisible water vapor when she exhaled, she said. It was, literally, magic - she was a magical being from another dimension. Totally alien, not of this world. Yet, somehow, I could sense that there was a woman's soul inside this strange, magical being. I did not know what taking my breath into her felt like, to her. But, judging by the soft sounds she was making as she exhaled my breath, it was apparently quite pleasant.

I started to get a crick in my neck, holding it up from the pillow, but I continued as long as I could. Finally, however, I had to admit I needed to rest. I gave her one last breath, then leaned back, and kissed her equine nose before resting my head on the pillow to relax.

Marilith took a deep breath, her eyes fluttering. *"Oh, my..."*

I chuckled. "I suppose that means you enjoyed it."

*"Yes. I never thought any male here would even want to..."* Marilith looked at me. *"Did you like it?"*

I smiled. It was interesting, but not titillating in the least. It was as sensual as scratching an itch for her. And really, someone that eats glowing charcoal like pastries does not have the most lovely breath, their breath smells of ashes. But, I knew that none of that was what she wanted to hear. "Yes, very much. Unfortunately, now I'll have to worry about you getting pregnant, I suppose."

Marilith giggled. *"I only wish. You can't, your chi is human, your breath lacks ana and kata, and it takes decades to a century even if you could. I could feel your spirit brushing mine, warming me... It was lovely, but... No, I only wish. But for me... Oh, my... You have lovely breath."*

I grinned. Coming from someone whose breath smelled a bit of ashes, this was not necessarily a compliment - I resolved to add a bit more powdered mint to my tooth-powder that I'd gotten in Vilandia.

"Come, let's get some sleep. The storm will be gone by morning, and we can begin our search then."

*"Ummm... My sister... She and I always sleep cuddled, like two spoons. I don't know if I could sleep any other way. Do you think you could... Err..."*

I smiled. She had slept in her bed by herself fine for weeks, while I had slept in my bedroll on the floor. Still, I would not deny her this. "Certainly," I replied, and she turned her back to me, moving closer. I cuddled with her, wrapping my arms around her, shifting until she seemed to be comfortable. Unfortunately, she still had a very shapely body, and it was now pressed quite firmly up against me.

Marilith giggled. *"My, my... Is that a club in your pocket, or are you just-"*

"Don't," I said, interrupting. "Just don't."

*"Oh,"* she said, wilting. *"I... I guess I should have expected you might not want to..."*

"That's not it. I do. But now is not the time. My father once said I should always do my thinking with the head that has eyes and ears attached. And I do - I always have. You asked me to court you, to romance you. And romance is more than that."

*"There will be a time, though... Yes?"*

"Yes."



"When?"

"When you're ready."

Marilith lay silently, reaching up to stroke my arm as it lay around her. Finally, she spoke. "*I love you, Corvid.*"

I smiled, leaning down to kiss her neck. "I love you, too, Marlith. More and more each passing day," I replied, because it was true.

The Raven - Five.

It took quite a bit for Marilith to say her goodbyes the next morning. There were several long and tearful hugs with Pearl, Yanar and many others I didn't know who apparently meant quite a bit to her - and more than just for helping save her life. I smiled politely. For Sasha and Marilith, apparently, these people were like family. In fact, Marilith had said before that she and Sasha were considered to be part of their clan, so really, they *were* like family. And given that Marilith could never go back to her home plane again, it seemed likely that this was all the family she had. So, I smiled politely, despite that I barely knew any of them. After all, if I was going to be serious in courting Sasha and Marilith, it seemed wise to at least be on good terms with whoever they might end up considering as my mother-in-law.

At last, Marilith was done. Carrying Sasha's belongings under one arm, she climbed up the ladder and was aboard. I was amazed at how easily she managed the steps with horse's hooves for feet, but I supposed she'd had a bit of practice, after all - judging by the shape of her leg, it was likely little more difficult than walking on one's toes. I clambered aboard after her, then Blue and Red pulled up the ladder and stored it as I went to the pilot's seat. Marilith then sat beside me in the passenger seat as the wings finished unfolding, clutching Sasha's belongings in her lap. *"I'm ready."*

Seeing Blue and Red had securely gripped the rail and were ready, themselves, I nodded. "Then here we go," I replied with a grin, pulling back on the left lever. The wings began to flap, slowly at first, then faster and faster, and the ship began to gain altitude in a spray of sand from the beach. Once we had a few dozen cubits of altitude, I tipped the ship forward and to port, sending us in a tight circle to Marilith's whoops and giggles. I then leveled the ship across the beam, sending us zooming off to the east, away from the island.

Marilith grinned broadly, looking the ship over. *"This is a fabulous vessel, Corvid. How fast can it go?"*

"Fast," I replied, and pushed forward on the control stick a bit more, pulling back on the altitude lever to increase the upward beat of the wings. I could *feel* the acceleration pushing me back into the seat slightly, and soon the ship was moving near it's maximum speed.

*"Oh, my..."* Marilith said, her eyes wide.

"Which way?" I called, raising my voice against the rushing wind.

Marilith pointed and I turned the ship slightly, then spent a few moments adjusting the pitch and altitude until we were going as fast as this ship would go - which I'd calculated with standard dead-reckoning tools as being a bit over thirty-eight knots, faster with a favorable tail-wind. Of course, that was easily faster than a galloping horse, and well over twice as fast as the fastest sailing ship I had ever heard of. "Let's see if we can find some air going our way!"

"What?" Marilith replied, clutching Sasha's belongings tight.

I shook my head, and instead leveled out the ship, letting it slow to a stop. Once the wind of our passage had stilled, I looked to Marilith again. "You'll have to put those things away, Marilith, or you'll lose them to the wind."

"Oh," she replied, then took Sasha's bracelets and slipped them over her wrists. Once she had it, she touched the lance to the little bottle, and it vanished - held inside, I assumed. She pulled on Sasha's gloves, then grinned at me. Then, to my utter amazement, she took Sasha's boots and slipped them on over her own feet - the boots changed their length and shape as she tugged them on and up to her knees, covering her equine lower legs as though they'd been made for them.

"How...?"

Marilith grinned. *"They're enchanted. Everything I made for Sasha is enchanted with certain spells, and since I made them, I made them so I could wear them, too if we thought I needed to. When she's in her mermaid-form, she can't wear them anyway,"* Marilith said, then winked. *"I suppose it's natural. Sisters often wear each other's clothes, you know."*

I grinned. "No, I *didn't* know, I've never had a sister," I replied, then tipped the ship forward again to gain speed once more.

It took a bit of fiddling with our altitude, but I eventually found a patch of air that was going roughly our way. The blast of wind rushing by us lessened somewhat, and I grinned at Marilith. "There we are."

Marilith looked past the rail nearby, to the gleaming sea below. *"Oh, my... How fast are we going?"*

I glanced at the sea, taking an estimate, then shrugged. "With the wind behind us, about thirty-nine knots."

*"Okaaaay... I'm not a sailor, Corvid. How fast is that?"*

"Well, that's hard to explain except by comparison, I suppose," I replied, shrugging. "The fastest ship I've ever sailed could go eighteen knots in a strong wind. A well-trained, well-bred racing horse in a short sprint can go about thirty-five knots. We're doing about thirty-nine knots - about thirty-nine leagues an hour. We can do this until the wind we're traveling with changes, then we'll be down to about thirty-eight knots. By trading out with Blue or Red, we can keep this course and rough speed all day and all night, and travel a bit over nine hundred leagues a day - assuming we don't encounter any storms."

Marilith gaped. *"Alright... We're going fast."*

I grinned at her. "Just a bit, yes."

*"What do you do if we encounter a storm?"*

"Well, that depends on the clouds. A low storm I can fly over - I've a ring that Eddas made for me that allows me to adapt to the cold and thin air above the clouds. But, we won't be going as fast, as the wings can't catch as much air. Above the clouds, there are also often bursts of wind that buffet the ship about and push it down. That makes it difficult to stay above the clouds, and this ship can't survive flying straight through a storm like a sailing vessel might. It's actually easier and safer to fly around a storm - but large storms can put me very far off course."

*"And you might get lost?"* Marilith asked, looking at me.

"Well, that's possible, yes, but it depends how far off course I get. This was a racing vessel, Eddas said, so it has nothing in the way of navigational aids. I've bolted a ship's compass to the deck near the bow, where I keep my other gear I use for navigation - sextant, compass, spyglass, and so on. I quickly realized that knowing speed was going to be the hardest part, so I worked with Frarim quite a bit on determining just how fast this ship can go, and being able to judge it by sight. Eddas said the dwarves have fairly accurate spring-wound clocks, that'll be the first thing I trade for so I can more accurately determine longitude. Until then, however, I just fly the ship the same way I sailed the seas - by the stars, moon and sun." I nodded my head towards my two crew. "If you'll look, beside Blue on the starboard side is a ship's hourglass, bolted below the rail. It's his job to rotate it when it empties, and keep track of how many times he turns it. He can count to twenty fairly well, but beyond that, he gets a bit fuzzy, so I have him rap his head like a ship's bell every four hours so I know the time. Knowing time, direction and speed, I can navigate anywhere."

*"I see..."* Marilith said, then looked up, her gaze becoming distant. *"I can sense their direction through my link with Sasha, and casting my vision to them, I can sense the essence of the reality there. They're moving quickly, the ship is enchanted... Not as quickly as this vessel, by far, but still quickly. Their ship is like a greyhound, made to travel far and fast, and has been enchanted to travel even faster."*

"Just keep us pointed at them, and we'll eventually catch them."

*"Perhaps... The greater reality is unclear in that regard..."* she said, then blinked, looking to me suddenly. *"We will have to go around Vilandia!"*

"They're past Vilandia already? That *is* a fast ship, it's only been a month."

*"Yes, they are, and Vilandia has many mountains!"*

I shrugged. "Well, we could fly over the lower ones or look for a pass, but going around would be

easier, yes. I'll set a course for the Coast of Skulls - that's on the northern tip of Vilandia. From there, we'll head towards their ship again," I replied, then looked to Red. "Red, come here and take over for me."

Red released the rail, trotting over to me. With the ship at speed and steady, the deck was only slightly inclined, so he had little trouble. Red snatched up the wooden wedge I'd attached to a chain, the other end being attached to the pilot's seat. As he wedged it into place to hold the altitude lever, I let go of the control lever, rising from the seat. The ship leveled out as I did so, and Red sat in my place, taking hold of the controls and tilting us forward again slightly as I pulled out the wedge. Moments later, I'd trotted to the bow, and was glancing at the compass. Opening the nearby trunk, I extracted my sextant, tossing the lanyard around my neck, then closed the box.

It was a bit tricky taking a sun-sight, particularly when the ship was moving. Still, I only needed a rough guess as to our latitude, as I already had taken a sun-sight while we were on the island, and knew our latitude fairly well. I glanced at the reading, made a quick guess as to the local time and the rough angle of the sun, then nodded, putting the sextant away. "Come one point to port, east by northeast!" I called, grabbing the rail.

Red did so, the ship tilting, then leveling across the beam again. I glanced at the compass, then nodded. "Very good, steady as she goes, then!"

I sat on the deck, putting my back to the bow rail, then grinned at Marilith. "Come on down here, Marilith, the wind's much less behind the rail!"

Marilith nodded, rising from the passenger seat, then reaching for the rail to follow along to the bow. She walked very unsteadily, the wind buffeting her, her mane flying. At last, she had it, and sat down with what looked to be obvious relief. *"It's very difficult to walk on these smooth boards with the ship tilted like this and the wind blowing and... I'm actually glad for these boots, a bit of soft leather over my hooves gives good traction."*

"Well, it would be easier if we had all the parts to this ship, but we don't."

"Err... *This ship is missing pieces?!*" Marilith asked, her eyes wide.

I chuckled. "Not like that, no. See those holes along the top sides of the rail? That's for a cover that goes over the ship that I don't have. Eddas and Frarim explained this was a racing ornithopter, and apparently, they raced by a strict set of rules. The cover was meant to make the ship slip easier through the air - a wood frame covered in canvas, enchanted so as to be transparent from the inside, like glass. Those were apparently made illegal in racing a few years before Frarim and Haifa stole this ship, eighteen centuries ago - so, this ship didn't have one. Then, there's that small hole there in the center of the deck, see it?"

"Err... *Yes, what's it for?*"

"A racing pennant, Frarim said. Like a slim mast, it was a pole they poked into that hole that had a pennant on it that identified the racer. I don't have it, either, though I plan on making one so I can fly a flag from it. I figure it will be easier to land without incident in the Southlands if they can see I'm flying the king's flag. For handicapping races, they added boxes full of sand, which bolted to various points along the sides of the ship. I use those points for cargo crates. As far as your problem, however," I said, pointing just above our heads, "there's a stanchion attached to the stem-post and stern-post. Frarim said that they ran a line between the two stanchions, attached to the pennant-mast. That made walking around on the ship easier, since you could hold onto it. Larger ornithopters had similar arrangements, and the crew would wear special life-lines with snap-hooks attached to it in case of bad weather so they didn't fall overboard," I said, then shrugged. "I don't have any of that. I plan on *making* it as I go along, likely with Eddas' help for enchantments for the cover, but I don't have any of it now."

Marilith nodded. "*I see.*"

"Can you estimate how quickly we're closing on them?"

Marilith shook her head. "*No. I only know we're traveling faster than they are. My vision at this distance is a thing of essences, of feelings... I do not actually see it, I perceive it.*"

"Does being closer make it easier to see?"

"Yes."

"Well, then eventually, you'll be able to see more, and we can plan what we'll do to recover Sasha."

Marilith sighed, hanging her head, the stray breezes that whipped around the protective bulwark of the forward rail fluttering her mane. *"I... I feel I have failed her. Our link... She can hear me speak to her, and I can hear her if she speaks to me. But, after I was wounded, I could not speak. I tried to enter her dreams at night... But her dreams were confused, and strongly affected by sorcery. I could do little - and each time she awakened, the wizard reinforced his spells, further muting our link."*

"Reinforcement implies that additional strength is needed," I replied. "That implies perhaps they fade, over time."

*"Perhaps, yes."*

"He left you wounded and dying. Do nothing, for awhile, just watch them. Perhaps he'll think you've died, and allow his spells to slip."

Marilith nodded. *"If they require his will to maintain, his will may flag, or he may simply decide there is no further need, yes. Then, I would be able to see around her, through our link."*



"Keep watching them, then, and we'll just wait and see."

Marilith nodded, leaning back, her gaze becoming distant. I leaned back, myself, and gazed up at the sky. There was little either of us could do, save wait.

The ornithopter sped on through crystal blue skies, heading to the east.

#### The Raven - Six.

Red held the ship steady, hovering, while I examined the map. The light of the full moon and the lamp I'd hung from the hook on the stem-post gave enough light to work by, though the ship moved as it hovered, making the lamp wave from side to side. I had a fairly good guess as to the location of Round Island, and sailing to where we were at had confirmed it. I dipped the quill in the inkwell, making a note, then wiped the quill. Slipping it back into its case, I capped the inkwell and screwed the cap down tight, putting the map and the rest of my equipment away.

*"Do you know where we are, now?"* Marilith asked, standing behind me and watching as I reached for the little candle-lantern.

I nodded, dousing the lantern with a quick puff of breath and putting it and the tin of dwarven matches away. "That there," I said, pointing to the darkened lands in the distance to starboard, "is the northern coast of Vilandia - the Coast of Skulls. We're about ten leagues offshore, and that light in the distance near the horizon is the lighthouse of Borlinton. We're precisely where I thought we'd be, and if Blue has been keeping good time with the hourglass, it's just after midnight," I replied, latching the chest. "Which way are they, now?"

Marilith gazed off into the distance, then pointed.

"Red, come two points to starboard, east by southeast, then full ahead!" I called, looking back to the stern as I gripped the rail.

Red saluted, then turned the ship, tipping us back briefly and rolling to port to turn, then leveling the ship across the beam and tipping us forward again to pick up speed.

"*Yeep!*" Marilith shouted, losing her balance.

I shot out a hand, steadying her, then smiled. "Hand on the rail for maneuvering, dear."

Marilith grinned back at me. "*Yes, sorry. I think I could come up with a quick spell of flight should I fall overboard, but I'd rather not have to.*"

"Yes, I would imagine not," I said, and yawned as she sat beside me, shielded again from the wind by the bow rail. "Can you see them better, now?"

Marilith's gaze became distant again, and she nodded. "*Yes. They are nearing a coast, and are turning to follow it south.*"

I blinked, startled. "A *coast*?! To port or starboard?"

*"Ummm... I can hear what you mean, my powers let me understand any language and speak that language back to you. Port is the dock-side of the ship when in port, starboard is the side placed towards the sea. But... Ummm... Which is which?"* Marilith asked, her ears flicking down in a blush. *"I'm not a sailor, Corvid, sorry."*

"Port is left, Marilith. Is the coast right or left of the ship? If they're heading south, is the coast east or west of them?"

*"East,"* Marilith replied after a moment.

"Damn," I muttered, thinking. "They must be near Antonica, then. In the direction you've got us pointing, we'll make landfall well south of Larinia, in the Wildlands."

*"I've never been there. What's it like?"*

I smiled. "Not as bad as Hyperborea, by far. Still, it's hardly tame. It's beyond the southern end of the Granite Mountains. You often encounter centaurs from the Cluain Plains there - the plains are to the east, on the southern end of the Inland Sea. There's also a few minotaurs and other beasts in the forest, as well as quite a few dryads."

*"And you've experience with them, too, I imagine,"* Marilith said, grinning.

I shook my head. "If I had, we wouldn't be talking - they can keep a man hidden to themselves up to twenty years and I'm only thirty, now."

*"Err... Sorry, I meant that as a joke."*

"It's alright. Cast your gaze between us and them, and look for storms."

Marilith was silent, her gaze distant for a long while. Finally, she spoke. *"I see only one. It is near them, to their east. It's winds drive their sails, and they move swiftly across the night sea."*

"Which direction is the storm headed?"

*"Roughly southeast, inland."*

"No danger to us, then," I replied, and reached for my bedroll, secured nearby. "Let's try to get some sleep. Red or Blue will wake us if there's a problem."

*"Alright,"* Marilith replied.

Slipping the two of us into the bedroll was a bit tricky, but we managed it. Marilith again preferred to sleep spoon-fashion, and I accommodated her. I couldn't really sleep, however. My thoughts kept turning to Sasha... And, in the end, the Goddess she served.

Yorindar, Frarim had explained, was a stern but ultimately fair god, possessed of a sharp wit, a dry sense of humor, and usually very unwilling to sacrifice his pawns. Indeed, it seemed Eddas' trip into the past a few months ago, a journey that had waited eighteen centuries, was all a part of a larger plan to allow Yorindar to recover Frarim from the past, and thus free up several thousand lesser pawns over the course of eighteen centuries to do other things. If Yorindar *had* to sacrifice a pawn, he would - indeed, Frarim originally had been sacrificed to further Yorindar's aims. But, Yorindar preferred to play the game of the gods preserving as many of his pawns as he could, that in the end, each would have a chance to be forged stronger, and be more useful. The Ocean, however, was nothing like Yorindar.

The Goddess of the Ocean could be immeasurably kind one moment, then instantly heartless the next. It was not out of evil, or some sense of enjoyment of the pain of mortals. It was, rather, her simple nature. If she needed to sacrifice a pawn to win, she would do so, instantly and without hesitation. And, indeed, she already had. Marilith had explained over the month she'd been healing that she and Sasha had already served the Ocean's purpose, in aiding the mer-folk of the Windward Isles to dominate the seas, and begin writing down their knowledge. And even before that, Sasha had (with Marilith's help) won a war in Palome, furthering the Ocean's purposes by aiding her allies, and further training her pawn to be more competent and skilled. But, for Sasha to even be in the right place for her childhood home, Vilandia, her parents had been killed. Indeed, everyone aboard the ship they sailed on had been lost, and only my father, the man who saved Sasha by placing her in a trunk and casting her overboard, had survived.

The Ocean did not rely on vast and powerful pawns equal to Eddas Ayar. Instead, Frarim had said, she worked like the waves - a thousand little forces that combined to a single irresistible force that crashed into the beach. I hadn't even been aware that waves worked like that, but Frarim said they did. No matter, however - individuals like Orissa, Pearl, and countless thousands more like them were how the Ocean usually worked her will in the mortal plane. Individuals with no special knowledge or ability, they simply were in the right place at the right time to do what needed to be done. And, if the Ocean needed to sacrifice a pawn to win, even a powerful or useful one, she would not hesitate.

Perhaps, with luck, Yorindar might convince the Goddess of the Ocean of the value of keeping a few powerful pawns around. Frarim had explained the game of *chatto*, an ancient Hyperborean game. A pawn forged stronger and stronger over time was far more useful, as they could often overwhelm an army of lesser pawns. Perhaps the Ocean's alliance with Yorindar would teach her this. Perhaps not. But, if not, then we certainly were not guaranteed of rescuing Sasha at all - for if it served the Ocean's purpose that Sasha be lost, then it would take far more than merely myself and her sister to save her.

Marilith slept soundly, and I gently rolled over to my back so as not to awaken her. Thereafter, I lay there, gazing at the stars above, and thinking.

## Interlude II - The Desert.

The enchanted ship swayed in the wind, guided by sorceries the one-eyed swordsman did not understand. Sleek as a shark, the long, single-masted, lateen-rigged ship required no crew, no hand at the tiller... And yet, it sailed smoothly, as though invisibly and expertly crewed by the men a ship its size would require. Atop the teak decks, various circles and glyphs of power were placed, inscribed into the wood of the deck, and inlaid in silver. The one-eyed swordsman could almost *feel* the power of the vessel. Yet, the enchantments were apparently not quite enough, for the enemy drew closer and closer. The one-eyed swordsman scratched beneath the eyepatch that covered his left eye, the eye he'd lost in a duel years before. Fighting ship to ship, he understood. How one might fight an enemy ship that flew, however, he had no idea.

At a sound, the one-eyed swordsman turned his head, glancing behind him as the bearded wizard approached. "What was she saying?" he asked, jerking a thumb at the wench who knelt on the deck of the enchanted ship. "I can't understand a word of her gibberish."

The wizard waved a hand dismissively. "Nothing, nothing. She wanted to know what that was," the wizard replied, his gaze on the winged ship, now visible in the distant sky. "I told her it was a monster, and I, her loving master, would take care of it."

The swordsman chuckled, his eye on the fire-haired woman. "If she wakes from your spell, old man, she'll slit your gullet."

The wizard smiled. "Then, unfortunately, you wouldn't be paid."

The swordsman grinned wryly, stroking his beard. "True - but watching that might be worth the price."

The wizard laughed. "You've a lovely wit, friend, but I'm afraid it's not likely to happen. Without that demoness, she is nearly helpless."

"I still say you should have let me kill the thing," the swordsman replied, shaking his head.

"Ah, but that would have completely defeated our goals, and displeased Ukkug. And should we displease the One True God, it won't matter if you're paid or not - we'll both be dead." The wizard waved to the woman. "Make certain she stays within the circle of protection on the deck, but otherwise, do not speak to her or touch her, as always."

The swordsman nodded. "Done - good luck with that ship."

"Oh, there will be little luck involved, friend," the wizard replied, walking over to a summoning circle near the stern of the enchanted ship.

## The Raven - Seven.

"*There they are!*" Marilith yelled, pointing.

I nodded. "I see them," I replied, looking at the ship with my spyglass. "It's a Mystantian tartan - you can tell by the shape and the sail. Very rare in this part of the world, you usually only see them on the coast of the Eastern Sea or on the Inland Sea. I've never seen one move so fast in a moderate breeze... And no crew in sight, just two men and Sasha on the deck. There isn't even anyone at the helm. You're right, it has to be enchanted, that ship should take at least eight men to sail, better with fifteen, and would never move that fast in this wind - it's moving like it weighs almost nothing... Like the whole thing's made of balsa. It can't be, though, it would break apart... It has to be enchanted."

"*What do we do, now?*"

"That depends on the range of your sorcery," I replied, snapping the spyglass shut. "We're about a league away, and closing."

*"Well, that depends on what I try to use. I could try to simply snatch her with a spell of telekinesis, but we'd have to be very close - a few dozen paces. I could risk casting on the ship, perhaps to slow it by damaging it and hope I don't hurt Sasha... But we'd have to be no more than a hundred paces away, I don't think I could hit beyond that."*

"Arrow ranges," I replied, putting the spyglass away.



"Well... Yes, sorry." Marilith replied, her eyes on the enemy ship.

I shook my head. "Don't be, that's the same ranges I used to have to fight at when I was chasing slavers. It's simply the reality of naval battle. Close to bowshot and exchange a few volleys as you try to get close enough to board. Red and Blue have repeating crossbows, however - Eddas gave them to me, he said they were ancient weapons of the Invaders... The Golannin, who destroyed Hyperborea. Red and Blue are made out of Golannin armor, as well. With one flying and one shooting, we'll have a tremendous advantage as we close. I just have to tell him to avoid shooting anyone with red hair."

*"She's in a circle, inlaid into the deck. It looks like... Yes, it's a circle of protection, surrounding the mast and about five cubits radius. I can't touch her with telekinesis. What would be the best place to damage with lightning to stop that ship?"*

"The mast. Snap it, and that ship isn't going anywhere. A better question is 'how do you prevent the same from happening to us?'"

*"I can shield our ship with sorcery,"* Marilith replied.

"Well, that means likely they can, too, so be ready."

*"I'll be ready."*

"Good. Now, hold on tight to the rail," I replied, gripping the rail myself, then looked to Red. "Red, bring us down to a quarter league, then bring us alongside, about a hundred paces out, matching speed, then bring us in close so Blue can fire! Blue, ready your crossbow to fire on the enemy, but don't shoot until you can be certain of hitting, and don't hit any woman with red hair!"

I felt my stomach lighten as Red swiftly brought the ship down in altitude, then began to slow us down. Blue reached to the case mounted below the starboard rail, pulling out his repeating crossbow and tossing the long lanyard over his head and below his left shoulder. A moment later, he slapped one of the slim spring-loaded boxes of quarrels into the slot beneath it, then pulled back on the cocking lever, readying the crossbow. I'd once tried pulling the string myself to try to see how strong the bow was, and found I simply could not do it - the bow itself was a band of orichalcum with at least ten stone's pull, perhaps more. Yet, the enchantments made it easy with the cocking lever. When fired, a magically-powered mechanism re-cocked the crossbow, readying it to shoot the next bolt - and it was not only as strong as a siege crossbow, it shot very rapidly. Its range was only about seventy-five paces, however, and Blue wouldn't likely hit anyone aboard until we were within thirty paces.

*"He's casting a spell..."* Marilith said, watching them. *"It... He's summoning something! It's... Oh, no!"*

"What?! What is it?!" I yelled.

*"He... He's struggling... No, he's got it. He's commanding him now... No, it can't be!"*

"Marilith, what is it?!" I yelled again.

But my question was answered a heartbeat later, as a hideous *thing* appeared on the deck of our ship, amidships. About three cubits tall, it was squat, built much like a toad, and covered in dripping slime. The creature *roared*, startling me badly - but Blue was already shooting at it, the *thump-thump-thump* sound of his crossbow firing and the sounds of the bolts smacking into the beast's flesh rousing me from my moment's hesitation.

*"Don't hurt him! Don't hurt him!"* Marilith shrieked as I drew my sword.

"Have you lost your *mind?!?*" I yelled back as the creature turned to attack Blue.

Marilith, however, did not reply - instead, she gestured. "*There - he's sealed within an abjuration! He can't hurt you!*"

And indeed, the bolts from Blue's crossbow were simply deflecting off some invisible surface, now, and the beast rebounded from the same invisible barrier. "Blue, stop shooting. Red, keep us back from that ship for now," I called, gaping. Blue did so, and I glanced to Marilith. "What the hell *is* that thing?"

"*My cousin,*" Marilith replied, walking up next to me.

The beast turned, gazing at Marilith. Green ichor flowed from the six crossbow bolts stuck in its side, and it panted as it gazed at us. "*Marilith,*" it growled.

"*Ignatus,*" she replied, her voice sounding pained. "*I'm so sorry...*"

"*It seems you were right, I should have chosen my final metamorphosis more wisely. Then these stupid stickpins wouldn't have bothered me,*" the creature replied, and grunted, tugging one of the bolts from its flesh and dropping it. "*My clan-father tried to warn me. 'Nevermind how handsome a bufotibranche is, a sixth-rank is weak, if you get summoned, you could die,' he said. Yes, he warned me. Many, many times. But, foolish me, I was young. I thought... I thought I might...*"

"*I know. I remember our night by the lake, the lava bubbling so nicely, the hell-hounds baying in the darkness... Oh, Ignatus, I'm so sorry...*"

The beast chuckled, an eerie rumbling sound as it pulled out another bolt. *"Heh. Ten thousand bufotibranches that mage could have summoned here today, and he gets me. But, it's no coincidence. There are no coincidences when the gods are involved, Marilith. And the gods have tormented me with you for nearly two thousand years... I finally managed to woo you, then just as we began I was summoned away and spent a good two hours having to explain the basics of reproduction to a journeyman mage... How humiliating. Then, when I came back, your clan-father had already dragged you back to your studies. I gambled, gambled that I might win you for my own with a final metamorphosis into one of the most handsome castes that my chi could attain... Gambled, and lost."*

Marilith sighed. *"That... That mage later went on to become the Great Mage, Eddas Ayar... If that's any comfort."*

*"Some small comfort, yes. He's known to our people well. Perhaps, in some small way, I helped teach him the truth about our people..."* he replied, groaning as he pulled the last of the bolts from himself. He then shuddered. *"The spell forces me to comply, Marilith, and the pain grows worse the longer I resist. I'm sorry - I am ordered to destroy this vessel. Do what you will to stop me, for I cannot stop myself,"* he replied, then lifted his slimy, webbed hands, a ball of crackling energy forming between them.

Marilith gestured, dissipating the energies. For several moments, the two of them sparred back and forth, he summoning energies, and she dissipating them. I just stood there, not knowing what to do - or, if there was anything I could do at all.

Finally, the frog-like demon was spent, kneeling on the deck and gasping as his green blood continued to flow from his wounds. Marilith panted, gazing at him. *"I'm going to try to dismiss you now, Ignatus. Please try not to fight - give me a moment to manage the spell."*

The toad-like demon shook his head, slime dripping from him. *"I can't. The pain drives me on, Marilith. The spell forces me to comply. Even to my death. If we never meet again... Remember that I loved you,"* he replied, then lifted his webbed hand, balling it into a fist...

...then, without warning, he smashed through the deck and into the spinning gears that powered the

wings.

The port forward wing froze, and the ship began to turn rapidly to port, swiftly losing altitude as the demon screamed, his hand crushed in the gears. I didn't stop to think, I simply acted, leaping forward. Immediately, I struck the invisible barrier that surrounded him, a cylinder of tingling force a pace away from his body in all directions. I couldn't get through it, and my sword skidded off of it harmlessly. "Marilith, do something!"

A moment later, the demon shimmered, then vanished, his howl of agony chilling as it faded.

The forward port wing began to flap again - but slowly. Too slowly. Running aft to Red as I sheathed my sword, I shouted. "Marilith, Blue, hang onto the rail! Red, stand by to switch with me!"

Red nodded, watching me. Once I had the wedge in place, he rose from the seat, turning to his left to get out of my way. The ship angled steeply to port as he released the control lever. I grabbed the arm-rests, pulling myself into the chair and struggling with the right control lever, trying to level us out again as Red removed the wedge in the altitude lever.

For a long, terrifying moment, the ship swooped towards the sea below. In desperation, I released the altitude lever to stop the wing's beating, and instead pushed forward and right on the control lever. The port wings responded, though the forward port wing was slow and I could hear gears grinding. The ship leveled across the beam, but was still diving towards the water. I then pulled back hard and left on the control stick, causing the aft wings to pause and the forward wings to spread their wooden feathers. A heartbeat, then two, the forward port wing slowly responding...

Then the ship leveled out a few cubits above the ocean, the spray of the waves dampening my cheeks.

I struggled with the controls, grateful for Frarim's careful and patient instruction. We could not gain altitude, that would require all the wings to flap evenly, and the forward port wing was slowed, now

stuttering as the gears ground louder and louder. Land was near, perhaps only a league away. If we could make it to the beach, I might be able to put us down safely.

Five hundred paces, then four, then three, the beach looming closer and closer. The gear noises were now very loud, and the forward port wing was now pausing every few heartbeats, and stuttering longer and longer. We weren't going to make it. I glanced at the waves, trying to gauge them. Slipping us between two wave crests, I pushed down on the altitude lever.

We struck the water with a tremendous splash, and I flipped the lever to fold the wings. In a few moments, they had folded - fortunately, that was a different set of gears that the demon's attack hadn't damaged. "Oars!" I shouted, rising from the pilot's seat and reaching for the long oar stored nearby. It wasn't much, but placed in the brass oarlock I'd attached near the stern, it would do as a makeshift rudder. Red and blue reached for the oars I had stored nearby them, pulling them loose of their mountings and slipping them into the oarlocks port and starboard. Frarim hadn't thought much of the idea when I'd suggested it, but he'd asked Haifa and her people to make the oarlocks I'd asked for. The wings, he said, would make the ornithopter unmaneuverable in water. That may be so, I'd told him, but a little maneuvering was better than none, and with no cargo aboard, the ornithopter should ride very high in the water, perhaps high enough so the wings wouldn't drag the water. Frarim had simply shrugged - he was no sailor, and could not tell me if my idea would work if the time ever came it was needed. Now, we would find out.

"Pull! Pull! Pull!" I called, leaning into my makeshift rudder to point us to the shore. Red and Blue responded, pulling in time. The wingtips dragged some, but not much - it was barely maneuverable. I needed to steer us to a smooth patch of sand we could beach on.

We were close... Very close...

"Ship oars and prepare to beach!"

Red and Blue pulled their oars up, tossing them atop the deck, then grabbing the rail. Peripherally, I was aware of Marilith, still hanging onto the rail, her eyes wide with fear as I worked the rudder, keeping the keel pointed at the beach...

Then we slammed into the sand, sliding up the beach by the force of the waves. "Mooring lines! Pull us up the beach!"

Red and Blue grabbed the coiled lines, already attached to supports at bow and stern - the same supports that would ordinarily have been used for the canvas wind-cover of this ship, if I had one. A moment later, they leapt into the surf. The waves washed over them, and they floated a bit before the waves withdrew, the cork that filled their armor holding them up briefly. Darting up the beach, they pulled on the mooring lines, quickly dragging the ornithopter from the waves and onto dry sand.

My knees were trembling as I leaned on the rail. I sent a silent prayer of thanks to Yorindar - things could have turned out much worse. The hole in the deck dripped slime from the demon's punch, and in the distance, I could see the ship of Sasha's abductors getting smaller and smaller. "Damn," I muttered.

At the sound of a sob, I turned my head. Marilith was sitting on the deck, weeping. I walked over to her, sitting beside her, and we shared a hug in silence for a long moment.

"Well, the ship's grounded, for now," I said at last, wiping the tears from her eyes.

*"My fault... I knew him. That... That distracted me. I should have tried to dispel the sorcery that held him here immediately."*

"Oh, you *knew* an old flame from the past was going to be summoned and were prepared for it?"

Marilith blinked. *"No, of course not!"*

"Then how can it be your fault?" I replied, and smiled. "Like your friend said - ten thousand demons of his caste that he could have gotten, and he was chosen. There is no coincidence when the gods are involved. And, like Eddas and Frarim both told me, the battles of the gods are not like the battles of men. There is more than just a physical component to it."

Marilith nodded, sighing. *"Joy said the same. The battles of the gods are also battles of emotion... Love, joy, hate, lust, fear... All emotions. My people are the Independents. We are supposed to be free of it all. But, we are not. The gods watch us, and they use us from time to time, even as mortal wizards sometimes summon us from time to time. And our numbers dwindled, as our people reproduce slowly, so slowly... As slowly as we heal. The destruction of the Hyperborean civilization... That stopped the greatest share of deaths. My people had a chance to recover, then... But, I do not know if they did. Ignatus... He may die of his wounds before he can get help, back home."*

"We still have those healing crystals. Can you summon him here? We could use them on him, then."

Marilith gaped at me. *"Me?! Summon one of my people to the Prime Material?! Do you even know what you're saying?! That would be... That would be horrible!"*

"Sooo..." I said, leaning back. "Letting him die would be preferable?"

Marilith lowered her ears. *"Well... No..."*

"And can you summon him specifically?"

*"Well... Yes, I know his name..."*



"Then do so, and we'll heal him," I said, and smiled. "Besides, I'd really rather have his favor than his enmity. After all, if I'm going to be your mate, knowing that there's a supernatural being on another plane who's tremendously jealous of me and wishes I was dead is hardly a comforting thought."

Marilith smiled briefly. *"Alright. And thank you, Corvid. I love you."*

I smiled again, rising to my feet on the deck and holding out my hand to her. "I love you, too, dear. More and more with each passing day."

The Raven - Eight.

*"I cannot thank you enough, Marilith,"* Ignatus said as I worked on his hand, slowly restoring the lost flesh with the orange crystal. The sun was warm on the sand of the beach where we sat, and that only made the effort of using the crystal more difficult.

*"Actually... It was Corvid's idea. I had a full set of chi-crystals from my clan-father, he gave them to me once he understood my choice to remain on this plane with my soul-sister. But, it was Corvid's idea to summon you, tell you we had the crystals to heal you, then release you from the summoning spell so you could remain to be healed or leave, as you thought best."*

Ignatus looked at me, his frog-like eyes bobbing up and down as he blinked. *"And this... This mortal is the one you chose."*

*"Yes, Ignatus."*

*"Should I be pleased or offended?"*

Marilith bowed her head. *"I hope you would be pleased. You and I have been friends since our brood-mothers first breathed us out on the same day. We've even... We've even been lovers, once..."*

Ignatus chuckled, reaching up with his undamaged hand to scratch between his horns. *"Almost lovers,"* he replied, and chuckled again, looking to me. *"Did she tell you she licked my paratoid glands before we were interrupted?"*

I smiled up at him, wiping the sweat from my brow with a sleeve. *"Should I be offended or amused?"*

Ignatus laughed. *"Both!"* he replied, and took his damaged hand from mine, flexing it. I had managed to stop the bleeding, and most of the flesh and bones was restored, but he was still missing the majority of his fingers. *"This is good. I can make it to the Temple of Pain like this, and they can finish the healing."*

*"Wait!"* Marilith called, holding out her hand. *"Please... Tell me, how are our people doing? Are we recovering, at least?"*

Ignatus blinked for a moment, then nodded. *"Ah, of course... You couldn't know. Yes, we recover. Slowly, but we recover. There are tens of thousands of mages who have the power to summon us in this world, now, but not counting the Witch-Women of Hyperborea, less than a dozen who know the spell. Of those, most do not use it, for fear of losing the contest of wills, and being killed. The Witch-Women have the power, but do not use it, out of the respect and understanding Eddas Ayar has taught them. Eddas Ayar can summon us with impunity, of course - his power is vast, and even the mightiest of us is not his equal. But, he does not summon us unless he has no other choice. And when he does summon us, it is never when he knows we would simply be killed. He understands that having the power does not give one the right to use it at whim. He is wise, that one. Do you remember Honoricus?"*

*"Mmm... Vaguely,"* she replied.

*"Eddas summoned him about a century ago or so to copy some texts with sorcery. He needed the texts both copied and translated, he needed it done immediately, and did not have the time to do it himself. It was nothing for Honoricus, of course, quite trivial. But afterwards, Eddas bowed and thanked him. Thanked him! And said he was honored! Hah! Honoricus said he was so startled, it's a wonder his horns didn't fall off from the shock."*

Marilith smiled for a moment, then sighed. *"I'm sorry... My sister is still missing, it's difficult for me to laugh right now."*

Ignatus nodded. *"I can't help with that. The wizard who summoned me is too powerful for a mere bufotibranche to challenge. You are strong, Marilith... Stronger than most nightmares I have ever met. But I do not know if you are stronger than him. A moment, however. A bufotibranche's vision is sharper than yours, in some ways. Perhaps..."* he said, and gazed off into the distance, his eyes glowing. *"They are still at sea. The foreshadow about them is clear, they head beyond the coasts of Kush, to the eastern coast of Mysterantia,"* he said, then blinked, gazing at Marilith. *"More than that, I cannot see. You should try to penetrate her dreams, that is all I can advise."*

Marilith sighed. *"I tried. Her dreams are confused, and heavily affected by enchantment. I can do little..."*

Ignatus blinked. *"What?! You?! Hampered in dreams?!"* Ignatus snorted. *"Impossible, I refuse to believe it. You were the best of all the dream warriors, and to my knowledge, you still are. I simply refuse to believe it. You are only hesitating because you fear you'll hurt her."*

*"Could you hurt her, in dreams?"* I asked, looking to Marilith.

Marilith nodded. *"Unfortunately, yes. We can even kill, in dreams, though that takes a precise touch, and great skill."*

*"Skill you have, Marilith,"* Ignatus replied, rising to his webbed feet. He looked over the ornithopter, then looked to me. *"I can repair the damage I've done to your vessel, mortal man, just as you repaired my own wounds. But, if you approach them in this ship again, that wizard will knock it from the sky again. And next time, you may not survive."*

I nodded. *"What do you suggest?"*

*"I'd suggest you give up, but I hardly think you will. I'd tell you why I think you should give up, but I hardly think you'd understand. Barring that, I have no suggestions."*

I forced a smile to my face. *"Tell me anyway, I might surprise you."*

Ignatus gazed at me for a moment, wiping slime from his arm down over his wounded hand. Finally, he nodded. *"It's a trap, boy. That much I can see in the greater reality that surrounds them. What kind of trap, I cannot say - but things are not as they seem. I know you will not give up, so be on your guard. And remember that when the enemy springs the trap, often the only escape is to choose an option the enemy does not expect, and did not anticipate."*

I nodded. "I'll bear it in mind."

"*Good,*" Ignatus replied, and gestured at the ship with his good hand. I could hear a sound of creaking wood, and a pinging sound of metal. Rising to my feet and looking at the ornithopter, I watched as the hole he'd made in the deck slowly sealed up. After a few moments, it was done, and Ignatus lowered his hand. "*I have repaid my debt to you for healing me, mortal man. She loves you, and you love her. Part of me is happy for her. Part of me burns with jealousy. For her sake, I will be happy for her. But you will understand, mortal man, why I do not bid you fare well.*"

"I do," I replied, and bowed to him.

Oh, I most definitely understood. The woman of his childhood love had been missing ages and ages, and when he finally meets her again, he finds she is in love with someone else - and someone he would *have* to consider as a lesser being, a "mere mortal." And yet, that rival had healed him out of kindness. No, if I were him, I'd be both grateful for the healing, more deeply in love with Marilith than before, and insanely jealous of my rival. Yes, I most definitely understood. I wasn't certain that I'd even be able to remain *civil* if I was in his situation.

Ignatus turned to Marilith, kneeling before her as she sat on the sand. "*A last kiss, perhaps?*"

Marilith smiled, and kissed his snout. It wasn't a kiss of passion - that, I could see clearly, despite how strange they were to see together. No, it was merely a brief peck of friendship. I felt a brief, strange mixture of emotion at seeing it - I was glad that was all he received, yet at the same time, I felt sorry for him. It was an odd sensation.

Yet, the brief kiss seemed to satisfy Ignatus, as the corners of his frog-like mouth twisted up in a smile. "*Thank you. I shall tell your clan-father you are well,*" he said, and vanished.

My hands were still coated with slime and demon-ichor from touching Ignatus and working on healing his wounds. I sighed, wiping my hands on my pants for lack of anything else to use, and trying not to

notice Marilith licking her lips and nose clean with a small smile. "I think he's right - if we follow them in the ornithopter, we only invite another attack. And next time, we may not be so lucky."

Marilith nodded, gazing at me as she sat on the beach. *"What do you suggest?"*

"I don't know," I replied, thinking. "Is it possible for you to bring us back to this spot with sorcery, if we were to go somewhere else?"

Marilith nodded again. *"Easily, though I could not bring the ship nor your golem-crew. I can take us anywhere in the world that I can perceive - and that is nearly everywhere."*

"Alright. We can fly the ship back to Eddas' tower, and leave it there - if it's not safe on his lands, it's not safe anywhere. Afterwards, you can bring us back here. There are horses in the Wildlands, and with a bit of rope from the ship and some luck, I can catch one. Breaking it to ride may be a bit difficult, I've never done that before, but-"

Marilith smiled as she sat on the beach, laying down on her side as she looked at me. *"Ummm... Corvid, you won't have to catch a horse,"* she said, and in the twinkling of an eye, she transformed to her equine form - a large black mare with glowing red eyes, lying on the sand and gazing at me. *"It seems you may have already caught one."*

I grinned. "Well, yes, I did know you could do that, but..." I said, then shook my head. "Well, nevermind. My thought is this: You should be able to travel at the same speed overland a horse can - and having seen that ship move, yes, it's fast, but a horse can still outrun it. From here it's another two-day flight north to Eddas' tower. We'll want to get there, pack some supplies in that little bottle of your sister's, and let Eddas know what's happening. He may have some advice, as well, he's a lot more experienced in conflicts between the gods than we are. Afterward, we come back here with your magic, so we can follow them. We already know where they're going, but we'll want to be near them along the coast as they travel, so that if they make landfall to take on water or other supplies, we'll have the best chance of freeing Sasha."

Marilith nodded, transforming back her humanoid-equine form. Still smiling, she rose to her feet. *"I agree. Let's get aboard your ship, and head to Hyperborea."*

Awhile later, Red and Blue had secured the ship for flight again, and I lifted off from the sand, turning the ship north and gaining altitude. Marilith sat in the passenger seat beside me, and as we climbed higher and higher, Marilith looked at me curiously. *"You were going to say something earlier, then said 'nevermind.' Is there something I should know?"*

I smiled at her. "Well... I *was* going to say that... Err... Well, I'm aware you can change form into a horse, I just wasn't certain it was necessarily wise to tell someone you loved that you wanted to ride her."

Marilith smiled seductively. *"Mmmm... That depends entirely on what kind of ride you wanted,"* she replied, then winked at me.

I burst out laughing, the ornithopter rising higher and higher into the clear blue sky.

It had been a whirlwind day, and I found myself quite ready to relax for a bit before beginning work on cooking supper. Beginning with the arrival of Corvid and Marilith in Corvid's ornithopter, the day had been one event after another. I was, of course, very concerned about Sasha. But, what could I do? Nothing. So, I smiled, made a pot of *byallar* for Eddas and Marilith and Corvid, and let them discuss the situation while I went outside to work on my garden.

Jhumni had been nervous again, that morning. She couldn't help it, I knew. A trick of her brain, Eddas told me. Something inside her head that her god had given her ancestors, ages ago, so they would survive against the pressure of the goblins. So, I had gone down that morning and began sweeping. Jhumni, being a dwarf-wife, couldn't just stand there and watch me work alone, and soon she had picked up a dust-cloth, and worked alongside me as we chatted. She could *feel* her fear, in her mind. To her, it was like a beast, lurking at the edge of her consciousness. But, talking with me and working on the ordinary routines of life helped, and soon, we were chatting like two old friends.

There was precious little for her husband, Karadin, to do - really, the only reason he was here was because he was necessary to conceive a child, and keep Jhumni company. Beyond that, he had little use - sad to say, but true. He was a merchant back in Iron City, so there was literally nothing for him to do here. So, of course, I found something for him to do - I gave him a fishing pole Eddas had made a few years before, and told him to make sure to bring in a few fish every evening so Eddas wouldn't have to spend time conjuring food for everyone, and could focus on his research. It wasn't much, but at least fishing kept Karadin out from underfoot, and made him feel he was contributing. Jhumni, fortunately, heartily approved - particularly that first evening when he brought in three fish, his head held high and proud, and I simply handed him a knife and told him to get to work cleaning them so we could eat them. Dwarves are not so different from other men, and if you let them convince you that "I caught it - the woman cleans it" was a good idea, soon you'd be up to your elbows in the guts of a dozen different dead things they brought in for you to prepare for each evening's supper. I'd very quickly broken *Eddas* of that notion, the first time he brought in a half dozen fish I suspected he lured onto his hook with sorcery, and I certainly wasn't going to begin teaching Jhumni's husband bad habits she'd have to break *him* of, later.

As we cleaned and chatted, of course, we learned of each other. I think I've now learned more of dwarves than any of my people ever knew before - and, perhaps, more of myself, due to having to think about my answers to Jhumni's questions. 'What was Eddas like, as a husband?' Jhumni wanted to know. Ah, that was an interesting question. When he wasn't working on research or studying something, he was a very quiet man, very introspective. He enjoyed telling stories of his people, the ancient Hyperboreans - and, fortunately, I enjoyed hearing them. Always in the background, though, was the scholar, the researcher, the teacher Frarim had trained him to be. He loved to lecture, and I could tell he truly enjoyed it when I asked him a question that required a long explanation - particularly when that explanation would spark a lecture an hour or more long. The only thing he loved more was when I asked him something he didn't know, and would require research for him to answer.



When he was studying or working on research, he was absorbed to the point of being blind to anything around him. If I didn't feed him, he literally wouldn't eat until his stomach was growling - and if I didn't stop him, he'd just conjure a small bowl of gruel, eat, then return to working. Part of it was, of course, his tremendous love of learning. Knowledge, Eddas explained, was essentially infinite, and how much one could learn was based on what one already knew - the more one learned, the more there was to learn. And he didn't learn passively, either. He read new books from Mungim or Taliad with an active eye, and would often grow quite vocal when the author had made what was, to him, a patently obvious blunder. "Look here, Joy! This one says he's confirmed the existence of phlogiston with this experiment - but his experiment is so lackadaisical, it proves nothing! *Astoundingly* poor laboratory technique! Why, if he wasn't already dead, I'd write him a letter setting the fool straight! What utter rubbish!"

"So write in the margins of the book why he's wrong, then send it back with Taliad for their scholars to examine, Old Man," I'd replied.

Eddas, however, had simply looked at me, as though I'd suggested slitting a baby's throat. "Write in the *margins* of his *book?!*" he'd yelled. "Absolutely not! He may be wrong, but he deserves a bit more respect than to have his work mutilated on a whim!" Eddas had replied, then sniffed. "Besides, I couldn't possibly fit a proper rebuttal in his margins, the explanation is far too long. I'd have to write my own book of alchemy to do it properly."

"So do so, Old Man," I'd told him.

"Ah, I will, Joy - once I understand a bit more of the 'why' of things, and have a proper model of atoms and atomic forces that is both mathematically and experimentally falsifiable," he'd replied, and gone back to studying, ignoring my chuckles.

Yes, part of the reason he would ignore food when he was researching was just because he became so absorbed with the quest for knowledge. The other reason, however, was that he still disliked that little half-elf woman's body that Yorindar had stuck him with. Oh, he'd clean it, brush it's teeth, brush it's hair, dress it appropriately and keep it presentable, naturally. He loathed a poor appearance - and, I supposed, this had always been true of him. But, beyond that, he cared little for it, and at times he loathed it.

"But what do ye and he... Err... Well..." Jhumni had asked, her own dwarvish politeness not permitting her to come out and ask. "Err... At night, I do mean... Err..."

I smiled. "That's hard to explain simply," I replied. "It's more a gentle touch, a moment of softness - a kiss, and another, quite special kiss that Arella taught him," I said, and smiled again. "Most times, he's happy just being held and caressed. He really is an old little man, inside that body, and he was alone and lonely for many, many years. But sometimes, there's more... And those times can be quite nice, for both of us," I said, and smiled again. "For him, the hardest part was worrying that no one would ever want to touch him again. What he had to learn was that it wasn't what was between his legs that made him a man - and never was."

Jhumni blushed so deeply I was almost sorry I'd answered her question - but then, the arrival of Marilith and Corvid was heralded by the beat of wings outside the tower, saving her and I from further embarrassment.

Marilith and Corvid's news had been shocking, to me - but, Eddas took it calmly, advising Marilith to make certain to use extensive and layered spells of protection when the time came to battle her enemy, and advising her how to defend against the kind of spell that incapacitated her before. I'd seen this face of Eddas before, as well. Calm in the face of disaster, cool-headed despite a looming battle. The battle-mage, the warrior-wizard. The ultimate face Frarim had trained him to wear, the ultimate role he'd been trained to fulfill. And yet...

And yet, I could not help but think that Frarim had, in the end, received the far better half of this arrangement of the gods. He had been allowed to relax, retire. Really, he'd been *forced* to retire. In his role as 'Father Patience', he could not lift a finger to do violence, even to save his own life or the life of someone he loved. Eddas, however, had never been allowed that. He was a sword that Yorindar sharpened and tempered and sharpened and tempered until his edge was keen enough to split the anvil he was forged upon - and in the end he did exactly that, with the final destruction of the Dyclonic Circle and the death of his old friend, Cordo. Hammered and heated and hammered again, forged and re-forged until that face... That dreadful, awe-inspiring face of deadly calm emerged.

Marilith and Sasha saw themselves as two, but they were not. They were one - one pawn of the Gods, now fighting for their lives, and their goddess. And someday, they, too, would bear that dreadful face of war.

And Corvid... Ah, Corvid. I could see a bit of myself in him, and I knew why he had been meant for Marilith and Sasha. He was to give them what I gave to Eddas. To Eddas, I was a helping hand when he needed it, a kind word when he needed it, and a push when he needed it. He told me himself - I was his rock, his mountain. And, so would Corvid be for Sasha and Marilith, in the end.

If he truly had the strength for it.

And if they survived.

At last, Corvid and Marilith had left, returning to their quest, and Jhumni's daily time in the sun had come and gone, and she went with her husband into their little room to share a quiet moment. I sat with Eddas, sharing a cup of *byallar* with him, the events of the day turning in my mind.

He sat at our table in our room, reading one of his books again. Again, I wondered what he really looked like, beneath the mask of the Raven of Yorindar. Again, I wondered what he was really thinking. And yet, somehow... Somehow, I knew the answers to both questions.

"Old Man..." I said, reaching across to him.

"Mmm? What, Joy?" he asked, looking up.

"Will they be alright?"

Eddas paused, gazing at me. "I don't know, Joy. This is a perfectly timed maneuver by the God of the

Desert. He lost a critical battle, but he is not quite willing to surrender the game just yet. He knows that if I oppose his pawns, he will lose again. So he has timed this engagement for a moment when he knows Yorindar has me committed to aiding Moradim. Moradim needs assistance building the foundations he will need in the future for the transition to the multi-racial kingdom of Tulan that Yorindar is working towards. And those foundations cannot be built by the dwarves alone - they need the understanding that other races have knowledge and skills of use to them, and are their peers. Ties to the elves, ties to my daughters, ties to the humans of the Southlands... This project is too important for me to abandon, and the God of the Desert knows it. So, this action has been timed to accomplish his goals, and perhaps reverse his board position in the great game the Gods play among themselves. I don't know if they'll be alright, Joy. Much of that, I think, will depend on Corvid."

"Is he up to it, do you think?"

"I don't know, Joy. He has a stubborn streak a league wide just like I do, he just might be," Eddas replied, deadpan.

I managed not to giggle. "Alright," I replied, and sighed. "Still... I worry about them, Old Man."

Eddas nodded. "I do, too, Joy," he replied, then closed his book and rose to his feet, holding a gloved hand out to me. "Now come. I can hear Jhumni and Karadin moving about downstairs, Jhumni's using the garderobe. It appears the effects of the wine have worn off, and she's sober again. It's time to give them the good news."

"Err... Good news?" I asked, then suddenly blinked, astonished. "You don't mean...?!"

Eddas smiled. "Yes - that was the last dose of dandelion wine she'll be taking, I saw it in her aura while we were outside. Drinking while pregnant is never advisable, it could harm the child."

"But... But is it...?"

"Yes. The egg was formed and released as female, not male, and she has now conceived and the child grows within her."

"Err... Wait... Dwarves have eggs?" I asked, blinking.

"Every creature does, even you."

"I do not!" I yelped.

"Yes, you do. They're just very, very tiny. That's what I discovered studying field-mice last year with that dwarven *occhiolino* in my lab - you remember, I got it from Mungim two years ago? You see-

I held up a hand. "Spare me the lecture, Old Man, and save it for later. I can tell it's going to be a long one, and *yes*, I *do* want to hear it. Oh, yes, spirits of my ancestors, I *do* want to hear you explain how I have eggs inside me like a chicken and have *that* nonsense somehow make sense after you explain it. But right now, I think we should tell Jhumni the good news first."

Eddas rolled his eyes at me. "Joy, they're not eggs like a chicken, they're very tiny. I can show you the slide I made for the *occhiolino*, and-

"Later, Old Man. Truly, I want to know. But later. Jhumni first."

Eddas paused, then nodded. "Of course, Joy - first things first," he replied, taking my hand. "Oh - could I ask you to fetch that jug of mead and two cups when we pass the pantry, please?"

"Eh? I thought you just said Jhumni couldn't have any more drink, it might harm her baby?"

"Of course. However, it's traditional for dwarven males to share a celebratory drink with the father once a pregnancy is known - and I want Karadin to feel that the announcement was properly shared with all his people's traditions."

"And these traditions naturally involve getting quite drunk and singing loud songs, I assume?"

"Naturally. The dwarves are a very tradition-bound people," Eddas replied, deadpan again.

I snorted, then burst into giggles. "Don't get *too* drunk, Old Man, I *still* want to hear you explain to me that I lay eggs and have me believe it," I said, wagging a finger at him as we walked to the stairs.

Eddas rolled his eyes as we descended the stairs. "Joy, you do *not* lay eggs, I never said-"

"Well, that's a comfort, after four children I was beginning to wonder if I was doing something wrong."

Eddas grumbled, and I paused on the stairs, taking him into my arms and kissing him firmly. When I let him go, he blinked at me, stunned. "What was that for?"

"For Jhumni. You've given her her dreams, Old Man, just as you did with me. And, just as you did with me, you gave her her dreams twice, out of the kindness of your heart."

"Well... Really... It was nothing, I-"

"And for me, Old Man. Just to let you know that I still love you and respect you, even if you do think I'm a chicken," I replied, and winked.

"Joy, I do *not* think you're a chicken! Really, I never said that, what I said was that you have very tiny eggs, like all creatures do. You see..."

I laughed as we went down the stairs, Eddas continuing his explanation. I knew that he would eventually have it make sense to me, but I certainly couldn't pass up an opportunity to pinch his cheeks like this one. After all, he was the most powerful mage in the world, the most knowledgeable scholar and researcher, and likely the most powerful mortal in all the history of the world. *Someone* had to jab at him with a pin now and again to keep his ego from inflating, and remind him he was also a man, and loved.

The Raven - Nine.

We had nearly been caught twice by hunting parties of minotaurs as we traveled through the forested foothills south of the Granite Mountains, but fortunately Marilith's tremendous speed at a gallop prevented any serious mishap. Each time we heard them bellowing to each other, and once caught a

glimpse of their bulky, horned forms in the distance between the trees - but each time Marilith simply out-ran them. After a few days, the last of the foothills of the Granite Mountains slowly vanished over the horizon behind us, and ahead lay the vast emptiness of the Cluain Plains - league after league of waving grasses, with nary a hill or tree in sight. Herds of long-legged antelope wandered the plains, as well as countless rabbits and other small creatures. Nearer the northern end of the plains, at the southern shores of the Inland Sea, there were herds of horses to be found, as well. But, our course took us along the southern edge of the plains, near the Eastern Sea, so Marilith could cast her gaze towards the enemy ship, and keep us near them should they make landfall.

I considered Ignatus' words as we traveled - and those of Eddas Ayar. A trap, Ignatus had said. And it likely was, Eddas had agreed. But, neither could say just what that trap might be. How could I prepare myself for something I did not understand, and had no way of predicting? That was a question I could not answer - and the lack of an answer galled me more deeply than I could say.

During the day I rode Marilith's back, she in her equine form galloping league after league across the plains, struggling to catch up with the enemy ship as it followed the coast. At night, she slept the sleep of the exhausted, curled up against me in her humanoid-equine form - only to rise again in the morning, and do it all again. Between using sorcery to conjure food and drink for the two of us and cleaning our clothes with a spell each day, she was slowly growing more and more tired as each day passed. With the mind-numbing effect of running, running, endlessly running... It was clear to me her entire world had narrowed down to chasing the ship, and her only waking thought was to keep running. She could not make it like this, she would eventually collapse. I had to do something... But what?

At last, one day near noon, I called out to her as she galloped across the plains. "Stop."

"What?" she called over her shoulder.

"Stop. Just stop."

*"I can't, Corvid, I've only now caught up to them again!"*



"Marilith, do you love me?"

*"I... Yes, Corvid. Very much."*

"Then stop."

Marilith slowed to a trot, then a walk, and finally stopped, panting. I slipped from her back, then walked up to her head, placing my hand beneath her jaw. "Walk with me. Come. Walk a bit, so you don't get cramps."

*"I... I'll be alright,"* she panted, her head hanging down. *"Why did you want to stop?"*

"I'll answer your question with a question: I see the wizard we've been chasing right before us. What are you going to do about it?"

Marilith jerked her head up, badly startled. *"What?! Where?!"*

"Nowhere. But if he were here, what could you do about it?"

*"I... I..."* Marilith replied, still panting. *"I don't know... I'm too tired to fight, I think..."*

*"Exactly,"* I said, and felt a sudden, surprising chill down my spine as I spoke the word.

Marilith gaped at me, no less surprised than I. *"I... I didn't know that you could do that, too..."*

I managed a smile. "I don't even know what I did, but as it was a remarkably uncomfortable sensation, I hope I don't do it again anytime soon."

*"You spoke with Yorindar's voice. To my eyes, your astral form very briefly was that of a raven. Not the vast and powerful beast I see in Master Eddas, no... His form is immense, and radiates power. You... You seemed a much smaller thing... Yet, slim, sharp, and canny, nonetheless."*

"Well..." I said, taken aback at this revelation. "I'm afraid I don't know what to say about that. I felt it when it happened, but I certainly didn't *make* it happen. I suppose it just goes with being a major pawn of Yorindar, as Eddas told me I was. But I'm hardly his equal, I think."

*"Not in terms of power, no. But raw power isn't everything."*

"Ex-" I started, then clapped my mouth shut as the chill began at the nape of my neck. "Yes."

Marilith grinned. *"You really can't control that, can you?"*

"No, and it's quite unnerving," I replied, then paused, thinking. "Still, I think Yorindar is trying to tell us something. My thought earlier was that you were wearing yourself down to nothing, and even if they did come ashore to take on food and water, we wouldn't be able to really do anything about it, you'd be too tired. That last time, you said 'raw power isn't everything' - I think that's going to be key, somehow. When you're fencing a man who's stronger and using a heavier blade, you don't just match him strength for strength, you work on his weaknesses. A heavier blade is slower, and the thicker his arms, the more musclebound he is. You use maneuvers that require him to call upon speed he doesn't have, and

eventually defeat him with speed. When fighting an opponent who's fast and using a rapier, you don't try to match his speed, you defeat him with better footwork, and attacks that wound his arm and legs to slow him down. Fight to an opponent's weaknesses, not their strengths - and be prepared to launch surprise attacks."

*"So what do we do?"*

"For now, we walk," I said, caressing her jaw and tugging her along as I walked forward. "Come - walk a bit, so you don't cramp."

Marilith nodded, following, her equine form dripping sweat. I had to admit that in the form of a horse, Marilith made a fabulous steed, in both performance and appearance. Riding her was, really, an incredible feeling - sitting astride her broad back, feeling the muscles flex as she ran, the wind whipping past as she raced across the plains... Yet, in the end, I still preferred her humanoid form. Though female in both forms, I found I had little attraction to a horse, and much more attraction to a nightmare. I smiled at the oddness of that thought, and decided I'd share it with her sometime. "A question," I said, looking at her.

*"Yes?"*

"Where does your clothing go, in this form?"

*"Nowhere. It's still here."*

"Err... What, it goes inside you when you change shape?"

*"No. I don't think you'll understand - certainly Sasha doesn't, and she's known me most of her*

*life, now. It's difficult to explain to someone who doesn't understand the basics of hyperdimensional existence, but... Well, I haven't really changed shape. This is like... Well, like looking at my back, instead of my front. This is the other side of the same body. Your body exists in three dimensions - altitude, longitude and latitude. Mine exists in four - altitude, longitude, latitude and spassitude. It's what allows me to see and move ana and kata, and it's a large part of why my perception isn't limited to what you think of as three-dimensional space around you."*

I grinned. "You're right, I don't understand."

Marilith stopped walking, then looked at me. *"Hmmm... Maybe I can make it clear to you if I turn around slowly kata. Watch closely."*

I watched, and as I did so, her form slowly grew slimmer and smaller. Her forelimbs flowed, becoming arms and hands, her hind legs flowed, becoming more human-like. Her body rotated vertically beneath a smaller head, and her eyes came closer together. A heartbeat later, she stood before me in her humanoid-equine form, gloves and boots in place on her hands and feet, her loincloth in place about her shapely hips, and her apodesmos in place over her lovely breasts. She was still covered in sweat, and her apodesmos clung damply to her, revealing her nipples. Marilith flicked her tail, then smiled at me. *"See?"*

I grinned. "I saw, but I don't understand what I saw, other than I saw you change from one form to another. Now, I see you in your humanoid form."

*"But I didn't change, really. I just turned kata. Watch again, I'll turn ana this time, very slowly,"* she said, and slowly, she turned back into a horse. *"You see? It's like looking at my back, instead of my front."*

"Mmm... No, I *don't* see, but I did notice that your clothes disappeared the instant you started to change."

*"Well, yes, they're on my kata side, you only see them when I'm turned kata,"* she said, and

shook her head, tossing her damp mane. *"It's really just like looking at my front or back, except in a fourth dimension you can't see because you're a three-dimensional being, not a four-dimensional being. Ummm... Well, I'd say it's like turning inside out, because that's the closest one can come in three dimensions, but that's not really a good explanation because there's no twisting or inversion or eversion involved. I'm just turning ana or kata, and showing you another side of the same body."*

I thought about her explanation. Though I likely did not understand it well, it seemed to me that she was saying she was larger than she appeared, somehow, having a dimension of space to her body I did not. A thought occurred to me. "I think I understand... Is that why your voice has a sort of hollow echo to it when you're in this form or the other? You're speaking not with a body of three dimensions, but one of four dimensions?"

*"That's right!"* Marilith replied, grinning. *"I have one nose, one mouth, one set of lungs and all that, but from your perspective, it's eight times larger and seems like I have two of each. That makes my voice sound hollow and echoing, to you, like you're hearing two voices at once. But, you're not - it's one body, one mouth, one voice. If I use sorcery to change my form to that of a human, to you, my voice would then sound normal, because you'd be looking at and listening to a three-dimensional form. But, I'm still there, behind it, in four dimensions, like an actress wearing a mask."*

I smiled. "Well, my dear, you make a lovely horse, but I hope you don't mind if I tell you I prefer looking at your other side."

Marilith laughed. *"No, I don't mind. Everyone has their 'best side', I suppose. You met Ignatus - as a bufotibranche, he has four sides he can show - a toad, the slimy toad-like humanoid form with horns that you saw, a ball of horns and spines that floats in the air, and a puddle of slime that bubbles and oozes along the ground. It all depends on how he turns ana or kata. I think his second form is the most handsome, of course."*

"Oh? And what's my 'best side', to you?"

Marilith grinned. *"Mmm... That would be the side you press against my back when you ride me."*

*You have a darling little rump, Corvid, it's sometimes all I can do to keep from pinching it."*

I grinned. "Well, you may end up pinching it anyway, because now that you've rested, we come to the remainder of my idea. It takes you energy to summon food for me and you. But, it dawned on me there may be an easier way - we're surrounded by leagues and leagues of grass. If you can eat it in your horse-form, like you are now, you might consider just grazing while you rest."

Marilith's ears flicked down. *"Err... Well... Yes, I can, I can eat almost anything on this plane. But... Well, I've been somewhat hesitant to."*

"Why?"

*"I... Well... I didn't want you to look at me and see a horse. I still want to be a sensual demoness for you, Corvid."*

I leaned forward, kissing her equine nose, then grinned at her. "Never fear of that, dear. I've known very few horses in my life that have glowing red eyes and can talk to me, the chance that I would somehow mistake you for one is quite remote," I replied, and laughed.

Marilith stuck her tongue out at me. *"You know what I mean!"* she snapped, stomping her forehoof.

"Yes, I do. And I'm trying to tell you that I don't see you that way. Perhaps I've an overactive imagination, or something, but when I look at you and hear you talk..." I said, and shrugged. "I hear your voice, and I see your eyes. Beyond that... My mind tells me I'm looking at a cloud, in a way. Like a cloud in the sky, constantly moving, changing... But with two glowing points for eyes, and a warm, lovely woman's voice."

"Oh, my..." Marilith said, lowering her hindquarters to the grass. In a moment, she was laying on the ground, her legs tucked beneath her.

"Are you alright?" I asked, kneeling beside her head in concern.

*"Oh, Corvid... I told Sasha I thought you were the one for us... That was more true than I could have ever dreamed. Corvid... That's what I see when I look at myself on the astral. That's what Eddas saw, when he saw me trapped in my crystal prison. That is my base form, before my first metamorphosis, the form my brood-mother breathed out of her nostrils, three millennia ago. That is a part of what I am, as well."*

I smiled again, sitting beside her head. Reaching down to the long grasses that grew around us, I pulled up a handful, and held it out to her. "Eat. Rest a bit. The winds rounding the coast of Kush south of the Barrier Peaks turn against them, and that will slow them. Even if they don't, you can still use sorcery to catch us up, rather than running yourself to death. We'll catch up to them. For now, eat. Rest a bit."

*"What about you?"*

"I'm fine, eat."

Marilith took the grass from me in her mouth, chewing it as she gazed at me. *"You're not. You're hungry, I can see it in your aura."*

"Considering that you're doing all the running between us, I don't see this as being a problem."

*"Self-sacrificing, noble, attentive, caring..."* Marilith muttered, then sighed, blinking away a tear. She then rolled to her side, laying her head on the grass as she gazed at me. *"Have I mentioned that I*

*love you, Corvid?"*

I smiled. "Not recently, no, you've been rather busy running this last week or so."

*"Oh, then it most certainly bears repeating,"* she replied, and shifted to her humanoid form. Reaching behind her with her hands, she untied her apodesmos, and let it fall from her. She then reached to her waist, untying her loincloth. Pulling it from about her waist, she cast it aside. *"Make love to me, please,"* she said, holding her gloved hands out to me.

I smiled wryly at her, gazing at the swell of her breasts, the curve of her hip. "Are you certain that's what you want?"

*"I'm certain I'll die if you don't,"* she replied.

I grinned. "Well, we can't have that," I replied, and reached for my sash to untie it.

\* \* \*

We lay there afterwards in the warm sunlight, I stroking her hip, and she gazing at me quietly. It was a moment I wanted to last - a moment of quiet and peace. The wind rippled the grasses around us, and brought the sound of a distant songbird to my ears.

At last, Marilith sighed, lying on her back. *"Thank you,"* she said, her voice soft.



"Mmmm... I think I'm supposed to be saying that to you," I replied, and winked at her.

*"Not this time,"* she replied, her gaze on the clouds above.

I stroked her belly as we lay there, and after a long moment, she spoke again.

*"I lie to you, sometimes."*

I smiled at her. "You do?"

*"Yes. It's simply what's expected of me... Just the way a female of our people is expected to act. But you saw through it, that day. You saw through my little act. You saw I was really a virgin. And you took that from me, so sweetly, so gently... I can still feel the touch of your breath, from that day... Gently filling me... Warming me... And now, you've taken this from me, as well. And I am glad... So glad."*

I said nothing, simply gazing at her quietly. In this form, she had the head and lower legs of a horse, as well as a horse's tail. Her skin was the smooth-haired hide of a horse, soft to the touch. Her sex, like that of a mare, was smooth and bare of hair, and the aureolas of her jet black nipples were the same. Yet, from her knees to the top of her neck, she had the body of a voluptuous, devastatingly beautiful woman.

A voluptuous, and truly astonishingly beautiful woman, whom I'd just spent a good hour lying with...

And then, as I gazed at her, I had an epiphany. For a long moment, I could see her as she really was. She *was* a woman. A woman of another race, perhaps. Another people, another culture, another *species*, even... She was a woman from a place I didn't even pretend to understand, and a people most mortals feared. But inside, she was truly a woman. All she had in this world before me was Sasha - and

her love and gratitude for her soul-sister for freeing her from ages of pain had led her to remain here, in our world. And having made that choice, she could never go home again. She had hoped and prayed that Sasha might find someone who could love her, too. And that she truly needed, for otherwise, she would spend eternity alone, trapped in an alien plane.

She would live forever, of course. Even her sister Sasha was, in truth, mostly mermaid. Sasha could live a millennia, possibly more. I, however, was just a man - and already thirty, closing swiftly on thirty-one. With luck, I might live to sixty or seventy. With a great deal of luck, I might live to eighty or ninety. But I would not live centuries, as Sasha would, nor would I live forever, as Marilith would. Eventually, I would grow old, and die.

I could not change that, of course. Someday, I would be dead. And, eventually, someday Sasha would die. Then, Marilith would be alone, here. And alone forever.

No, I could not change any of it. But, I could make what little time we may have together memorable for her, that the memories of it might carry her through those lonely years to come.

I leaned down, kissing her equine lips, and smiled at her. "It was my pleasure, dear. Truly."

Marilith looked at me suddenly. "*Err... Corvid, I think we have a problem.*"

"Mmm? We do?" I replied, glancing at her taut belly. "Err... I thought you couldn't... Err..."

"*No, that's not the problem. They are the problem,*" she said, looking past my shoulder.

I turned to look, and saw three young centaur stallions pointing bows at us, the arrows at full draw. "Oh - for a moment, you had me worried," I said, and smiled at them. "*Greetings, friends,*" I called in

their language. *"Terribly sorry to violate your territory, but we're only passing through."*

Marilith blinked at me. *"You speak their language?"*

"Yes, they have a trading post to the south somewhere, on the shore of the Eastern Sea. They trade with ships that pass by who need to re-provision with food and water. Err... Well, *one* of their tribes does. Some of them are hostile."

The oldest of the three stallions, who looked to be about nineteen, glared at me. *"Get up, human, and get dressed. You and that... Thing... You're coming with us."*

*"This would appear to be one of the latter,"* Marilith replied, reaching for her apodesmos.

"So it seems," I agreed, reaching for my pants.

We reached the top of the stairs, and I gestured. "And here we are," I said, smiling at our guests.

Frarim, of course, was not impressed by the top of Eddas' tower, having seen it before. Haifa, however, gaped openly, the snake-hair on her head writhing, their tongues flickering. "It's lovely..." she said, in Hyperborean.

"Haifa! Frarim!" Eddas called, rising from the table. "You remember Faral, Frarim?"

"Master Frarim!" Faral yelped, rising from his seat at the table to dart over to Frarim, and hug him tight. "Gods... It's been *ages!* How are you?" It was odd for me to see the two of them together - Frarim, the ancient master, looked young and vital, in his mid-thirties, with a beard as black as night, while Faral now looked very old, his beard long ago gone snow white.

Frarim smiled. "Better than I was when you saw me last, Faral - now, I breathe," he said, and winked.

Faral laughed. "True, true. Master, this is my mate, Rhane," he said, gesturing to the green-haired dryad seated at the table. Rhane had, fortunately, chosen to wear a simple dress of hides, and for that I was quite glad. I remembered my first meeting with her, and watching her prance about naked without even a shred of modesty was quite embarrassing.

"Ah, yes, the Ancient One of Wilanda Forest," Frarim replied, bowing. "It's an honor to meet you, Rhane."

"And an honor to meet you, Master Frarim," Rhane replied. "Faral has told me so much about you over the years."

Haifa still gaped at the furniture. "It's really very beautiful... Much better than we make. Where did it come from?"

I smiled. "Well, most of it is elvish - made by the *Sylvani*-elves. We traded with Taliad to get it. A few of the pieces are dwarvish, like the bed and the tapestries, the carpet and that candle-stand, there. We had to get a larger bed after Eddas and I were mates, the little bed he had before was just too small, my feet stuck out over the end."

"The wrought-iron and wood furniture on the parapet is all dwarven," Eddas added, pointing south to the parapet visible through the large windows and the glass door. "It's enchanted so it won't rust or warp, and it's actually quite comfortable."

"I see," Haifa replied, her hair undulating. "Will the little dwarf-woman be coming up, too?"

Eddas shook his head. "Well, she finds the view out the windows quite disconcerting, so I told her to wait a bit until we'd covered the windows."

Karadin nodded. "Aye, I shall yet fetch her shortly."

"I'll take care of it now, Old Man, you continue on chatting with your friends," I said, walking over to the windows. This was one gathering I wouldn't want him to miss a moment of.

Soon, I had the windows and the glass door covered, and Karadin brought Jhumni up from below. Jhumni was, naturally, quite startled by Haifa's appearance. And, really, I supposed I couldn't blame her. Haifa's dress seemed quite nice, made out of various fibers the gorgons made from swamp-plants and dyed various colors, the weaving making interesting rainbow-hued patterns across the material. Still, beneath that pleasant dress, she *was* a gorgon - she had the height, shape and build of a human female, but her skin was reptilian, and her hair was made of dozens of snakes which writhed and looked about constantly. I was rather proud of myself that I'd managed to not shudder gazing at her - but, I supposed

living with Eddas, I'd seen far worse over the years.

Frarim glanced to Jhumni, and chuckled. "Haifa, your hair is making our little friend nervous."

"Oh! Sorry," Haifa replied, and reached up with her hands, smoothing her hair down to lie limply over her shoulders and down her back. "I suppose I'm just very excited to be here."

Jhumni blinked. "Err... They do lie still?"

Eddas smiled. "They're like extra eyes and noses for her, Jhumni. She can use them like hands, too, and if she had to fight, they have a poisonous bite. But they're not real snakes, they're an extension of her nervous system, like tentacles. She can control them, much as you can control your hands - they were waving about because she was excited, much as you might wring your hands or clap with joy."

Jhumni grinned. "Aye, Eddas, that I do understand - but an I do be nervous, it be yet a trial to yet not wring me hands and such... Be it the same with ye?" she asked, looking to Haifa.

Haifa grinned - which was an odd and somewhat eerie expression on her, since she had sharp fangs. "Well... Yes, it is, a bit."

"Well, hold them not on my account, I'll yet become accustomed to them, I do reckon."

"You should let her touch one, Haifa," Frarim said, nodding to Jhumni. "You remember how we used to teach the apprentices not to fear your people."

Haifa looked to Jhumni. "Would you like to?"

"Ummm... They will yet not bite?" Jhumni asked nervously.

Haifa grinned again. "No - they're like hands, to me, they have no minds of their own and cannot bite unless I will it."

"If they could, I'd have been dead a thousand times over from all the times I've annoyed Haifa over the centuries," Frarim added, grinning.

"Oh, *you!*" Haifa giggled, nuzzling his neck with a strand of her hair.

"Well... Alright," Jhumni replied, and Haifa extended one of the longer strands from the nape of her neck, curling it to within Jhumni's reach.

"Err... The eyes... They do seem to yet watch me..."

Eddas smiled. "She can see through the eyes, and sense your heat with the pits beside the nose. She can also smell you, when she flickers the tongue."

Jhumni ran a finger over the snake-head, then blinked. "It be yet cold to the touch!"

Eddas held out a gloved hand, pointing. "Yes, it has a bit of the original lung system left from the

pit-vipers her ancestors combined with during the Fell War - a mana-storm melded the two into one. She can't actually breathe with it, it's just used to cool her, like a dog panting. Gorgons can't sweat to stay cool, so their hair does it for them. With forty-eight strands on a typical adult, they do fairly well even in the desert. When they're cold, they can wrap their hair around themselves to stay warm, a bit, but winter requires them to wear winter clothes, like everyone else."

Jhumni grinned. "The legends did say that thy people could yet turn thy enemies to stone with but a glance."

Haifa nodded, pointing to the lump in the middle of her forehead. It split, revealing a milk-white eyeball. "The gaze of our third eye can do that. It is blind to light, but sees the astral, and by focusing our will, we can petrify," she said, closing her third eye again.

"Which rather neatly brings us to the subject of our gift to you, today," Frarim said, and reached to his side, producing a small, hand-carved box. "This is a common gift among the gorgons, given to an expecting mother. It is thought to bring good luck, and a healthy child."

Jhumni opened the box, revealing a small statuette, made of what appeared to be marble. Carefully pulling it out, she gazed at it in wonder. "It be a mouse! And so perfectly carved, I can yet see nearly every strand o' the fur on it!"

"Actually, you can see each strand because it's been petrified," Haifa said, smiling. "I caught him sneaking about the pantry, and stoned him before he could get away."

Jhumni blanched. "Err... Ye do mean this be a dead mouse?"

Eddas smiled. "Well, yes and no, Jhumni. Yes, he's dead, but no, that's not a corpse. He's been turned to vitaliginous marble - he's stone, through and through. Look at the pose, though," Eddas said, pointing. "That's the tricky part. Catching them at rest is what makes it lucky to have one, for a gorgon. And a mouse is a symbol of fertility and health, for them."



"Aww... The poor dear..." Jhumni said, stroking the little mouse.

"He never felt a thing," Eddas said, and Haifa giggled, her hair writhing with mirth.

Jhumni grinned back at Haifa, then rose to her feet, curtsying as she held the marble mouse in her hands. "I do thank ye for the gift, and I do accept it with the honor and goodwill ye did yet intend," she said, carefully placing the mouse back in its padded box.

"You're welcome," Haifa replied, bowing her head briefly.

"And now," Faral said, smiling, "a gift from us."

Rhane nodded. "When the seeds swell with life for one of us, it is a time of great rejoicing. This is the gift we give each other, to congratulate the mother on her impending birth," she said, and held out her hand. In the palm of her hand was a small stone with a hole in it, threaded on a leather thong. "The stone is pierced by the hand of nature, water dripping upon it for aeons until we found it. They are very rare, and considered very lucky, to us. In our traditions, you wear it for luck, and give it to your eldest daughter, when her time comes."

Jhumni smiled, slipping the necklace over her head, then gazing down at it for a moment. Jhumni then lifted her head, and curtsyed. "I do thank thee muchly, and I shall yet give it to me daughter, in her time."

"Your turn, Joy," Eddas called, smiling at me.

I grinned at Jhumni. "Well, it's traditional for our people to give an expectant mother household goods and baby clothing. But... Well... I didn't know how big your babies were, and I hardly thought you would have a use for a giant's baby clothing that was big enough for you to use as a tent," I said, and Jhumni giggled as the others grinned. "So, I've knitted a little blanket for you to wrap your daughter in, after she's born," I said, and held out the folded blanket.

"Ah, Joy, it be quite beautiful - it be thick as me thumb and yet be soft, too! What did ye yet knit it of?"

"It's a goat-hair yarn my people use," I replied, grinning. "I got it from Dhobari village, just down the road a bit."

"I do yet love it, thankee!" Jhumni replied, curtsying.

I suppressed a sigh of relief, and smiled back, curtsying in return. Eddas smiled at me, and gave me a quiet wink. I'd been worried Jhumni wouldn't like it, but he'd told me that she would love it. He was right, again. I'd have to poke him later about it - no good letting something like that go to his head. "And now you, Old Man."

Eddas smiled wryly at Jhumni. "Well, I was hoping my daughters would arrive before now, but..." he said, and walked over to the box he'd placed atop his dresser, extracting a stuffed toy bear, about a cubit tall. "Ah... Well, I wish I could say I made this entirely myself, but, I can't - I've no skill with needle and thread. So, I gave our sewing kit to one of my musicians and let him figure it out."

"Ummm... Thy musicians?" Jhumni asked.

"Don't ask," I said, shaking my head. "You don't want to know. Truly, you don't."

Eddas blanched. "Well... Yes, likely she doesn't," he agreed with a nod. "Anyway, it's a toy bear. There's a little bell inside it's head in a small cage surrounded by the padding, and I've enchanted it a bit, so it will be a bit more useful for you," he said, and sat the bear on the table. "Dance, bear," he said.

Then, to the awed amazement of Jhumni and her husband, the bear hopped up, and did a little jig on the table, the bell inside it's head tinkling as it hopped about.

"That be marvelous!" Karadin yelled.

"Aye!" Jhumni agreed, her eyes wide.

"It's nothing, just a standard golemic enchantment and another enchantment to bring it's intelligence up to something useful," Eddas said, smiling. "It can keep the baby company, entertain it, watch the baby while you sleep, and will do what you tell it to do otherwise. Only, don't get too complicated with it, it's really not terribly smart."

Faral chuckled, shaking his head. "Eddas, in our day, that little toy would have cost a sack of gold and been the keepsake of a prince or princess."

Eddas shrugged. "Fortunately, we've little use for gold these days in Hyperborea - though I do think Jhumni's little girl is certainly worth the same treatment as a Hyperborean princess."

"Come ye here, ye darlin' little thing!" Jhumni called.

"That's the mother I told you about, the child she carries will be born in a few months. Obey her

utterly," Eddas said, and the little bear stopped dancing. It bowed to Eddas, then trotted across the table on its soft little legs.

Jhumni snatched up the bear from the table, hugging it. "Oh, Eddas! It be darlin! What be its name?"

Eddas grinned. "Err... Well, it doesn't have one. You can give it a name, if you like, and it will remember it."

"I'll yet call him Laggo, he be too cute!" she said, holding the bear out. "An that be alright with ye, wee thing?" The bear nodded, the little bell inside his head jingling, and Jhumni laughed.

I tried not to bite my tongue, I really did. Eddas' gift was, in my eyes, far and away a thousand times greater than that which everyone else had given, even myself. Especially myself. But Eddas said dwarven culture didn't work that way. *'You'd better be right again, Old Man, or you and I are going to have a loooong chat after she leaves,'* I thought silently, keeping a smile on my face.

"Aye, now ye do sit here, little one," Jhumni said, placing the bear on the table again, then looked again at the little stone necklace she was wearing. "Oh, dear me... This has all been so wonderful. I'd yet ne'er e'en seen a gorgon nor dryad in all me days, and now I do yet have the gifts of thy traditions. This whole adventure be a story that we shall yet hand down in my family for yet many a generation to come... Ah! And the blanket o' a giant, oh dear, oh dear, I can yet see that wrapped about me babe and bein' added to our cherished linens one day, aye, oh, aye... I cannot yet e'en imagine a better day, nay, I cannot."

I grinned despite myself - Eddas had been right again. I truly was going to have to poke him severely, later.

"Well, there would be more," Eddas said, "but apparently Pelia and Lyota are running a bit late. Perhaps they'll-"

But just then, the air shimmered, and Lyota and Pelia appeared in the middle of the room, Lyota carrying a large box and Pelia gripping her arm, her staff in her free hand. It was sometimes odd to see the two of them together - they looked very much like sisters, or even twins, despite that Pelia was actually Lyota's mother. "Hello, Father! I'm sorry we're late, it took us a bit to get everything together," Lyota called.

Pelia blushed, smiling. "Well, yes, that was my fault, fiddling with my... Hair..." Pelia said, her voice trailing off and her eyes widening in shock as she gazed at the people seated around the table. "Sweet Vyleah... *Men!*" she yelped, dropping her staff with a clatter.

"Mother? What's gotten into you?" Lyota asked.

"Eddas!" Pelia yelped. "Who are these men?!"

"Pelia, you've met one of them before," Eddas replied dryly. "This is Faral. You met him the day Gorol and Natchok died. I realize he looks older than when you saw him last, as he's now physically around eighty, but that's a problem I intend to address tonight. Beside him is Rhane the Dryad, his mate."

"Err... Well, yes, I remember meeting him, but... I thought he would be... Err... Dead?"

Faral smiled. "I've lain in Rhane's arms twice since we last spoke, Pelia, and between times I tend to her tree, and to Wilanda forest. Clearing underbrush to prevent fires, helping the younger dryad's trees grow straight and true..."

"And who is this?" Pelia yelped, pointing at Frarim.

Eddas nodded to Frarim. "My Master, Frarim Starka, once High Master of the Dyclonic Circle, now a servant of Yorindar like myself."

"Charmed, I'm certain," Frarim replied, rising and bowing.

"But... But...!" Pelia yelled.

"To his left," Eddas continued, pointing, "is Haifa, Chieftess and Ancient One of the *Sis'thlash-nal* clan, and Frarim's mate."

"A pleasure to meet you," Haifa said, bowing her head to Pelia.

"But *Eddas!*" Pelia yelled. "That means if you brought back Gorol and Natchock, there would be *four* men for us!"

"And just what, *precisely*, do you mean by the phrase '*for us?*'" Haifa said, her voice a hiss as the strands of her hair began to rise, some gaping and showing their fangs.

Rhane glowered at Pelia. "I may only be a dryad, not a mage, but it seems to me that your mathematics are a bit in error. Your two dead acquaintances would make two, not four. Faral belongs to me."

"*Mother... Quit making a scene...*" Lyota muttered.

"There are two problems with your suggestion, Pelia," Eddas said, his gaze one of ice. "The first of which being that Faral and Frarim are already spoken for. The second problem is that *you* are already spoken for, as are all eighty-nine of your circle. Or have you forgotten?"

"Well, no, of course I haven't forgotten, but... Eddas, I'm sorry, you don't even have-

"Time!" I shouted, clapping my hand over Pelia's mouth. "Oh, my goodness, it's late in the afternoon, come, Pelia, I've always wanted to show you my garden," I said, tucking her head under my arm and dragging her to the stairs. "I think it's a wonderful idea for you to see it right now. Jhumni, Pelia and I will be right back. Eddas, why don't you introduce Lyota and let her show what she's brought? I'm sure it will be wonderful!" I said, turning Pelia around and dragging her down the stairs quickly.

Pelia began to struggle by the time we made it to the fourth floor, but Eddas had trained me well in wrestling - in a trice, I had both her hands behind her back in one hand, my other hand gripping her head with my hand over her mouth. My parents were giants, and though Pelia was a mage and the power of *mana* flowing through her veins made her stronger than she looked, she was merely a healer, not a battle-mage, and her strength was hardly better than a human woman. My hand from thumb to forefinger nearly touched her ears on each side of her head, and my grip was too strong for her to simply pull herself free. She couldn't possibly cast, and she wasn't going to be able to get free without a fight.

By the time we made it to the third floor, Pelia was struggling with all her might. But she quickly discovered she simply couldn't escape my grip. She might have managed it had she been more serious about learning how to fight from Eddas, but all the women of Pelia's circle had always been more interested in learning how to use their knives. Eddas, of course, had been far too gentle and caring a man to bash them around teaching them what he knew of unarmed combat. For their part, Pelia and her women were more than willing to allow Eddas to be gentle with them, they really weren't fighters and did not wish to be. I, however, had not allowed Eddas to be gentle with me. I had insisted he teach me everything he knew, and I refused to allow him to be gentle. I had taken my lumps and learned, knowing that someday, I might need to use what I learned to save Eddas' life.

We finally reached the bottom floor, and as I approached the door I released Pelia's hands, opening the door quickly. She started to raise her hands, possibly to fight, but I wasn't having any of it. I shoved her out the door, stepping through to follow her and slamming the door behind me.

Pelia sprawled into the dirt of the road in front of the tower, then glared up at me. "Just what in the hell do you think you're doing, Joy?!"

"That, Pelia, is precisely *my* question to *you!* Just what in the hell were you about to say he didn't have?!"

Pelia blanched. "Err... Well..."

"That's what I thought! Are you *insane*, or are you just *stupid*?! You, his *head courtesan*, were going to say *that* in front of his *master*, his oldest *daughter*, his *oldest surviving friend*, and all his *guests*?! Do you *want* him to kill himself in shame? Is that what you're trying to accomplish?!"

"No!" Pelia yelled. "I just... I just..."

"You just let your mouth run away with you, that's what you're trying to say! *Gods*, I can't *believe* you! The men of Hyperborea had honor - but you *women* had *none!* *NONE!*"

"Yes, we did!"

"*Well maybe they did then, but you sure as hell don't now!* You asked to be his courtesans! He didn't ask it, he didn't want it, *you* asked it of him! You did it because you loved him, you respected him... *Or so you said!* But it's been a hundred years, not even *once* have you even considered touching him! He's given you children over and over again - over fifty children for each of you, using his magic! Fifty daughters, each with a powerful talent, each beautiful and healthy and smart! Each a powerful mage! Every time, the spell for you gives you ecstasy, while he feels nothing! And how do you repay him? With *nothing!* As soon as he was done, and had given you all the children you needed to insure the survival of your daughters' race... Poof! Gone! You left and started wandering the land again, just like you did in the



old days! Then when you finally see a man of Hyperborea again, your brains fall out your ears and you're willing to toss Eddas aside, despite that he has helped you and stuck by you all this time!"

"But... But we... We don't *want*..."

"I know! You don't want a pasty-skinned little half-elf woman, you want a man of Hyperborea! But has it ever occurred to you *why* you haven't gotten one?! He has the power to raise the dead - he could raise an army of them from the dust of your civilization, alive again! There are dozens of masters of the ancient battle-circles he could raise, many of whom he knew in life, with even less effort! But he hasn't, because you are his courtesans, he can't have you *shaming him by cuckolding him!*"

Pelia gaped at me, but I was far too angry to even care the tiniest bit what *she* thought anymore. "Yes, only *now* do you see it. Only *now* does it occur to you. Eddas can't even *consider* it. It would be *shameful* for him to even *think* about it. The thought doesn't even cross his mind. *But it's true.* He has the power to raise men of his race one by one until all eighty-nine of your circle have your own man - even if he had to raise *tens of thousands* before he found eighty-nine men you found agreeable. He did not have that level of power before, but after surviving in the heart of a *mana*-storm and mastering the Deep Magic, he does *now*. But, he does not do it, because it would mean you, his courtesans whom he respects and cares for and has aided and assisted in every way he can for over a century, would be *shaming him by cuckolding him!*"

"No!" Pelia gasped.

"Yes. You made a commitment to him. He has honored his side of the bargain - he has complied with all four of the vows of acceptance. You had but *one* vow, and you have *never* fulfilled it. He treated you with honor and respect, he treated you as a full member of his household, he did not touch you without your consent, he calls your children his own. But you have *never* honored your side of it! Your vow was to hold him in honor and respect, and always act to protect his honor and the honor of his house. And you have *never* done that! You have reminded him of his shame time and time again by refusing to touch him! You have told him time and time again why you will not touch him - because he's trapped in that body and has lost his manhood! You've made him feel like a eunuch for years! Decades! Over a century! And now here today, you, his *head courtesan*, were going to *shame* him in front of his *master*, his oldest *daughter*, his *oldest surviving friend* and all his *guests* by saying you wanted *Frarim* because *Eddas* doesn't have a *penis*?! *You were going to call him a eunuch to his face and before his friends and his master?! What the hell is wrong with you?!*"

Pelia began to sob, and I just crossed my arms. "You *disgust* me. *Truly*. I have seen all he has done, for me and for you and for everyone else, and I loved him. I saw him dying of loneliness, and I comforted him. I came to him that day, twenty years ago now, and I found him sitting in his chair on his parapet, *starving to death because he no longer had the will to live, he was so lonely! Spiderwebs had grown between his arm and the chair!*"

Pelia sobbed, but said nothing.

"Pelia, I've been his mate now for twenty years, and I-

"You... You have?!" Pelia gasped, her eyes wide.

"Yes. You didn't know. None of your circle did. But your daughters knew. They have always been able to see it, in our auras. They didn't tell you, because they knew you weren't ready to hear it. Mungim and Taliad didn't tell you, because they assumed you already knew. I'd never even touched a woman before, I'd never been interested. And to my mind, I still haven't. I've touched a man - Eddas Ayar."

"We thought... We thought you were just living with him, as his companion..."

"He's a man, not a stone. He has needs - needs which you have thought too disgusting and too beneath you to even consider fulfilling."

"No, no! It's not that... It's not that at all. It's just..." Pelia said, then sighed. "Have you *looked* at him? I mean, really *looked* at him? Have you *seen* that face? It's... It's not even real. That body is... So beautiful, it's not even *real*. It's like... It's like he's some kind of *creature*, really."

"I'm supposed to *sympathize* with that thought?" I asked, glowering at her.

"No, it's just... I mean, it's been a century... Some of us... I mean, yes, we do, with each other. There's no one else, all we of my circle have is each other."

"You have him. You've always had him - all you ever had to do was open your arms to him. But to you, it means nothing," I said, and glared at her. "It's time for the women of your circle to make a decision, Pelia. Either honor your commitment to him, or let him go. You haven't even joined your daughter's circle, the Eddasic circle they founded in his honor. You still have your own circle, and you pretend to be the revered matriarchs of their new society. But you are hardly revered matriarchs, to your daughters. You're like children, to them. They love you as their mothers, and they honor you as their father taught them to. But you are nothing to them. They know everything you know about sorcery and herblore and all the rest - and they're all battle-mages, besides, having been taught by Eddas, their father and grandfather. Their power dwarfs yours easily, and more, they can see the *soul*. They see him for who he is, and they see you for who *you* are. And yet there's more, so much more. Economics, political studies, history, physiology, biology, geography, alchemy, metallurgy, engineering, military sciences, hyperdimensional mathematics... A thousand different things, and all they learned from *him*, not you! They encompassed all *you* had to teach them before Lyota was even twenty!"

"I... We..." Pelia sniffled.

"*'Revered matriarchs...'* Bah. They talk about you, when you're not around. Did you know that? They do. And they don't revere you. Oh, they love you, you are their mothers, after all. And they honor you, as their father taught them to. But they do not revere you. Not in the least. No, they *pity* you. They-"

"They *pity* us?!" Pelia gasped, interrupting.

"Yes! Your daughters *pity* you! They look at you and shake their heads because you live in your own little dream-world where you are waiting for the time when Eddas will finally snap his fingers and make all the last eighteen centuries of ruin and decay vanish so you can live happily ever after with him as a man

and you as his courtesans, living in the lap of luxury and basking in his fame as the restorer of your civilization! But he *can't* fix everything with a snap of his fingers, and he *isn't* restoring your civilization! He's working with your daughters to build a new civilization on the broken ruins of the old, *just as you asked him to do at that midwinter gathering one hundred and twelve years ago!*"

"Oh, Goddess..." Pelia sobbed.

"He has *always* done what you asked him to do, Pelia. You asked him to understand your decision to reject his plan, and reject the men of the Dyclonic Circle. He did. It was painful for him, because he knew in his heart it spelled doom for your race, but he did. You asked him to later rescue the members of your circle that the men of the Dyclonic circle abducted in desperation and concupiscence - you asked him to save them from being raped. And he did, even at the cost of the lives of his former friends. You and I both asked him to come back to us after his final confrontation with those men. And he did, despite wishing he was dead, despite the shame of knowing the changes that had been wrought in him by that *mana*-storm were *permanent*. You asked him to accept you as his courtesans, so you would not be alone. He did, despite what to him was a scandalous number of courtesans - more than even that old goat, King Nebthor, in your histories. You asked him to rebuild a new civilization atop the ruins of the old, with your daughters. He is doing it now. He has always done what you asked him to do, Pelia. And now, it's time for the women of your circle to make a decision. Either honor your commitment to him, or let him go."

Pelia wiped her eyes on her sleeve as she sat in the road, then gazed at me. "What about you, though? What happens to you if we... I mean..."

"I don't know," I replied, tearing my gaze from her and looking out over the trees of Eddas' lands, trying to keep my face smooth. "Maybe I'll step aside, and allow you your proper, legal relationship. Maybe I won't, and just hope his damnable sense of honor doesn't make him feel uncomfortable again. I just don't know," I replied, and looked to her again, my face calm. "But it doesn't matter what I do. What matters is what you and those of the White Mountain Healers choose to do. It's time for you and the women of your circle to make a decision, Pelia. Either honor your commitment to him, or let him go."

Pelia sighed as she sat in the dirt road. After a long moment, she finally pushed herself to her feet. Gazing at me, she sighed again. "Joy, I'm sorry. We always were friends-"

"'Were' is right, Pelia," I snapped, interrupting. "Anyone who was about to humiliate the man I love by calling him a *eunuch* before his friends and family is *not* my friend."

Pelia nodded, summoning her staff to her hand. "I... I understand. Tell Eddas..." she said, then shook her head. "No, don't tell him anything. He wouldn't understand. You understand, but he never will. He's a man. I was wrong, Joy. We all were. And I'm sorry. I'm going to go back, now. And we'll talk about it. And we'll make a decision. And we'll let you know," she said, and gestured, then vanished.

I gazed in silence at the spot where Pelia had stood. Part of me was quite satisfied. *That* little rant had been something I'd kept bottled up inside me for decades, and to finally pull the cork and pour it over her head made me feel very much better.

Yet, another part of me felt terribly sad, because I knew there was only one choice they could make honorably - and that was to fulfill their part of the bargain.

I could not possibly share Eddas. He was too important to my life, and I was, at heart, a giantess. Perhaps Haifa could share Frarim among her tribe, but I was not she. Perhaps Sasha and Marilith may even be able to share Corvid between themselves - but I was neither of them. If Pelia and the women of her circle chose to honor their commitments as Eddas' courtesans, I would have to step aside. I could not possibly share him. Either he was all mine, or he was not.

I did not know what I would do, or where I would go. I only knew I could not share the man I loved with anyone.

\* \* \*

An hour later, Eddas found me working in my garden. I pretended not to notice him walking up behind me in those stealthy little boots he'd gotten from Dyarzi. "Joy?" he called.

"Yes, Old Man?"

"It's getting dark. Are you coming back in?"

"Have the others gone?"

"Yes. Frarim and Faral have taken their mates back home, Jhumni and Karadin are back downstairs, and Lyota just left. I conjured dinner for the lot of us when it seemed you weren't going to be coming back soon. Faral and I played a hand of *chatto*, while Frarim and Karadin played a dwarven game he'd brought. Faral nearly beat me, but I managed to pull out a win in the end. Afterwards, I let him copy the age-rejuvenation spell from my grimoire, the one Frarim has been using. Rhane was very happy, and Faral thinks he can adapt it into a spell that will allow him to rejuvenate her tree, and add another eight or nine centuries to her life. It was rather a nice evening, really, though I missed your company."

"Thank you," I replied, and continued working, poking at a weed with my hoe. "I'm sorry I made it a bit unpleasant at the start."

"Actually, no, you didn't. Jhumni had no idea what Pelia was really saying, though Rhane and Haifa did. So, Jhumni saw you drag Pelia down the stairs in a headlock, and it was so startling, she burst into laughter. That made everyone laugh, and soon, the whole incident was behind us. Lyota's gift was some pots and pans they got from Mungim the other year. They'd developed a spell so food doesn't stick to them - makes cleaning just a simple wipe with a cloth. Quite amazing, really, and the enchantments were very neatly done. We had similar enchantments for cookware like that in my day, but I'd forgotten about them until I saw Lyota's work. I really never cook."

"And you never clean dirty pots and pans, either," I replied, still poking at the hapless weed. It was certainly dead, I'd pulled it from the ground and hacked it's root into several pieces, but the poor thing was doomed to suffer awhile longer, it seemed.

"Joy?"

"Yes, Old Man?"

"What happened?"

"I..." I began, then shook my head. "Nothing, Old Man. Nothing."

"Joy, I've known you long enough to know that when you say it's nothing, it's something. What happened?"

"Nothing happened. Nothing, nothing, *nothing!*" I yelped, hacking the hapless weed to bits.

"Joy," Eddas said, putting his hand on my arm.

And at his touch, my heart broke. I turned to him, dropping my hoe, falling to my knees and wrapping my arms around him tightly. I poured out all that had happened in one long, breathless, weeping explanation. When he had at last heard it all, I sobbed, hugging him.

"I'm sorry, Old Man. I can't share you, I just can't. You're either all mine, or you're not. I can't share you."

"Well, Joy, two things..." Eddas said, stroking my hair.

"What?"

"First, you shouldn't be too unhappy about yelling at her. That particular encounter has been coming a long time. Vyleah was using the Law of Karmic Balance to pile suffering upon me from them, so our daughters would avoid suffering something worse before they were ready. But, it's like a set of scales, Joy. At some point, the balance has to be redressed. I've known this time was coming, and today, it appears it has finally arrived. Like with Swift-wing's little diatribe with Arella, it takes a third party to redress the balance. That person this time was you. This is a good sign, really."

"It... It is?" I asked, sniffing.

"Yes. It means that my daughters are now strong enough and numerous enough to weather the ordinary hazards of life, and grow in numbers on their own. Lyota said Arella was wanting more of them to visit the Southlands, and deal with their people - trading, teaching, learning... And Lyota thinks this is a good idea. They will also be working with the giants, as their skills as healers are far superior to their mothers'. And they'll be chatting with the elves about joining the Seelie court. And they'll be chatting with the dwarves in regards to a more sophisticated trade arrangements. Then, there's the roads project, the various herb projects they've been working on, and... Oh, yes, Joy. This is a good thing. It means phoenix of the New Hyperborean Race is finally beyond the fledgling stage, and is ready to take flight."

I leaned back, looking into his eyes as I knelt before him. Kneeling, he and I were nearly the same height - though I was still a bit taller. I managed a smile, despite the utterly calm expression on his face. "Alright. And what was the second thing?"

"Well, Joy, given that you have unequivocally stated you absolutely will *not* share me with anyone, ever, there is only one possible choice for me."

"And that is?" I asked nervously.



"I'll have to agree, obviously. The vow is physical relations by *mutual* consent. And I do not consent, sorry. Really, Joy, even should my courtesans suddenly decide to change their minds, it *has* been over a century, dear, I do believe *that* ship sailed *quite* a long time ago. They have most definitely missed the boat. And then my head courtesan's eyes pop out of her head just because she actually saw another man of Hyperborea, and she very nearly insults my honor to my face and before my friends and family? Why, they've not only missed the boat by a hundred years, they've burned the dock, as well."

My heart was singing. "*Really?!?*"

Eddas smiled at me. "Of course, Joy! Good gravy, did you *really* think I'd even for a moment be even *slightly* interested in them by now? I mean, certainly, there's the titillation factor of the possibility of having eighty-nine attractive women all after me at once, but let's be truthful here, Joy, I'm one thousand nine hundred and two years old - even if you only count the years I've seen pass with my own eyes, that still makes me almost two hundred and fifty! I have *quite* outgrown the desire for a horde of small-hearted women who take a century to decide that they *might* live up to their vows, oh, *quite* so. No, I'm quite happy with one very large-hearted woman - you."

"Oh, Eddas, I love you!" I yelped, and kissed him passionately.

Eddas grinned when I finally let him go. "And I love you, too, Joy. Now come, get up, let's go back inside - I've saved some of the dinner I conjured for you."

"Yes, dear," I replied, rising. I was surprised I didn't simply float on the air.

"And gather your hoe, I know you don't want to leave it out for the morning dew, it will just rust and you'll be quite cross with yourself."

"Yes, dear," I replied, snatching up my hoe.

Eddas began walking back to the tower. I followed, and he gazed at me in the gloom. "Oh, dear, look at the knees of that dress - and that's your best dress, too. I'll have to clean it with sorcery. Why, if one of the grandchildren visiting had done that, you'd take them over your knee!"

I smiled. "Now there's a thought, Old Man."

Eddas paused, blinking at me. "Err... You can't be serious."

I smiled a sly smile down at him. "Old Man, you just told me you'd give up eighty-nine attractive women for me. I do think that obligates me to at least make an attempt to convince you that your decision was a wise one."

Eddas looked me over, then shook his head. "Dear, two things, again:"

"Yes?"

"First, I already *know* it was a wise decision."

I grinned. "Thank you, Old Man."

"Second, this: I'm a Hyperborean, Joy. In my day, we liked *tall* women. In this body, I'm three cubits

three hands tall. You're five cubits tall. Your skin is light olive and only a few shades lighter than a Hyperborean woman's, your hair is golden blonde, you've a svelte, muscular build that defies adequate description, your waist is narrow, your hips are broad, your rump is shaped like an inverted heart, your breasts are the size of my head, and you've used a depilatory stone just like women of my day did so your sex is as bald as a baby's bottom. It doesn't take much thought to realize that you already are every possible male fantasy of my time come true, and there's no way any of my concubines or even all of them at once could even possibly compare. You are beautiful, tall, incredibly intelligent, a living goddess, I love you more than I could possibly express in words, you excite me more than I could ever explain, and if I hear even one more word from you that makes me think you've forgotten that even for an instant I'm going to be quite cross with you, so shut up."

I grinned at Eddas silently.

"Very good. Now come, dear, dinner is waiting," Eddas said, and resumed walking towards the tower.

"Yes, Old Man. And thank you, again," I replied, following and grinning from ear to ear.

Eddas glanced back at me, and smiled. "You're quite welcome, Joy."

"We found them on our southern borders, chief," the young stallion said, pointing to Marilith and I. His companions still kept us covered with drawn bows, and Marilith and I had wisely chosen to simply follow passively. For me, the choice was a simple one - a man with a sword facing a man with a drawn bow had almost no chance at all, and none against the deadly accuracy of a centaur - they survived by their skill at archery, and hoping that I might dodge an arrow from their bows was a foolish hope. As for Marilith, she could cast, but they watched her with such a wary eye, I was afraid that if she even tried a single gesture, she'd be shot dead. So, we had followed to their village - a large village of sixty broad, tall huts of woven grasses nearby a small stream and pond. Centaurs could eat grasses, but preferred meat, and could not survive without a source of water.

The chief, a gray-bearded centaur who wore a hair-shirt of several colors, gazed at us and shrugged. "So why have you brought them here? Driving them off would have been sufficient."

"This one," the stallion said, pointing at Marilith. "Look at her, chief. An evil thing, she is, and that is clear. This human brings her here to infest our lands, certainly."

The chief stepped closer to Marilith, looking her over for a long moment, and sniffing at her. Marilith smiled innocently, and the chief stepped back, shrugging again. "I see no evil, nor smell evil upon her. Indeed, she bears the scent of copulation, and the smell of grass on her breath. Her eyes are strange, but no stranger than those of the antelope, whose eyes slit from side to side and seem to gaze in all directions eerily. It is my estimation that she is simply a beast we've not seen before, perhaps some odd thing this human finds amusing to couple with. The sexual habits of humans and their beasts are no concern of ours - release them and drive them from our lands."

The stallion shook his head, pointing at Marilith with a hand as he stomped the ground with a forehoof. "No beast is she, chief, for she can speak! She is a creature, a monster, like the minotaur of the western forests! Observe, she has the head of a beast and two legs, both the lower legs of a beast - just as the minotaur does!"

"You speak?" the chief said, looking to Marilith.

*"I do, yes,"* Marilith replied, and smiled again.

"What say you to Cholo's accusations? Are you a monster out to kill us?"

*"No, we were just passing through,"* Marilith replied, smiling.

The chief shrugged. "There we are, the matter is done. Release them, and send them on their way."

I had to admit, the chief had a point. Minotaurs were hardly known for their conversational skills (whether they even had a language was debatable), and one of them in Marilith's position would likely reply with a roar of battle, not calm words and a smile. Though perhaps Cholo's apprehension was understandable, as minotaurs were carnivorous and vicious in the extreme, the chief was right - Marilith wasn't one of them. Still, that wasn't an answer Cholo appeared to be willing to accept.

Cholo pounded his chest with a fist, pawing the ground with a forehoof. "No! This is ridiculous! You've grown old and soft, Bakkar, and cannot see a danger to our clan! It is time for you to be replaced as our leader!"

A sudden silence fell over the centaurs gathered around us. The chief was unarmed, but he hardly looked afraid. Instead, the chief looked to the young stallion, and smiled pleasantly. "I see. And, of course, you feel that you would make an appropriate replacement for me?"

"Yes!" Cholo replied, reaching to the long sack at his side, from which a length of wood with a lanyard protruded. Wrapping the lanyard about his wrist, he withdrew a rather impressive club. "This clan shall be mine, and your harem shall be mine!"

The chief nodded. "So you say," he replied.

Then, in a sudden move that startled me, Chief Bakkar whipped his upper torso down and to the left, flinging his arms out as his rear legs flexed. In a twinkling, he literally spun his body about on his left forehoof as he snapped his upper torso back to the right as a counter-weight, then clapped his right forehoof to the ground next to his left, and lashed out viciously with his rear legs. There was a crunch of bone as the young stallion, Cholo, was kicked in the chest - and an eyeblink later, the chief kicked again and again, smashing an arm and pushing him back to fall on his hindquarters, the second blow snapping a forelimb and sending the young stallion sprawling, screaming in pain.

The whole attack, including all three kicks, had taken just a bit over two heartbeats. I gaped, astonished. I had heard of trained warhorses in Larinia which could move similarly in battle, but I had never seen it in my life - nor had I ever seen a centaur fight. Apparently, the power and agility of a horse combined with the wisdom of a man made for an extremely deadly opponent.

"So," the chief said, turning casually and gazing down at his opponent, "too old, am I? You'll have my harem, will you?" he said, and lashed out with a forehoof, smashing the stallion in the ribs of his lower torso with a crunch of bone. The young stallion again screamed in pain as the chief gazed at him. "At some point in time, you colts are going to have to learn that things don't quite work that way. Just what were you going to do with my harem, eh? You think they would meekly accept you and turn their rumps quietly to you so you could mount them with ease? Oh, hardly. Yes, they'd turn their rumps to you, Cholo - just before Meefa and all the rest of my mares kicked you to death as the upstart colt you are." He then lifted his head, smiling to the crowd gathered around us. "Oh, Meefa? This young colt thinks he would make a better stallion for you and the girls than I. What say you on the matter?"

An older mare nearby wearing a leather apodesmos shook her graying head, crossing her arms beneath her breasts. "I'd rather be slow-roasted and eaten by minotaurs."

"Oh, dear me, Cholo. It seems Meefa has not quite fallen for your charms. I do think I'll crush your skull, and save you any further humiliation."

With a broken leg, he could not rise, and with his weapon-arm broken he could not even begin to defend himself. "*Mercy!*" the young stallion screamed as the chief raised his forehoof.

"Ah, mercy is what you ask for now, eh? Well, we shall see," Bakkar replied, and looked to his tribe again. "Of the adults here, who agrees with a call for mercy?"

Two hands went up among the centaurs - one older mare, and a young colt of perhaps twelve.

"It seems, Cholo, that only your mother and brother believe I should grant you mercy - and your brother's voice does not count. The rest of the tribe, it appears, has had quite enough of your bullying ways." Then, to my surprise, the chief looked to Marilith and I. "And what say you, our fine guests? Should I grant mercy to this one, or kill him?"

I smiled. "The decision is yours, of course, we were merely passing through. If the decision was mine, I'd likely grant him mercy, if only so he might learn from this experience."

"And what of you, creature? How old are you?" the chief asked, looking to Marilith.

*"About three thousand years old, chief,"* Marilith replied, inclining her head.

"Ah, an Ancient One. We're honored," the chief replied, bowing at the waist. "What say you of Cholo's fate?"

*"Alive, he may learn. Dead, he is merely a corpse."*

The chief nodded. "Wisdom from an Ancient One - and truth that is easily seen," he said, then looked

down to his bloodied opponent. "I give you your life this day, Cholo. See that I do not have cause to withdraw my gift in future," he said, tapping the stallion's head with his forehoof. He then crossed his arms, his gaze falling upon the two stallions that guarded Marilith and I. "Jakar, Goro, you followed this idiot. Learn from his mistakes. A leader does not rule by strength or intimidation, nor is a harem gathered to you just because your testicles hang large and low. A mare follows her stallion for the same reason the tribe follows a chief - wisdom, and speed."

"Yes, chief," the two stallions responded, bowing their heads.

"Good. Now help this idiot to his feet and get him to the healer's hut while I'm still in a good mood."

I smiled as the two stallions did as they were bid, helping their wounded comrade to his feet. "If you don't mind, Chief, Marilith and I will be on our way. We-"

"What?" the chief replied, then shook his head. "No, no. After the treatment you've received today, it's clear to me we must at least give you food and drink in repayment for your trouble. Stay awhile, friend, and we'll share a meal together, you and our clan."

"Of course, Chief. We'd be honored," I replied, bowing.

Marilith looked to me. "*Err... Corvid...*"

I smiled to her, and spoke in my own language. "Turning down the hospitality of a centaur is very unwise. Their temperament is like the wind - it can change instantly. I'd rather not have him do to us what he just did to that stallion - particularly considering he'd find our refusal insulting, and we might get the same from his whole tribe."



Marilith smiled to the chief. *"We'd be honored to stay for lunch."*

\* \* \*

"So," the chief said, picking his teeth with a bone toothpick, "let me see if I understand this... You're following a ship that carries her sister, a prisoner being taken far away. You can keep up because she can transform into a horse. When you rescue her, the two mares will be your harem."

I smiled. It was difficult putting our story into terms the Centaurs could comprehend, particularly since my knowledge of their language was only at the conversational level. I had no idea how to explain what Marilith truly was, nor did I really know what their reaction would be to the truth. It seemed safest to me to put our story in simple terms, so as to save a great deal of trouble. "Yes, that's right."

"Ah, but she tires from daily galloping, and cannot provide food for the two of you with her magic and keep up. So, you thought to rest, and then Cholo and his two friends found you."

"Yes."

"Interesting," the chief replied, burping and smoothing his gray beard. "Would you like to hear a tale of ourselves?"

"I'd be delighted," I replied, hoping that it would be a short story.

"We've lived here on the central plains for many generations. There are few minotaurs here, this far east - yet, game is scarcer, as well, and during the dry seasons, campsites with water are few and far between. Rains come and go in cycles, here - seven years of wet years, followed by seven years of dry. And during the dry years, we must often move closer to the forests in the west to find game and water,

and the minotaurs kill those of our clans if they catch us. And, of course, we need wood and other supplies only found to the west, which also occasionally causes us to lose members of our clan to hunting minotaurs, as well as brings us into conflict with other centaur clans whose territories are to the west. We have looked to the east for forests we could gather wood and the things we need, but the Barrier Peaks loom sharp and large, and chimeras haunt their hills - it's simply too dangerous."

I nodded - I'd heard stories of the Barrier Peaks, but never been there. The closest I'd ever come was chasing a slaver who was working out of Kush, and then, I only saw the Barrier Peaks from the sea. Those mountains did not look friendly, they looked like jagged, sharp rocks clawing at the sky.

The chief gestured, continuing his story. "Our legends say that our ancient ancestors migrated south from the lands of Hyperborea following a great war, and found these plains to their liking. Yet, so did our enemies, the minotaurs, and several other beasts, besides. The goblins of the Granite Mountains arm the minotaurs with bronze axes and spears, where we have little to match it save our bows. Word passed down from elven hunters on the plains has it that the Great Mage, Eddas Ayar, has awakened from two millennia of slumber, and together with his daughters, builds a new civilization to the north, in our ancient homelands. Our legends say that once, we were friendly with the Hyperboreans, and shared in the benefits of their civilization. We did not face the beasts of the land alone and with sticks and stones, but with bronze and iron and allies at our side. The elves say that some day, the Hyperborean civilization will rise again from the ruins, and likely even better than it was in ancient times. I would like to lead my people back to those ancient lands, and see if there may be room for us in their lands, and in their future. But, I hesitate to do so. Many questions remain. How to get there? None living know the way. How to speak to them in peace? None living know their tongue. And more, the elves say that Hyperborea swarms with giants, dragons, ogres, trolls and other creatures that may find us tasty. What to do? This, I do not know. And yet, somehow, I think that our meeting was no mere coincidence. Somehow, I think that you may have the answers to these questions - or, perhaps, may know how we may learn them ourselves. So, I put it to you: What answers do you have?"

I tried to keep my face smooth. There were no coincidences when the gods were involved, Frarim had said. And that seemed more and more true with each passing day. "Well, as for ogres and trolls and such, yes, they're vicious and evil. But, giants are not - they're actually quite nice, if you treat them respectfully. I've even met lamias and gorgons, they're also rather nice if you treat them well. And my friend Frarim once told me that even dragons can be dealt with easily - just leave them alone, and they'll leave you alone. As a dwarf once said to me, 'In Hyperborea, those that will talk before they kill are considered friendly races.' And, really, there are many friendly races, by that standard - but, just as many unfriendly ones. As far as whether there is room, that I don't know - you'd have to ask Eddas Ayar," I said, and grinned.

"You know him? You've met him?" the chief asked, an eyebrow raised.

"Actually, yes. We're friends, and follow the same god."

"Interesting... What is he like?"

I shook my head. "That's difficult to explain simply," I said, and shrugged. "For reasons I don't know how to explain in your language, he looks like an elf-maid. But, don't let that fool you. He's a very powerful mage, and he's incredibly wise, and seems to know everything... Or fairly near everything, at any rate. As to how to get there, I know how to get there from air or sea, but not overland. Marilith?"

Marilith smiled. *"I can see two ways for you to get there. One is to travel north to the Inland Sea, then turn west. Follow the western shore of the Inland Sea until you arrive at the elven city of Thall-Tassaal. From there, turn west, following the road until you arrive at Thall-Aibhne'. You can speak to the Sylvani-elves, and wait for the elven trader, Taliad - he returns there once a year. He can then lead you to the tower of Eddas Ayar, in Hyperborea, when he next journeys there. In all, it should take you two to three years to arrive at his tower, then you can talk to him and find out if there is room for you in their lands."*

The chief nodded. "And the second way?"

*"I use my magic to go to Eddas Ayar's tower right now. I talk to him, see what he says, and come back. If he agrees, I can take you all there by sorcery - you'll all have to join hands for me to take you, however, which means you'll only be able to carry what you can hold in one hand and what's on your back."*

The chief smiled. "Our entire village fits on our backs, this is nothing. Your second way sounds interesting. I agree - please ask him."

*"I'd be glad to. I'll be back as soon as I can!"* Marilith replied, and vanished.

I hadn't expected Marilith to simply *leave* me here, and I sat there in the silence that followed for quite awhile thereafter, not really knowing what to say.

Finally, the elder mare I'd seen before, Meefa, smiled at me from where she sat beside her mate. "What did you think of the food?"

Remembering centaur customs I'd learned trading at their outpost to the south, I concentrated a moment, working up a belch. I then grinned. "Delicious." And, really, it was. Nobody knows how to smoke antelope-meat better than a centaur.

The mare smiled back at me. "Thank you."

Chief Bakkar rose to his feet, looking around the centaurs gathered near. "Whether we go there or stay here, it matters not - game grows thin, here, we'll need to be moving on! Pack the village, then we'll wait and see where we'll be going!"

"What of my son?!" a mare shouted - after a moment, I recognized her as the mare the chief had said was Cholo's mother. "He's crippled, he can't come! You can't just leave him here!"

Chief Bakkar gazed at her. "Oh, yes, I can, Vila. Your idiot son is crippled because of his own stupidity, and he lives only because of the kindness of our guests. You want him to live? Fine - you stay with him, and tend him until his bones heal. And your younger son, too - he's old enough to bear a bow, he can hunt for you. If we end up going to Hyperborea, these lands are yours to do with as you will. If not, I want you and your sons off these lands as soon as Cholo can walk again."

"But he has no harem to build the tents, gather the wood, cook the game, nothing! We can't live here alone!"

"Oh, and now you want a harem for your worthless son? Paugh!" the chief snapped, glowering at her. "You want him to have a harem? Fine - once he can walk again, have him talk to the neighboring clans and see if he might woo one of their mares. If he can't, then YOU can be his harem," Bakkar replied, and over the mother's sputtering objections, he turned to the rest of his clan. "Leave Cholo, his mother and his brother here with a hut and their belongings. Make sure they have everything they might need, and particularly insure they have at least two months worth of dried meat, so that none can claim they were left to die."

The other centaurs voiced their agreement, and I had to admit it was a stern but fair judgement. The chief was, by his ways, well within his rights to simply kill his challenger - but he had given Cholo every possible chance to live, including asking Marilith and I what we thought. Bakkar was a good leader, a deadly fighter, and a wise person. I found I had to grin up at him in respect. I hadn't expected this little detour in our journey, but I was actually quite glad I'd met him.

Bakkar looked at me, and saw my expression. "You smile. What do you think of my ruling, friend?"

I thought about it for a moment, and then an old sailor's insult about farmers came to my mind. I thought it humorous, and re-worded it a bit, then looked up to him again. "If he ends up with his mother as his harem, this may not be such a disaster for him. After all, he's a bad seed to begin with, I can't see as he'll do any worse ploughing the field his father ploughed."

Barrak blinked at me, then burst out laughing. "You've a cruel, cruel wit, friend. I like you."

I grinned back. "Thank you, Chief Bakkar - I like you, as well."

\* \* \*

I watched silently as the centaurs packed up their village. The mares and fillies did most of the work. The colts and stallions simply waited, helping only to lift heavy or bulky things. I realized very quickly it wasn't out of laziness - it was simply how they did things. The mares were responsible for their homes and their belongings, the stallions guarded them and did the hunting. The larger the harem, the more hands there were to get the work done for the mares - but, by the same token, the more mouths there were to feed for the stallions. This made the whole system self-limiting, in that there was only so much game a stallion could bring back to camp. With small family hunting units of a father and his sons working with allied friends, a stallion could manage a slightly larger harem through cooperative hunting. These hunting relationships linked family to family, throughout the clan, and helped hold the clan together. Meanwhile, the mares and fillies cooperated with each other, as larger jobs that were their responsibility went faster when working as a group - again, friends linking families together into larger units across the clan. It was a rather simple yet elegant arrangement, and one that Cholo had threatened with his notion of simply bullying the others into submission. Likely that earlier confrontation had been coming for awhile, and Cholo simply saw us as a good excuse to use to attack Bakkar and try to take over. But a centaur clan didn't work on brute force and intimidation, it worked on mutual respect and cooperation. Whether he would survive or not, I didn't know. If he did, however, it would only be because waiting for his bones to heal gave him time to finally learn that lesson.

At last, the village was packed, all the belongings of the centaurs on the backs of the mares, fillies and colts as the stallions stood nearby with their bows, waiting. I wondered what was taking so long, when suddenly, the air shimmered beside me. I rose to my feet - then grinned broadly as I saw that not only had Marilith arrived, but she'd brought Eddas Ayar with her. "Eddas! It's good to see you!"

Eddas smiled. "Thank you, Corvid, it's good to see you, as well. I assume this is Chief Bakkar?"

"Yes," I said, and looked to the chief, speaking in his language. "Chief, this is Eddas Ayar. As I said before, due to a complicated reason I don't really know how to explain in your language, this is what he looks like."

"Dear, dear, Corvid, your accent is atrocious," Eddas said, looking at me. "I assume you learned the language from trading with the coastal centaurs?"

I grinned. "Well, yes. Ships bound for Kush or Mysantia often stop at their trading posts for food and water."

"And likely trade worthless beads and trinkets to them to get it, but there we are."

The chief looked Eddas over, a puzzled expression on his face. "Hmmm... With respect... I'd expected a Great Mage to be a bit taller."

"Sadly," Eddas replied dryly in the tongue of the centaurs, "I'm not. On the bright side, I *am* Eddas Ayar, and in answer to your question, yes, there's a place for your clan in Hyperborea, if you wish to come. To the southeast of my tower there's a broad plain that's covered with grasses and flowers. Near the road is an old monastery you can use to build a more permanent village, and trade with the elven traders that pass by. Nearby is a rather pleasant river that has quite a few fish, and beyond it is a fairly extensive forest that is absolutely crawling with deer. Unfortunately, it's also crawling with ogres, so you'll need to kill them off. I took a moment to speak with Karg the Terrible - he's the dragon whose territory you'll be living in. He's agreed to allow you to live there, so long as you're careful not to hunt out the deer and you do a good job of killing the ogres. Not hunting out the deer is important, he eats about fifty or sixty of them a year, along with mountain goats and a few other beasts within his territory - if you kill off all the deer, all he has left to eat in that area is you, and that's something you'd likely find *quite* unpleasant. As far as the ogres, Karg doesn't like them much, they occasionally try to sneak in and nick his treasure, which annoys him immensely - if you kill them all off and leave Karg alone, he'll likely be quite pleased with you. If this arrangement is agreeable to you, Karg has agreed to spend the first few years after you arrive eating the manticores that inhabit the area instead of the deer, which will get their numbers down to something more manageable so they won't be bothering you. Is that agreeable to you?"

"A dragon..." Chief Bakkar replied, boggled.

"Yes, quite," Eddas replied calmly. "The land you'll be living in is in his territory, it belongs to him."

"And he'll be eating the manticores to make the area safe for us."

"Yes. Not all of them, they're a part of the chain of life like everything else, but he'll drive them more into the mountains he controls so they don't bother you. In turn, however, you must agree to kill off all the ogres in the territory you'll be sharing with him, and not over-hunt the deer."

"Hmmm... Ogres are a fierce opponent, Eddas Ayar, that will take quite some work."

"Yes, but they're also dreadfully stupid and Karg will help you out a bit."

"Oh? How?"

"Well, you'll need a bit better weapons, and Karg has quite a collection of swords, daggers, bows, arrows, shields, lances and other items he's gathered from delvers over the last few millennia who thought to steal his treasure. Some of it is enchanted and he's not willing to part with it, but the majority of it is non-magical, and to him, worthless. To you, however, it's not worthless, particularly the bows, arrows and other weapons. He also has some suits of armor that are more-or-less intact, you can wear them over your upper torso, arms and head. He also has some horse-barding that's also more-or-less intact, you can wear that over the rest of you. Armed and armored, your people should be more than a match for the ogres, and Karg has graciously agreed to use a bit of sorcery to repair the scorch marks and puncture-holes from his teeth and claws, remove the ancient bloodstains and generally clean up the armor to be serviceable for you - after all, if you succeed, both sides benefit."

"Ah, I see..."

"Now, the dwarven trading routes don't go by that old monastery, it's off on an old side-road. But Taliad and the few elven traders that go through Hyperborea do have routes that pass it. Naturally, as the elven traders come by, you can trade with them to obtain more arrows and other smaller items you need. In the long term, say over the next five to ten years, you can begin panning the river - that river starts from an underground source in the mountains, and there's a bit of gold in it that washes downstream. As it's in Karg's territory no one has touched it, and he's far beyond the age where he'd worry about sieving tiny grains of gold from a river. Thus, it will be available to you, and I can teach you how to pan for gold later. Once you begin obtaining gold from the river, you can save it up as part of a clan treasury, and your clan can trade gold for more expensive items you would like from the traders - such as more armor and



weapons, of course, but in the long run you can go over to visit with my daughters nearby on Iolo Mountain, and learn literacy and the Hyperborean language from them. The races of Hyperborea use our old tongue as a sort of common language for our lands. Once you've mastered literacy, you can trade with the elven traders for books and other things you may wish to use to educate your children. You can also trade with the giants nearby to obtain sheep, and you'll find that raising sheep on the plains is far easier than hunting - more food for your families, no lean years when game is scarce, and the wool and leather from sheep are just as useful as what you can get from deer - more so, in many ways, once you learn how to weave wool into cloth. Over time, you'll be ready to begin your own education to join the rest of the races around you in a larger civilization over the course of the next century. Oh - and there's another clan of centaurs in Hyperborea already, they've been there for ages. They're far to the north of my tower, near the edge of the northern forests. As your populations grow you may enjoy meeting them and allowing your younger stallions and mares to court each other."

Bakkar gaped. "You... You're talking about plans of a vast scope! My largest hope was that we could find a place where we wouldn't be hungry and thirsty in the dry seasons, and might perhaps benefit from being neighbors with a more advanced people who had tools better than simple sticks and stones. You're talking about *becoming* a more advanced people, ourselves!"

"Yes, quite. Is that a problem?" Eddas asked, an eyebrow raised, and I had to struggle to keep from laughing.

"No, far from it! It's more a dream come true!"

"Ah, I see. Well, that's what will happen, if you find this arrangement agreeable. I have to tell you, however, that the three most important things are to not over-hunt the deer, to work on killing off all the ogres, and to make sure you do not annoy Karg. That's his territory, not yours. He's willing to share it with you, but if you're going to be good neighbors with him, you want to abide by your part of the agreement. If you fail to abide by your part of the agreement or if you pester him or try to steal his treasure, he'll simply eat you all. Is all this agreeable?"

"Oh, yes, Eddas Ayar!"

"Wonderful, I - Oh! I nearly forgot!" Eddas said, then paused. "I should mention you'll be sharing

your lands with another group of people... Ah... How do you feel about pixies?"

Bakkar grinned. "Darling little things, the children love them. In the spring, the plains to the north of us near the elf-lands flower and the land swarms with them. They're often quite useful for warning when enemies are approaching, as well."

Eddas breathed an obvious sigh of relief. "Ah, good, you'll love it there, then, the lands around that ruined monastery are absolutely infes - err, they have quite a few of them."

I grinned, and Marilith giggled as Eddas looked around. "Ah, good, I see your people are ready. Well, if you'll all join hands, I'll be transporting you to my daughter's village on Iolo mountain - you'll need to know where they are, anyway, and my daughter Lyota has agreed to lead you to your new home and deal with Karg for you. It's about a two-day trot from their village down the mountain, but never fear, she's a skilled battle-mage, she'll easily guard you all until you've safely arrived. Alright? Yes, everyone join hands, that's right, there we go... Good," Eddas said, taking Bakkar's hand, then beginning to gesture with his staff. A moment later, they all shimmered, and were gone.

I had never seen a hundred and fifty centaurs vanish at once, and was surprised by the sudden gust of wind. I grinned at Marilith. "Well, I suppose that's that. Are you ready to go?"

*"Not quite, we have to wait here a bit."*

"Oh? What for?"

*"Well, I - ah, there he is,"* Marilith said as the air shimmered again, and Eddas re-appeared alone, a thick book tucked under his arm.

Eddas looked around, spotting Cholo, his mother and brother. "Ah, the ones you mentioned, Marilith? I assume they won't be going?"

*"No, Master Eddas - that's Cholo, the one I spoke of, his mother and his brother,"* Eddas said. The three of them studiously ignored us.

"Well, it appears that stallion picked a particularly bad day for a revolution, but, such is life," Eddas said, and held out the book to Marilith. "Here's a copy of my treatise on magic theory - it's titled *The Mathematics of Magic*. I didn't write it as a schoolbook, I wrote it more as a reference work and a dissertation on my research and discoveries, but... Well, my daughters use it as a schoolbook, so I suppose you can do the same. This is one of the copies my daughters have of it, I didn't have time to make one for you, and..." Eddas said, and sighed. "Gah. The timing of all this is bad, horribly bad. You're going into a trap - this much is clear. And it's perfectly timed so that I cannot help you, nor can I finish teaching you how to adapt your own methods of sorcery to the laws of magic that govern the Prime Material. I still have to watch Jhumni. There are several complications of pregnancy that dwarven females sometimes get in the first month or two of pregnancy, and I have to watch for them. It's the same with human women, in a way - miscarriage, spontaneous abortion... It happens, sometimes. It's very unlikely, she's carried several children before without any problems, but if she *does* have problems and I'm not there to spot them and deal with them immediately..."

*"We understand, Master Eddas,"* Marilith said, smiling.

Eddas shook his head. "And now, these new centaurs... They'll need help, they'll need someone to talk to so they can make the transition. Lyota will show them how to find my tower, it's only a few hours' run, for them. And they're *going* to have questions, they're *going* to have problems... Gah!"

I smiled. "It's alright, Eddas. Really."

"No, it's not, but that can't be helped," he replied, and reached a hand to Marilith, looking into her eyes. "Marilith, listen, and listen well. The mage you're facing is powerful, easily a master mage. You're never going to defeat him meeting force with force. Layer your defenses, and try to exploit his weaknesses. I don't recommend you try a Word of Power, you'll tire yourself and likely not affect him. Still, if you do choose to do so, only use a Word when he is distracted, and can't instantly focus his

*Talent* to fight the effect. Read the book, particularly the chapter on Mysantian magic theories - he's likely gone far beyond that, but it will at least give you an understanding of where he began, and some insight as to how he thinks about sorcery. And remember, *stay calm*. Your magic is the Will and the Word, and unlike me or any other mage of this world, your spells are weaker when you are afraid, panicked or in pain. Remain calm and focus your will, remembering the laws of magic that limit sorcery on this plane, and apply your will precisely in accordance with those laws. If you can do that, you have the power to defeat him. If you let your emotions run away with you, however, you will *lose*."

Marilith nodded, rolling down her glove, then touching the book to the little cork on Sasha's magic bottle to store it. "*I'll remember, Master Eddas.*"

"Good. As for you, Corvid - keep your sword close at hand, stay alert, and follow your *Talent*."

I blinked. "Err... My *Talent*? Eddas, I don't have any *Talent*, I'm as mundane as a fish."

Eddas rolled his eyes. "Hardly, Corvid. Your *Talent* is one that's often seen in mundanes - a minor manifestation that allows you to sense danger. I'll bet you likely have smelled danger in the wind, at sea - or felt the hackles of your neck rise when an enemy was creeping up behind you."

I grinned, crossing my arms. "Well... Yes. But if that's my *Talent*, it hardly worked well today when Cholo and his friends captured us."

"Really?" Eddas said, an eyebrow raised. "Hmmm... Is it possible you were distracted, somehow?"

"Ummm..." Marilith said, her ears lowering in a blush.

I grinned wryly. "Well... Yes, I was a bit distracted."

Eddas looked to me in curiosity, then to Marilith. After a moment, his eyes widened in realization. "Ah, sorry, say no more," he said, then smiled politely. "No matter, however, as you weren't in any danger, anyway. Those centaurs were meant to come to Hyperborea, Yorindar intended you to find them. I've known they would be coming for two days, it's how I had time to make all these arrangements. Cholo was a pawn that Yorindar used to get them there - as was his mother and brother. The centaurs are halfling races, what gods they believe in do not exist. Still, Yorindar sees a use for them, and he will eventually reveal himself to them. For now, he uses them to strengthen his alliance with the gods of the dragons, the elves, the..." Eddas shook his head. "More alliances, more complicated moves in the games of the gods. No matter - Cholo was also an incredible ass, from what Marilith said, but he has his own role in Yorindar's game. In time, he, his mother and his brother will spread the word to the other tribes that Bakkar's clan has gone to Hyperborea - he'll spread it as disdain and will probably eventually be killed when the other clans absorb these lands, but that's as may be. This gives Yorindar an escape plan for the centaurs should the gods of the goblins gain the upper hand through their minotaur pawns, and..." Eddas shook his head again. "Well, regardless, you were distracted a bit and sensed no danger, but fortunately, you were *in* no danger. You only would have been in danger had you tried to flee - and you didn't."

"Err... Well, no, I had a gut feeling that if we tried, we'd be shot."

"There you are," Eddas said, nodding, and placed a hand atop my forearm. "Gut feelings... A strange sensation that raises the hairs on the nape of your neck. A strange scent in the wind. A feeling that you can't explain or identify, but sets your nerves on edge. I can tell you've survived many a fight because when your gut feelings told you to duck, you ducked. That's how Danger Sense manifests itself, and among those warriors in my day who were celebrated as being the best, it was a common ability. In my day, many mages considered it a weak manifestation of the talent and completely useless, as it could not be turned to sorcery. But it is *not* useless, Corvid, and in your case, it is hardly weak - for you, it is strong enough to form a sixth sense, if you'll use it. I would explain the mathematics of it to you, but you'd likely fall asleep listening and I don't have that much time available to begin with. It's covered in the third chapter of that book Marilith is carrying, the chapter on the various ways *Talent* manifests in the creatures of this world - animals, fell beasts, humans, humanoids, and all. She can read it and explain it to you, so you understand. The short of it is, however, that my *Talent* is like a mountain, and yours is like a sword. It is smaller, yes. Much smaller, in fact. But, it is no less valuable - and your *Talent* is strong enough that if you use it correctly and combine it with quick thinking, good timing, surprise or a bit of careful planning, it can be deadly, even against one of my power. Trust your instincts, Corvid. Use your mind, assess the situation logically - for a sharp mind makes your power all the more deadly, like a sword in the hands of a skilled and quick-witted swordsman who observes his enemy while fencing with him, and looks for weaknesses. But regardless, trust your instincts," he said, gripping my forearm firmly for emphasis.

I grinned. What Eddas had told me gave me an incredible feeling inside I couldn't properly explain - but the notion that I had a power of my own that was not only useful but one Eddas acknowledged and respected made me feel quite good about myself. I uncrossed my arms, and bowed. "Thank you, Eddas. I will."

"Good. I have to go. Marilith, fetch me tonight, and we'll work on the larger problem you discussed."

*"Yes, Master Eddas - and thank you."*

"You're welcome. I'll see you tonight," Eddas replied, gesturing, then he vanished.

Marilith quickly shifted to her equine form, then looked at me. *"Come on, Corvid. Hop on my back, and we'll get moving."*

I did so, vaulting atop her back, then sitting astride her. "Ummm... We'll be seeing Eddas tonight?" I asked as Marilith flicked her head. The world blurred, and we were elsewhere on the plains, closer to the enemy ship. Marilith began to canter, and quickly built up to a gallop.

*"Yes, I'll be going to fetch him. And you, I think."*

"Err... Fetch me? But where will we be meeting him, then?"

*"In dreams,"* Marilith replied, and kept on running.

## The Raven - Eleven.

We rode across the endless plains, Marilith galloping so swiftly, it seemed we were flying. She talked as she ran, the wind whipping her mane. Again, she was explaining what she'd tried to explain before - the strange secrets of the mysterious book Eddas had given her. And yet, her words meant nothing, it was just a confusing babble. "Marilith, I don't understand," I said, but she simply glanced over her shoulder and laughed, and began her babbling explanation again. She was built much like a centaur, now, with the lower body of a horse, a human torso and arms - but, she still had the head and mane of a horse, and her eyes flashed fire. I grinned, slipping my hands up her waist as I rode, then squeezing her large breasts from behind. "Marilith, *this* I understand." But she only laughed again, and kept running, her babbling, confusing explanation continuing non-stop.

An ebon horse smoothly galloped up beside us, its eyes glowing like coals. The horse gazed at the two of us, and chuckled. "*Oh, my, Corvid! Is that how you see me?*"

"Err... What?" I asked, blinking.

*"Oh, dear, Corvid, I do hope not. I'm not sure I could even twist my body like that! I mean... Goodness, Corvid! Do you sometimes dream of women who can lock their ankles behind their head, too?"*

"Err... Marilith?"

*"Yes, Corvid. That's not me you're riding, it's a dream simulacrum of me - a product of your mind. One moment..."* she said, then suddenly I was riding her instead, the centaur-Marilith having vanished. *"There we are. And do I really sound that confusing to you?"*

"Ummm..." I replied, my mind muddled. "Sometimes, when you talk about magic..."

*"Ah, I see. I confused you earlier, before we went to sleep. I'll explain it better in the morning. For now, where are we going?"*

My jaw firmed. That question, I knew the answer to - and the answer was crystal clear. "Sasha. We have to find Sasha. We have to rescue her."

*"Ah, good. Well, let's stop, we're not rescuing her this way, we're just running around in your dream."*

"Err... A dream? This is a dream?" I asked as Marilith slowed to a stop.

"Yes," she replied, and suddenly she was standing before me in her humanoid-equine form. I stood before her, though I did not remember dismounting - more confusion. *"This is a dream, Corvid. And in dreams, I am at my greatest power. And through dreams, we will try to rescue Sasha. Now come, Corvid,"* she said, and took my hand firmly. With her other hand, she drew a flaming arc of fire in the shape of a door, which became a door a moment later. She opened it and stepped through, pulling me behind her...

...and a moment later, we stood nearby the camp we'd made, a dark sky above. "Where are we,



now?"

*"We're on the astral plane - it borders the plane of dreams. You're actually astrally projecting, with me pulling you along. Don't worry, though, it's perfectly normal for sleeping humans to project, sometimes."*

"What... What's wrong with the sky?"

*"Nothing, that's how the sky looks at night. Stars cannot be seen on the astral... Err... Well, not by you, at least, they're too far away."*

"And what's that glowing thing, there, in the sky?" I asked, pointing at a dull blob in the heavens that rippled and flowed as I watched.

*"That's the moon, that's how it appears on the astral."*

"And I see you and I lying there... Asleep?"

*"Yes. We're waiting now for Master Eddas. His own dream state will begin soon. I have to time this well, and hold you carefully - a dream seems like hours and hours to you, but it's actually only a few minutes. And I'll have to let you nap, today, at some point."*

"Nap?" I said, confused.

*"Yes. I am a Dream Warrior of my people, Corvid, and this is how we tried to strike back at the mages of ancient times who were summoning us. We were dying, Corvid. We needed to be able to strike back. This is my power, and in dreams, I am supreme - only dragons and gods are stronger. I can enter your dreams, following along and even speaking to you without harm. Still, following along in your dream and speaking to you is one thing, but dragging you around or changing things in your dream is another. It's an imposition of my will upon your sleeping mind, and it denies you rest. You can wake up more tired than you were when you went to sleep. Done over years, it can weaken and kill. And those with weak hearts can be slain in dreams, with a hard enough fright applied at just the right moment. Wizards learn the skill of Lucid Dreaming to protect themselves against us, but mundanes can master it, too. I... Ah - now! Come!"* she said, and tugged my hand - an instant later, we were zooming over the land at an incredible speed. The plains blinked away behind us before I even realized they were gone, and the vastness of the Inland Sea now whipped by below, its coastline a flickering wiggle. A moment later, we had turned, and flew across forests, towards the mountains. Dodging between the peaks at lightning speed, we flew down the mountains, then across forests, and broad plains. Large, glowing spots could be seen on the horizon, and I pointed. "What are those?"

*"Dead Zones. We won't be going there, the astral plane is too disrupted there to do anything useful, and passing through one might cause me to lose my grip on you."*

"Err... I'd get lost?"

*"No, you'd snap back to your body and wake up, which is nearly as bad for what we're trying to do. Here we are!"* she said, as we zoomed towards a spire of white. It glowed blue, starkly standing out from the lands around it, and there were several brighter spots at various levels.

"What in the world is that?!"

*"That is the tower of Eddas Ayar - it's how it looks on the astral. It's actually very well protected, astrally, but not from friends,"* she replied as we zoomed towards the parapet from above, then flew through an open door.

I gaped - Eddas Ayar's room looked nothing like it usually did. It seemed to glow with power, and

various spots here and there glowed even more brightly than the rest. Eddas and Joy lay together in the bed, Joy curled up against Eddas and her arms draped over him. Eddas seemed so tiny compared to Joy, it amazed me. Marilith reached out to Eddas, touching his forehead...

...and an instant later, I gaped in amazement. We stood on a blasted plain in the heat of a blazing sun, an ominous wind howling in the distance. We stood behind a black-robed, black-bearded man, tall and dark of skin, a steel skullcap atop his shaven head. A Hyperborean, he reminded me of Frarim. Yet, his beard and clothes were matted with dust, and rings gleamed on each finger of his hand. Before him lay several horrid things, like puddles of oozing flesh that slithered and twitched. "*You killed me, you bastard!*" one of them shrieked in a bubbling voice.

"Yes, but you were an idiot and a rapist, Jasto, so I'm not sure that was much of a loss," the man said, shaking his head. His voice was an immensely deep *basso profundo*, and he seemed to radiate power. "Gah. I loathe this dream," he muttered, sighing.

"*Master Eddas?*" Marilith called, and he turned around. I gaped at him openly - Eddas was an olive-skinned, black-bearded man with a strong jaw, a piercing gaze, and a truly commanding presence.

"Ah, Marilith," he said, his deep voice warm in recognition. "And you've brought Corvid, good - we may need him."

"*Are you ready to go?*"

Eddas nodded. "Just remember that even with skill at lucid dreaming, it is still dreaming for me. If I start to wander off, pull my attention back again. I'd have used a spell of astral projection, but that would have been a draw on my will that is both detectable and disruptable, astrally. Let's go," he said, and held out his hand, the dust of the blasted zone falling from him.

Marilith nodded, drawing a door again, then opened it. Taking Eddas's hand, she pulled us through...

...and a moment later, we were again in Eddas' tower. An instant after that, we were again zooming across the lands at breathtaking speed, many times faster than before. The land flew by in a blur, giving way to the ocean, then a ship. I opened my mouth to shout that at this speed we'd smash into the ship and be little more than a smear...

...but then suddenly we stopped, hovering over the ship.

"Good, good," Eddas said, gazing at the ship. "Tell me what you see, Corvid?"

I shook my head, gaping at the vessel. "It's... It's a ship. A Mysantian tartan. Covered with spines sharp as razors. A million little spines, each sharp and deadly. And more. Edges... I don't know how to describe it. Like lines from here to there, thin as a spiderweb, yet sharp as a knife."

"Likely exploding runes, from what I'm seeing. And that there is a ward, and over there a glyph..." Eddas said, and shook his head. "Marilith, can you see what he's seeing?"

Marilith shook her head. *"No, Master Eddas. I can see the aura of many enchantments, but that is all - I'd have to study them longer to be able to understand them."*

"Well, when he's awake, explain to him that this is a manifestation of his own *Talent*, it'll help him understand himself better - you and I see the auras of each enchantment, but he's actually seeing the danger the ship presents. For now, cast your perception into the ship, and look around."

*"Alright..."* Marilith said, pausing a moment. *"I can perceive a hallway behind that door, Master Eddas. There are four cabins behind it, one of which is being used to store food and drink for the journey. I sense Sasha in one of the cabins, and the swordsman in another. Both are asleep, and Sasha is dreaming. I cannot penetrate the third cabin with my vision, it is protected."*

"Alright. Corvid, we need you to lead us past all the sharp things you see without touching anything, all the way up to that door."

I shook my head. "How?"

"You're dreaming, asleep. Float over there like you would in a dream - but be very careful not to touch anything, or pull us into anything."

"Well... Alright," I said, not really understanding what was happening. A few moments later, it was done, and we were before the door. "It's covered with thousands of needles, so thick it's like metal fur. Now what?"

Eddas stared at the door, his *basso profundo* voice becoming soft and hushed. "Nice, nice... Oh, a very nice enchantment, look at the fourth palliation, there - oh, very neatly done, yes... And then there's the-"

"*Master Eddas,*" Marilith called, tugging his arm, "*you're drifting.*"

"Oh," he replied, blinking, then nodded, his deep voice firm again. "Sorry, I usually use the Spell of Astral Projection, doing this while projected in a dream-state is immensely difficult. My thoughts feel like they're filtered through mud," he said, and shook his head again, as though trying to clear it. "One moment," he said, and gestured slowly and carefully, speaking an incantation. Oddly, I could *see* the words he was speaking as energies flowing from his mouth and gathering about his hand, and almost hear them as notes of music... Or perhaps it was notes of music responding to his words, I couldn't tell. The energies built and built, the glow about his hand growing brighter and brighter, his gestures shaping them, setting the whirling colors to spinning... Then he flicked his hand out in a final gesture, a piercing dart of light that struck the door. I gaped in amazement, watching.

"There, now what do you see, Corvid?"

"The needles on the door... They... I don't know how to describe it. They're still silvery, but... They're like pine needles now. They look soft... Flexible. Not dangerous at all."

"Good. I've loosened the eighth palliation of the enchantment, and looped it back to the triggering condition with a flux-link from a Spell of Enchantment Suppression. It should be utterly harmless to astral beings, but it won't last."

I shook my head, my mind even more muddled than before. "I don't even understand what you said."

Marilith nodded. *"So long as I can pull you two through it, Corvid, that's all that matters. I can enter her dreams directly from the plane of dreams by myself, but I can't do anything when I'm there. This is why I needed Master Eddas - to try to understand what I'm seeing. Come,"* Marilith replied, and pulled us straight through the door without opening it, then an instant later pulled us straight through a wall.

I blinked, now very confused, but then realized there was someone in the cabin before us, asleep in a bed. It looked like Sasha... And yet, it did not. Her legs were a mermaid's tail, and her hair shone like fire. "Is that..." I asked, but Marilith did not pause. Instead, she dived straight for Sasha, pulling us behind her, and touching Sasha's forehead with her equine nose.

Instantly, we were plunged into darkness. A strange whispering sound came from all around, but I could see nothing.

*"This is all there is, Master Eddas. I cannot work with this. She has to dream something for me to have something to work with, but the spell that's upon her leaves her with this dream - endless nothingness, and whispering. She doesn't even have a sense of self I can focus on, and try to build*

*around."*

Eddas gazed into the darkness, stroking his beard with his free hand. *"I can understand it. It's Mysantian... But not what they speak today, what they spoke in my day."*

"What's it saying?" I asked, struggling to think.

"Nothing - nonsense. Literally nonsense. It repeats, a moment and I'll translate it..." he said, then paused a bit before speaking again. *"Wood ship upside down up and down round and round storm flip upside down round and round upside down..."* Eddas said, his deep voice droning. He then shrugged. "It starts again from the beginning. Nonsense."

*"That's it!"* Marilith yelped. *"That's the answer! It's the inside of the slaver ship!"*

"Eh?" Eddas asked, then stroked his beard again. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

*"He's plucked this from her memories, and locked it into a language she can't understand - and I can't understand it, because I'm sensing what's in her dream, not hearing it myself!"* Marilith said, then closed her eyes. *"Sasha, you must get out of the water! There are many large pieces of lumber used to repair the ship, here! They're floating to your left, Sasha! Planks and boards, even a spare mast! Swim to your left, and climb on top of them!"*

Then, from what sounded like a great distance, I heard the whimper of a young girl's voice. "Marilith?"

*"Swim to your left, Sasha, and climb atop the planks!"*

"Alright... I did... Now what? Goddess... I'm so cold..."

*"Reach about over your head. The shelves this lumber was stored upon are nearby. Pull yourself atop the shelf, so you can rest."*

I could hear a grunting sound - the sound of a young girl, struggling, and the splashing of water.

Silence followed, and slowly, the whispering resolved itself into the sounds of a storm.

"Marilith? Is it really you?" a young girl's voice called, sounding as though she was at the verge of tears.

*"Yes, Sasha. See now, the storm fades, and the morning comes. Look down, Sasha. See the blue from the open deck hatch, beneath the water. See it?"*

And slowly, there *was* light - a blue glow, coming from below, that slowly resolved itself into a square.

"I see it..." the young girl's voice replied.

*"Dive into the water, and swim down to it - then up and out! Up and out, Sasha!"*



There was a splash, and after a moment, I saw the form of a mermaid, her tail flicking as she swam for the light below.

*"She's going to awaken soon, and suddenly,"* Marilith said.

Eddas nodded. "Pull us out of her dream, Marilith, I can't do anything to help if I'm kicked back to my bed in Hyperborea."

Marilith nodded, and an instant later, we stood in the cabin again. I gazed down at Sasha in confusion - and an instant later, she jerked upright in her bed, a small gasp of shock at her lips.

"Very nicely done, Marilith," Eddas muttered, gesturing with his free hand. "Yes, now, let's snip the rest of the enchantment." He muttered a brief incantation, brilliant energies swiftly gathering about his hand, then flicked out his hand, a dart of energy lancing from his fingertips to strike Sasha in the head. Sasha blinked, looking around with her eyes wide.

"Err... Can she see us?" I asked - oddly, she now looked to me much as she usually did. A red-haired human woman, beneath a blanket.

Eddas shook his head. "No, we're astrally projected, and she's a mundane. But she should be able to hear Marilith, now, through their link," he said, then resumed gesturing, muttering another incantation and sending a blue-white glow of energy to wash over Sasha's body, and remain.

*"Sasha? Can you hear me, now? If you can, whisper - be very quiet."*

"Marilith?"

"Yes, Sasha," Marilith replied, her voice quavering. *"Do you remember what happened to you?"*

"Yes... It's like a dream..." Sasha whispered, then scowled. "That bastard... Why, I'll-"

*"Wait, Sasha. Corvid and Master Eddas are with me, they're helping me."* Marilith then looked to Eddas. *"What should she do?"*

Eddas shook his head. "For now, nothing. She'll need to pretend the spells are still in place, until she gets to where she is going and they get off this ship. If she doesn't and he notices a change in her behavior, he'll just ensorcell her again. I've cast a protective spell over her, but I don't know how powerful this wizard is - he may be able to remove it. Certainly *I* could, given time. There's too many defensive enchantments on this ship to board it - it would even be deadly for me to try, what with layer upon layer of wards, glyphs and explosive runes. This mage has had *years* to prepare this vessel, and he's quite skilled. It's stouter than the tower of a battle circle, and considerably more maneuverable. He'll have to get off of it, first. She'll have to pretend the spells are still in place, so you can plan what to do."

Marilith nodded, and repeated what Eddas had said. Sasha scowled. "I'll try, Marilith, but..." she said, then shook her head. "You can't know what it was like. He had my mind in bondage... I was his happy little slave. And yet, all the time, I was a little girl again, trapped aboard the slaver ship."

*"It's alright, Sasha. I think-"*

I felt a sudden prickling at the back of my neck. "Marilith, we have to get out of here. Someone is coming."

Eddas nodded. "Do it, Marilith."

*"Sasha, we have to go, someone is coming. Remember, don't reveal the spell is broken,"* Marilith said. She then looked to Eddas, releasing his hand, then touching his forehead. *"Wake,"* she said.

To my surprise, Eddas instantly shot away like an arrow from a bow, and was gone. Marilith then looked to me, releasing my hand, and touched my forehead. *"Wake,"* she said.

Suddenly, in a jarring eyeblink, I was awake, lying on the grassy plains at night. I gasped, my heart stuttering from the sudden awakening, and looked around. It was still night, now near midnight. Marilith lay cuddled against me, and as I looked to her, she opened her eyes and turned to me, rolling onto her back. After a moment, she smiled. *"Thank you, Corvid. I'm not sure we could have done it without you."*

I blinked, shaking my head. "I'm not sure I understand what I did. Or where the dream ended, and reality began."

Marilith grinned. *"Welcome to my world, dear,"* she said, and kissed me, giggling.

## The Ocean - One.

The water was cold, though tolerable. The salt stung my eyes painfully, however, as I struggled to keep myself pointed at the open hatch. Closer, and closer still, the water around me pressing painfully on my ears. Nearly there, I reached out, grabbing the edge of the hatch with a hand. My lungs burned - but I could not stop. Underneath the upturned ship, pushed upwards by my own buoyancy, I pulled myself across the deck, grabbed the ship's rail, and pulled myself over it. I could see a glimmer above - the sun in the sky. I swam for it, kicking my legs. I could feel the pressure on my ears easing... Easing...

No, something was wrong... I was not a young girl swimming from a wrecked ship... I was a mermaid. My eyes did not sting in salt water - I blinked my nictating membranes shut, and could now clearly see the gleaming water's surface above me. The pressure of a few cubits of water did not bother me, the magic of the mer-magi belt that was now a part of me allowed me to adapt to even the crushing pressures and chill of the greater deeps.

It was a dream... Some kind of cloying, sticky dream that would not let me go.

I kicked my tail hard, launching myself to the surface...

And like a sudden, stunning slap, I was awake.

My head spun as I sat up. I looked around, and saw I was in a strange dark place I'd never seen before, the only illumination a small shaft of moonlight coming through a tiny round window in a nearby wall. The bed shifted, and I could hear the sounds of the sea... A ship? I was aboard a ship?

What had happened to me?

I felt a touch on my head, a tingling... And the last of the cloying dream fell from my mind. Suddenly, I knew.

*I remembered.*

*"Sasha? Can you hear me, now? If you can, whisper - be very quiet."*

My sister's silent voice, through our link. I looked around, but she was nowhere to be seen. "Marilith?"

*"Yes, Sasha,"* Marilith replied, my sister's silent voice sounding as though she was on the verge of tears. *"Do you remember what happened to you?"*

I paused, the memories flooding back. "Yes... It's like a dream..." I whispered, then scowled. I remembered, yes. All too well.

The sneer of disdain on the wizard's lips as he told me I would be coming with him. The casual ease with which he struck Marilith and I down, a single gesture feeling like the smashing blow of a mountain. Feeling his cloying spell slip over my mind, and the darkness smothering me...

\* \* \*

The one-eyed swordsman gave a final stroke to Marilith, laying open her belly. The swordsman then gazed down at her, and chuckled. "All too easy."

"Of course. The One True God is with us," the red-turbaned wizard replied, his red silk robes billowing in the ocean breeze. He then looked to Sasha, gesturing again. The last of her will slipped away to nothingness. "Strip," he ordered, in Vilandian.

Sasha rose, silently complying, pulling off her boots and gloves, then removing her bracelets.

"And that armor," he ordered, again in Vilandian.

Sasha nodded, retracting her scales.

"Kneel," he commanded, and Sasha did so. The wizard then gestured briefly, and looked Sasha over, his eyes unfocused.

"Well? What do you see?" the one-eyed swordsman asked.

"Hmmm... There's still an item about her waist, but it appears to have blended with her flesh - it's a part of her, now, and she a part of it..." he said, then blinked, shaking his head. "A thing of Wild-Magic. Likely mer-magi. A trash enchantment from a sub-human race, it's fused with her, made her more mermaid than human," he said, then made a *moue'* of disgust. "Feh. What rubbish," he said, shaking his head. "She's safe, for now, she bears no weapons."

The one-eyed swordsman grinned at Sasha, eyeing her nude form appreciatively. "She's a beauty, that one. Mind if I bed her for a bit once we have her aboard the ship?"

The wizard glowered at the swordsman. "Ukkug does not condone rape, and those who commit rape in his name are not his followers."

The one-eyed swordsman shook his white-turbaned head, the loose Mysantian muslin of his yellow swordsman's tunic and gray, billowing trousers rippling in the ocean breeze. "But I am not a follower of your god, old man. Any god who says it is wrong for a woman to dance in a tavern for a few coins I may throw at her is not a god I wish to follow."

"All Mysantians follow Ukkug in their hearts, whether they know it or not. But, whether you believe in the Old Ways or not matters little - until this is over, you will obey if you wish to be paid."

"Money I can understand. I'll worry about the afterlife when I'm dead," the swordsman replied, and withdrew a cloth from beneath the leather broadbelt about his waist to wipe his tulwar of Marilith's blood before sheathing it. "I don't know why you worry about it. She's not even human, you said it yourself."

"True," the wizard grudgingly admitted. "She was once, but isn't now."

"So who cares if I rumple her a bit?" the swordsman asked, shrugging.

The wizard paused, then nodded. "Alright. Ukkug gave me specific instructions, but beyond the end of those instructions, her fate matters little. When we're done, you can have her to do with as you will."

The one-eyed swordsman grinned. "You'll have to teach me how to say 'bend over and spread' in her language, then."

The wizard rolled his eyes. "I'm certain you'll make yourself understood when the time comes. For now, let's get her aboard the boat and thence to the ship."

"Alright, I..." the swordsman replied, then swore as his gaze fell upon the top of the beach. "There's one of the things watching us. A little one. Shall I kill it?" he asked, placing his hand on the hilt of his sheathed sword.

The wizard shrugged. "No, there's little point. They're barely better than beasts, they can't stop us," he replied, then looked to Sasha and spoke in Vilandian. "I am your loving master, and you are my slave. You will obey me utterly and with a smile, for you love me dearly and beyond measure."

Sasha smiled. "I love you, Master."

"Good. Now rise and come with us, we've garments aboard the ship for you to wear. We've rescued you from this island, and we'll be taking you home, now."

"Yes, master! Thank you, master!" Sasha replied, rising.

The one-eyed swordsman shook his head. "I am *so* glad I had a rune of protection branded on my arm. The thought of having one of your kind do *that* to me..."

The wizard chuckled as he walked to the boat. "You paid your gold and suffered pain for nothing, friend - that rune on your arm is useless. Next time, go to a *real* wizard, not some fakir."

The one-eyed swordsman swore again, then paused, his eye on Sasha. "Can she understand us?"

"A good question," the wizard replied, and looked to Sasha. "Do you speak Mysantian?" he asked. Sasha made no reply, and the wizard shrugged. "It appears she's as ignorant as I thought. Likely all she



speaks is Vilandian, a language of irredeemable infidels, and perhaps the chitters and squeaks that pass for language among the sub-human mer-folk," he replied, climbing into the boat. "Worry, not, I've a ring of translation."

"Aye, and a magic ship, and sorcery to spare, and..." the swordsman replied, watching Sasha climb nude into the boat, then shoving it into the surf before hopping in, himself. "It must be nice to be a wizard," he said, reaching for the oars.

The wizard gazed at Sasha's breasts, and smiled. "Oh, it has it's moments, yes," the wizard replied, and laughed.

\* \* \*

I remembered. Their words meant nothing to my memories, but their actions and the leer of their gaze spoke loudly enough. And the cloying, sickly-sweet love that the wizard placed in my mind... Now hate took it's place. "That bastard... Why, I'll-

*"Wait, Sasha. Corvid and Master Eddas are with me, they're helping me."*

I waited, grinding my teeth in fury. After a long moment, Marilith spoke again.

*"Sasha, you need to pretend the spells are still in place, until this ship gets where it's going and you and the wizard get off it. If you don't and he notices a change in your behavior, he'll just cast the spell and capture your mind again. Eddas says he's cast a spell of protection over you, but he doesn't know how powerful that wizard is, he might be able to remove it. There are too many enchantments on this ship to board it, Eddas says... Explosive runes, and other things. He says this mage has had years to prepare this vessel, and he is quite skilled. You'll have to pretend the spells are still in place, so Corvid and I can plan what to do."*

How could I possibly pretend to love someone who had stolen my will and turned me into a slave? The thought infuriated me - but, I knew Marilith was right. If the wizard knew I was free, he could do it to me again. And next time, I might not escape his spells. "I'll try, Marilith, but..." I said, then shook my head. "You can't know what it was like. He had my mind in bondage... I was his happy little slave. And yet, all the time, I was a little girl again, trapped aboard the slaver ship." I supposed I should have been glad the wizard and his henchman did not rape me - though judging by the frequent lustful looks I remembered from the one-eyed swordsman, that thought was never far from his mind.

*"It's alright, Sasha. I think-"* Marilith said, then paused a moment. *"Sasha, we have to go, someone is coming. Remember, don't reveal the spell is broken,"* Marilith said.

I nodded silently - someone was coming here, too, I could hear their footsteps beyond the door. I smoothed my face with an effort of will, and an instant later, the door opened.

It was *him*.

The red-robed wizard gazed at me from the doorway, and I smiled at him, despite my wish to kill him. "Hello, master. Was there something you needed?"

The wizard gazed at me quietly for a moment. "I heard a sound, my dear, and sensed a presence... Perhaps more than one. Are you alright?"

"I am fine, master, thank you for asking," I replied, trying to hold my smile.

More footsteps, and behind the wizard, the one-eyed swordsman appeared, barely visible in the gloom. He grumbled something in his language, and the wizard snapped a quick reply. He then stepped aside, allowing the swordsman to enter the cabin, then looked to me again and smiled. "My dear, Hassan suffers from a bit of concupiscence from the voyage, and I'll need his reflexes sharp when we arrive. Rise

from that bed and strip, then service his needs until dawn."

I gaped at him, then shrieked in fury, leaping from the bed, intending to kill the wizard with my last breath, if necessary.

Immediately, the one-eyed swordsman tackled me, taking us both down to the deck. He was strong and a skilled wrestler, but I was stronger as I had the strength of a mermaid, and I was furious. I twisted, jabbing with my elbows as we struggled. He shifted, trying to improve his grip, and I kned him between the legs. The one-eyed swordsman let out a gasp, then released me, his hands flying down between his legs. I could hear the wizard speaking, possibly reciting an incantation. I rolled the swordsman off me, leaping to my feet to attack the wizard...

...and he simply gestured, lifting me a half-cubit into the air with his magic, then held me there as I struggled, screaming and spitting. I literally could do nothing - with my feet off the floor, I could not move towards him, and I was well out of reach to even touch him. I remembered Eddas Ayar had once incapacitated me just as easily, and it dawned on me that telekinetic spells rendered mundanes helpless so easily, it was likely a basic spell for them, something that mages learned when they were mere apprentices. I considered summoning my lance to my grip, then remembered how easily Eddas had blocked that years ago, and abandoned the notion.

The wizard incanted another spell, gesturing at me, and I felt the force of a spell wash over my mind... But, it did not take hold. The wizard then gave me a puzzled look, and tried again, a longer incantation. I felt the force of it building as he cast, then strike me, yet it was somehow deflected, muted... It did not affect me. Something was protecting me from his attempts to regain control of my mind. I spit at him, and tested the extent of my vocabulary, calling him every name and insult I could think of in the three languages I knew.

About the time I had wrung the last dregs out of Palomean and was working on some of the more interesting insults in the language of the mer-folk, the one-eyed swordsman rose shakily to his feet, glowering at me. He spoke to the wizard, and the wizard replied. There followed a brief exchange, and the swordsman nodded. Hauling back his fist, he smashed me in the side of the head. I spun, seeing stars, then knew no more for awhile.

When I awoke, I found I was on the deck of the ship, manacled hand and foot. The manacles attached to my feet were attached to the ship's mast by a chain, and surrounding the mast and myself was a circle of silver inlaid into the deck. My hands were manacled behind my back, and I could feel that a chain connected the manacles at my wrists to those about my ankles. I looked around, groggy, and saw the wizard and the swordsman stood nearby, watching me.

"So, you're awake again," the wizard said, gazing at me calmly. "You quite caught Hassan unprepared, my dear. I only told him to take you up to the deck, not rape you. I judged your expression to be a bit strained, rather than relaxed - as though you were trying to hide something. I wanted to see your reaction, and determine whether or not my spell was still in place. You revealed yourself quite readily, my dear. You really are a little fool."

"You-" I began, and launched into another stream of invective.

"You've a mouth that would make a sailor blush," the wizard said calmly. "I've no idea who cast that protective spell upon you, but it's well done, well done indeed. It couldn't have been that demonesse you call your sister, her magic is the Will and the Word, and this is far more precise than that. No matter, however. Instead of riding in comfort, you'll stay chained there for the rest of the journey. I'd rather not have done things this way, as I detest foul odors, but as I can't possibly unchain you to relieve yourself, you'll simply have to lie there in your own filth as it accumulates. We'll toss some water over you from time to time to try to wash away the worst of it, and perhaps a meal or two to keep you alive. Perhaps you may eventually even change your mind regarding your decision. A few weeks of lying in your own urine and excrement will likely make you wish you'd spread your legs, instead... Though by then I doubt even Hassan will be interested any longer," the wizard said, then glanced at his one-eyed companion. "Well, perhaps he might, he is rather a pig. Ah, well - good help is so hard to find, these days," he said, stroking his beard. "Not like the old days, no. Sadly, no."

"I'll *kill* you!"

"Forgive me if a sub-human thing in chains and at my mercy fails to arouse the proper fear in me. A failing of mine, I suppose," he replied, and spoke to the swordsman briefly. The swordsman nodded, then the wizard withdrew, walking over to the door to the cabin area, opening it, stepping through and closing it behind him.

"Sub-human?! What the hell does he mean by that?!" I snapped, glaring at the swordsman.

He, however, made no sign he even understood a word I said, but instead fetched a chair from nearby, placed it well outside the circle on the deck, then sat, watching me.

I struggled against the manacles for awhile, but quickly found they were more than strong enough to hold me. The swordsman gazed on with only mild interest. I growled. "Marilith? Can you hear me?"

There was a pause, then I heard my sister's voice again. *"I... I hear you, Sasha. Sorry, I was asleep."*

"They found out the spell is no longer holding me, now I'm chained to the deck in some kind of circle."

*"How did they find out?"*

"I sort of... Err... I sort of tried to kill the wizard," I replied, blushing.

*"Out of the maelstrom, into the vortex..."* Marilith muttered. *"I can see it, Sasha. There is still nothing we can do, at present. We have to wait for the ship to stop, and for them to get off."*

"The wizard... He said that would be weeks."

*"I'll tell Corvid, that's all I can do until then."*

"Corvid? What can *he* do?!"

*"You'd be surprised, Sasha. He's been working with me for weeks, trying to rescue you. We were nearly killed once, when his airship was brought down by the wizard. We've been traveling for weeks, trying to keep close to the wizard's ship. We've been attacked by a demon, captured by centaurs... But, I'll tell you the story later. He's been a great comfort to me, Sasha. I love him dearly. He lies next to me, here, and he blushes to hear me say it, but it's true. I told you he was the one for us, Sister. He truly is. He loves you, too, Sister. He has loved you since he was a child, as the magical princess on a distant island it was his quest to find. He helped Master Eddas and I to break the spell that was upon you. He risked his life doing that, though he knew it not at the time, he was asleep."*

"Err... Asleep?"

*"Yes, it's quite a long story."*

"It doesn't look like I'm going anywhere, so you may as well tell it," I said, and sighed. Mistakes, mistakes... I should have clawed the swordsman with my poison-claws when I had the chance, but I wanted to reserve that honor for the wizard. Stupid. I could have used one on each. I was just too angry to think clearly - and now, I paid the price. "I'm sorry, Sister... It's just that I hardly know him. I'm glad you love him, I'm glad he has feelings for me. But, I hardly know him."

*"And I hardly knew Vaddan. But, I saw you loved him, and I opened my heart to him, and I loved him, too. Please, Sister. He saved my life. He healed me when that wizard's henchman had hacked me to pieces, and tended me for weeks while I recovered. His touch is gentle, his heart large and warm, and... Oh, my, he is blushing tremendously, now,"* Marilith said, and giggled. *"Oh, Sister... Open your heart to him, as I did for Vaddan. He is worthy."*

I sighed. "Well... Tell me the story, at least, so I can try."

*"Yes, Sister,"* Marilith replied, and began.

I lay there on the cold deck of the ship, listening to my sister's silent voice in my ear, and sighed again.

#### The Raven - Twelve.

The plains slowly gave way to low, rolling hills as we drew nearer and nearer to the foothills that surrounded the Barrier Peaks, and soon, we could see the mountains themselves on the horizon. Immensely steep, jagged peaks capped in snow, forbidding even in the distance. We had to turn, the mountains themselves simply were not passable - they weren't called the Barrier Peaks for nothing. Near the middle of the range, the summits of each mountain were nearly five leagues above sea level, and the western faces consisted mainly of sheer granite cliffs. Towards the northern and southern ends of their ranges, the mountains softened, growing smaller, until they petered out into foothills near the sea to the south, and into the scrublands and jungles of southern Mysantia to the north, that eventually gave way to endless reaches of desert.

Our choice was clear - head north or south. To continue following the ship as it hugged the coast, we could only turn south, and slip through the southern foothills of the barrier peaks. We only spotted one manticore as we traveled, and to my eye, it was little more than a black speck in the sky, far above. Marilith was taking no chances, however, and cast her vision forward, then translocated us several leagues onward to avoid it.

Days of travel passed, the wooded foothills giving way to deeper forests, and finally jungle that grew thicker and thicker the further on we went. Finally, riding Marilith became a moot point - the trees were so close together, the ground so laced with tree roots and other obstructions that she could not travel at any decent speed without risking breaking a leg.

Both of us now were driven, focused. Each night as we rested, we talked about possible plans to rescue Sasha. Between times Marilith translocated us during the day, we chatted more, quietly discussing the possibilities. And when we weren't discussing what we might do, Marilith studied the book Eddas Ayar had given her, while I exercised with my blade, keeping myself limber and ready.

There was, really, no other choice for us. The more we knew of what was happening to Sasha, the more focused and intent we became on freeing her as soon as possible.

Marilith had told me that they'd manacled Sasha, and attached the manacles to the mast inside a circle of protection. This much, I could have understood. As Marilith explained it, the circle was necessary to prevent her from being snatched away by sorcery, and the manacles were necessary because Sasha was, really, rather dangerous herself.

But she had never been released since then.

Now, after weeks of lying in her own filth and being fed only once a week, Sasha was extremely dehydrated, very weak, and very ill.

Oh, they tossed a few buckets of water over her once a day to keep down the worst of the mess and the smell, and from that, Sasha got some water by holding her mouth open as she was splashed by the buckets. And once a week, they tossed her a loaf of bread to keep her alive. But that was all.



Could she survive until we could rescue her? That, I did not know. I only knew what Marilith had told me - she could not simply take us to the ship, the various wards and runes were keyed to defend the ship against interlopers. If we tried, we would simply be blasted to bits. I could only hope Sasha could hold out long enough...

It was more than frustrating. It was maddening. Knowing she was suffering, and knowing we could do nothing about it but keep following. And as hard as it was on me, it was a thousand times harder on Marilith, who could *hear* Sasha's quiet whispers of pain. Marilith became focused on her studies of Eddas' book, trying to master what was within it, knowledge I did not understand... Could not understand. Reading, practicing gestures, studying formulas and diagrams and tables that were utterly esoteric to me - but, to her, were clear.

I found that weeks of travel had hardened me, now. Though I was hardly soft before, all Marilith conjured was gruel and water. A diet of constant gruel would kill, I knew, from scurvy and other problems. But, it was no mere gruel, it was literally sorcerous food, conjured by her will. It nourished the body, though its taste was bland. Taste, I cared nothing for, however. I was too focused, too intent on our goal. It was with some surprise that after weeks of this, I one night noticed that I could literally see nearly every detail of the muscles in my limbs, and daily exercise and practice with my blade had increased the thickness of my forearms.

Marilith, too, had hardened over the trip. She practiced what Eddas had told her - layered enchantments, defenses cast over herself that I could neither see nor understand, but were there nonetheless. And, the same diet of conjured gruel and water toughened her, hardening her body. Whereas before she had a soft, rounded, feminine appearance to her equine-humanoid form, now her body was muscular and athletic, and even more enchanting to my eye. In her equine form, however, the change was even more dramatic. The muscles of her body stood out in rigid detail, her hooves gleamed like polished black iron, and her overall mein was more like a knight's charger, fierce and ready for war - or, in truth, the nightmare she truly was.

Marilith translocated again in her equine form, and once we had arrived, I found the sounds of the deep jungle surrounded us still. The chirp of birds, the howls of monkeys, and the endless drone of insects was a smothering blanket of sound, accented by the damp heat of the day. Night here was hardly much better - though cooler, the insects were numerous. I slipped from Marilith's back, landing lightly on my feet, then patted her shoulder. Marilith shifted to her humanoid form, then gazed at me.

*"Are you alright, Corvid?" Marilith asked. "You look like you're angry."*

I shook my head. "This is frustrating. And yet somehow, I think this is intentional. Our whole idea was to be near them so you could watch them, and see when they were coming ashore for supplies. They're aboard a Mysantian tartan, and you already said you saw they carried food and water. They can't have enough for their entire journey, it's just impossible. And given that they were carrying food with them, that means that wizard likely doesn't know a spell to summon food, like Eddas does..." I said, thinking.

*"Likely so, but this doesn't mean he is inexperienced or weak. Eddas Ayar's grimore contains over three hundred spells - literally the largest collection of spells in the world, Corvid, and possibly in all of history. Measuring other mages by the cubit-stick of Eddas Ayar will always have them coming up far short, and greatly underestimate them."*

I nodded. "No matter, though - they can't carry enough food for the entire journey, they will *have* to come ashore to take on more. But they didn't take on supplies west of us, and here in Kush, there's few places for them to try to do so. Most of the natives here are hostile to strangers, and that we've managed to avoid them so far is more luck than anything else, I think."

*"So, you think they will come ashore here in Kush?"*

"Yes, definitely. They'll have to, they haven't taken on food that I know of anywhere along this voyage, and they can't possibly have enough left to finish the journey to Mysantia. And that means that the best course of action is to just have you translocate us straight ahead to where they're going to go."

*"If we knew where that was, yes. But you say that as though this was a bad thing. Are the natives that bad, here?"*

"Well, yes and no," I said, my eyes on the jungle around us as we talked. "Kushites are interesting people, really. Their skins are dark, with flat, broad noses and thick lips. Most live in tribal units, but on the southeast coast, called the Gold Coast, things are different. Ashyra is their port city, there, and they

trade gold they get from mines and panning the Gold River. The people there are fairly friendly to outsiders, it's where they get most of their goods. The smaller tribes, however, usually are not friendly - particularly those to the north. They are extremely hostile to strangers, at times."

*"Really? Why?"* Marilith asked, her head tipped in curiosity.

"Well, Mysantia is to the north, and the Mysantians and the Kushites often war with each other - the Kushites I've met along the Gold Coast say the Mysantians think of them as sub-human, and want their gold. The Mysantians basically say the Kushites aren't human, they're just hairless, tailless monkeys, so I guess the Kushites are right," I said, and shrugged. "Well, really, Mysantians think of everyone as being lesser than them. It's just the way they are. The ones along the Inland Sea have learned to deal with the elves across the sea and to the north of them, but..." I said, and shrugged again. "They still think of them as lesser beings."

Marilith nodded, thinking, then sighed. *"Well, that explains a lot of what's happening with Sasha."*

I nodded silently, thinking.

*"You've gone quiet again. What are you thinking?"*

"This is planned, all planned... All of it. You've said it, Eddas said it... Where would they stop? Where would be the best place for them to stop, the worst place for us to try to intercept them...?"

*"I hope that's a rhetorical question, Corvid, because I don't know the answer."*

"Aaaah... But I think I *do*," I said, realization slowly dawning. "There's only one place they'll go -

where both you and I will be at a disadvantage. Ashyra, on the Gold Coast."

"*Why there?*"

"Because Mysantians who are willing to peacefully trade with the Kushites go there. They'll be able to get what they need, then move on. And I won't be able to fight them there, and neither will you."

"*Err... Why not?*" Marilith asked, blinking in confusion.

"Well, for you, because the city of Ashyra is in the territory of the Enebua. You'll never pass for one of them, they'll kill you very quickly."

Marilith smiled. "*Corvid, I can shape this body with sorcery to look like one of them, easily.*"

"But you can't *act* like one of them. They're a warrior culture, and there's a lot of little rituals and exchanges you're just not going to know. You'd have to pass yourself off as a foreigner, and we'd have to wait in the foreign quarter and hope to catch them at the docks. And foreigners who are sorcerers are required to wear *mana*-suppressing bracelets so they can't cast - they don't want a wizard or wizardess starting fires with lightning-bolts or summoning dangerous beasts in their city. If they catch you casting spells, the whole city guard will turn out to catch you and kill you. Only *their* people are allowed to cast spells."

"*Well, alright, but the same limitations would apply to them, yes? That means you could still fight.*"

I shook my head. "No, I can't. Men aren't permitted to bear arms in the lands of the Enebua. Only women are. The penalty is death - when I visited there last, I lost a crewman because he forgot he was

carrying a knife. If you're going to leave the docks, you have to leave your arms aboard ship."

*"So, they're a society of warrior-women?"*

"Yes. Really, they're considered the finest warriors in all of Kush - it's how they've managed to hang onto their gold mines and the Gold River, despite everyone else wanting it. And, with their gold, they can afford the best weapons from all the traders that come to their port to trade with them."

*"But you know their little social interchanges, yes?"*

I started to reply, then paused, shaking my head. "If you're thinking you'll use your sorcery to make me female, I should tell you that won't work. Yes, I'm familiar with their culture - but not well enough to pretend to be one of their warriors, even if you did make me look like one. I've dealt with them often enough hunting Mysantian slave-ships to know that what I know isn't everything, and isn't enough," I said, then reached out my hand, taking her hand in mine for a moment. "Marilith, believe it or not, the Kushites are *not* primitive. Yes, many of them still live in tribal villages in the jungle. That doesn't mean they're stupid or primitive. They live that way because they *choose* to live that way. Nearly all their tribes are literate, and some of the larger ones live in timber-walled villages and have extensive libraries of scrolls covering their history, geography, literature, religion... And of all of the Kushites, the Enebua are the most advanced. They've had Mysantians trying to steal their gold and their lands by hook or by crook for millennia, Marilith. They are *quite* used to dealing with foreigners trying to fool them, both with mundane methods and with sorcery. These are *not* primitive people, it would *not* work."

Marilith placed her free hand atop mine, holding my hand between her hands. *"Alright, let's work through this step by step. First, how could we get into the city? Nevermind whether or not we could do anything, let's just see how to get in."*

I shrugged. "If you looked like one of their people, perhaps a tribeswoman from another tribe, you could just walk in. If I was unarmed, I also could just walk in. The moment you began to cast spells or I drew a weapon, however, we'd be in trouble."

*"Alright. You said 'if you're going to leave the docks, you have to leave your arms aboard ship.' I take it the rules are different at their docks?"*

"Well, yes, they have to be. Not only are sailors generally a rowdy bunch, but you simply can't do your job as a sailor without a good knife and a marlinspike. A ship's lines don't work themselves, and you often need to cut and splice. Opening crates takes a crowbar, sealing them takes a hammer, moving them sometimes takes a gaff..." I said, and shrugged. "You can't disarm a sailor on the docks, all his tools are usable as weapons, and some simply *are* weapons. Also, there's the matter of defending the ship while it's in port from thieves."

*"So, if you fought his henchman at the docks, the city guards wouldn't try to kill you for being armed?"*

I wagged a hand so-so. "Mmmm... That depends. Some guards might try to stop it on general principles, others might be amused and wait to see who won. Once that wizard started casting, however, the alarm would be raised, and the city guards would attempt to swarm his ship. The Enebua are *not* going to allow a wizard to burn down their docks and perhaps a good portion of their city tossing lightning and fire around, that's just not going to happen."

*"At which point, the explosive runes and other defenses hit them. Then what?"*

"Chaos. The High Magess from the Temple of Esvina would be called, and she'd come with a dozen or more lesser mages and priestesses. About half of them would be assigned to suppressing any fires that may be burning, and the rest would follow the High Magess as she moved in for the kill. Anyone who resisted would be in for a serious fight. I've never seen it happen, but I've heard stories... Sea-stories, of course, and likely quite larger than the truth. Still, none of them are pretty. That wizard would be calling down several opponents on his head, all of them skilled."

*"And what if we spread the word that there was a woman in chains on that ship, suffering, starving, possibly dying?"*

I blanched. "Gods... *Is she dying?*"

Marilith paused, then let out a slow sigh. *"Yes, Corvid. Slowly, but yes. She can't survive like that."*

I swore quietly, releasing her hands and stroking my chin. "Well... To answer your question, they don't care what happens aboard ship. If you're standing on their docks, yes, they care. Aboard ship, no, they don't. Mysantian Slavers go in and out of that city, and the Enebua don't care about the cargo unless there's a woman of Enebua aboard. *Then* they'll board to free her, and the gods help anyone who gets in their way. Otherwise, no, they simply don't care."

Marilith nodded. *"Then it seems to me the best plan is for me to take us there, then for us to walk into the city, wait until they arrive, and then attack them on the dock. I think if I can get close to that ship without my being attacked, I can try to suppress the defensive spells on it, one by one. It will take time - quite a bit of time, in fact. But, if everyone is distracted watching you fight, they won't notice me doing it - there is nothing to see, to mundane eyes. Once the spells are down, we can board the ship safely and rescue Sasha."*

I shook my head, crossing my arms. "You're assuming a lot of things will happen. You're assuming I'll be able to challenge his henchman, he'll accept, and I'll be able to duel him on the docks entertainingly enough to keep everyone distracted, and long enough for you to succeed. And then, after stretching the duel out and showing him every move I have, you expect I can then somehow beat him, and we board the ship, somehow overcoming the wizard in the bargain."

*"You have a better plan?"* Marilith asked.

"No, I suppose that will have to do," I said, and grinned at her.

Marilith smiled. *"Alright. Now - guide me in transforming myself. What does a typical Kushite woman look like?"*

"Mmmm... Well... You've seen the Witch-Women of Iolo Mountain? Eddas' daughters? That's a good place to start."

Marilith's form shimmered, and she smiled at me in the form of a human woman with olive skin and ringlets of curly hair spilling down her shoulders. "Like this?" she asked, her ethereal demoness' voice now a human woman's voice.

"Yes. Now make the skin darker. No, darker. Darker than that. A little more... There. Now make the nose wider and flatter - no, not that much, you have to breathe through that thing... A little less than that... There, that's right. Now make the lips broader from top to bottom... Good. Now make the hair kinky, not curly. Each strand is like a very tight spiral. No, more than that. More than that... There. You'll want to shorten it, your hair looks like a huge ball of fuzz and the women here wear their hair much shorter because of the heat... That's right. Now darken the eyes a bit... That's right. Good..." I said, looking her over. "Mmmm... You'll want the cheekbones a bit higher... Yes, like that."

"Will I be pretty, to them?" Marilith asked, smiling and turning around, still wearing her black loincloth and apodesmos.

I grinned, reaching for my sash. "I'm more hopeful you don't look like you come from a clan or tribe they're hostile to. You'll want to close the tail-hole in that loincloth, it will look funny to them."

Marilith gestured, doing so, then nodded. "I suppose we're ready," she said, and looked east, her gaze becoming distant. "I see a walled city, about two hundred leagues away down the coast... It straddles a river."

"That's it, but we're not quite ready yet," I said pulling off my sash and then reaching for the buckle for my sword-belt. "You'll need to wear my sword. It'll be more obvious how we made it here walking



through the jungle that way, and the Enebua will think you're a warrior-woman from another tribe. Once you take us somewhere outside the city, I'll think of a suitable story while we're walking to the gates," I explained, pulling off my sword-belt, then wrapping it around her waist and buckling it tight. "How far ahead of the ship will we be?"

"About a day, perhaps a bit less if the wind holds for them," Marilith replied. Having watched the ship constantly for months, her skill at judging distances and speed with her longer gaze had improved.

I nodded, tying my sash about my waist again. "Alright. If you wear my sword for two days, it will be attuned to you, not me, so let's try to make sure that doesn't happen," I said, and took her hand in mine. "Now, try to take us within an easy walk of the gates, but not anywhere we'll be spotted."

Marilith nodded, and the world blurred for a moment. When it steadied, we were elsewhere in the jungle. She tugged my hand, pulling me behind her as she stepped around a group of trees, revealing a narrow dirt road. "The city is that way," she said, pointing east.

I smiled, bowing and waving a hand to the east. "Lead on - we're in Enebua territory, you're the woman, you lead."

Marilith grinned, walking down the trail. "I think I may like it here."

"It's actually rather nice. I've been to Ashyra several times, it can be quite pleasant."

Marilith blinked, then suddenly glowered at me. "I am getting the feeling that there are a lot of things about this place you aren't telling me."

"Oh?" I replied, smiling innocently. "And what would make you think that?"

"Because all the places from your sailor's days you think are really nice often have extremely loose women."

"Well, I wouldn't say the women here are 'loose', per-se..." I said, and shrugged. "Although it *is* true that the Enebua trade gold with several neighboring tribes to obtain silphium."

"Err... Silphium? What's that?"

"An herb... It doesn't grow in the Southlands that I know of, although I think the elves know of it... It... Ah... Prevents pregnancy, if taken within a day or so before or after coupling. Quite effective, as well."

"You mean... They can just... Any time they want?!" Marilith replied, her eyes widening.

"Yes - and they often do, if they meet someone who piques their interest and treats them right. They don't like overweening men, and they'll kill for insults or attempts at bullying them, of course - they *are* warriors, and very honor-bound warriors, at that. Ah, but if you deal with them just right..." I said, and winked.

Marilith glowered at me. "Oh, I can see I'm going to have to keep a *very* close eye on *you*, sailor-man."

I grinned, sweeping her into my arms and kissing her passionately for a long, breathless moment. I loved kissing Kushites - their lips always felt marvelous. When I let Marilith go, she staggered, blinking at me. "Oh, my..."

I smiled again. "Believe me, dear, you have nothing to worry about from me. It's the other women you should be watching. I have... Err... Somewhat of a reputation, in Ashyra." I gestured to the east, up the trail. "Shall we continue?"

Marilith recovered herself, shaking her head. "Oh, dear... No, Corvid, much as I'd like to, we have to get to the city," she said, then turned to walk up the trail, her saucy hips swaying as she strode on. A moment later, she glanced over her shoulder, and winked at me.

I burst out laughing, following after a moment.

### The Raven - Thirteen.

Doshta looked up as we entered, and grinned. "Corvid! How are you!" she called in her language.

I grinned at the tavern's proprietress, leaning across the bar to exchange a quick hug. Her blouse was a billowy Mysantian linen that left her navel bare, dyed a dozen different rainbow colors. Her skirt was of the same fabric and came down to her knees, loose and flowing. When the light struck her just right from behind, one got a glimpse of the shapely figure beneath - though, as she was a woman of Enebua, it was not wise to be caught staring. Doshta's tavern, like many nearby the port, was brightly decorated to

attract the eye of passers-by. Behind the bar, a stuffed and mounted basilisk regarded the crowd of Mysantian sailors with eyes of glass - a relic of Doshta's days as a hunter. "Fine, Doshta, fine. It's good to see you again."

"And who's this with you?" Doshta asked, nodding to Marilith.

"Doshta, this is Marilith. Forgive her if she seems a little odd, she was actually captured by slavers and then shipwrecked on a distant island - her only company for most of her life was mer-folk. I had to teach her your language."

"Hello," Marilith offered with a smile. She'd said before that she could speak any language with ease, it was simply one of her powers as a demon - and I'd seen her do it with the Centaurs. It was not like Eddas' translation sorcery, where one heard the words he was speaking as though he spoke in one's native language, yet at times it seemed his lips and words did not match. No, with Marilith, she simply spoke whatever language she wished, having a demonic facility with any language she encountered. It was fascinating to watch, and an ability to be envied.

"Welcome to my humble tavern, warrior," Doshta replied, clasping her hands together briefly and bowing. "If I may ask... I see no wedding bracelet on your wrist or his?"

"Err..." Marilith said, glancing at me. "Well, no, we're not married..."

"Good, then he's still available," Doshta replied, and kissed me firmly.

I grinned, and Doshta finally let me go, looking to Marilith - who did *not* look amused. "Ah, I see there *is* something there, isn't there? Shall we duel for him?"

"Doshta," I said, smiling, "don't tease her, she couldn't possibly win a duel with you, anyway, and you *are* married."

Doshta laughed, jingling the gold bracelets on her left arm. "Three times, now! You didn't even notice!"

I grinned, leaning on the bar. "I did, I did, I figured you'd get to the story eventually. What happened, did you wear another one out again?"

"Hah! No, my sister lost hers in a duel. You remember Haggan?"

"Mmmm..." I said, leaning back a moment. "That would be the weaver, yes? Tall, thin, little scar on his shin where he said he fell as a child?"

"That's him. Lovely man, lovely. Beautiful singing voice, too - my sister has him now, I gave him to her. My new husband is Pago - he can cook!"

"He can? How good is he?"

"Order some food and find out, I fired my last cook!" Doshta said, and laughed again. "Wait, wait - first ale on the house, handsome. And one for your friend, as well," Doshta said, snatching up two mugs from below the bar, then filling them from a keg behind her. "There you are - a table should be free shortly, then you can sit and enjoy some of Pago's cooking! I've other customers - don't go away!" she said, and breezed off.

I leaned on the bar again, sipping at the mug of ale, and grinning at Marilith. She again looked anything but amused as she looked around at the other patrons. "I feel *very* under-dressed," she said, in Arcadian.

"You're not. They're sailors, all Mysantians. Most have learned that gaping at a warrior of the Enebua can lead to one coming up short one's head. Of course, they don't know enough to tell that you aren't Enebua, but that's as may be. Black cloth, like that, means a bodyguard. They don't wear much armor here unless a major battle is brewing, it's just too hot to wear armor all the time."

"A couple of them are staring at me, though..."

"Put your hand on the hilt of that sword and glare at them a bit. They'll stop."

"Err... The hilt is the grippy-part, right?"

I grinned. "Yes."

Marilith did so, giving a very fierce glare to two sailors sitting with a small group of three more. Seeing that, their friends elbowed the staring ones, and a brief, which whisper of conversation ensued. A moment later, the two men studiously ignored Marilith, pointedly keeping their gaze elsewhere.

Marilith grinned, releasing my sword. "It worked!"

"Of course. An Enebua bodyguard could mop the floor with all of them, they're only sailors. Staring like that is insulting, here. You should remember that, it applies when you're looking at any Enebua woman above the age of sixteen."

"Err... Well, what do you do when you're talking to someone, then?"

"Here, you look them straight in the eyes and nowhere else. Looking at someone's body means you're watching their stance and their hands in preparation to fight. To show submissiveness or acknowledgement of a superior, you look down at their feet. To show disdain, you look away to their side - that's an insult, too."

"Okay... Look into everyone's eyes," Marilith said. "They're all so *tall*, though! Did you notice? All the women we passed on the street were very tall. The men were shorter and slender... How did that happen?"

"Diet, mainly," I replied, sipping at my drink. "Enebua men are forbidden from eating the product of any animal. Meat, eggs, milk, cheese... All of it is considered "women's food", and they believe it reduces the fertility of one's seed. And that's important to them, because if their woman decides she wants a child and he doesn't deliver, she'll get rid of him and find someone who will. But, eating nothing but plants means they grow shorter and slimmer. On the other hand, women eat half their diet as meat growing up. Makes them taller, broader... Also makes childbirth much easier for them, because their hips are broader, or so Doshta said once. Interestingly, men tend to live a bit longer than women, here. Of course, part of that is because the women duel each other from time to time."

"I hope I don't have to do that..."

"Be careful, and you won't. When in doubt, look at their feet, that defuses a lot of violence. Duels here are rarely to the death, they duel with wooden sticks about two fingers thick and three cubits long. They beat on each other until one of them gives up or until one of them breaks their stick. It can be very long and often bloody, but rarely fatal. Formal duels are with edged weapons. They're usually very short and very messy, but they don't happen often. I don't know what makes them decide between the two - I've seen them duel over a husband with sticks, and I've seen them duel with swords. What makes the difference, I don't know."

"Love, maybe?" Marilith offered sarcastically.

I grinned. "Probably - you can't judge an entire people by Doshta, though she's not too uncommon. Regardless, the safest thing to do is look straight in their eyes, and if they look even slightly annoyed by that, look firmly at their feet."

Marilith grinned. "And just how did you figure all these rules out? By getting thumped on your head by these women?"

I grinned back. "No. A good ship's captain hires a good crew, and before I came here, I hired a Mysantian sailing-master. He talked about these women like they were all dangerous apes with swords, of course, but I gathered the basics from him. From there, I made a few friends ashore like Doshta, and asked them to teach me how not to get into trouble around here - and who might be the best to talk to regarding slaver-ships I might take as prizes. As it turned out, Doshta was one of my best and most reliable contacts. We quickly made a deal where she'd get a share of the prize money and booty, same as a crewman of my ship, sealed the deal in her bed, and I started hunting down a few of the more notorious Mysantian slavers that passed by the Gold Coast on their way to Larinia and Arcadia."

It was, at times, comical to realize that the Mysantians looked at the Enebua and saw men-hating, evil women who ran around nearly naked - or, very often, saw only hairless, tailless, violent she-monkeys with swords who had too much gold for their own good. Meanwhile, the Enebua looked at the Mysantians and saw brainless idiots who wore useless layers of clothing in smothering jungle heat and humidity, and treated their women like cattle. As I'd learned from my days chasing slaver-ships from country to country around the world, things were rarely that simple.

"Wait... You sealed the deal in her *bed*?!"

I simply grinned. "Men here are not valued for their brains, dear."

"But what about her *husband*?!"



I nodded. "That concerned me, too. Doshta, however, thought I was being very silly, and she said if he gave her any noise about it, she'd beat him. After all, she said, it wasn't like she was going to bear my child or something - silphium takes care of that."

Marilith shook her head. "That doesn't sound very nice."

I smiled again. "I never said she was nice, dear. After all, she *did* betray several of her regular customers to me in exchange for gold and booty. I said she was reliable, not nice."

Marilith crossed her arms, fuming. "Sometimes you can tell *too much* truth, Corvid. I'm not certain I'm happy knowing you bedded that woman."

"Would you prefer I lied about it?"

"Well... No, I don't think I'd like *that*, either."

I smiled, setting down my drink and taking her hand. "Dear, I have never lied to you, and I never will."

"Alright... Then promise me that it will *only* be Sasha and I from now on. No one else, *ever*."

"Of course, Marilith. I agree wholeheartedly and completely. That's what I wanted, myself - I told you this before, that day I spoke with you and your sister on the bridge by Eddas' tower. Truly, Marilith, that's precisely what I have always wanted, all my life," I replied, kissing her hand. "Alright?"

Marilith smiled. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," I replied, letting go of her hand and reaching for my drink again. "I should, however, warn you of one thing..."

"Oh? What?"

"If we stay too long in this city, I likely won't be able to keep that promise. Women here don't take 'no' too kindly, particularly women like Doshta," I said, sipping at my ale.

"*What?!*" Marilith yelled.

"Dear, I *did* tell you I had something of a reputation in this city."

Marilith growled wordlessly, looking away from me.

"Dear, you're making those sailors you glared at earlier very nervous, please try to relax."

"*I DON'T CARE!*" Marilith snapped.

Instantly, the five Mysantian sailors at the nearby table bolted, leaving their drinks and their half-eaten meals behind and darting out the door.

"Well," I said, "it's a good thing Doshta takes payment in advance." I looked to Marilith, and smiled again, picking up both her drink and mine. "Dear, it appears a table has come free. Shall we sit and have dinner?"

Marilith gaped, then burst out laughing.

\* \* \*

An hour later, Marilith leaned back, patting a full tummy. "Alright, yes, her husband can cook."

I nodded, stifling a belch. "Very well, too." The meal had been a simple steak, cooked to perfection in a marinade of Enebuan 'black-sauce' and served with a mixture of local vegetables. Black-sauce was actually quite fascinating. Made of vinegar, molasses from the *burnuba*-tree, dried and powdered fish, onions, salt, garlic, a bit of tamarind, a dash of cloves, a pinch of pepper and a bit of fennel for aroma, it was a dark, watery liquid that the Enebua women ate with nearly every kind of meat except fish. It had a strong, slightly sweet odor, and a bitter-sweet flavor that complimented beef very well.

Doshta breezed over, smiling. "How was the food?"

I grinned. "Fabulous, Doshta. You should hang onto this one."

Doshta nodded, grinning broadly. "I'm not letting go of this one short of steel, that's for certain," she said, then glanced at Marilith for a moment before leaning in to me. "He doesn't wiggle quite as nicely as you did, however."

"As you Enebua say, *'No man is perfect,'*" I replied, smiling. "I can't cook at all, so we're even."

Doshta grinned to Marilith. "This is a good one, dear - you can expect to duel for him, if you get serious about him. Did he tell you where he learned all his tricks in bed?"

I couldn't see it under her dark Kushite skin, but I was certain Marilith was blushing. "Yes, from a whorehouse madam in Vilandia."

"Now *there* is a woman I'd love to meet!"

I smiled. "Sadly, Belana passed a couple years ago. I'm sure you two would have hit it off very well, though."

"Ah, too bad..." Doshta said, and shook her head. "Where are you staying tonight, Corvid? On your ship?"

"No ship, this time. Marilith and I came overland. We're chasing a Mysantian who has kidnapped Marilith's half-sister, and we're pretty certain he'll stop here to re-provision before going on to Mysantia. Her half-sister is an Arcadian girl with red hair."

"Interesting, I've never seen red hair..." Doshta replied, tapping her chin with her finger for a moment. "What's his ship look like? I'll have my children keep an eye on the docks for it."

"A Mysantian tartan, covered stem to stern with carvings of sorcerous glyphs and runes and such."

Doshta's eyes widened. "*That* bastard? Watch out for him, Corvid. He was here six months ago. He's a wizard, that's for certain - and an utter bastard. Do you remember Hassan Algraid?"

I smiled. "Likely not as well as he remembers me."

"He was here buying food and drink for him for his outbound journey. The Mysantians say you can tell the master by his dogs - and Hassan is utter scum. Filth. Vomit of diseased pigs. Spittle of lepers."

I smiled again. "Oh, I wouldn't praise him *that* highly."

Doshta giggled, then reached out and pinched my cheek. "You rascal!" she said, then looked to Marilith. "Slap a wedding-band on this one quickly, little one, and hone your sword. You'll need it."

"Thank you, I'll do that," Marilith replied, smiling.

Doshta nodded, then looked back to me. "Well, if you've no ship and no place to stay, stay with us, tonight. We've a guest room, you two are more than happy to use it, for a price."

"What price?" Marilith asked - a little too quickly, I thought.

Doshta grinned, seeing her expression. "Not that, though it would be nice. I want Corvid to explain a few of those tricks to my husband. As we say, '*no man is perfect - but you can work on them.*'"

Marilith giggled, and I grinned. "Was there any particular thing you wanted me to explain to him?"

"Oooo... That trick with your tongue. Do you remember?"

I nodded. "I'll explain it to him - he'll have to practice with you before he's good at it, though."

"Oh, now *there* is a bargain, Corvid Hremn!" Doshta replied, grinning, and we clasped forearms. She still had a strong grip.

Doshta looked to Marilith, waving a hand. "Come, come, the both of you. I'll show you the room, and you can get settled while I kick the last of the stragglers out of here and close for the night. I'll send Pago to talk with Corvid in a bit, as well. Come!"

Marilith grinned at me as we followed Doshta. "It seems that's a trick you haven't shown *me* yet, Corvid," she said, in Arcadian.

"Oh? Well, this is apparently something I'll have to rectify, tonight."

Marilith shivered, then grinned at me again.

\* \* \*

I awoke in Marilith's arms, and smiled at her. She still had her Kushite form, and it was quite pleasant

to stroke the swell of her mahogany breast. Marilith kissed me, and I kissed her back.

"I love you, Corvid," she whispered.

"I love you, too, Marilith," I replied.

A knock at the door, and Doshta's voice rang out from behind it. "Breakfast! Wake up, you two, breakfast!"

"Is it free?!" I shouted back.

"After what Pago showed me he'd learned last night, you're damn right it is!"

I laughed, looking to Marilith. "Come - let's get dressed."

"Alright, I..." she said, then paused. "Wait, Sasha is talking to me."

"How is she?"

"Weak. Very thirsty. Very ill. She says..." Marilith's eyes widened. "Corvid, she's *here!* She says she sees a city over the rail!"

I reached for my pants, and began to frantically dress. "Look for the ship while you dress. Remember to put on the sword-belt, you have to carry it for me until it's time."

"They're close... Perhaps a league away," she said, feeling around blindly for her clothes - she couldn't look there and see around her at the same time. I took a moment, grabbing her clothes and thrust them into her hands. "They're definitely putting into port," she said, wrapping her apodesmos about her breasts.

Trousers, boots, then tunic, then my sash - I looked to Marilith, she was buckling on the sword-belt. I summoned my sword to my hand - it was still mine, though she'd worn it for almost a full day, now. Hopefully, she wouldn't need to wear it any longer. I slipped the sword into the scabbard she wore as she was pulling on Sasha's boots and gloves. I looked her over - she was ready. "Let's go!"

"Wait - spells, protective spells!" she said, and began gesturing.

"Alright," I said, pausing. I nearly said "Alright, but hurry," but I didn't. "Take your time. Get it right."

"I will," she said, carefully gesturing over herself several times, then over me. It seemed to take forever, though it couldn't have been longer than a few minutes.

Finally, she nodded. "We're ready."

We dashed out of the room, down the hall, through Doshta's tavern, and out the door. "Where are you going?!" Doshta yelled. "You're missing breakfast!"

Down the street, towards the dock, then skidding to a halt. "There it is," I said, my heart pounding. "They're headed for that empty berth, there. Come!" I yelled, grabbing Marilith's hand.



Dodging early-morning longshoremen, Marilith and I wove our way between stacked crates, running down the pier. We ran past two spear-carrying guards, and I knew that if they didn't at least follow, they'd watch - running people rarely meant anything good. "Guards are watching, don't let them see you casting!" I yelled in Arcadian.

"Already have an illusion up!" Marilith replied, right behind me. "And a conceal enchantment, and an obfuscation, and-"

"Just so long as it works!" I interrupted, still running.

The ship was at the pier, a mooring line reaching from it like some enormous snake, wrapping itself about a nearby bollard. I slowed to a trot, and then a walk. They weren't going anywhere. They didn't have the food to go anywhere. Marilith stood by my side. We were ready.

I let my breathing slow, hearing swift footsteps approaching on the boards of the pier behind us. Likely the guards. I could see the wizard - red robe, red turban. He looked middle-aged, but that meant nothing for a spellcaster with the right spells, that Frarim had shown me already. Beside him stood Hassan in a dirty white turban, stained yellow Mysantian duelling tunic, and stained gray pants. He hadn't yet seen me - he was busy scratching under his eyepatch.

"Hello, Hassan," I called cordially in Mysantian.

Hassan looked, then did a double-take. "You?! What are *you* doing *here*?!"

"Oh, just passing through. Heard you were spotted here half a year ago, outbound. Figured if I waited long enough, you'd be back. How's the eye?"

"You bastard, I'll-"

"You'll do *nothing*," the wizard interrupted. "If you want to be paid, just get our supplies and we'll leave."

"But I... He...!" Hassan sputtered, livid.

"Oh, I should mention, Wizard, that I'm here for your prisoner, too. After I kill Hassan, you'll be next."

"Oh, really?" the wizard replied, raising a hand.

"Think carefully before you do that," I said. "This is Ashyra, and there's guards watching. Are you *really* ready for the consequences?"

The wizard smoothly continued his gesture, turning it into a simple scratch of his head just below his turban. He then lowered his hand. He gazed at Marilith and I for a long moment, then nodded. "And a local girl to carry your sword, so you don't violate the law. You think you've thought of everything. But should you even try to board this vessel, you will die."

"I'll take that chance," I replied.

The wizard looked around again, then shook his head. "The demoness isn't here, that's just a mundane

girl beside him. Kill him. And make it quick, we have to get our supplies and get moving before that demoness figures out where we are."

"Consider him dead - I've waited for this for years," Hassan replied, grabbing the gangplank and sliding it over the rail. Normally, someone dockside would assist, out of politeness. I caught the end of the gangplank, and held it until Hassan had the hooks in place, then set it down. I then stepped back from it, and willed my sword into my hand. Frarim once said that the ancient Hyperboreans believed it was sweet justice to treat one's enemy with honor. I found he was right. It was actually a delicious feeling.

Hassan charged down the gangplank, then straight at me in a *fleche* attack. I parried, and countered. He parried, and the fight was on.

It had been over two years since I saw him last, and apparently in that time he'd learned to compensate for the loss of his left eye. He held his head turned more to his left, and the gaze of his right eye was turned to me. His stance was good, and he was just as good with his tulwar as he was before. The blade I bore was an ancient Hyperborean blade, forged by Eddas Ayar himself, ages ago. About the same length of his tulwar, it had a much less pronounced curve, and a half-length back-blade. Eddas said it was a horseman's blade, in his day. But, the guard was what made it a fighter's blade, a duellist's blade, really... A single ring for the index finger, and carefully cut indentations in the hilt for the other fingers of the hand. Not as fast as a rapier, but not as slow as a cutlass, it had the speed of a longsword, and its bell-guard completely protected the hand. Yet, Eddas had said it was originally a horseman's weapon. That struck me as so incredibly appropriate, now.

The blade gleamed as brightly as it had eighteen centuries ago, when Eddas forged it, and flew in my hand like an extension of my will.

Twice, Hassan tried to flick the tip of his curved tulwar past my guard to thrust at me - and twice, I nearly disarmed him for his trouble. Though one *could* thrust with the tulwar, as it was straighter than its lighter cousin the scimitar, it was still hardly a point-fighter's weapon. It was a cutting, slashing weapon, made to have the mass needed to penetrate the light chain the Mysantians often wore. Against Kushites, who rarely wore any armor at all due to the heat, it was lethal. Against me, it was a handicap. Hassan had made another mistake, in not getting a faster blade. A man with one eye needs all the speed he can get.

Realizing his danger, Hassan switched to cuts. I parried, then parried again - then suddenly thrust at his head. He dodged, the back-blade of my sword laying open his left cheek to the bone. Hassan leapt back, touching his left hand to his cheek. I let him, standing in a ready stance. "First blood to me. Again."

Hassan spat, closing with me carefully. You had to respect a man that could muster up saliva when fighting for his life. I flicked my blade out in a feint, but he was wary, now. We engaged blades, then began again.

I worked him around to my left, putting more and more pressure on his blinded side - which now had even more attention in his mind, from the pain of the cut I'd put there. Blood rolled down his cheek, and I knew he could feel it. I knew he remembered that night.

The wizard shouted from behind us. "He's pushing you to the edge of the dock, you fool! Watch out!"

I could *see* the sudden fear in Hassan's face, and he launched a frantic, deadly series of attacks. I let him push me back, giving him room again. Yes, Hassan remembered. I could see it on his face. He remembered. Losing his balance at the edge of the dock and falling backwards *just* as I made a final lunge. That thrust would have gone through his heart, but his falling backwards meant it hit him in the eye, instead. He was not keeping his surroundings in mind. His world had focused down to me, and the blade in my hand. Being forcefully reminded threw him off. A missed parry - I flicked over his guard, and cut his right shoulder. He then parried reflexively, but wrongly, after the hit - my blade was already moving, to lay open his right cheek, just below his remaining eye.

Hassan leapt back, his eye wild, panting. I smiled, holding a ready stance. "Do you remember Belana, Hassan?"

"Who?!" he said, his sword at the ready.

"The woman you killed that night. Do you remember her?"

"Yes," he panted. I could see his thoughts on his face, clear as day. If I was willing to give him a chance to catch his breath, he was willing to take the opportunity to do so.

"She wasn't quite dead when you left her. She was a tough old bird. She lived long enough to ask me to make it slow for you. I didn't. I was too angry. And you lived. It seems, however, she was right. I should have made it slow. And that's what I'm going to do now. This is going to be very slow, Hassan. You're going to *bleed*."

Hassan snarled, and leapt to the attack.

I could see a crowd had gathered, now, but I paid them little attention. Hassan was angry, now, as well as fearful. I had to parry, and counter just enough to keep him on edge. Let him fight until the anger faded, and only the fear remained. Belana had died for giving me information on the wrong slaver. Wrong, in that it was one with friends who had the money to hire Hassan. Hassan had likely spent that gold on a healer, that night. The only reason he'd lived is that the flickering torches on the Vilandian dock that night had destroyed my night-vision - once he fell into the water, he was gone to my sight. And I was not fool enough to leap in after him, and fight blind in water two fathoms deep.

At last, I could see it. The anger had faded. Now, only the fear remained. It was the same look I'd seen in Belana's eyes when I held her in her last moments, her blood soaking my clothes. She knew death was near. Hacked and hacked again, she should have been dead already - but she wasn't.

"*Make it slow...*" she whispered.

"*I will,*" I replied.

Her eyes had teared then, weeping as she gazed at me.

I did not know what she wept for. Perhaps she wept simply because she was dying. Perhaps she wept out of the thought of plans unfinished, things left un-done. Perhaps, she wept because she loved me, and knew she would not see me again. I did not know.

*"Remember me..."* she whispered. Then she was gone.

Hassan grew desperate again, launching frantic attacks. I waited, parrying, then countered, slapping the edge of my blade across the flat of his chest at an angle. My sword weighed a bit over a fifth of a stone, the blow was like being slapped with a crowbar - but, the edge was not straight on, which would have allowed the enchanted blade to shear through flesh and bone, laying open his chest cavity with the razor-sharp, invulnerable edge. Instead, the blow had only staggered him and cut him. Hassan leapt back, and I gave him a moment to recover. He looked down at himself, and I gazed at him, waiting.

"You're going to *bleed*, Hassan."

Hassan glanced around, but there was nowhere to run. The docks were completely blocked by a crowd of women, watching wide-eyed. At least two dozen of them were city guards. His only choice was to either fight, or try to dive into the water and escape by swimming. If he did, however, there was nowhere to go but out to the sea.

Suddenly, I saw a change in his expression. I could tell he had a plan, now. He closed slowly, cautiously, and engaged my blade again. He slashed, and I parried, then countered, flicking the tip of my blade across his thigh to lay open his skin. Another parry, and another counter, running the tip of my blade across his abdomen.

*"Bleed,"* I said, in a voice as cold as ice.

He came in again, his attacks more careful, his parries more precise. He had a plan, I could see it in his eye. Slowly, he moved back, towards the ship. I followed. He turned, working the two of us in a circle. I let him. When he'd oriented himself, he began working his way backwards, towards the gangplank. And I knew what he intended.

He was playing what he thought was a certain bet, a winning card. He could not know that the deck had been stacked.

I felt no danger from the ship.

I moved in for the kill.

Our blades flashed in the morning sunlight, the song of metal clashing against metal the only sound on the hushed docks. He was confident, but the gangplank was unsteady. I allowed him to move back, inch by inch.

Soon, we both stood on the gangplank, near the middle. He had the advantage of height. I reduced his advantage by slashing his right shoulder again, this time deeper, slowing down his arm. A parry, then another, and I lunged again, slashing his upper arm. He was bloodied, now, his clothes soaked in blood. Sweat mixed with blood on his cheeks, his beard matted with blood.

"You fool! What are you doing?!" the wizard shouted.

"Shut up, you old prick!" Hassan replied.

"There's a dozen guards nearby! Ukkug's beard, man, I even see the queen's palanquin, you've been fighting twenty minutes, the whole damn *city* has heard of it by now! Stop! Stop!"

*"Ari feh sabahak!"* Hassan replied. A grave insult - but one the wizard was in little position to do anything about.

My head was now level with the deck. I could see Sasha now, just out of the corner of my eye. She lay limp, unmoving... And as I watched, the manacles on her ankles popped open, and fell free. Marilith, it had to be. Using her strange vision to see the deck of the ship despite that she stood on the dock, and casting quietly. The wizard did not notice. His entire focus of attention was Hassan and I.

Hassan's back foot finally reached the deck. He leapt back onto the deck, then grinned at me.

"You idiot!" the wizard shouted.

"I piss on your mother's grave!" Hassan replied, jovially.

I stepped up the gangplank, and stood there atop the deck, facing Hassan, my sword at the ready again.

Hassan's expression changed from a smile to one of shock.

*"Corvid! I have the manacles free! Get Sasha into the water!"*



Marilith's voice, in my ear, startling me badly. Hassan leapt to the attack. I tried to parry, but too late. I felt his sword bite into my side.

*"Noooooooo!"* Marilith screamed.

Time slowed to a crawl.

I reached down, grabbing his right wrist with my left hand, holding the sword in me.

I began to swing, but he reached up and caught my wrist in his hand.

We stood there, grappled for a moment.

*"Neek rasi..."* Hassan said, panting.

I flicked my blade below his chin. "See you in hell," I said, and flicked my wrist.

With any other sword all I'd have done is cut him. A minor wound, at best. With an extremely keen blade, I might have laid open his windpipe, though likely not deep enough to kill him. With the blade Eddas Ayar had forged, however, the edge was as keen as a razor, and utterly indestructible.

The blade bit through his throat and into his spine.

Hassan staggered back, blood spraying, and I let go his wrist, his sword twisting as it came free of my body. I jerked my blade free of his neck, then swung again, finishing the job. His head flew free across the deck, bouncing once, then fell overboard with a small splash.

The wizard gaped at me as Hassan's corpse flopped on the deck. "You should be *dead!*"

I glanced down at the wound in my side. A bloody loop of intestine protruded.

I looked back up to the wizard. "I *am* dead," I replied, then stepped over to Sasha.

The wizard started to raise his hand, then thought the better of it. I knelt to pick Sasha up, and realized I still had my sword in my hand. It was obvious I wouldn't need it anymore - I tossed it after Hassan's head, and dimly heard the splash as it hit the water.

I picked Sasha up, slipping my arms beneath her. She was light... So very light.

Stepping to the rail, I jumped.

The water slammed into me. I felt it hit the wound in my side painfully... Agonizingly. I struggled to hold her head above water. "Swim, Sasha..."

"C-Corvid?" she asked, her voice weak.

"Swim, Sasha. Swim, and escape..."

I felt her change, in my arms. In a heartbeat, her legs became a tail, and she slipped from my arms. A twist under the water, and her soiled clothes fell from her.

My last view of her, beneath the rippling surface of the water, was of a mermaid, nude and free. She flicked her tail, and was gone, vanishing into the depths of the harbor.

I could hear splashing, now - people diving in and swimming towards me. But, it didn't matter anymore. It was over. She was free.

I let myself relax and slip beneath the water as everything went black.

The Ocean - Two.

*"Sasha?"*

My sister's voice... I felt the warmth of the sun on my face. I opened my eyes, and looked around.

I lay on a beach - where, I did not know. I felt weak... Dreadfully weak... Deathly weak. "Marilith?"

Suddenly, Marilith was leaning over me, a bowl in her hands. *"Food, Sasha. Try to eat, please."*

She held a spoon to my lips, and I did so - it was gruel, and bland. But to my starving body, it tasted like heaven.

*"Easy, now, easy..."*

Time passed... I knew not how long. I had the impression of sleeping, drinking, eating... And sleeping again. And Marilith was tending me again, slowly gesturing over my body. I could feel the touch of her sorcery, healing me, soothing the aches, cleansing me of the terrible chills...

"Where... Where are we?"

Marilith continued gesturing over me for several moments before she replied. *"A few dozen leagues west of the city of Ashyra, on the Gold Coast of Kush. Sea water seemed best for you, and it occurred to me that once you're a bit better, it will probably be easier for you to hunt the sea to build your strength again."*

"I... I saw... I saw Corvid? He was... He was fighting?"

*"Yes. He dueled the wizard's henchman, and killed him. Then he rescued you, and put you in the sea so you could escape. I dived in from the docks, shaped a mermaid's tail with sorcery, and followed you. You were just swimming straight out to sea, I had to lead you to shore. Then I moved us away from the city a few dozen leagues, so we wouldn't be disturbed."*

"He... He saved me?"

*"Yes."*

"Where... Where is he now?"

*"Rest now, Sasha. We'll talk about that later."*

"A-alright..." I said, and sighed, enjoying the gentle sensation of her healing magic. "I remember... You talked about him every night. Keeping my spirits up, telling me what he was doing, what he was saying... He sounds... So sweet and funny and lovable..."

*"Yes, he was,"* Marilith replied, still gesturing over me.

"W-was?"

*"Yes. We'll talk about it later, when you're feeling a bit stronger."*

I reached out my hand to her, stopping her. Marilith gazed at me quietly.

"Marilith... What happened?"

"I... He..." Marilith said, then shook her head. *"Please, Sasha. We'll talk about this later."*

"Tell me."

Marilith gazed at me silently for a long moment. Finally, she turned her head, her gaze on the distant horizon of the sea.

*"I could only rescue one of you. You were separated. Both underwater. I could only rescue one of you at a time. You are my sister, Sasha. I love you. You were very close to death. So, I went after you, first. I knew what that decision meant. I went after you anyway. He was dying already. His blood was everywhere in the water. When I went back to look for him, he was gone. The undercurrent in the harbor carried him out to sea."*

"He... He's dead?"

*"Yes. And I killed him."*

I shook my head. "No... You made a choice... You didn't kill him."

*"Yes, I did. He was in a duel. I needed to tell him you were free. I used a spell to talk straight to him, to be sure he would hear. I literally shouted in his ear. That startled him, and the henchman cut him. Mortally. But he still did what needed to be done. He got you to the sea before he died."*

Dead. Corvid dead.

A thousand little stories Marilith had told about him danced in my head. Stories she had told me late at night, when he was asleep, so she wouldn't disturb him. Those little stories, those quiet moments of laughter... Those were all that truly sustained me when I was chained to the deck of that ship, dying of starvation and thirst, ill to the point of death from lying in my own filth. Hope, and laughter. I had fallen in love with the funny, sweet man my sister described. I survived on the hope that they would rescue me, so I might get to know him myself. And he did. I saw him, I felt his touch...

And now, he was gone.

I shook my head. "We have to find him. We can take him to Eddas. He has a spell... He could..."

*"I TRIED!"* Marilith shrieked, and burst into tears. *"I looked for him for days! I've searched and searched, casting my vision far and wide across the harbor, across the sea... HE'S GONE! THE CURRENT CARRIED HIM OUT TO SEA, AND I CAN'T FIND HIS BODY!"* Marilith sobbed, then let out a keening wail of misery. *"Every moment I don't need to look at you, I'm looking for him. Every moment. I've looked everywhere. All I ever found was his sword - that's all. You know as well as I do there are sharks and other creatures in the sea. A body does not last long. I chose you. I know I made the right decision. But he's only dead because I made the wrong decision, and distracted him during a duel. I loved him, Sasha. And I killed him. I... I don't know how I'm going to live with that. I just don't know. But I couldn't leave you, not even for a second. I knew if he could tell me what he wanted me to do, he'd tell me to save you! So I did! And now the man I love is dead and gone!"*

I held out my arms to her, and we hugged each other in silence for a long moment afterwards, weeping.

At last, our tears faded to silence, and I lay there on the sand, stroking Marilith's back. "We'll find him. Somehow, we'll find him."

*"I don't know how, Sasha. I have tried."*

"I don't know, either. But Eddas Ayar might," I said, and managed a smile. "I don't understand everything about Eddas, but I have figured out this much - if it's dead, Eddas knows everything about it."

Marilith smiled slightly, briefly, then sighed. *"This is true. No one can match his power with the dead and the undead."*

"And I know he's probably the best healer in the world."

*"He says his daughters are better, but I'll agree with you, since I've felt his touch."*

"So take me there. And when I'm well again, we'll come here with him, and search for Corvid. Maybe he'll find him. Maybe he won't. But either way, he's the best person to ask."

*"What if..."* Marilith said, her voice choking. *"What if we can't find him?"*

"Then we find that damn wizard and make him *pay*," I replied with a hiss.



Marilith nodded, her face a mask of fury. *"Yes. No matter what happens, he must pay."*

Marilith reached her arms beneath me, gently lifting me from the sand. She nuzzled me softly, then the world blurred, and we were gone.

### Interlude III - Hammer and Forge.

Mungim grinned at me broadly. "Ah, sister, ye do set me heart to sing with joy. May I yet touch the babe?"

I grinned, patting my swollen belly as we stood inside Eddas Ayar's tower. "Aye, brother, ye may."

Mungim placed his hand over my belly, feeling it. The expression on his face was likely very similar to my own. "Ah! A little bump! Me niece do poke back?"

"Aye, brother," I grinned. It was nothing to me, but Joy found it amazing when she felt the same. Pregnancy for a human was nine months, and nearly as long for a giant. For a dwarf, however, our pregnancies only lasted six months at most, and our child's quickening we could feel much sooner. I had giggled, hearing Eddas have to explain to Joy what was, to me, common knowledge, but I supposed this

was just a part of the differences between our people and the other races. "Aye, I did yet feel it, meself. She'll yet be a strong one, and that be certain," I replied, and giggled.

"I do yet think ye shall not quite fit in our little box again, sister. Love ye I do, and do not yet take this athwart, but... Thy belly be far too big for that," he said, and winked.

I laughed. "Aye, yes, and I be much glad to say it! Eddas has yet said that the times o' danger have yet passed for this bearin', and I'll yet carry the child to term with ease."

The outside door opened, and Karadin came in, quickly closing the door behind him. "Flori do say the wagons be yet packed, Mungim, thy brothers be ready."

Mungim nodded. "Well, the trades be yet done, all be done - and all be good, right good indeed," Mungim said, and kissed my cheek. "I'll yet see ye in a few weeks, sister, when I do yet return to Iron city."

"Karadin and I will yet await thy return with happiness, brother," I said, and kissed his cheek in return.

A movement caught my eye, and I turned, then smiled. Eddas came down the stair, his tread as silent as ever. "Oh! Eddas Ayar, ye do look *very* proper."

"Oh, aye," Mungim agreed, nodding. "The *barab* do yet fit thee perfect-like, and do add an air of dignity to thy mein that cannot be yet denied."

Karadin nodded. "It be *most* impressive, Eddas Ayar. And such a fine *barab*, with e'en the beard-hairs o' a prince? It be an honor e'en to just gaze 'pon it, much less to yet see it worn by its proper owner."

"Thank you," Eddas replied, bowing. He then rose, making a final adjustment to the feathers tucked into the band that held his ponytail in place, and smoothing the *barab* as it lay down his chest. "I quite like it, myself."

"A question, though..." I asked, looking at Eddas. "What were that laughter I did yet hear upstairs, earlier?"

"Err... Sasha's sister, Marilith, made a joke, and Sasha laughed very loudly. This is a good sign, incidentally, it means her healing is progressing well."

"Oh, aye, laughter always be good medicine," I agreed nodding.

"Indeed, let's hope they're still laughing after Joy finishes chatting with them," Eddas said, then smiled. "Well, I've placed all your things in my Hidden Sanctuary, we can unload it when we get to Iron City. If you two are ready, just join hands, then Jhumni take my hand, and I'll take us to the road that leads to the gate."

"They do yet know to expect ye, Eddas, have no fear that ye will get shot as a dark-elf again!" Karadin said, grinning.

I rolled my eyes at my husband. "That be impossible, husband! Do ye look again at that *barab*! Do ye truly think someone would yet mistake Eddas for a dark-elf with it?"

"Nay, wife, nay, I did but jest," Karadin said, and winked.

Eddas nodded. "I can honestly say that no dark-elf would even think to wear one, even if you told them that it might allow them to get into your cities. Elves are just strange like that," Eddas replied, and held out his hand. "Shall we go?"

I took Karadin's hand, then took Eddas' hand. "I be ready, Eddas Ayar. Do take me home, please."

Eddas gestured with his staff, and the world blurred for a moment - then, suddenly, we stood a hundred paces from the gates of Iron City. I trembled for a moment at the sight of the sky, then controlled my fear with an effort. We would be inside soon, I was completely safe, and I was holding the hand of the most powerful mage in all the world in one hand, and the hand of my husband in another. That didn't make the fear any less real, but it would certainly make it manageable until we made it inside. I grinned. "Do come in with us, Eddas Ayar, that we may yet feast ye proper-like!"

"Of course, Jhumni," Eddas replied, nodding. "I would be honored."

"And ye will yet have to return after the babe is yet born in four months, that ye may yet name her proper-like as her godfather!" I said, tugging him towards the gate. The guards waved and cheered, seeing us.

"I'm looking forward to that very much," Eddas replied, smiling. "As I said last week, once you've chosen the day for the ceremony and have the time to teach me what I must know for my part in it, just send a messenger to Iolo mountain, it's closer to Iron City and my daughters can relay it to me the same day."

"Have ye yet considered a name, Eddas?" Karadin asked.

"Yes. Bettara. It was the name of my nephew's wife. She's gone, now, of course, but I met her once - she was a wonderful woman, very beautiful, and she had several lovely children."

"Ah, Eddas," I said, sighing. "It be a lovely name to the ear o' a dwarf, like music! And it do rhyme with our word for silver, a bit!"

Eddas smiled. "Well, I thought about another name - Dyarzi. That was the name of my ancient beloved. When she died, I searched all the lands of the world I could reach trying to find a way to bring her back to me. And even other planes, to boot. She was beautiful, intelligent... A wonderful woman. That was my first choice... Err... Well, but then I realized it rhymed with the dwarven word for "Slag Heap", and that didn't seem like a really sparkling name to give a young girl, so I went with my second choice," Eddas said, and grinned.

I burst into giggles, squeezing Eddas' hand. "Oh, aye, I be yet certain that me daughter will yet thank ye when she be yet old enough to do ken thy decision, Eddas!"

"Well, let's get you inside before the sky gets too much for you, shall we?" Eddas said. As we neared the gate, the guards bowed, touching their beards respectfully for both Eddas and the *barab* he wore. Eddas inclined his head in return, smiling at them.

I trembled, keeping my gaze downward from the sky, but still smiled. "Eddas Ayar, with ye by me side, I can yet know no fear. And someday soon, all the dwarves will yet hail ye the same."

Karadin nodded, grinning as we walked through the gates. "Aye, wife. We do yet say that now, indeed we do."

The Raven - Fourteen.

The voices were soft, indistinct... And I found I lacked the strength to even lift my eyelids to see who might be speaking.

"How is he?"

"Just this side of death, My Queen. I have done all that herblore and sorcery can do, for the nonce - but both draw on the body's reserves, and he has none. He needs drink to try to rebuild the blood he has lost, but is too weak to swallow and is unconscious in any case. He will need to be kept warm, but he has no strength to keep himself warm, even should we layer blankets over him. If he survives until dawn, My Queen, I will be very surprised."

"Your answer is unsatisfactory. If he does *not* survive until dawn, I will be extremely disappointed in you. You will present a better answer immediately, or I will order you replaced as High Magess."

"Erm... Well... Perhaps if we get one of the servants to lie with him, and keep him warm?"

"Also unsatisfactory. Attendants: disrobe me. I shall lie with him myself."

A hand, a soft touch at my side...

"Cover us."

"Yes, My Queen."

"You will remain here and watch him every moment. If you fall asleep, I will have you whipped."

A gasp of shock. "My Queen!"

"Do not fail me. This is the one I dreamed of. I am certain of it. He is the one who can finally give me get."

"But... But he... He's pale as a maggot!"

"Precisely as in my dream. And I saw him fight - he is a great warrior of his people, just as in my dream. This *must* be the one. He *has* to have seed strong enough to give me an heir. *Do not fail me.*"

"Yes, My Queen."

### The Ocean - Three.

I bowed deeply to Eddas as we stood in his room at the top of his tower. The warm sunlight from the fall afternoon shone in through the western windows as I held my bow respectfully. I had waited a full day to be able to give him this apology, and only now that he had returned from Iron City was I able to deliver it. "Master Eddas, I am *deeply* and *truly* sorry I laughed at your *barab*."

Eddas bowed in return. "*Forglamma*, Sasha. It never happened. We shall not speak of it again in future," he replied, then smiled as he straightened up. "Besides, I had a feeling you would likely laugh, that's why I asked you to stay up here until we'd gone. The dwarves would *never* have understood, they'd have been deeply and profoundly insulted. I was merely annoyed."

"Merely?" Joy said, gazing at Eddas.

Eddas smiled wryly. "Alright, yes, perhaps more than merely, I do have to admit that *barab* does mean quite a bit to me," he said, then looked back to me. "But I accept your apology, Sasha. Truly, it is *forglamma*."

I smiled at him as I straightened up. "Really? It's alright?"

"Yes, forgiven and forgotten."



"Ummm... Well..."

"Yes?"

"Is it alright if I ask a question about it?"

Eddas shrugged. "Certainly," he replied, then looked to Joy. "Joy, is there any *byallar* left in that pot I smell? I managed to squeak away after breakfast so I could catch up with Durgrim, but then he just *had* to show me his new battle-axe - oh, and the magic throwing-knives he captured on his last raid of the dark-elves. Quite impressive, both, but I've completely missed lunch."

"Already fetching the *byallar*, Old Man, and I've some soup left I'll pour for you," Joy replied, smiling as she strode to the fireplace.

"Ah, lovely, thank you," he replied, pulling off his gloves and laying them on the table as he sat in his chair. "Sit, Sasha, we've time to chat now."

"*There's a chair here, Sister,*" Marilith added, patting the chair beside her on the opposite side of the table from Eddas.

I sat, taking Marilith's hand and smiling. "Well... I was wondering... I know you told us before why the *barab* is important to the dwarves, but... Why is it important to you, personally?"

Joy smiled at me as she set down a cup for Eddas. "He still misses his beard," she said, pouring a cup of *byallar* for him. "I've often wondered what it looked like."

"I've seen it on the astral, Joy," Marilith said, smiling. "It's quite magnificent."

Eddas grinned broadly as Joy walked back to the fireplace. "You really think so?"

"Yes, quite impressive," Marilith replied. Whether she was being truthful or simply trying to work our way back into his good graces, I didn't know. I hoped it was the former, I'd hate to be caught at the latter and have him angry again. The expression on his face after I laughed at him yesterday was *not* one I wanted to see again anytime soon. Even more, since Marilith and I desperately needed his help.

"Wait..." Joy said, pausing as she reached for the soup-pot. "Now, I have a question, Old Man. I've been listening to your lectures on the astral plane... How can an astral body have *hair*?"

"They don't," Eddas replied, smiling. "The astral form is a shell of ectoplasm which envelops the soul when the soul is projected from the body. Its shape and appearance is based primarily on the determining factors within the body and soul itself. The somatoplasm of the body is the largest factor, but there are several other factors that are involved, and... Well, I won't bore you with a long lecture or the mathematics of it, the end result is that astral form generally looks like the body of the projected individual. There are exceptions, however - such as that if they're missing limbs, the lost limbs will be visible and usable on the astral. With me, when I cast my spell of Hidden Life, my soul was bound to my animuary instead of the body I had back then, and my astral form was locked into the shape it had then - that of a bearded, shaven-headed Hyperborean male. The patterns of one's somatoplasm and germ plasm are stored in the animuary's *mana*-pattern structures, to be followed when acquiring a new body. But, the effect of the Skull of Hyarlanoth made *this* body my animuary, through a forced haptation effect - save that it's a living body, not a crystal vial, so if it dies I move on to the Afterlife. The silver cord generated by this body is linked to my soul, much as any other living being. But, because this body also is my animuary under the Laws of Magic, specifically the Law of Commutation, for the purposes of many spells it's treated as being an inanimate object. So, when it comes to my astral form, the mathematics of the Law of Commutation means that the somatoplasm and germ plasm of this body are irrelevant to the ectoplasm of my astral form - as though it didn't have any, like an inanimate object. Inside, I am still who I am - Eddas Ayar, a man of Hyperborea. And, on the astral, I still look as I did when I first cast the spell of Hidden Life, back in my first life in my thirties."

"Ah, I see," Joy said, spooning out some soup into a bowl.

I grinned. "I don't, but that's alright."

"Incidentally," Joy said, walking over to Eddas and placing a bowl of soup before him. "How is Durgrim?"

"Good - very good, in fact, once I told him what I was about. He's getting on a bit, but he's still a sharp and canny warrior, and once I told him that it was actually now *possible* there might be more females in their population in the future, the look on his face was absolutely priceless. None of the *akmaran* actually *want* to be what they are, after all. Declaring oneself as *akmaran* simply removes the social stigma for being unable to find or afford a bride. Of course, he'll have to begin accumulating a bride-price again, but that won't be too much trouble for someone of his skills. Why, those knives he captured on his last trip alone could buy him a rather nice bride, if he sold them," Eddas said, taking a sip of the soup before he continued. "Lovely work on the enchantments, truly, Joy. Four knives, they come back to their scabbards after they hit something. Strap them to your arm, draw and toss them one at a time, and you can have a constant stream of daggers flying at your enemy. Lovely enchantments - and the story of how he beat the dark-elf who was using them was quite exciting, I'll tell you it later."

"I'd love to hear it," Joy said, smiling.

"Oh - and the soup is fabulous, Joy, thank you."

Joy grinned broadly. "You're welcome, Old Man."

Eddas then looked to me. "Shall we return to working with Palomean martial arts in the morning, Sasha? I've been studying that table of pressure points used in battle you drew for me, it's all very fascinating."

"Err... Well..."

"Yes?"

"Ummm... Well, I'm really glad that you healed me, of course. Very glad. And it was really a wonderful experience. I mean, you just sang that lovely song, and... Wow, I just felt so much better, right then and there!"

"You're welcome," Eddas replied, sipping at his cup for a moment, the many rings on his hand flashing in the light.

"But... Err... Well... Now Marilith and I have to ask you for help again."

"Oh? Help with what?" Eddas asked, setting down his cup and reaching for the soup-spoon again.

*"Corvid, Master Eddas. He..."* Marilith said, and suddenly her composure broke, and she sobbed. *"He's dead, Master Eddas. He died fighting... I... I made a mistake, I distracted him in the duel he was fighting with the wizard's henchman. He was cut, mortally wounded, but he still won the duel, and rescued Sasha. He got Sasha into the water, and I dived after them, forming a mermaid's tail with sorcery so I could swim quickly. But I could only get one of them, Master Eddas, they were separated. I... I chose Sasha. And I know Corvid is dead. I looked for his body, hoping that maybe... I mean... You might be able to..."* she said, and sobbed again. *"But I can't find it. I can't. I've looked everywhere. He's gone. Please... Please help us."*

Eddas sat quietly, sipping at his soup-spoon. What he was waiting for, I did not know. Perhaps he was considering how to word some very bad news. I hoped not.

Finally, he set his soup-spoon aside, then picked up his cup of *byallar* and sipped at it for a moment before replying. "Marilith, he's hardly dead. He's the tool of a god, we're all a bit more difficult to kill than most."

"He's *not* dead?!" I yelped, elated.

"*But where is he?!*" Marilith yelped, shocked and happy.

"You really aren't ready to know, Marilith, and if I told you, you'd be miserable, so let's let the matter drop."

I blinked, gaping at Eddas in shock.

"*Master Eddas, please... Please tell me.*"

Joy gazed at Eddas, an eyebrow raised. "Old Man, I assume you have a reason for tormenting them?"

"I'm not tormenting them, Joy, I'm trying to spare them some heartache," Eddas replied, gesturing idly with his free hand.

"Oh?" Joy said, her fingers fluttering as she smoothed the front of her dress.

"Quite," Eddas replied, nodding, and sipped at his *byallar* again.

It dawned on me that their gestures meant more than their words - the '*Cant*, Joy had called it. It was a secret language of gestures that Eddas had taught Joy - but not Marilith and I. There was something going on, but I knew not what. And that was *immensely* frustrating.

Marilith sniffled. "*Master Eddas, I have wept for days and days, now, my heart is broken already. Please tell me.*"

"Marilith," Joy said, placing a small stand on the table and setting the pot atop it, "there are certain things Eddas knows that he doesn't tell. Sometimes, it's due to paradox - he can't speak of things he knows will happen because they are *\*Events\** the gods are working towards, and to speak of them risks paradox. Other times, like as now, he can't say simply because he is trying to protect people from harm. This is the latter. I know it hurts, but this is something you and Sasha simply do not want to know. Particularly you," she finished, and sat beside Eddas.

"Quite," Eddas said, and reached for his soup-spoon.

I opened my mouth to snap a curt reply, then closed it, and held my tongue. '*Be polite,*' Marilith had said last night, while we were cuddled together in our bed downstairs. '*Be excruciatingly polite. He's a man from an ancient civilization, extremely honorable - just as much as Buntaro was, if not more so. He may help us out of friendship for us, but if we offend his honor, the only way he'll help us is if his god orders him to. We've already offended him once, when you laughed at that barab. I know it looked silly to you, I understand you couldn't help but laugh. But it doesn't look silly to him, and it doesn't look silly to a dwarf. If the Goddess is with us, he'll grant us forglamma - for him, that means total forgiveness, he will not hold it against us, nor speak of it again so long as we never speak of it again and do not offend him again. Then, afterwards, be polite. Be excruciatingly polite.*'

Sound advice, I knew. Eddas hardly deserved me laughing at him, for any reason - he had healed Marilith, helped us find Orissa, and aided us in so many ways I couldn't possibly count them all. He was, really, a true friend, a great teacher, and a man of honor. But he was hardly going to help us if I insisted on letting my mouth run away with me. I started again, controlling myself carefully. "Master Eddas... With respect, my sister and I humbly request you tell us whatever you can. We both want to know, no matter how painful it may be to know."

*"Yes," Marilith agreed.*

Eddas sipped at his cup a moment longer, then gazed at Marilith. "Think carefully, Marilith - are you really ready to know?"

*"Yes, Master Eddas."*

"Alright. You made a mistake, Marilith. This mistake meant that both Yorindar and the Ocean were forced to make a deal with Esvina, the goddess of the Enebuans of Kush, to save his life. Without that arrangement, Yorindar would have been forced to allow him to die. Not only does Yorindar not surrender his pawns that easily, Corvid's loss would have badly affected both his game and the game of his ally, the Ocean. He lives, yes. But, the move that both Yorindar and the Ocean were trying against their mutual opponent has failed. The trap was avoided, and your lives were saved. But, Corvid's loss means he was no longer there to make the move that both Yorindar and the Ocean were trying to make against their mutual opponent. All three of you were required to finish that particular move. This failure has put both Yorindar and the Ocean in an extremely bad position, one that I'll likely have to rectify in about fifty years after the coming internecine war between the twenty or thirty-odd caliphates dies down and the future theocracy is firmly in place in Mysantia. And, because of this deal between the gods to save Corvid's life, you both have lost him."

I gaped at him, stunned, and Marilith burst into tears.

Eddas reached across the table to pat her hand. "Marilith, try to comfort yourself with the notion that he will eventually work himself free of where he is. I estimate that it will take about twenty or thirty years, but eventually, he'll be free of his obligations, and be able to catch a ship. From there, he'll work his way back to here over the course of another year or so. Once he has his ornithoper and his charts and maps again, he can find his way to Round Island, if he chooses."

*"But I want him now!"*

Eddas sat back again, reaching for his cup. "Well, you can't have him, so there we are."

I shook my head. "Wait... There's going to be a *war*?"

"Yes. Because of your failure, the god of the desert now has the advantage. Had you succeeded, both of the pawns of the god of the desert would have been lost, either on that ship or at the crater that used to be the Temple of the Sun, and all his plans that depended on them would have been defeated. Instead, you failed, and the god of the desert neatly sacrificed one pawn to spare another, and forge him at the same time. His pawn now has learned respect for warriors - something he didn't have before. His pawn has abandoned his original plan, which never would have worked anyway, and is now going to begin gathering an army of like-minded mundane warriors - several from the Hajja-clan of assassins - and like-minded wizards. Eventually, the theocracy will be in place, their leaders will all be mages. With a skilled army backing them and the stealthy blades of their assassins in the night to eliminate their opponents, they'll be able to enact the longer-range plans of their god, which is to expand the deserts and grow his power. Crushing them will be a bit of a bother for me, but that can't be helped, and at least I *do* have half a century to prepare for it."

"Err... Okay, but... He abandoned his original plan? What was it?"

"To rebuild the temple of the sun and imprison your sister again, naturally."

I blinked. "What?! You're kidding! I thought it was about *me*!"

"Hardly, Sasha. His whole goal was to get Marilith to go back to the Temple of the Sun, attempt to rebuild it from the crater that's there, and imprison Marilith again. He couldn't possibly force her to go there - though he's a master mage and a liche at least as old as I am, he's hardly the equal of the Great Mage who built that place. *That* pawn, the God of the Deserts sacrificed long ago - his heart gave out in building the temple and imprisoning Marilith, and he is now in the Afterlife."



"So, he was going to lead her there using *me* as bait?"

"Yes - that was the trap. Yorindar couldn't tell me about it, other than in the most obscure of terms, because it was an \*Event\* that the gods were working towards, a critical moment in future history. Once their move failed, that no longer became possible, so he was able to explain," Eddas said, and shrugged. "Of course, the kind of alignment of the celestial and earthly forces necessary to rebuild the temple won't even happen again for another two centuries, so the plan was doomed to failure from the start, and Marilith would have died. But, the Temple of the Sun was a volcanic spire, Sasha, and the forces that built it still remain, in slumber deep within the earth. In attempting to re-ignite that volcano and re-form the spire, he would have caused an earthquake along the plate that forms the Barrier Peaks, and the eastern edge of the Inland Sea. An earthquake in just the wrong spot, at just the wrong time - or, the right spot at the right time, for the god of the desert. This earthquake would have shifted the way the plates interact, causing a chain reaction that released massive volcanoes over a thousand leagues away, along the northern expanses of the Barrier Peaks, two hundred leagues from the easternmost point of the Inland Sea. The courses of rivers that feed the Inland Sea from the east would be changed, and in the long run, the weather along the eastern shores of the Inland Sea would change, along with the weather in the southern expanses of the Mysantian desert and the northern expanses of the jungles of Kush. The desert would begin to grow southwards, instead of the jungles and forests slowly moving northwards over the aeons. Also, the forests and jungles along the southeastern edge of the Inland Sea would begin to dry out, allowing the desert to creep closer to the sea. Several hundred thousand Mysantians would have died in the earthquakes, weakening their god's position in his game for the short term. But, the long term goal would be served, and future history would have been irrevocably altered. Corvid was Yorindar's attempt to interrupt that. Corvid loves Marilith, and you. He was more than willing to sacrifice his life for you, if necessary. In the final confrontation, protected by Marilith's spells, he could have beaten that wizard. But, he isn't going to be there, nor is Marilith, nor are you. The \*Event\* will never come to pass, because none of the pawns will be there in place for it."

I shook my head. "But I never would have *survived* all the way there, Master Eddas! I was *dying!*"

"Sasha, two things: First, if that mage had bought more food in that city and told you he'd feed you and water you regularly if you promised to behave, would you have obeyed?"

I blinked, then paused, thinking about it. After a long moment, I grudgingly nodded. "Yes. I was... I was very weak. I'd have agreed to anything, at that point."

"Secondly, even if you had died, do you *really* think Corvid and Marilith would just shrug their shoulders and go home, or do you think they'd have followed him to the ends of the earth to kill him in revenge?"

"Well..." I said, and sighed again. "But wait, though... You're talking about... *Huge* things! Earthquakes, volcanoes! Changing the face of the land!"

"What, did you think the gods limited themselves to struggles over the death of a butterfly?" Eddas said, and shook his head. "They *do* fight over such things, Sasha, but they often fight over much, much larger things. And in all their contests, even ones that seem utterly trivial to us such as the birth of a child, the fate of the world is often at stake. The child that's born could be a great king when they grow up - or, in Jhumni's case, the answer to a long-held prayer for a people. And more, you yourself have been involved in tremendously huge things. You fought a war in Palome, the end result of which was the unification of all their kingdoms under a single emperor, satisfying an arrangement between the Goddess of the Ocean and the gods of Palome, in exchange for forging you to be stronger. You unified the mer-folk of the Windward Isles, gave them the tools and knowledge they needed to dominate the seas around them, and taught them literacy so they could begin to found a more advanced civilization - one that in time will draw mer-folk from all around the world to live, including the wandering mer-magi. You've even taken the first steps towards building trade with the mer-folk and the civilizations around them, which in time will be quite important to them. And your actions helped destroy the Temple of the Sun, which changed the future of this world irrevocably, releasing the arrested forces of sun and moon, tides and continents, restoring a cycle that had been interrupted for almost two thousand years. And you went into the past to the time of the Great War of Devastation and were instrumental in events which eventually led to the destruction of the Hyperborean people, which in turn allowed the people who birthed you, the Arcadians, to come into existence - possibly the most dramatic paradox I have ever heard of, and one of literally earth-shattering proportions," Eddas said, and shook his head again. "No, Sasha. You've been involved in some very large events - you've just never had the vision to truly see and understand what you've actually accomplished."

I gaped. "I... I..."

"Corvid's idea of catching the ship when they stopped for food and drink bypassed the trap that the god of the desert intended. Even had you been unable to do it, however, he still could have stopped the wizard at the crater, saving Marilith's life and yours. But now, that plan has failed, and the god of the desert has the advantage. The gods never just have one plan in motion, they always have several at once. Like in a game of *chatto*, a player has to be flexible as to where he'll move his pawns, and when a thrust in one direction fails, he has to have his pawns in position to move elsewhere. Though the god of the

desert lost one pawn, he was able to forge his other pawn, and begin a new plan which eventually I will have to put a stop to. If I can. Of course, I do have fifty years to prepare for that particular confrontation. I've grown quite adept at reading the meaning behind Yorindar's hints, and though paradox prevents him from telling me precisely what nature this future conflict will take, I can certainly guess. An army of elves and dwarves combined with an army of giants, centaurs, gorgons, dragons, lamias, and other beings from Hyperborea with a few hundred of my daughters supporting all three armies with battle-magic would likely do the job, though I've several notions as to how I might handle it myself. It all depends on how things turn out," Eddas said, then sipped at his cup of *byallar* again.

I gazed at Eddas wide-eyed, utterly astounded. "I... I'm sorry, it's just hard for me to imagine that I've actually been *that* important... Or that what Marilith and I and you and Joy are doing is... *So big!*" I shook my head. "Marilith and I... We decided that between the two of us, *she* would be the Ancient One with the greater perspective, and I would be... Well... The mysterious mermaid, I suppose."

Marilith sighed, laying her head on the table, her cheeks damp with tears. "*I do not know if I can do that, right now. All I want is Corvid. It is... It is incredibly hard, knowing that my mistake cost me his loving embrace. And it is just impossible for me to let him go.*"

I leaned down to her, hugging her and kissing her damp cheek. "I want him, too, Sister. I remember those stories you told me, late at night, when I was in chains aboard that ship," I said, and looked up to Eddas. "Those stories kept me alive, Master Eddas. It was all I had - the hope that this wonderful man my sister kept telling me of each night would come to save me. And he *did* come to save me. But then... We lost him. I see her pain, I feel it with her. I want what we've lost. Perhaps I didn't have the time with him she did, and perhaps I don't really know him as well as I could. But I know what she told me, and I feel in my heart the man that she described to me. And I love that man. And I want him. She says that man is Corvid. So, I want Corvid. I don't want to wait twenty or thirty years for him. He'll be old... Fifty, maybe sixty. I want him now."

Eddas shrugged. "Well, you can't have him, so there we are," he said again, and held his cup out for Joy. Joy refilled Eddas' cup silently from the pot of *byallar*.

Marilith wept quietly, tears streaming from her eyes. I looked to Eddas imploringly. "Please, Master Eddas, there must be a way! Please help us get him back!"

"You haven't the faintest clue what you're asking. The goddess of the Enebua *needs* Corvid, a deal has been struck, and she isn't going to just let him go because you want him."

Marilith lifted her head from the table, her cheeks damp with tears. "*Please. I love him.*"

"Do you realize you're talking about opposing the will of three gods?! A deal has been struck! It's *done!* Marilith, you of *all* people should know what that *really* means!"

"*Yes, I do. Please.*"

Joy reached out, placing a hand atop Eddas' arm. "Old Man?"

"Yes, Joy?"

"Corvid is for them what I am for you, Old Man. If you made a mistake and lost me, how far would you go to get me back?"

Eddas gazed at Joy silently for a moment before replying. "I would move the skies and the earth for you, Joy. I would search the seven higher planes, and batter down the gates of hell to find you. And if any deity opposed me, I would fight the very gods themselves to win you back to me."

Joy smiled, and kissed Eddas lovingly for a long moment. She then leaned back, and nodded to Marilith and I. "So it is for them, Old Man. Perhaps not quite for Sasha, yet. But for Marilith, yes."

"Joy, Marilith was never at issue. It's Sasha who has always been the problem."

I blinked, startled. "Me?! How?!"

Eddas gazed at me calmly. "Because you, like that wizard who captured you, lack vision. You have grown enough to where you can *understand* that your actions have a greater scope, but you can't *see* that greater scope, yourself. He simply responds to the dreams his god gives him. He understands their source, and he understands he is doing his god's will. But he lacks the vision to truly comprehend the greater picture. So do you."

"I... Well..."

"Marilith grasps the greater picture - she is a demoness, and nearly three thousand years old. Even Corvid grasps the greater picture. He held his father's sword in his hand, heard his father's stories, and when I told him that yes, I forged it eighteen centuries before, in his mind he could see he was a part of a greater tapestry of events, working towards a greater future. You, however, lack that vision. You understand it, yes. Your time in ancient Hyperborea served you well, in that regard. But you can't *see* it, yourself."

"And... And you're saying that my being able to see the larger picture, my place in all this... That will help us get Corvid back?"

"*Exactly,*" Eddas replied, and I felt a chill run down my spine as he spoke.

Marilith shuddered, squeezing my hand, and I nodded. "Alright... Help me to understand, please. Help me to see that larger picture."

"I can try - but there are things I cannot tell you. Some things I cannot tell you simply because I do not know. Other things I cannot tell you because they are \*Events\* the gods are working towards, in the future. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Master Eddas."

"Good. We'll begin with the basics: When is your birthday?"

I blinked again. "Ummm... Well, I don't know. My father always celebrated it in the spring, because that's when he found me on the beach in that trunk of clothes from the shipwreck. He guessed I was less than a year old when he found me, but..." I said, and shrugged.

"Your sister knows. She knows precisely when you were born, and where."

I looked to Marilith. "You *do*?!"

Marilith nodded. "*Yes, Sasha. I watched and waited for you for almost two thousand years.*"

"But... But why didn't you tell me before?!"

Marilith managed a smile. "*You never asked.*"

"Which," Eddas said, nodding, "is at the heart of the problem."

I nodded. "Alright. I'm asking now."

Marilith smiled at me. *"You were born on the first day of fall in the year seventeen fifty-two, by the calendar used in the Southlands. You were born in the city of Riverside, twenty leagues south of Greenhaven along the Thunder River. Your mother was Vitalla Maylan, your father Kalas Maylan. Kalas Maylan was born in the year seventeen thirty in the city of Greenhaven, to a wealthy family of merchants. He was sent to Riverside to work in his uncle's offices there. His uncle was there because he'd been sent in seventeen ten to rebuild the family's business in Riverside, which was burned and looted by the goblin horde that King Noril defeated in the Battle of Steelgate six years before, following the murder of Queen Lyssa. Your mother's family had lived in Riverside since it was first settled in the early sixteenth century, and prior to that, her ancestors had lived in Greenhaven. Greenhaven was settled in the early fourteenth century by farmers and herders who had migrated north, fleeing the effects of the civil war that marked the birth of the Larinian nation, to the south. Of those who were your ancestors, they were part of the Arcadian nation which eventually evolved in the eighth century from smaller kingdoms which had preceded it. Those smaller kingdoms evolved from the scattered bands of Golannin warriors and captive, transformed Hyperborean women that had fled the destruction of the Great War of Devastation, some eight centuries before. Of your Hyperborean ancestor, her name was Zajaza, and she came from a family of weavers in a small village near Costora-city. Of your Golannin ancestor, you are derived from a single officer of the Seventh Brigade, Raktarl, of which I know little more. I did not see the Great War of Devastation - I was imprisoned before it began, and spent most of my time during the first two centuries or so screaming in pain. After I had adjusted to my situation and was able to look around, it was already over. But the Ocean whispered to me of you, and told me the line from whence you would be born. And I watched that line for centuries thereafter, waiting, hoping..."* Marilith said, and sighed. *"Your father was eventually sent along with his cousin to establish an office in New Solith City, and hopefully expand your family's wealth through taking part in international trade and shipping. Their ship was caught in a storm, and driven onto the shoals just south of the Village of Woe. Corvid's father was a sailor aboard that ship - and the only other survivor. He placed you aboard that trunk of clothes and cast you in the sea - all in accordance with a deal between Yorindar and the Ocean, which he knew nothing of. You washed ashore on the beach, and your Vilandian adoptive father found you at dawn."*

"Oh..." I said, my mind awhirl.

"As you can see, Sasha," Eddas said, gazing at me, "you didn't just crawl out from under a rock. Your family line has been the focus of Marilith's attention for centuries. And, it's been the focus of the gods' attention even longer. Thousands of people, your ancestors, stretched across time through the centuries, all leading up to your birth. Thousands more, Corvid's ancestors, all leading up to his birth. You are part

of a tapestry of countless billions of events, great and small, going back into the past beyond the Great War of Devastation, beyond even the rise of the Hyperborean people, back to the beginning of the Arc of Time. You are part of a tapestry of countless billions of events that leads forward into the future - a future the gods are attempting to shape. Births, deaths, friendships, love, hatred, peace, war... All of it, countless billions of events in a greater tapestry of existence, slowly being woven by the gods to form the future of our world, and our universe. You love Corvid - or, you love the man your sister told you of, at least. But you must see that you and he and Marilith and Joy and myself... We are all a part of a much larger existence, from the lowliest farmer to the highest king. In the plans of the gods, the fall of a leaf can change history - and the wail of a newborn can turn into the battle-cry of a king, marshaling his armies to change the face of the world."

Eddas fell silent then, apparently allowing me a moment to think about what he'd said. And I took that moment, because I needed it. The vision that Eddas had revealed to me through his words was a vast one.

Eddas gazed at me, watching my expression, then nodded. "And now, seeing the scope of the things you are dealing with, are you prepared to hear the deal that Yorindar and the Ocean made with Esvina, the Goddess of the Enebua Kushites, and why?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"Alright," Eddas replied, and began.

I listened quietly, squeezing Marilith's hand. Marilith squeezed back, also listening. It was a simple thing - the 'why' of it, I could easily understand. The 'how' of it, I did not understand at all, but Marilith apparently did, judging by her expression. I decided to ask her, later.

"And that is the plans of the gods, and where Corvid fits in," Eddas finished, then shrugged. "And that is also why you cannot have him back."



I shook my head. "No, I disagree."

Eddas raised a perfectly-arched eyebrow. "I beg your pardon?"

"I disagree. I think we *can* get him back, if we can fix what went wrong."

Eddas rolled his eyes. "Impossible."

Marilith held up a hand. "*Wait, not quite. There is one way,*" she said, and briefly explained.

Eddas rolled his eyes again. "You two are impossible. You're both as stubborn as I am."

I grinned, and Marilith giggled.

"I did *not* intend that as a compliment. I accept that this is one of the things I need Joy for - to temper my stubbornness with common sense."

*"Perhaps this is one of the things we need Corvid for - to temper my stubbornness and brash mistakes with his quick wit and level-headedness, and to temper Sasha's stubbornness and smaller perspective with his sailor's experience, broader perspective and masculine outlook,"* Marilith said, squeezing my hand. *"I am by far the older between Corvid and I, Master Eddas, but I did not plan every move we made - Corvid and I worked together, hand in glove. I found that my own background as a demon made me wish to simply brush aside the mortals we dealt with, and simply move on. With the centaurs, that might have gotten the both of us killed. He was right, I followed his advice, and that turned out well. With the Enebua, he knew things about their culture I did not, and made our time there much easier. And when I lay on Round Island, mute and wounded, he discovered how to communicate with me, and how to heal me. He is wise, Master*

*Eddas, and he has a sharp, inventive mind. I will not give up on him."*

"Perhaps," Eddas replied, "but what you've proposed, you could not do. Only *Sasha* could do it."

I nodded my jaw firm. "And I *will* do it, too."

"And of what *you* have proposed, *Sasha*," Eddas said, looking at me, "only *I* could do. And it will hardly be as easy as you think - just getting *in* there will be tremendously difficult, the pawn that *Esvina* intended to use to get me there can no longer do so, she is absorbed in caring for *Corvid*."

"*Well, I remember Corvid's explanations of how their culture works, and there may be a way,*" Marilith said, and outlined a brief plan.

Joy gaped at Marilith. "Are you *insane?! He's not a god, he can't just sweep an entire army aside at a gesture!*"

"Joy," Eddas said, as a breeze from the open door to the parapet caught his hair.

"It's ridiculous! *Insane!*" Joy shouted, glaring at Marilith. "You'd end up getting *your* love back, but it might be at the cost of *mine!* '*Brash mistakes*', you said?! Oh, most *definitely* brash! And *stupid!* *Idiotic! Outrageous! Why, I-*"

"Joy," Eddas said again, calmly.

"What?!" Joy snapped, looking at him.

"You left the glass door open. The breeze has blown something onto your hair from outside."

Joy reached up to her long, blonde hair, flowing over her shoulders, and drew her hand back, holding a single black feather. "Oh, DAMMIT!"

Eddas took the feather from her hand, then leaned forward, kissing her cheek. "It will be alright, Joy. We'll have to allow the gods some time to set things up so it is possible. Paradox, Joy. They are responding to *our* plan to help them fulfill their own plans, rather than the other way around - and that means they can't simply tweak the past to make it happen, they can only act now, from this moment, to arrange the future. Yorindar will have to let me know when things are arranged. But, it will be alright."

"It had *better be*, Old Man! If you think I'm going to-*mmmmph!*" Joy began, interrupted by Eddas kissing her lips.

Eddas smiled, but Joy simply glowered at him. "Don't just think I'm merely annoyed, Old Man, I am utterly furious with-" Joy began again, and was again interrupted by Eddas' kiss - much longer, and with more passion.

Eddas leaned back, and smiled again. "There. Better, Joy?"

Joy grinned wryly. "No, still a bit more annoyance left, Old Man. One more should do it."

Eddas grinned, and they embraced for a long moment, kissing lovingly.

I grinned, watching them. "Sister, that's what *I* want."

Marilith nodded. "*Except a bit taller,*" she said, and burst into giggles.

#### The Raven - Fifteen.

I awoke in a strange room that smelled of flowers, the sound of a quiet flute and drum in the background. A soft woven blanket of several colors lay over me, and the bed I lay upon felt rich, sumptuous. My head and shoulders were propped up a bit on some enormously large and soft pillows, and as I looked around, I saw the walls were draped in light fabrics of several colors. A warm breeze came through a nearby archway, fluttering the hangings on the walls. *'Where in the world am I?'*

"He is awake, My Queen," a voice called in the language of Enebua. I glanced to my right - an Enebua Kushite woman gazed back at me. She looked *tremendously* tired. By the light yellow robe, she was from the temple of Esvina - and by the golden chain headdress she wore that flowed over her hair and down her shoulders, likely the High Magess.

Another kushite woman stepped over quickly, kneeling beside the bed. Also an Enebua Kushite, she had a firm, muscular body, her ebon skin smooth and nearly flawless, marred only by a small scar here and there, apparently from battle. A warrior, and apparently an experienced one, she had a beautiful,

noble face. She wore golden breast-plates held to her with gold chain, a loincloth of Enebuan samite, and an eagle-feather headdress with a gold band, and - most astonishingly - a flowing peacock-feather cloak that draped from her shoulders and down to her ankles. I gaped openly - there was only *one* woman in *all* of Enebua who wore the peacock cloak.

"How do you feel?" she asked, smiling at me.

"Qu-queen Gonnakasi?!" I replied, astonished.

She smiled more broadly. "You know my name, but I know not yours. Can you tell me that, at least?"

"Corvid, your majesty. Corvid Hremn," I replied, trying to sit up. Pain stabbed my side, and the queen laid her hand upon my bare chest.

"No, no. Rest, for now. You were very close to death." Gonnakasi nodded to the High Magess. "Covema saved you with her sorcery and a bit of herblore, but she says your wound still needs to heal."

The High Magess smiled through what looked like total exhaustion. "No, My Queen, you saved him with the warmth of your body. I merely sealed the wound, and worked to repair the damage within. It was your warmth which kept him alive."

"Your modesty is appreciated, but shall be ignored," the Queen replied. "Is there anything further you need do with him?"

"No, My Queen, he is past the crisis point. The wound is sealed, the scars good. If treated gently, he will recover fully. Water and soft foods the first few days, then normal meals thereafter."

"Good, good. I thank you, Covema. You did not fail me," the queen replied warmly. "We shall sacrifice together, later, in thanks to the Goddess. For now, rest," she said, then looked to the four female attendants by the door, each dressed in a short white garment that left their arms bare and their legs bare from the hips down. "Summon my porters with my divan immediately, and have the High Magess borne back the guest quarters instantly! Prepare a bath and a meal for her, and have my personal masseuse tend to her! Now!" she snapped, in a voice like steel.

"Yes, My Queen!" the attendants replied, and darted out of the room through the open door like their rumps were on fire, the sound of their sandals slapping against the marble floors rapidly fading.

"My Queen," the High Magess replied, "I'm deeply honored, but really, I can walk back to the temple and... Ah..." she said, her voice faltering as the queen gazed at her silently. "That would be lovely, my queen, I am honored."

The queen then turned back to me, her expression warm, her voice soft. "And now, I ask again, Corvid Hremn... How do you feel?"

I smiled what I hoped was my most pleasant smile. My father didn't raise any idiots. "Quite sore, your majesty, but quite grateful, as well. A bit hungry and tremendously thirsty, though."

"This is a good sign," the High Magess said, smiling as the attendants ran back into the room. Four female porters followed behind them, bearing a litter consisting of a long backless couch with portage poles. One end of the couch was angled upwards, and it looked a marvelously comfortable way to ride about. The porters themselves were lean, wiry women who looked very strong.

"Indeed. I shall call if you are needed, Covema. Eat, bathe, and rest."

"Yes, My Queen," she replied, rising, then stepped over to sit on the litter. Once she had lain herself on it, the porters lifted it up and turned about, heading for the door.

"A meal!" the queen snapped, looking to her attendants. "Water, now, and rolled oats to follow, boiled well and served with milk and honey!"

"Yes, My Queen!" the attendants replied, darting out of the room again.

The queen then smiled at me, her voice soft again. "I've been told men of your people drink milk, forgive me if it is not true."

I smiled. I hadn't drunk milk since I was a child, it simply didn't last at sea. But, I'd eaten my fair share of cheese and butter, and then some. "Not precisely, your majesty, but close enough."

"Not precisely? Pray, explain, I find I am quite curious. It is our own belief that milk, for a man... Ah... Lessens his fertility."

"Well, given the swelling numbers of people there are in the Southlands, I'd have to say that though that may be true for your people, it doesn't seem to be true for ours. Milk is a very common drink there, though usually only farmers drink it, it doesn't store well. Meat is also common, for those who can afford it, as is cheese, butter, cream and eggs."

"Oh? And do your farmers have many children?"

I smiled. "They breed like rabbits."

The queen laughed - she had a strong, clear laugh, the laugh of a warrior. "Good, good," she said, looking up as two of her attendants ran back into the room, one carrying a jug, and the other carrying two mugs. They quickly filled one of the mugs with water, then held it out to the queen, bowing. She took it, reaching an arm behind me to lift me up from the pillows. She was quite strong. "Drink, Corvid Hremn."

I did so quietly, wondering just how much trouble I was really in. My initial estimation was 'quite a bit', but that was subject to revision. One doesn't have the queen of the most powerful and wealthy Kushite nation tending to you hand and foot unless she has a damn good reason for doing so. I could only hope that reason would, at least, not be painful or require much more than lying on my back, as I barely had the energy to hold my head up and my side already was quite sore as it was. "May I ask how I got here, your majesty?"

"You were involved in a duel on the docks. I was passing nearby, and ordered my bearers to bring my palanquin close enough to see what was happening. I saw a good portion of that fight, though apparently I missed the beginning. You were quite good, I was very impressed. When at the end your opponent got in a lucky blow, I thought that not quite fair. I ordered my guards to recover you from the water, bind your wound and bear you here while my attendants went to fetch the High Magess, to see if we might save your life. And, fortunately, we did," she finished, and smiled.

"I am immensely grateful, your majesty."

Gonnakasi smiled more broadly. "I'll bear that in mind."

I revised my estimate of the trouble I was in upwards slightly, and smiled back. "Your majesty, I was fighting there to try and rescue a woman that had been kidnapped. She... Well, she is a woman of my people, red-haired, pale of skin. What happened to her after?"

The queen's smile faded. "Drowned, as was the woman you came to this city with. You apparently stumbled overboard after you were wounded, and you were carrying the red-haired one. The foreigner Kushite you came to the city with apparently dived in, attempting to rescue the both of you, and also



drowned. The currents near the bottom of the harbor are swift, a rip-tide that is dangerous to swim in. The red-haired woman's body was not found, nor the body of the foreigner Kushite you came to our city with. Please accept my condolences if they were relations of yours."

*'They can't have drowned, they can't,'* I thought, turning my gaze from her. Sasha was a mermaid... Or, at least partly so. She can't have drowned... Could she? As for Marilith, it was questionable if she even needed air to begin with.

And yet, if they *weren't* drowned, then this begged the question... Where were they? Why was I here, and not with them?

I tried to search my memories of what happened, and found that they were blurred. I did not remember going into the water. I remembered fighting Hassan, being wounded, and killing him. Beyond that... I simply could not recall. Shock, I knew. I'd seen it in men after battle myself, many a time. In my slaver-hunting days, I always kept a good healer aboard my ships, usually the best physicker I could hire. It was expensive, yes - they got a triple share of the booty. But, it was worth it, in my estimation. A dead man was merely a corpse, but a man who had been healed with herbal concoctions and stitching after a battle to fight again was not only far more useful, but the story of his care and recovery aided me greatly when it came time to gather a new crew for another voyage. Yet, many a time, a severely wounded man did not remember the moments leading up to his injury or following it, once he recovered. 'Shock', the physickers called it. I was no physicker myself, and had no better explanation.

I lifted the blanket, for a moment, gazing at myself. I was nude beneath it, and the scar across the left side of my abdomen livid and fresh. Marilith had not done it, in my estimation. She should have been able to heal me without a scar, given what I knew of her abilities. The queen's story had to be true - I was healed by the herblore and sorcery of the High Magess. This also would explain her apparent utter exhaustion, as she'd likely been up all night making certain I stayed alive.

Drowned... How could they possibly have drowned?

Yet, Sasha was weak. Deathly weak. Perhaps... Perhaps she hadn't had the strength to transform into a mermaid when we went into the water. Yet, I could not remember. Did I fall, or did she ask me to take her there, or...?

I sighed, my gaze on the fluttering draperies near the archway, gently rippling in the warm breeze.

"You weep," the queen said, gazing at me. "Who was the red-headed woman, to you?"

I shook my head. Explaining that would likely take more energy than I had. "We were to be married, your majesty, but she was kidnapped. The other..." I said, and shook my head again. That, too, was impossible to explain simply. "She brought me here, she was her half-sister."

"Ah," the queen said, her voice level. "The wizard who owned the vessel told the guards that you and the man you killed apparently had an ancient enmity he knew nothing of. As we had no reason to prevent him from leaving, we allowed him to purchase food and drink, and sail away."

"So it was all for nothing," I said. My heart felt like lead.

"Kerchief," the queen said, snapping her fingers as she gazed at me calmly. She held her hand above her shoulder, and heartbeats later, an attendant dashed up, placing a kerchief in her hand. She then daubed gently at my tears, her voice soft again. "We did not know, Corvid Hremn. Again, I extend my condolences."

Moments later, an attendant trotted into the room, bearing a tray with a steaming bowl of oatmeal. Another followed close behind, bearing a small jug in each hand. The queen pulled the blanket up over me a bit higher, then laid the kerchief across my chest, below my neck. One of the attendants held out the bowl, and the queen poured milk and honey into it, stirring it slowly, then held a spoon of it to my lips. "Eat, Corvid Hremn. You've been through quite a bit, you need food to heal and be well."

I ate in silence, as it seemed unwise to decline and I was quite hungry. I revised my estimation of the

trouble I was in to 'dreadfully severe.' One does not have a queen serve one pap with milk and honey spoonful by spoonful without her having an *astoundingly* good reason to do so. And when one considered that this was Gonnakasi, Queen of the Enebua, my only possible conclusions were I had died and gone to the Afterlife and was enjoying my eternal reward, or whatever it was she was eventually going to ask me for was going to be something on the nature of a suicide mission. While it would have been nice to presume the former, the pain in my side tended to hint that I, unfortunately, still lived - so it was likely the latter.

When the last of the pap was gone, the queen carefully wiped what little had dripped onto me with the kerchief, then looked me over. "I see you shave, Corvid."

"Yes, your majesty," I replied, running a hand over the stubble on my face, "though not since yesterday."

The queen smiled at me. "Would you like to shave now?"

I smiled, fearing the worst. "Well... That would be nice, thank you, but I feel like I've been trampled by an oiliphant, I've really not the strength to do it today."

"I would be pleased to do it for you, Corvid," she replied.

Oh, I was *truly* in trouble, now.

"Thank you, your majesty. I would be honored."

I thought that a rather wise reply, and far better than telling her I wasn't truly honored. I was, rather, totally stunned, flabbergasted, and dreading the wait for her to finally lower the boom and tell me what

baleful deed she needed me to do. Possibly there was some creature somewhere that they needed slain, and she had decided that my swordsmanship showed I was the best to do it. That seemed a likely explanation - something vicious, likely man-eating, and amazingly deadly.

I considered what I knew of Kushite wild-life as the attendants scrambled at Gonnakasi's order. There were quite a few beasts that would qualify. Lions were bad enough, though rare here in the south. Panthers were more common here, but they weren't dangerous enough to warrant this kind of treatment. What could it be?

*'Ah, of course,'* I thought. Basilisks - it had to be. A stumpy-tailed, six-legged lizard with a large maw, basilisks did not look anywhere near as deadly as they truly were, though they hardly looked friendly. But, the truth was they were ambush hunters, and their gaze could petrify. The saliva of the beast turned it's victim back to flesh, bite-by-bite, but couldn't be used to restore a victim if gathered - it worked, yes, but they were still dead. A basilisk deciding to move into one of their gold mines and content itself on the occasional miner could put a serious crimp in their economy, and would require someone expendable to go kill it. Unfortunately, most people did not consider themselves expendable, and Gonnakasi might have come up short on a call for brave warriors to rid her of the beast.

*'Hmmm... No, a basilisk would never go into a mine,'* I thought, as the attendants returned with a razor, strop, mug, soap, water and brush. *'They can't see a thing at night, that's when the trophy-hunters go after them. It has to be something nastier than that.'* There was little left in Kush that was, however. Chimeras and Manticores were bad, but a company of archers had little to fear from them. Rocs were outrageously bad, but as they limited their predations to things the size of oiliphants and larger, it seemed very unlikely that would be it. The only thing left was dragons. That thought made me shudder as Gonnakasi worked the soap into a lather, then began applying it with the brush to my face.

Everyone had heard of dragons, of course, but few had seen them. Immense beasts... Truly titanic in size, ancient, covered in scales tougher than steel, able to breathe fire, spit acid, and do sorcery. *'That has to be it. There's a dragon that's decided to settle on one of her gold mines.'* That would be an incredible problem for them, and one that even their army might not be able to handle. How *I* might be able to deal with it, I did not know. But certainly, that *had* to be the reason that the Queen of the Enebua was gently, carefully and precisely shaving my face like a humble maidservant.

It is generally unwise to chat while you're being shaved unless either your barber is quite skilled or you enjoy being cut, so I remained silent as she worked so as not to test the queen's skill at shaving men. She used a good bronze razor, honed keenly, and I could feel it shaved well. I preferred bronze razors,

myself, they held a keener edge than iron, did not tarnish easily and were generally cheaper than steel.

Finally, she cleaned the last of the soap from my face with a damp cloth, then looked me over. I smiled. "Your majesty, if I may ask?"

"Yes?"

"Where is the dragon?"

Gonnakasi raised an eyebrow, gazing at me. "Whatever do you mean?"

I opened my mouth to explain what I meant, then clapped it shut. My father *still* hadn't raised any fools, and if she claimed to have no idea what I was talking about, it might not necessarily be wise to prod her for an answer. She would tell me what she intended in her own time. "Nothing, your majesty, terribly sorry, a small joke of my people."

Gonnakasi smiled, reaching down to stroke my smooth-shaven jaw with her hand. "I'm afraid I don't understand the humor, but that's alright," she said, and leaned in to me, kissing me softly. She then leaned back, smiling again. "I'm afraid it's near noon, I have to hold court. The affairs of state cannot be put off, Corvid. I'll be back after, however, and we can chat more. If you have any needs, speak to the attendants, they will see to them," she said softly, then rose, turning to gaze at her attendants, her voice again turning to steel as she pointed to two of them. "You, and you. Watch him closely, attend to his every need instantly. Stay within arm's reach of him at all times. If there is any problem, fetch the High Magess instantly. *Do not fail me.*"

"Yes, My Queen!" the two attendants replied in chorus, dashing over to me and kneeling beside the bed.

"Good," she replied, then turned and strode out of the room, the peacock cloak billowing behind her as she walked, the remainder of her attendants following in her wake.

My lips still tingled with her kiss, and I realized that whatever it was she was eventually going to ask me to do, it almost certainly was not going to be something I would survive. Unfortunately, I lacked the strength to even consider escaping, so there was nothing I could do about it, for the moment.

I gazed at the ceiling, draped as it was in delicate fabrics, my mind flitting back to Marilith and Sasha. Drowned, the queen had said. Drowned and dead. It seemed so impossible... And yet, Sasha had been so desperately weak and ill, and I knew myself from previous visits to this city that the rip-tide in the harbor was deadly. She might indeed have drowned if she lacked the strength to transform back into a mermaid, and Marilith might have drowned trying to save her. Both of their corpses would have been sucked out to sea by the rip-tide, and lost. Had she asked me to take her into the water, or had I simply stumbled overboard trying to rescue her after being wounded? I did not know. But, as I was here and not with them, it seemed they truly were gone.

Sasha... The princess of my childhood fantasy, come to life. And Marilith, her sister, a fantasy of her own. I had loved Sasha since childhood, and though I was wise enough to know that the reality might be nothing near my childhood fantasy, her beauty, intelligence and charm would likely more than make up for that. And as for Marilith... Ah, Marilith. Wise, yet sometimes foolish. Powerful, yet sometimes needing protection. It had seemed somehow that my entire life had been building up to the climax of finally having those two for my own...

...and now, they were gone.

I did not know what to think, and the only person I could think of to ask was thousands and thousands of leagues away, literally on the other side of this continent. Indeed, Eddas Ayar was literally almost as far away from me as one could possibly get and still *be* on this continent. Of course, even if he knew what happened to Marilith and Sasha through some mysterious means beyond my understanding, there was little I could do at the moment. It seemed very unlikely I'd be able to crawl out past the attendants and the palace guards and somehow remain unnoticed. The way I felt right now, I didn't even know if I had the strength to crawl to the door.

And that was going to be a problem, as I hadn't wet the bed since I was two and had little intention of starting, now. I sighed, looking to the attendants. "Ummm..."

"Yes, Lord?" they replied in chorus.

"I... Err... I find I have to urinate."

Instantly the one on the right reached below the bed, fetching an oddly-shaped pan, while the other darted around the bed to the other side. It was apparent the pan would go beneath me.

Soon, the deed was done, and one of the attendants darted off, carrying the pan away - I guessed to empty and clean it before returning it, though I hardly thought that it was wise to be running around through the royal palace carrying something like *that*. I resolved that I would gather my strength as quickly as I could, so as to both escape whatever suicide mission the queen had in mind for me, return to Hyperborea and perhaps learn the fates of my beloved, as well as to avoid having to ever again suffer the tremendous embarrassment of a strange woman holding my penis while I urinated into a pan.

Drowned... How could they have drowned?

## The Ocean - Four.

Eddas and Joy seemed ready, and I looked them over as we stood in the dusty road outside Eddas' tower. "Well, I've tried to teach Marilith what I know, but she doesn't learn as quickly as I do, so she still has quite a ways to go. I suppose the same will be true of you... Mermaids retain things like this very easily. I'll go slowly as we work on this. If either of you is hurt, Marilith can heal you, she says she needs the practice. Alright?"

Joy nodded. "Alright."

Eddas nodded. "I'll certainly try to keep up."

"Alright... Well, the first thing Buntaro did with me was assess what I already knew. I didn't know that was what he was doing at the time, my command of his language was rather poor, then. But, I did eventually figure it out when he taught me all of his art. So, that's what we'll be doing first - sparring, so I can see what you know. Err... I suppose I'll start with Joy, she's wearing her chain, but... Err... You're still in your robe, Master Eddas."

"I was trained to fight in a robe, Sasha, you can start with me. If you think it's best, I'll take it off, however," Eddas replied.

"Well, you took your feathers out, at least you won't lose them," I replied. "Let's see your 'ready' stance."

Eddas stood, legs spread slightly apart, gloved hands open and relaxed, arms loose, elbows bent, left foot and hand leading.



"Well, that's not bad, but I don't see how you'll kick like that. This is just sparring, so I'll go easy on you."

"Thank you," Eddas replied dryly.

I hopped in and snapped a side kick with my right leg at his side - Eddas shifted back, raising his leg to block it, and I swatted his thigh under his robe with my foot. I immediately snapped high and he blocked with his left forearm, then caught my ankle, hopping back to pull me off balance. I staggered, and as I fell he went down with me, dropping to one knee on his right leg and still holding my ankle with his left hand, his hand on my thigh. It was tremendously fast, and very surprising. He held me for a moment, my right knee over his right thigh. He then let me go, rising to his feet. "Sorry about that."

I smiled. "Sorry? Don't be! That was great, very fast, caught me off-guard, very nice. Well, except that last move, I didn't see the point."

"Ah... Well, yes, that's where I was taught to drop onto the opponents knee with mine from the side while holding onto their ankle. It tears the knee so they can't rise. From there you simply stand up and cast on them, or just kick them to death. In practice, however, you have to be careful to guide your partner's leg atop yours so they won't be hurt."

I smiled. "Well, I'm not certain you'd have been able to get that grip had I been kicking full-force. And I'm afraid your forearm block wouldn't work well if I was kicking full-force, I'd still have hit you in the head."

Eddas nodded. "Well, it worked fine when I was four cubits and two hands tall, but I can see your point - this body isn't as large, certain actions that worked fine for a man who was almost as tall as Joy won't necessarily work as well for a woman as small as this."

"Right," I replied, smiling.

"Still, I'm interested in seeing what would happen. Please feel free to do that again, this time as hard as you please."

I blinked. "Err... I'm afraid I'd kick you senseless, that's entirely against what we're working on, today."

"Well, Sasha, if that happens, it's entirely my own fault, isn't it?" Eddas said, and winked.

Joy shook her head. "Old Man, you shouldn't do this," she said.

I smiled again. "Well, no, you shouldn't."

"After all, you could hurt her quite badly, you've been sparring with me for twenty years, now, you're used to someone who can take a bit more than she can and kick hard enough to put our front door off it's hinges."

"Well, I - hey!" I yelped.

Marilith grinned. "*Try not to break her too badly, Master Eddas.*"

I started to get angry, then stopped, biting back a sharp reply. '*Always remember that anger is a weapon you give to your opponent,*' Buntaro had said. I nodded. "Alright, let's take a different tack. You two have been sparring for years. If you'll show me what you do, I'll watch and learn. From there,

I'll see what I need to teach you, and what you need to teach me."

Joy smiled at Eddas. "She's quite sharp, sometimes."

Eddas nodded. "Her old master taught her well, she just needs time to get into the teaching mind-set again," he said, then stood in a ready stance again, this time facing Joy. "Come, Joy, let's go through the basics."

Joy nodded, facing Eddas in a ready stance, and Eddas looked to me. "Now, I taught Joy how to fight the way *I* was taught to fight in my first life. This works for her, because in my first life, I was only about a head shorter than her. For a battle-mage, sorcery is our first weapon. One of our most important spells is telekinesis - just lifting an enemy into the air usually stops a fight immediately. We learned it as journeymen, the spell is too complex for an apprentice - but, only a master has the will to hold a man in the air any length of time. So, for a battle-mage, there are only two reasons to engage in unarmed combat - either you're completely exhausted, have lost your knife and have already broken your staff in desperation so there's literally nothing else you can do, or someone is grappled with you. In the case of the former, you're in *very* dire straights, you want to end the fight as quickly as you can so you can get away to hopefully rest a bit and recover some strength. In the case of the latter, you want to escape from them so that you can immediately use your staff again. First, I'll have Joy show you the maneuvers you do against opponents who don't know what they're doing." Eddas then looked to Joy. "Top-down, Joy."

"Alright," Joy replied.

Eddas then threw himself at Joy as though intending to tackle her to the ground. She instantly surged forward, one arm low and one high, grabbed Eddas between the legs and at the shoulder, lifted him into the air while turning him upside down, then held him there, above her head, and stopping her charge.

"Now, at this point," Eddas said, flicking his ponytail out of his face and looking at me, "she shouts at the top of her lungs, and brings me down straight on the top of my head to break my neck. However, since I've never quite annoyed Joy enough to where she would even consider doing that, we stop here," he said, and Joy giggled as she gently put Eddas down. "The key is momentum - once you catch the opponent and overcome their momentum, lifting them from the ground, it's just a matter of rotating your arms and smashing them down. Size doesn't matter much - if they're anywhere near your size or smaller,

you can do it. And most people don't fight well after you break their necks, they usually just lie down and die. Again - the goal is to immediately end the fight."

"I see," I said, nodding. It was a killing move, of course, but that was as may be.

"The next maneuver is used against opponents who know a little of fighting, and begin with a snap punch," Eddas said, and assumed a ready stance with his fists balled, held high. He stepped in to snap a punch at Joy, and Joy instantly blocked, stepping in close and to Eddas' right side, her right leg behind Eddas' right leg. At the same time, she slipped her left hand behind Eddas' head, and clapped her right hand to his chin. Levering his head back, she shouted, bending her knee as she twisted. Eddas, his leg behind Joy's leg, lost his balance, going over her knee and bending backwards. Joy then held still, releasing his chin. Eddas then looked at me. "At this point, if I have once again filled the tower with another foul stench from one of my laboratory experiments, Joy then bears down with her full weight on her right hand while pulling up with her left, pushing my chin to the right and snapping my neck. This is why I am so meticulous about my laboratory experiments," he said, and Joy giggled again as she gently helped him up.

"I see," I replied - it was another killing move, and a rather effective one.

Eddas and Joy went through a good dozen more maneuvers like this, each of them swift, sure, and ultimately fatal. Nine were maneuvers that broke the neck, two were maneuvers that crushed the trachea, and one was a maneuver that snapped the spine. The style was not nearly as complex or scientific as what Buntaro had taught me - yet, it was no less effective. To the contrary, it was brutal, vicious, and extremely effective for someone who was large and knew how to use their mass and leverage.

I raised my hand. "I'm beginning to see a pattern, here. Every one of these maneuvers is a killing maneuver."

"Yes, quite," Eddas replied, flicking the dust off his robe with a gesture. "As I said before, as a battle-mage, the entire purpose of everything we learned about unarmed combat was to end a fight as quickly as we possibly could."

"But really, they're all based on the physique of someone who is very tall."

"Naturally. Most Hyperborean men were about four cubits tall, and I was about two hands taller than that in my first life. Joy is five cubits tall, it's perfect for her."

"Well... What do you do at *your* size against someone who is *her* size?"

"Ah, now she sees the flaw," Joy said, grinning to Eddas.

"I knew she would, she's actually quite intelligent," Eddas replied, nodding, then looked back to me. "Well, again, if we're assuming I don't have a staff, I don't have my knife and I'm too tired to use telekinesis to lift them up into the air with my will..." he replied, then shrugged. "There isn't really much I *can* do against someone who is significantly larger than me. I have to wait until they move, as I did with you, then use maneuvers I know that will work. Most of them, however, are crippling maneuvers, not killing maneuvers. Knee breaks, elbow breaks, eye-blinds, and so on. There are grappling maneuvers I learned, of course - before you can learn to escape being grappled, you have to know how to grapple someone so they can't escape. Pinning holds, submission holds, choke holds, sleeper holds, and so on. And, of course, I've taught Joy what I know of grappling, and this has only made her all the better for it. But, it's the problem you have just pointed out which is precisely why I was hoping to be able to learn what you knew - much of what I knew that I taught Joy simply does not work in this body, because it lacks the leverage and mass to do it. I have the strength to pick up Joy in the 'top-down' maneuver, as this body has had the power of *mana* flowing through it for a century and a half and I've lived the ascetic life of a battle-mage all that time. But, I don't have the mass to stop her in the body-to-body collusion it requires, and overcome her momentum - she'd literally run me over. What little you've shown me so far leads me to believe the art Master Buntaro taught you is a very precise and scientific art that would likely be very useful in this body."

I smiled. "Well, I understand what you know a lot better now, and I think I know how to begin so you'll be able to smoothly pick up what I know. Let's start with the basic stance, and the basic blocks," I said, and assumed the basic ready stance. "Starting from here, left foot forward, left hand out and up, right hand back with a fist..."

## The Raven - Sixteen.

Queen Gonnakasi returned in the late afternoon, breezing into the room with her attendants following in her wake. She snapped her fingers, and the two that had knelt by my bedside for hours rose, bowing to her. "Were there any problems?"

"No, My Queen," they chorused. Apparently they didn't consider having to fetch me water and having to hold my penis to use a bed-pan twice to be a problem.

"You may go - your dinner is already in your quarters. Eat, then rest the remainder of the day. You have done well."

"Thank you, My Queen!" the two chorused, then dashed away and out the door.

"Musicians!" Gonnakasi called.

From behind one of the draperies hanging from the wall, four musicians stepped forth - two bearing flutes, the other two drums. All were slender women and were nearly naked, having little more than a

sheer, gossamer robe that concealed almost nothing of their bodies. The women were apparently the source of the chamber's music, as the chamber fell silent immediately. "Yes, My Queen?" the musicians said, bowing before her.

"I was particularly pleased with your work towards noon, your rendition of *Sleeping Lion* was particularly poignant. Your replacements are in the hall, and your dinner is already in your quarters. Send your replacements in, then eat and rest the remainder of the day. I am pleased with you."

"Thank you, My Queen!" the four replied, bowing, and walked out the door. Their replacements walked in, bowed briefly to the queen, then took their places behind the drapery, in a little room apparently made for them. A moment later, the music resumed. I found it interesting that apparently musicians weren't required to move at a dead run everywhere in the palace. I supposed gasping for breath would tend to reduce one's ability to play the flute.

Gonnakasi walked over to me, then knelt beside the bed again. "And how are you feeling now, Corvid Hremn?"

"A bit stronger, your majesty, thank you."

"Dinner will be served shortly, if that is alright?" she asked, her voice soft.

I suppressed a sigh. I didn't know what was going on, but I was far too tired and far too weak to really feel like waiting any longer for her to lower the boom. "Your majesty... Can we speak in private?"

"Of course," she said, smiling, then turned her head. "Out! Everyone out until I call!" she snapped loudly.

I expected the musicians to emerge from their little nook, of course. The six guards that emerged from other hidden nooks, I did not expect. The guards wore sandals, breastplates of bronze, and a simple loincloth that was little more than a strip of leather about the waist and another between the legs. Their skins were beaded with sweat, it apparently was a bit warm in their little nooks.

Once all had gone and the door had been closed, Gonnakasi then looked to me, and smiled again. "What was it you wished to talk about, Corvid?"

"Your majesty... I appreciate the care and tenderness you have shown me, but it occurs to me that you are giving me the kind of attention I would expect from a maidservant - or a slave. I do not deserve such treatment, and certainly not from the Queen of the Enebua, whose majesty and beauty is widely known, and whose glory as a warrior and leader is beyond compare. Why am I receiving it?"

"Cannot a queen have fallen in love?" she asked, smiling.

"Yes, she can," I answered carefully, "and were that true, I would be deeply honored. But the queen I see before me has not. You hardly know me, your majesty, and I am a mere commoner - I am nothing compared to you. And, by your people's standards, I am odd looking, perhaps even ugly."

Gonnakasi chuckled, running a finger along my jaw. "You underestimate yourself, Corvid Hremn. Yes, we find your skin odd, your lips a bit thin, your nose a bit long... But you are hardly ugly. Mysantians are ugly. Your people are rare, here, and different. Most are plain, some are ugly, yes. You, however, are neither."

"I thank you, your majesty, and I appreciate the compliment. However, you are still not in love with me."

A flare of anger passed across her face for a moment, then was gone. "You are of a different people, Corvid Hremn. Tell me, what does it take to capture your heart? A man of my people would have been swept off his feet by such treatment."



"Honesty, your majesty. We absolutely adore honesty. It makes our hearts sing, and our veins fill with desire," I replied, with an absolutely straight face.

Gonnakasi gazed at me silently for a moment, then nodded. "So be it, then," she said, and rose to her feet, then flicked her cloak aside and sat on the edge of the bed. I tried to ignore the shapely, firm rump that was placed beside my hand, and kept my gaze focused on her eyes. "I am thirty-three years of age, Corvid Hremn, and I have no heir. This despite eight husbands' best efforts. Should I fall outside my bearing years without a girl-child to name as my heir, the generals of my armies will begin to mutter. Should I die without an heir, that mutter will grow to a roar of battle, as each vies with the others to seize the peacock cloak. Already it grows difficult to keep them in line, as they have watched husband after husband come and go, and my belly remains flat and barren. And yet, a month ago, I had a dream. In this dream, I saw a pale-skinned warrior - a mighty warrior who had seed strong enough to give me an heir. I had no answer for what this dream meant, until the day I saw you fighting on the docks. I gamble, Corvid Hremn. I gamble that you are the warrior I saw in my dream. At stake is the fate of my people. Civil war would tear us apart, and allow our enemies to conquer us. This cannot be allowed."

"I understand, your majesty."

"Do you?" she said, sneering. "Then tell me what you understand, Corvid Hremn. Why would I kneel and serve you, do you think?"

"Because despite what the Mysantians think, or even the other Kushite nations such as your warlike neighbors, the Hehecoe and the Farazi, the women of the Enebua do not hate men. They adore them. It's just that you have a different culture. You did not want me to believe that you thought of me as merely a stud to service you. The Enebua respect men, they care for them, they adore them, they cherish them, they fight for them, and they even die for them. And you did not want me to think otherwise by simply telling me why you wanted me here."

Gonnakasi blinked, apparently startled. I smiled at her. My time with Doshta had been wisely spent. Most of what I knew of Enebua culture, I learned from simply talking to her, and asking polite questions. The basics of the language, I'd learned from the Mysantian sailing-master I'd hired when I first came here. From there, I made an effort to get to know these people, far more than he had ever done. Yes, my time

with Doshta had been wisely spent - even if I *did* have to cuckold her husband Haggan, then afterwards pretend I barely remembered him and cared little for him.

Despite what Marilith had thought, that wasn't anything I was proud of. Haggan was actually a nice little man, and I felt he hardly deserved the treatment he'd gotten. I hadn't learned how he'd gotten the little scar on his shin by accident. He and I talked quite a bit, as well. He loved Doshta. He loved her dearly. But he knew she was, as we said in Arcadia, "much woman." He knew he was not man enough to keep her happy for long, and eventually, she would give him away. In listening to his stories, his explanations of Enebua culture from the men's point of view, I heard echoes of what Belana had told me about women in Vilandian culture - and women in general in most cultures. The fear of being abandoned, the desperate wish to not grow old alone... Men and women were not so different as many might think. My cuckolding him hurt him. Deeply. But, when we spoke later, and I apologized to him, deeply and profusely...

...he suddenly shook his head, and laughed. "Well," he said, "it's not like you could have told her 'no'! How do you think I got this scar on my shin?" he said, and laughed again.

No, as I'd told Marilith, Doshta was not a nice person. Reliable, yes. But not nice. Still, I have discovered in my travels that one learns the most about a culture not by dealing with those who are considered the pillars of society, nor by dealing with those who are considered the dregs. From the upper crust of society, one only learns about the highest ideals of that society - understanding how anyone could steal a loaf of bread is impossible for someone who has never been hungry a day in their life. From the dregs, one can only gain a warped view of society, which has little bearing on the reality - it is impossible for someone who cannot remember a day they were not hungry to view the upper crust as anything but fat, brainless pigs. No, one learns the most about a culture by dealing with ordinary people, who have both their good parts and their bad, their successes and their failures, their shining deeds and their hidden skeletons in the closet. From the ordinary people, one learns the highest moral ethics and ideals of a people - and just how far some will fall from those ideals in their daily lives, and *why* they fall.

No, my time with Doshta had been well-spent, and I understood why the Queen had done what she'd done. She lived the ideal, as most of the upper-crust of Enebua society did. And in the ideals of Enebua, men were cherished and loved and respected for who and what they were, just as women in the upper crust of Arcadian society were. Gonnakasi only needed me for stud service, she did not love me. But she did not wish me to think that meant she did not respect me as a man.

Gonnakasi smiled at me. "I see you *do* understand."

"Yes, your majesty," I replied, and smiled.

"So will you do it?"

"On three conditions, your majesty."

"Oh? And what are they?" she replied, her eyes narrowing slightly.

"First, of course, you're going to have to give me time to heal," I said, and grinned wryly. "Right now, I'm afraid I don't have the energy to rise up to kiss you, much less anything else."

"Of course," she replied, nodding.

"Second, you're going to have to allow me time to heal in spirit," I said, and sighed. "I... I loved Sasha. And her sister. And now... Well, I'm sorry, but what you're asking me for may be pleasant, but I think you should at least understand I need time to think."

"And time to mourn," she replied, her gaze softening.

"Yes."

"And your third condition?"

"You are going to have to make time for yourself to be alone with me, as now."

Gonnakasi grinned wryly. "That rather goes without saying, don't you think?"

I grinned back. "No. I mean like as now. Talking, openly and honestly. I've watched you deal with your attendants and others. Your voice carries the threat of a whip, but you make the time to insure that each of them is cared for well. If you were truly as harsh as you pretend to be, you would hardly care. And now, here you are, willing to bed someone you have never met before and care nothing about, gambling that this will result in an heir which will stave off a potential civil war, and preserve the peace. A great personal sacrifice, in my opinion, and again hardly one that someone who is cold and callous would seem to be wont to make. You told me of your generals. It's clear you have to keep an iron grip on the reins of rulership, lest the horses you ride take their own head, and cause chaos. Perhaps, once you have an heir, things will calm down. Perhaps not, and you'll have to teach your heir the same skills you have to rule with a keen eye and an iron grip. Still, you strike me as a woman who needs *someone* she can talk to, someone who she cannot order around, nor does she *need* to order around. You strike me as a woman who needs a friend. And I find that having lost the two people in the world that matter the most to me..." I said, and sighed again. "Well, I find need a friend, as well."

Gonnakasi smiled at me, reaching out to caress my cheek with her hand. "Ah, Corvid Hremn... You are no mere man, I think. You are wise, very wise. You are right. I *do* need a friend. Someone I can talk to without worrying that they are involved in the latest power play against me, someone who does not whisper behind my back that no man will ever give me get, nor conspires about the future of the nation. Ah, but you are wrong, as well, quite wrong."

"Wrong, your majesty?"

"Yes. You said that to insure the future of the nation, I was willing to bed a man I had never met before and cared nothing about. The former is true, yes. The latter, however, I find is not," she said, and leaned down to kiss me gently, softly. She then leaned back, and smiled at me.

"So we have a bargain then, your majesty?" I replied, holding out my hand.

Gonnakasi grinned, clapping her hand about my forearm and gripping it tightly in a warrior's grip. "That we do, Corvid Hremn. That we do." She then lifted her head, and looked to the door. "*Enter!*" she shouted, her voice again hard as steel.

Moments later, her guards had returned and hidden themselves, her attendants stood by the door awaiting her next command that would send them sprinting through the palace, and the musicians were hidden in their little nook, playing quietly. Again, she resumed the role of the iron-hard queen, her flinty gaze one to be dreaded. And yet, when she glanced at me, her eyes now contained a softness they hadn't had before, and her smile was now genuine. I smiled back, stroking her hand.

### The Raven - Seventeen.

It was actually quite difficult to get used to sleeping with the queen. As I quickly discovered that first night, I wasn't in just any room, this was her royal bedchambers, and I was lying in her bed. She slept beside me at night, but unlike Marilith who simply slept, Gonnakasi would often gaze at me in the moonlight, and stroke the hair on my chest with her fingertips. I endured this quietly, of course, despite the number of times she awakened me in the middle of the night doing it. After all, it wasn't like I thought I should be telling the queen what she could do in her own bed.

The High Magess visited every day, examining me, and occasionally casting spells over me or asking me to drink one herbal concoction or another - most of which had a horrid taste. Still, under her ministrations, I was eventually able to rise from the bed to relieve myself in the queen's guarderobe the following day, and by the fourth day, I was up and walking about, if not quite sprightly yet.

The first few days, I simply walked around the queen's room, or out onto her balcony. Her room was quite well-designed - the archway that led out onto the balcony was oriented to catch the prevailing wind from the northeast, yet at the same time it had an overhang to guard against rain. Only a fairly strong storm would be able to blow rain into the room - but there were sliding shutters to cover the archway in that event. The floor of the room was covered with inlaid tiles of marble, and I could see outside the door that the palace was likely floored the same. In the queen's bedchamber, however, the marble floor had intricate, interlocking patterns of light and dark tiles, and around the queen's bed, a circle of marble was inlaid into the floor. The queen said it was enchanted to keep night-hags and dream-creepers away so she could rest undisturbed by bad dreams. What either of those two things might be, I had no idea - but, since she apparently slept well, it appeared to work.

By the end of a week, the wound in my side had faded to a dull ache that occasionally itched, and I was feeling well enough to walk around the palace. The queen provided clothes for me, in the style of an Enebua male, of course. Short breeches, sandals, and a loose tunic. I had to admit they were more comfortable in the humid jungle heat than my ordinary clothes, but I felt quite odd wearing them - and even more odd realizing that I was literally the only man in the entire palace.

The palace itself was both utilitarian and beautiful. I found the purpose of the sheer draperies that hung everywhere was to allow air to circulate - otherwise, with the doors closed, the palace would become quite hot. The palace itself was structured around a central, open-air area that looked much like a small amphitheater, with elevated seats around a central, flat area. Above, shielding the area from the sun, was a delicate dome of wood covered in fabric, apparently treated to resist the rain, somehow. The queen's seat was at the northern end of it, overlooking the floor at about five cubits of height. My curiosity as to the purpose of this area was satisfied very quickly - the queen had me sit in a smaller chair beside her throne while she handled the affairs of state. This was, apparently, her royal courtroom.

Court, for the queen, was actually a moderately complex affair, with a short ritual for her arrival. I did not quite grasp the purpose for the ritual, but as it seemed quite important to the Enebua, I made no comment. Upon her arrival, there was quite a bit of bother with several naked female attendants who waved censers about her chair. Once they were satisfied the air had been properly perfumed (or, perhaps, what biting insects there may have been flying about had been encouraged to depart), the queen was presented with a spear by another naked attendant, then the censers were hung up on hooks nearby

the throne, and the attendants departed. The queen's spear had a mahogany shaft and a bronze head, and was decorated with several feathers and ribbons near the base of the head. Apparently, it was the equivalent of a royal scepter in the Southlands, and her symbol of office. Once all the proper rituals had been complied with, the queen would then sit and hold court much like any other monarch might, with various petitioners or advisors who needed to speak to her entering via a door to the south and walking across the floor of her court to bow before her throne, and say their piece. The queen's throne, such as it was, was a backless chair that allowed the peacock robe to drape behind her - it had a small box it rested in, rather than draping on the floor. I sat on what was, basically, an elaborately padded and embroidered stool to her right. Why I was even necessary baffled me for the longest moment, then I realized that she *would* need others to see that she *did* have a man, and was working on the issue of an heir. Of course, the truth was that we had made no real progress on resolving that particular political issue as of yet nor had we really tried to, but that was as may be. I had thought that perhaps my own appearance might cause her problems - after all, though I was human, I was hardly a Kushite, much less a man of Enebua. Still, no comment was made by any who saw me. Apparently, whether the heir would be pure-blooded Enebua was not at issue - only the issue of an heir was at issue.

Despite what I may have thought before about what it might have been like to be a monarch, I quickly discovered that the affairs of state were dull. More than dull, really, they were painfully, agonizingly boring. Her royal court and retinue of advisors and functionaries sat in the seats that encircled the floor. Then, one after another or in small groups, various advisors would leave their seats, going to doors that were at the east and west, then enter the floor area through a door to the south, and stand before Gonnakasi to report to her on various aspects of her kingdom. The weekly amount of gold extracted from the mines, the weekly taxes of gold-dust taken from those who gathered gold by panning the Gold River, various persons who had been caught attempting to pan gold without a royal permit (who were immediately executed), the various persons who had tried to shirk their taxes on the gold dust they had recovered from the river (who were immediately executed), and the occasional individual who attempted to trade alloyed gold in the city, trying to cheat people in trade (who were slowly and painfully crushed to death under a large stone cylinder in the public square of the city). Then there were the military reports - mostly of various incursions by scouting parties from neighboring Kushite nations, all of which were either driven back or killed, depending on whether or not they chose to stand and fight. More advisors then followed, reporting on the weekly status of the city's granaries, various minor reports from functionaries in the smaller towns and villages of the Enebua, and so on. If Gonnakasi had questions of those who were not currently on the floor, she would point to them in the stands with her spear, and ask them. They in turn would rise, bow, and respond. She would also occasionally point to someone and order them to take the floor for a full report on something of interest to her. The only real function of the floor seemed to be that when an advisor was there, they literally 'had the floor', as it were, and could speak at length. It was all, unfortunately, boring to the point of tears.

Still, I knew that Gonnakasi could hardly afford to have it look like she'd simply picked up just any random foreigner off the street and plopped him into her bed. I sat quietly, doing my best to appear interested and attentive despite how utterly dull the entire proceedings really were. I couldn't imagine the queen's reputation was any less important than the reputation of any other monarch anywhere in the world, so I did not allow my face or posture to reveal just how utterly, devastatingly bored I really was.

It was because of this that when one day General Ashakazi spoke, demanding a report on the status of the queen's pregnancy, if any, it caught me utterly by surprise.

Ashakazi was a woman in her early forties, wearing a feathered headdress, bronze plates over each breast, greaves and vambraces and a skirt of leopard-hide. In her hand, she bore a short-hafted spear with a long, broad, teardrop-shaped blade of steel, and she wore a cloak of leopard-hide about her shoulders. Her face was strong and fair, and she bore several small scars here and there, the marks of battle.

Gonnakasi had apparently been as startled as I by the demand, and made no immediate reply. Ashakazi then repeated her demand, in a louder voice.

"My Queen, I and the tenth legion demand to know whether or not you are actually attempting to produce an heir, or if this maggot-skinned male is simply a distraction you are placing before us!"

Knowing what I knew of Enebua culture, such an insult would likely not be endured by the queen for long. Insulting a woman's man was, to the Enebua, much the same as insulting a man's woman in the Southlands, back home - it quite often led to a fight. Of course, the Enebua were a bit more serious about fighting than most, and it occurred to me that this was not quite all that it seemed.

I smiled, chuckling, then laughed at the General.

Gonnakasi snapped her head to me, her expression furious. "You laugh?! Why?!" she asked. The expression on the general's face showed she was no less annoyed with me.

"If I may, your majesty, I'd like to ask the General a question in return?"



"Ask, but be quick about it," Gonnakasi replied curtly.

I smiled at the general again. "General, if you don't mind, I find I'm quite curious: Do women of Enebua commit suicide by falling on their swords, or hanging themselves?"

The general blinked at me. "What?"

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry, general, I can see I'm being confusing. Well, you know how it is, male logic, your woman's mind is quite superior, but sometimes our way of thinking is a bit mysterious. Let me attempt to explain by asking you another question: Just how many children have you had, yourself, General?"

She clapped a broad hand to her belly, gazing at me. "I've borne four children, three girls and a boy. I've shown *my* ability at producing heirs to my line," she replied, in an obvious dig at Gonnakasi - and likely a veiled declaration to Gonnakasi's advisors and other generals of her suitability as a possible replacement.

Gonnakasi growled, gripping her spear and starting to rise, but I simply smiled. "Well, then, general... I am only a man, and do forgive me if my next question is one that seems to have an obvious answer to you, however, you seem to be an experienced woman who can answer it: Is it not true that even if a woman does couple at just the right moment, there will not be any signs of this for quite some time and even in the most fertile of women, a child is not guaranteed by a single coupling?"

The general blinked for a moment, staring at me, then Gonnakasi. "Well... Yes, of course, everyone knows that."

"And is it not true that there are certain days within a woman's monthly cycle when she not only cannot conceive, but even attempting to is rather messy and often uncomfortable for her?"

"Well, yes, of course, but that has nothing to do with-" she replied, but I interrupted her.

"Ah, thank you!" I called, drowning her out. "Now, I don't quite know whether or not you consider the queen's monthly cycle to be fodder for public discussion, however: It does seem to me that as you've had four children yourself, three beautiful and strapping girls that even I have heard of thousands of leagues away in my homeland, you should have more than enough experience yourself with the process to know that when a man has only known a woman for a week, it seems extremely unlikely you can expect her to birth a child the next morning. A bit of patience is required, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, but you have to understand, we-"

"And since you admit that you are quite experienced in this area yourself," I said a bit louder, interrupting her again, "you admit that you know a week is hardly enough time to expect any kind of results, you already know that a bit of patience is at least required... Well, forgive me, General, but I find I have to ask yet another question. You see, I am not completely familiar with every aspect of your people's lovely and glorious culture, so I'm afraid I do have to ask this: Don't you think it's astonishingly rude to even think to ask such a question of your queen in her court? Why, I've heard of people losing their heads in other kingdoms for far less."

"I... I..." the general replied, boggled. Apparently, no man had ever spoken to her in this manner before. Of course, being as she was Enebua, this was not surprising.

"Oh, I think we can take that for a yes, don't you think? Now - given that you've deeply insulted the Queen in front of her entire court, we return to my original question: Do women of Enebua commit suicide by falling on their swords, or hanging themselves? I do hope you'll answer, General, for I find I'm merely an ignorant maggot-skinned foreigner male who has no clue as to what the answer might be, and I find I'm *immensely* curious," I said, leaning forward with my elbows on my knees and putting an expectant look on my face.

"I... I..." the general replied, trying to recover herself.

Gonnakasi then opened the clasp to the peacock cloak, letting it slip to rest in the box behind her. She then rose to her feet, gripping her spear in both hands. "The answer to your question, dear Corvid, is that we usually slit our forearms from wrist to elbow in a bath of cool water. It appears, however, that some believe that challenging myself is a far better and faster route," she replied, then focused her iron gaze on the general. "Well, Asha? Shall we bring out the swords, or have it out with our spears of office?"

General Ashakazi gazed at Gonnakasi for a long moment, her eyes flickering occasionally to the stands, where the other advisors and generals sat. It seemed she was weighing her chances not only against Gonnakasi, but in winning the support of those in the stands. Finally, she knelt, bowing her feathered head. "My Queen, I extend my deepest and sincerest apologies. I spoke completely out of turn and insultingly. I was wrong, and I deeply and wholeheartedly apologize."

Gonnakasi glared at her in silence for a moment, then sat, holding her spear in her right hand again. She glanced at the others in the audience seats, then snapped her fingers. Immediately, two attendants stepped from the curtained alcoves to the sides, lifting the peacock cloak and fastening it about her neck again. "You are fined two hundred talent-weights of gold, and you are ordered to the city temple immediately. You will sacrifice a black hen to Esvina and beg her to curb your tongue in the presence of your queen. Out of respect for Corvid, who has a man's delicate constitution and likely would not be able to withstand seeing you whipped before me, you are spared that. You are dismissed."

"Thank you, My Queen," Ashakazi replied, rising. She bowed, then turned on her heel and strode off the floor, out the door to the south.

I kept my face smooth as Gonnakasi pointed to the next advisor with her spear. Two hundred talent-weights of gold was a *ruinous* fine, almost a *stone* of gold dust. And more, a black hen was the sacrifice made by those who publicly admitted shame and wrongdoing, an absolutely humiliating sacrifice for someone of the general's rank. I was quite sure that the old general would have much preferred a whipping.

And yet, I could see that Gonnakasi was holding the reins to a very wild and dangerous team of horses, many of which seemed quite ready to buck out of the harness. Had Ashakazi received just a few

more supportive glances from the audience, she might have chosen to duel. Gonnakasi was no stranger to dueling or to war, judging by the various small scars she had here and there about her body. It was clear she had to have an heir to stifle this resistance to her rule, before it was too late. But where eight men failed before me, how could I guarantee I might succeed?

I sighed, my thoughts again turning to Sasha and Marilith as I watched the rest of the day's proceedings. Things that might have been, if only...

Drowned. How could they have drowned?

\* \* \*

"You did well, Corvid," Gonnakasi said, her attendant removing the peacock robe and placing it on its stand in her chambers. She then sat on the bed as the soft music of evening played. "Come, come. Let us eat," she said, gesturing to the small table beside the bed, which bore several plates of food.

I smiled, sitting beside her. "I only did what seemed necessary."

"No, you did much more than that. You pretended to be a cliché of a man, one not understanding the simplest of things - and yet, you knew precisely where you were going, and led old Asha straight into your trap." Gonnakasi smiled at me, reaching for a plate of dates. "Tell me, Corvid... Are all men like you, where you come from?"

"Men, like women, are all different, your majesty."

"Hah! After eight husbands, I'd have to say that's true, yes. Each was unique..." she said, then looked at me again. "Yet, you are different than they. You have wisdom they did not have - and a confidence

and self assurance they lacked, as well."

I smiled again. "Perhaps, but you are not inspiring confidence in me, now. Eight men before me have failed. Tell me... What have you tried, with them?"

Gonnakasi rolled her eyes. "Everything. I have timed my cycle precisely, knowing the optimum day when conception would occur. I have eaten a diet of nearly all beef to build strength and blood. I have knelt on the bed for an hour after coupling, my head low and rump in the air to hold the seed within me. Nothing."

"Hmmm... Well, Belana once said-"

"Belana?" Gonnakasi asked, interrupting.

I smiled. "An old friend. She's passed, now, but she knew much."

"Ah - do go on."

"Well, Belana was a friend of mine. She was quite familiar with... Ah... Well, nevermind that. The point is that I know a little of what you're saying, and what you've done is all well and good, but Belana said the largest part was simply timing. There is a kind of 'window' of days, and like a real window, an arrow fired at that window will pass through - but, fired before or after has no effect. Perhaps, the trouble is with you that this 'window' is very narrow, like the arrow-slit of a castle. It is not impossible to hit, but takes great precision."

"Or a company of archers," Gonnakasi agreed, then paused. "Err... If that is what you are going to suggest, Corvid, I remind you that it's bad enough I have a foreigner in my bedchambers. Having a

company of men troop through would be a scandal I could not suppress."

I laughed. "No, no! That's not what I mean. I mean that with you, more precise timing may be necessary."

"How would we determine this timing?"

"That, I don't know. I have a friend in Hyperborea-"

Gonnakasi blinked. "Hyperborea? Is that not a land of dragons and giants and fell beasts galore?"

I nodded. "Yes - but that's where he lives. His name is Eddas Ayar, and he's a Great Mage."

"We have heard the name from traders," Gonnakasi said, nodding. "You know this person?"

"Fairly well, we serve the same god. More importantly, however, he knows nearly everything - or he seems to, at any rate. When I last saw him, he was working to help a dwarf-wife become pregnant, using his knowledge. It is possible he may be able to help you determine the correct timing."

"Interesting," Gonnakasi said, pouring a small bottle of 'black-sauce' over her meat. "Sending a messenger to find him would take years, however. I am afraid I can't wait that long."

I smiled. "And they'd likely get eaten in Hyperborea anyway, it's really amazingly dangerous, there."

The queen nodded, waving her right hand over her meal and then mine, her eye on the large signet ring she wore. The first time I'd seen her do that, a week ago, I thought it odd, and asked - she told me that the ring she wore had an enchantment that detected poisons (or, more precisely, it detected substances that were poisonous to the wearer). Whether it worked or not, I did not know, but she said it did, and she'd had two cooks executed over the last few years when it warned her of poison. She told me that the method of execution she'd used was ultimately fair - she'd simply had the cooks eat what they had prepared for her. After the second time she did this, the poisoning attempts stopped.

We chatted over our meal - Gonnakasi was interested in learning what my homeland was like, and it's history. I'm no historian by any stretch of the imagination, but I know my own people fairly well, so we had a rather long and interesting conversation as we ate.

Finally, Gonnakasi wiped her lips with a kerchief, gazing at me. "What did you think of the meal?"

I considered my answer only for a moment. "Well, your majesty, honesty is what we'd agreed upon, so... To be completely honest, your majesty, the wine was really the best part of the meal. The beef was good, the greens crisp, quite nice. The black-sauce, however was only mediocre, and I think it detracted from the meat. It's supposed to be more watery, and it's flavor wasn't the best I've had." Most cooks in Enebua made their own black-sauce from the basic ingredients. Though there were a few merchants who sold it in pre-made bottles (one just shook it up prior to serving), most cooks preferred to make their own, as it allowed them to add individuality to their meals.

A flash of irritation passed across Gonnakasi's face, vanishing almost as soon as it came. "Oh? And what is the best you've had, then?"

"That would be the cooking of Pago, the husband of Doshta Elakama. She owns a tavern near the docks, on the street of the water buffalo, under the sign of the basilisk. His cooking is beyond compare - and I say that without fear of contradiction, he truly is excellent."

"Oh? Perhaps I should speak to him, and sample his food."

"It's late, now, your majesty - by the time we got there, they would be closed."

Gonnakasi chuckled. "Even were it open when we arrived, I have no intention of sitting in a dockside tavern and smelling drunk, stinky Mysantians, Corvid," she replied, then lifted her head to gaze at her attendants. "You!" she snapped, pointing. "Have the captain of the guard and her personal squad go to tavern under the sign of the basilisk on the street of the water buffalo, and fetch this woman and her husband to me *immediately!*"

"Yes, My Queen!" the attendant replied, and sprinted away.

"So," Gonnakasi said, reaching for her mug of wine, "what is this woman like, Corvid?"

"Earthy, frank, not entirely honest but very reliable if paid well, and a very passionate lover. She values her current husband, Pago, very highly, and likely would choose steel if she had to duel to keep him. Of course, this is because he's such an excellent cook - when I was last in her tavern, every table was full."

"Hmmm..." Gonnakasi replied, thinking, then grinned wryly at me. "So, you know what she is like as a lover, eh?"

"Yes, your majesty. After all, she is a woman of Enebua, I could hardly refuse, now could I?"

Gonnakasi rolled her eyes. "Bah, a man should have a right to refuse. Only ignorant commoners assume they are all rutting pigs."



"That would be Doshta, yes," I replied, smiling. Gonnakasi lived the ideal ethic of the Enebua, naturally, but Doshta did not. Of course, Gonnakasi was queen, she could afford high ethics and ideals.

We chatted a bit longer, perhaps a quarter of an hour, when a dozen guards in scale armor and bearing swords and shields trotted into the room, dragging Doshta and Pago along with them. Their leader, a thirty-ish warrior wearing a red captain's feather in her helmet, bowed to the queen - behind her, the soldiers pressed their hands on Doshta and Pago's shoulders until they were prone on the floor. "The woman and her husband, My Queen," the captain of the guards announced.

Doshta and Pago trembled as they lay on the marble floor of the queen's chambers. I supposed they had reason to tremble. Not only were they in the presence of the Queen of the Enebua, who hardly had a reputation as a sweet person, it was apparent that given that it had only taken a quarter hour or so for the captain to fetch them, the guards had likely run straight to the tavern, burst in, grabbed the two of them, and dragged them to the palace at a dead run. Likely they were expecting to be put to death for some crime they couldn't imagine.

Gonnakasi gazed at them in silence for a moment, then snapped her fingers. The guards then grabbed Doshta and Pago's shoulders, pulling them up to kneel sitting on their heels. Pago wisely kept his head bowed, but Doshta gaped at me in utter shock and amazement before a guard forced her head down by pressing atop her head.

"Corvid tells me that you are named Doshta," Gonnakasi said, her voice cold as ice.

"Y-y-y-yes, My Queen!" Doshta stammered.

"He also tells me that your husband's name is Pago, and he is the best cook in the land."

"H-h-he is very good, yes, My Queen!"

"He also tells me that you can be trusted, so long as you are paid well."

"My loyalty to you is unquestioned, My Queen, I obey!"

"You say that now, surrounded by my guards, but were I to send you home you would spit and swear at this interruption of your evening."

"N-no, My Queen, I am deeply honored to be here!"

"You are only here because of your husband. Corvid says he is the best, and he is yours. Corvid also says you would likely choose steel should you have to duel for him. I wish to have him myself. Do you still prefer steel?"

"No, My Queen, he is yours!"

Gonnakasi looked to me, then nodded to Doshta, rolling her eyes. I simply shrugged.

Gonnakasi then looked to Doshta again. "Your loyalty to your husband is uninspiring," she said, and Doshta trembled. "The truth of the matter is that I do not want him as a husband, I want him as my cook. His cooking pleases Corvid. However, he would be the only man in the palace, aside from Corvid himself, and many of my attendants and guards are young, attractive, and unattached. Does your husband have roving eyes?"

"N-no, My Queen!"

"Because he knows you would beat him, of course."

"Ye-I mean, no! No, My Queen!"

Gonnakasi glanced at me again, and I shrugged again. Doshta was who she was.

"Your husband will become my cook, should he agree, and will be paid the usual wages for the queen's cook. It is rather unusual for the queen's cook to be male, but I am willing to permit you to remain in the palace and live with him. Be aware, however, that only *I* have the right to corporal or capital punishment in this palace. That is the law. You may have beaten him before in the privacy of your home, but here in the palace, you will not. Should you do so, you will have broken the law, and I will have you flogged nude in the public square for all the city to see. Is this perfectly clear?"

"Yes, My Queen!"

"Good," she said, then looked to Pago. "What say you, man? Will you serve me as my cook?"

"I would be deeply honored, My Queen," Pago replied, trembling.

"Good. Here is what you must know about your task: First, despite what anyone in the kitchen may tell you, your responsibility is to cook for me and my guests. There are other cooks that serve the remainder of the palace. You may assist the other cooks if you wish, but you are never required to do so, and if anyone should tell you otherwise, you are to report them to the guards. By the same token, you alone shall cook for me. No one is permitted to help you, on pain of death. Secondly, despite what anyone in the kitchen may tell you, you are the only one permitted to bear the key for the queen's pantry.

Should someone attempt to borrow it from you or ask to enter the pantry to perhaps borrow a bit of sugar or salt or something, you are to report them immediately - if you fail, you will be put to death. Be aware that all the food you cook, you may be called upon to eat if I have any suspicions about it. This means if someone else slips poison into the food, *you* will die of it, not me - so watch your life, and do not allow others near when you work. You will have your own separate kitchen, your own pots, pans and utensils, and a monthly budget. You yourself will be responsible for purchasing, storing and preparing all the food, though when going to market you will be accompanied by a retinue of guards who will protect and assist you. Be aware that I sometimes call for food at odd hours, it is wise to at least keep a small fire in the oven between mealtimes and into the evening. My favorite meal at breakfast is eggs, bacon and bread, my favorite dinner is beef steak a finger thick, cooked well and served with boiled peas. Do not serve them all the time, however, I get bored of them easily and would prefer to see your own culinary inventions. I have no favorites for lunch as I often do not eat at mid-day, but when I do, you should surprise me," Gonnakasi said, then paused. "Oh - and I abhor filth, you are required to keep both yourself and your utensils scrupulously clean. As I have a magic ring that detects poisons and it often registers filth as poison, I suggest you be *very* meticulous in the washing of your pots, pans, and hands or you will find yourself eating the filth you attempted to serve me, and likely receiving a whipping if you survive. Now, do you have any questions?"

"O-only one, My Queen," Pago replied nervously.

"Yes?"

"Am I to be responsible for caring for my wife's children, as well?"

"I was not aware you had children," the queen said, pausing. "Married servants live in separate quarters, it's why my cook is usually unmarried. How many of them are yours?" the queen asked in reply.

"None, My Queen."

"Then no, you are not. If your wife chooses to remain with you here in the palace, she will be required make arrangements for them. I suggest you send them to a relative."

Doshta lifted her head. "I-I have a sister, My Queen, I... Err... Most of the children are those of her husband, she-"

"I did *not* speak to you *nor* did I give you permission to speak!" the queen replied, glowering at her. Doshta immediately lowered her head and fell silent. Gonnakasi snorted. "Your relationship with your sister's husband is of little concern to me, and indeed, as the story already seems rather decadent, I would prefer not to know. Now: do *you* have any questions?"

"Ah... Well... Will there be a stipend to pay for them, My Queen?"

"You will find that the salary of a queen's cook is more than sufficient to afford whatever brood you may have squirted out over the years, assuming your relationship with your husband is such that he chooses to share his salary with you. The queen's cook is paid fifty talent-weights of gold annually, due to his heavy responsibilities."

Doshta lifted her head, gaping openly. "Fif-fifty *talent-weights?!"*

"Yes. Did I stutter?"

Doshta immediately lowered her head. "N-no, My Queen!"

"Good. If your husband chooses not to share his wages with you, I suppose you'll have to go back to your tavern and work for a living. I am hiring him, not you," Gonnakasi replied, then looked to Pago again. "What say you, man? Will you share your wages with your wife?"

"Of course, My Queen. I love her, and it is only proper."

"So be it," she said, and looked to Doshta. "Woman, when you leave me tonight, you will make the arrangements necessary to send your children to your sister, and move into the palace before the dawn."

"Y-yes, My Queen!"

"Captain, send a detachment of guards along with her to assist her in whatever she may need to accomplish her tasks. Tell the old cook her services are no longer required, fetch the key to the pantry from her, take her to the exchequer to receive the balance of her pay, and have her escorted to the gate."

"With respect, My Queen," the captain replied, "Kestra will throw a fit."

"If she does, toss her out on her ear without her pay, I've little respect for those who can't control their temper or who think a tantrum will sway my opinion."

"Yes, My Queen," the captain replied, nodding.

The queen then nodded, pointing to Pago, and the guards beside him hauled him to his feet. "As for you," Gonnakasi said, "you are the new queen's cook. In case you do not quite grasp what that means, there is only one person in the palace who is being paid more than you, and that is the woman standing next to you - Jozen Anisha, the Captain of the Guards. She will give you the key to the queen's pantry. Guard it with your life. Do your job well, Pago. *Do not fail me.*"

"Y-y-yes, My Queen... Ah... May I ask a question?"

"You may."

"Ah... Was there any particular dish I make that piqued your interest and made you choose me? I would like to know, that I may make it again for you."

"Corvid said your black-sauce was excellent, I would like to sample it myself."

"Of course, my queen, of course!" Pago said, beaming. "I'd just run out of what I'd made back at the tavern, but I'll have some ready for you for tomorrow evening's dinner, certainly!"

"Good," she said, then pointed to Doshta, nodding, and the guards immediately hauled her up to her feet. Gonnakasi looked at her, and shook her head. "Your face betrays a million questions, and I'd rather not have you distracted wondering, I want this accomplished tonight. Speak freely, let us get this over with."

"Oh, no questions, My Queen, I... Well... I may speak freely?"

"Yes, but make it quick."

Doshta grinned, looking at me. "Corvid, I swear I didn't tell that many people about your little tricks in bed, but I suppose the rumors must have spread all the way here! But, if it landed you here in the palace and us to follow... Well, who am I to complain?"

Gonnakasi rolled her eyes again, and I chuckled.

"My Queen," Doshta said, grinning, "you'll love that little trick he does with his tongue - that is *fabulous!* Err... Well, he may have shown it to you already, I suppose you already know!"

"We're *done!*" the queen called, and waved a hand. "You are dismissed. Captain, see to them."

"Yes, My Queen," the captain replied, apparently struggling to keep her face smooth. Shortly, Doshta and Pago had been led out the door, and were gone.

"Commoners," Gonnakasi said, shaking her head.

"They're people too, your majesty."

"I didn't say they weren't," she replied, then gazed at me. "A little trick with your *tongue?*" she asked, an eyebrow raised in curiosity.

"My old friend Belana taught me several interesting things," I replied, smiling wryly.

A wicked leer slowly crept across the queen's face. "I should *order* you to show me," she said, then smiled. "But, we agreed that I could not order you."

"Thank you, your majesty," I replied, rather relieved.



"So, I shall *ask* you to show me," she said, then paused. "If you feel able and willing, that is," she said, a hint of something softer in her eyes.

I knew that look. Belana had told me about it, and I'd seen it on Marilith once. There was really only one choice open to me, particularly given just who it was that was asking. "Of course, your majesty," I replied, and smiled again.

\* \* \*

Later that evening, we lay in her bed, alone in the room. Gonnakasi cuddled up close to me as I lay on my back, she stroking the hair on my chest. "That commoner-woman did not lie. That was... Truly marvelous," she whispered, and shuddered, remembering.

I managed a smile, and kissed her softly. "I'm glad you enjoyed it, your majesty."

"Mmm... Call me Gonnakasi when we're alone. Or just 'Kas, if you wish."

"As you wish, 'Kas," I replied. I could see in her eyes she wished to be touched, so I reached out and stroked her cheek with a finger, then her breast.

Gonnakasi smiled at the touch. "You are a fabulous lover, Corvid. I have always wanted one like you. Gentle, strong... Giving, not taking... Passionate... Even your breath smells pleasant."

*'You have lovely breath,'* Marilith's voice whispered in my memory.

A memory, and nothing more.

I managed to hold my smile as I lowered my hand, then lay there, gazing at the ceiling. Part of me remembered warning Marilith that if I stayed in this city too long... I wanted to laugh, really. It was funny. But, another part of me remembered Marilith's touch, the feeling of her legs wrapped around my hips as the queen's had been moments before... Part of me remembered, and sighed.

Gonnakasi gazed at me silently for a long moment. Finally, she reached out to my jaw, turning my face to hers. "It was too soon for you. I'm sorry," she said, her voice small.

I smiled. "Don't be. It's alright."

"Then can I...?"

"Yes?"

"Can I ask you to do it again?"

I chuckled. "Alright," I replied, and drew her close for a kiss.

## The Ocean - Five.

Eddas sat on the floor on the first floor of his tower, one leg straight behind him, one leg straight before him, bending to grip his foot in front of him as I counted. He had removed his robe - none of his robes allowed this much freedom of movement for his legs. All he wore now was that strange *nepni* - a katani-elf woman's underwear, he said it was. It was, really, little more than two triangles of elfin chain over each breast, and a third triangle of elfin-chain over the groin. The black leather boots he wore came up to just above the knees, while the gloves came up to just above the elbow. Both fit virtually skin-tight, and the exercises we'd been doing had only made them fit tighter. I tried not to notice how he looked, but it was extremely difficult. Seeing him like this, it was almost impossible to picture the man inside.

"And one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, and change, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight..."

Eddas switched legs as I called, stretching. This was extremely necessary for him, I had realized very early on. Eddas simply could not kick high enough to be effective against someone who was significantly larger than him. Relying entirely on the strength he'd built as a battle-mage in that body was not enough - he lacked leverage and reach with his punches. He would have to learn to kick higher, and harder. And now, a month after I had begun working with him, it seemed we were finally getting near the goal.

"Now splits, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, and hold, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight..."

Eddas obediently switched to a split-leg position, his legs perfectly straight out from his body, bending forward to stretch his leg muscles. Eddas had said that the *mana*-storm which he had survived had left within this body what he called a "great knot of *mana*" that preserved it as it was, constantly regenerating him and healing him. He worried that he simply wouldn't be *able* to change how flexible he was, simply because the energies that maintained his body would not allow it. As it turned out, however, he was

wrong - he *could* increase his flexibility with stretching, and he could increase his physical strength slightly through hard exercise. The results, however, were far more than I expected. His body, already hard and muscular from the life he'd led before, now had a lean, whipcord appearance, the muscles even more sharply delineated, and was even more beautiful than it was before. And, really, more eerie, as the already surreally perfect beauty of that body was honed even further. Only his face changed little - for which I was extremely grateful. It was now sometimes difficult to gaze at him without thinking I looked like a beached orca.

Eddas, oddly, was ecstatic once he discovered he could actually force changes to occur in his body, and stretched and exercised with incredible intensity - so intense, in fact, I worried he might hurt himself at times. Eddas simply replied that yes, it did hurt. But his body healed so rapidly it didn't matter. He said he could toss himself off the top of his tower, smash into the ground and lie there in a broken heap of bloody bones and flesh, and a few minutes later he would rise again, fully healed. I decided not to ask how he knew that was possible - I was afraid he'd tell me. I asked Joy about his incredible focus and intensity on exercising and stretching, and she said it was like anything else that was new he was working on - he always became deeply focused in things that interested him, or were important to him. It was simply the way he was. Why being able to make a minor change in himself was so important, however, I didn't know.

"And we're done - kip-up!" I called, and Eddas smoothly rolled on to his back, then kicked his legs out, flipping to his feet nimbly. I grinned at him. "You do kip-ups well - better than me, really."

"This body is half-elven, very nimble and light, it always has been," he replied. "I enjoy that maneuver, however, and I can see several situations it would come in useful. More work on the pell, now?"

"Yes - let's go!"

Shortly we were outside, working on the pell we'd placed near the large shade tree at the base of Eddas' tower. A very simple affair, it was really little more than a log stuck upright into the ground, with pads placed around it for kicking targets. Eddas had long since learned to balance on one foot and do snap-kicks at various heights - now, we were working on just getting him to kick higher and harder. I watched him kick about the height of a normal man's head repeatedly, smoothly, with either leg, and very hard. He was getting there. "Alright, rest for a moment."

"One more," he replied, then paused, gazing at the pell and adjusting his distance. He then placed both his hands behind his back and delivered a vicious roundhouse kick to the post. It wobbled, and Eddas placed his hands on his hips, then spat. "Damn. If I'd only known this then..." he muttered.

"What do you mean?"

Eddas gazed at the pell as he replied. "When I first awoke and met Darian, we were press-ganged by Vilandians. Darian, they put to work on the crew, he never knew what happened to me until I managed to free myself. As for me, however..." Eddas said, and kicked the pell again, hard.

"What happened?"

"There were forty-eight sailors aboard that crew, counting the captain and the mage who captured me, but not counting Darian. They manacled and gagged me, and took me into one of the cargo holds. I couldn't do anything - everything I knew was based on mass and leverage I did not have, this body was weak, then, and I was nearly ninety when I died. I was old, and I'd spent the last forty years of my life as a researcher, scholar and teacher between searching the globe and other planes for a way to bring Dyarzi back to me, poring over ancient tomes and magical lore from a dozen different civilizations, studying, researching... I hadn't practiced in years, Sasha. Decades, really," he said, and shook his head. "They opened the manacles on my wrists and I punched the mage in the jaw as hard as I could. But, it only rocked him back, this body had no strength, then. Afterwards, they tied me across a barrel, then gang-raped me for three days straight. Each shift of sailors came in and gang-raped me as they got off-duty. And there was nothing I could do. But if I'd known how to do this," he said, and snapped another vicious roundhouse kick into the pell. "Maybe..." he finished, his voice trailing off. His eyes were still on the pell, but I could tell that wasn't what he was seeing.

"I... I know you told me about that before, but... Well... I still don't know what to say, other than I'm sorry," I said, my heart aching for what he had suffered.

Eddas looked at me, blinking. "Mmmm? Oh! Terribly sorry," he said, and grinned. "Please, don't worry about it. That was over a hundred and fifty-six years ago. I killed the mage myself. As for the rest of the crew, I killed them in hand-to-hand. I was tremendously upset for decades afterwards, but really,

I've gotten over it. It makes me think, now, but it doesn't hurt anymore. That's what I was doing, then, Sasha - just thinking aloud... Thinking about what might have been different. But... Well, it *has* been a hundred and fifty-six years, after all, it's alright. And besides, I've discovered that was truly nothing compared to being eaten alive by ogres. *That*, Sasha, was *very* bad. I still sometimes have nightmares about it," Eddas said, and shook his head, flicking his ponytail back over his shoulder. "I suppose if there's any moral to be gathered from it all... Well, I suppose it's as I told you before, Sasha - losing and being captured by the enemies of your god sometimes means pain worse than death, and loss worse than mere defeat."

I nodded. "So I have learned, Master Eddas. So I have learned," I replied, and hopped forward, snapping a kick into the pell at the same level Eddas had. I then stepped back, gazing at the pell, then sighed. "I still haven't caught him, yet. I want to. I want him to *pay* for everything he's done. For me, for Marilith... And for Corvid. Corvid most of all," I said, and sighed, gazing at the ground.

Eddas reached out to me, placing a gloved hand atop my forearm. "He'll be alright, Sasha. Gonnakasi will take care of him."

"I know, I know, it's just..." I looked to Eddas, my eyes misting. "What if I *lose* him to her, before I ever really have a chance? What if he falls in love with her?"

"She *is* worthy of him, Sasha. More than you know."

"That *doesn't help!*" I yelled.

"Perhaps not, but you should still know. I told you before, she needs him. In more ways than one. She needs a friend. And she needs an heir. The latter problem was one Yorindar had already arranged with Esvina, the goddess of the Enebua. She sent her a dream of a pale-skinned warrior who would come to her, a warrior with seed strong enough to finally give her the child she needs. That warrior was supposed to be me."

I blinked. "You?!"

"Yes, me. I *am* Yorindar's Warrior in the great *chatto* game the gods play, just as Frarim is the Priest, and Corvid the Chariot. And more, I *can* give her an heir, the same way I gave children to all my concubines. A girl child, guaranteed. And more, one that would have a sparkling talent, and the ability to *know* what other people were thinking and feeling, to *know* what they were really like as a person, simply because she could see the *soul*. This would have been a tremendous advantage to her daughter, and given her daughter the tools she needed to slowly pluck out the weeds that have crept into her mother's military and government, and replace them with women more dedicated to their people's future. The original plan was that Corvid could simply take me there in his airship, since I can't use a spell to get there because I've never been there before in this body. Thereafter, meeting with the High Magess would have led me to the queen and..." Eddas said, then shook her head. "But, all that's gone, now. Now, the only way I can see to repair it is the very plan your sister suggested."

"But we're waiting... Waiting... What are we waiting for? Why can't we go *now*?!"

"Because, Sasha, I simply can't do it yet."

"Why not?! What's stopping you?!"

"You're not listening. Nothing's stopping me except my lack of ability," Eddas replied, gazing at me. "What, do you think I *enjoy* tearing my hamstrings every other day, ripping my groin muscles, kicking hard enough to feel the slender little bones in this tiny elf-woman's feet break? I don't - it's actually a remarkably uncomfortable sensation."

I winced. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean-"

"No, you didn't, and I wasn't offended," Eddas said, reaching out to me and taking my hands. "Sasha, I feel like I'm actually the one who should be apologizing to *you* for not developing fast enough, for not learning fast enough. I am *trying*. I really am. But if we go before I am ready, we will fail."

"I know, I know... And I don't want that to happen. It's just..." I said, and sighed again. "I don't *care* if she's worthy of him, I don't *care* if she needs him. *I* want him. He belongs to Marilith and me, not her. I want him back."

"I know. And I understand. And I agree. And I want you to have him back, too," Eddas replied, and turned back to the pell. "That's why I'm *working! So! Hard! On! This!*" he said, smashing the pell again and again with high kicks to emphasize each word.

I winced - I *heard* a bone break in his foot on the last kick. He simply stood on his uninjured foot, shaking the injured foot for a moment, then stood on it again. "Are you alright? I heard..."

"I'm fine, Sasha. Minor breaks like that heal in a heartbeat or two, it's only briefly painful when the ends of the bones grind a bit as they come back together," he said, and faced the pell again.

"Stop," I said, reaching out to him. "Wait. Listen a moment."

"Yes?"

"I don't *want* you to break bones and tear muscles. If we've reached the limits of what your body can do, that's that. Let's concentrate more on speed and accuracy, now. If you can't hit harder, you can hit *faster* and make your blows more telling."

Eddas glanced at me, a brief smile flickering at the corners of his lips. "This is a half-elf's body, Sasha. Speed and accuracy, it does *quite* well. Teach me."



## The Raven - Eighteen.

Gonnakasi and I coupled twice more that week, though the onset of her menses brought that to a halt. Her people used small pledgets of cloth, I discovered, rolled tight and changed once or twice a day. It was hardly a pleasant thing, unfortunately, and Gonnakasi's mood was atrocious as her abdomen felt quite uncomfortable. Belana had taught me a gentle massage that sometimes helped, though it did not work for every woman - some, it was merely painful. And whether it worked or not, it increased the woman's flow tremendously. Gonnakasi enjoyed the relief, however, and was willing to put up with the mess it caused. Another 'trick' that Belana had taught me was far more simple - hair from the mound and the lips sometimes worked it's way inside, and caused itching and discomfort, she said, much like having a hair from one's beard stuck between the teeth was uncomfortable. I'd never worn a beard or moustache, but I knew many men who wore full beards and I'd occasionally seen them fish about in their mouths with a finger after a meal or rinse with water to get rid of an errant hair. It seemed to me that if Gonnakasi was to bear children, it would be best to remove any potential source of problems. Shaving was tedious, and Belana had recommended plucking the hair, as plucking lasted longer and eventually resulted in successive growths of thinner and thinner hair which were easier to remove. However, I could not imagine Gonnakasi enduring having the hairs from her groin plucked one by one, warrior or not - it seemed more torture to me than anything else. So, when I shaved myself each morning, I took the time to shave her, as well. This, she enjoyed tremendously, and it heightened her ardor quite a bit - once her menses were over, she would couple with me each morning afterwards. Combined with coupling each night, it seemed we had the best chance of producing an heir for her. Only time would tell.

I was not surprised when Gonnakasi asked me to marry her. Such was the way things were done here, the woman asked the man. I knew she would ask, and I had been thinking about it quite a bit. Really, in the end, there was only one answer I could give that would make her happy - and what reason did I have to make her unhappy? There was no one left for me in the world, after all. And more, it was rather scandalous for the queen to simply take a lover, she was supposed to be the epitome of 'proper' society in Enebua. Of course, given her problem, it was understandable, so it seemed few held the notion against her. But, I did not want people thinking Gonnakasi was desperate for an heir and willing to rut

with any handsome face that caught her eye - such would hardly improve her standing among her people, and right now, she was already having enough problems keeping her unruly generals under control. So, of course, I agreed.

The marriage ceremony was quite involved, but as Gonnakasi had been through it eight times before, she was able to tell me precisely what to do, and when. The climax of the ceremony involved the exchanging of gold bracelets before the High Magess in the Temple of Esvina. In short order, we were packed aboard an open sedan-chair, and carted around the city so the inhabitants could toss flowers upon us. As I was to these people a maggot-skinned foreigner, I was grateful they didn't toss rocks.

Three weeks after I had arrived in the palace, I was walking in the western wings, just exploring and seeing what there was to see, and thinking about myself, Gonnakasi... Everything. Gonnakasi, who was very familiar with timing her cycle, said that the 'window' we were seeking might be open sometime within the next few days. What would happen afterwards, I did not know. If she conceived and the child was a girl, my usefulness to her was at an end. It seemed she loved me, but she was also a pragmatic woman. Would she keep me afterwards?

And more, did I want to be kept?

I cared for her, yes. She was a warm, wonderful woman with fire and backbone. But did I love her? This, I did not really know. In my heart, I still missed Marilith, and Sasha, and what might have been.

Walking through the corridors, I heard the sounds of sandals swiftly slapping atop the marble, and reflexively stepped to the wall, out of the way. The queen's attendants had the right of way in the palace, and anyone who interfered with them unnecessarily was usually in for a whipping. Anyone who actually *tripped* one of the madly running girls was usually in for far worse. I did not believe Gonnakasi would apply those same punishments to me, but it seemed very unwise to put her in a position where she would have to even think about it, so I flattened to the wall as one was supposed to.

"Corvid!" a familiar voice yelped.

I turned to look - and to my surprise, it wasn't an attendant at all. It rather was Doshta, panting and out of breath as she skidded to a stop beside me. "Corvid! You have to help me!"

"What's happened?"

"Pago..." she said, gasping. "Something's wrong, he won't tell me what, he's in the kitchen, he says he needs to talk to you, I think his brain's gone soft!"

I blinked. "What?"

"He won't tell me what's wrong, I don't know! Please come!"

"Alright," I replied, and Doshta grabbed my hand, then turned and began running back the way she came, me following.

It wasn't a long run, but I found myself a bit winded by the time we got there. It was apparent I needed more exercise. Doshta dragged me through the door to the queen's kitchen, stopping before her husband.

Pago was a thin Kushite man, a bit on the wiry side and a bit short like all Enebua men, and he looked utterly terrified - though of what, I had no idea. "Yes, wonderful, you got him! Thank you! Now leave!"

"What?!" Doshta yelped, panting from the run.

"Leave! Get out! I love you! You're wonderful, you're beautiful! Now get the hell out!" he snapped, his voice carrying a note of hysteria. "And close the door behind you!"

"Pago, have you lost your mind?!" Doshta yelled.

"*OUT!*" he shrieked.

A nearby guard peered into the door. "Is there a problem?" she called.

"I want my wife out of the kitchen! And you, too! And close the door after yourselves!" Pago shouted.

"As you wish, Cook," she replied, and grabbed Doshta by the arm, giving her a no-nonsense look. "Let's go."

Doshta grumbled, but followed, and soon the two were gone, the door closed behind them. I looked to Pago. "Pago, what's the matter?"

"I am *dead!* You have to help me, Corvid! Please! I beg you, you have the queen's ear, tell her I didn't do it! I can't trust anyone - not even my wife! They're all women! You're a man, you know how sneaky and conniving and vindictive they are! Help me, please!"

"Pago, I haven't the foggiest notion what you're going on about. What's the matter?"

"Come! Come!" he said, reaching below his tunic, and extracting a brass key two hands long. "I'll show you!" he said, and trotted off to a door at the other end of the kitchen. "Come!"

I followed as Pago unlocked the door. As badly as his hands were trembling, it was amazing that he managed to get the key into the keyhole. He swung the door open, then snatched up a lit taper from the holder nearby. "Come!"

"I'm coming, I'm coming," I said, following him in.

Inside the pantry was, as I expected, various foodstuffs. Barrels, boxes, and long shelves of spices to choose from, it was a chef's heaven. In the back, sides of beef, pig and goat meat hung in a box-like frame, the frame inscribed with various runes I did not understand - but as the meat wasn't rotting nor could I even really smell it at all, it seemed the purpose was to keep the meat fresh. Pago tucked the taper into a glass-domed lantern that hung by the wall, trotted over to the spice shelves, then snatched down a small jar. Opening it, he held it out to me. "Look! Look!"

I looked - it was a jar of powdered, dried, chopped and diced plants, unrecognizable to me. They were pale green and the smell was pungent, but that was all I could tell. "What am I looking at?"

"Can't you see? Read the jar!"

I grinned. "I can speak your language, but I don't read it well. What's it say?"

"It says 'fennel'! And it looks like fennel, doesn't it?"

"I suppose, I don't know what fennel looks like."

"It looks like fennel, it smells like fennel... I'm going to *die!* The queen is going to *have me tortured to death!*"

"What, you're saying it's *poison?!?*" I asked, blinking.

"No! Goddess above, I *wish* it was poison!" he replied, taking a pinch of it and popping it into his mouth. He swallowed, making a face. He then looked to me, shaking his head. "No, it's not. Goddess, I *wish* it was poison, but it's *not!*"

"Alright, what is it?"

"Can't you tell?! Can't you tell from the smell?! Smell how pungent it is! It's labeled fennel, it's in the place for the fennel jar, but this is not fennel, it's *silphium!* Just like it was when I first arrived!"

I blinked, realization slowly dawning. "Alright... It appears the queen will have to track down her last cook, and have her executed."

"No! You don't understand! I threw that out! I threw it all out, washed the jar and replaced it! I have my own fennel, lots of it! It's a necessary part of black-sauce, it's what gives it the proper odor and flavor! I didn't tell anyone, I thought it was just a mistake, and nobody would want to add silphium to the queen's food, *Goddess*, no, she'd *kill* for that, she's been trying to get pregnant for years, and... *DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND?! I THREW IT ALL OUT! THIS IS NEW, SOMEONE PUT IT BACK LAST NIGHT!*"

I let out a low whistle, appreciating the intricacy of the plot. The queen couldn't be poisoned - she could detect poison with her ring. But silphium wasn't poison. And more, if someone had replaced it, that

meant there was more than one key to the pantry. It was even possible that two of the queen's previous cooks had been murdered by someone trying to poison the queen before the conspirators managed to get their own cook into the queen's kitchen. It was even possible the last cook died simply to *enable* them to get their cook into the kitchen - and, it was even possible that *all* of the cooks were innocent, and only Pago's greater skill at cooking had detected the switch in herbs.

Pago was trembling so badly, he looked like he was about to drop the jar. I reached out, taking his hands in mine and placing the lid back atop the jar.

"Corvid, you have to help me! You have the queen's ear! Tell her I didn't do it! I swear, I'll do anything for you! Doshta likes you, she's coupled with you before! I'll ask her to do it again, she'll do anything so long as I keep giving her the gold I'm paid each week, it's four times what we made in the tavern!"

"Easy, now. Steady," I said, and smiled reassuringly. "First off, that's a remarkably bad idea. The queen would likely kill her."

"I-I-I-I..."

I took the jar from him, placing it back on the shelf. "Relax. The queen is not going to torture you or kill you."

"But Corvid, what am I going to *do?!?*"

"Make fish for lunch. Calm down, and make fish for lunch."

"Alright, but *then* what?!"

"Make fish every day, three times a day. Why, didn't you know? Women who want to get pregnant in the Southlands eat fish three times a day, every day, without fail. And it always works."

"Is... Is that true?!" Pago asked, amazed.

I grinned. "No, of course not. But that's what we're going to tell everyone. And I'll talk to the queen for you. And you are *not* going to be tortured or killed. I think, in fact, you'll likely be rewarded."

A smile managed to fight it's way onto his panicked ebon face, and slowly work it's way into a look of relief. "Re-rewarded?! You really think so?!"

"Yes. But only if you calm down, and make a lovely fish lunch. Relax, act normally again, and never speak of this again to *anyone* except the queen herself."

"Oh, no! I don't *have* fish in the locker! There was none when I arrived, I assumed the queen didn't like it!"

I shrugged. "You're the Royal Chef, grab your guards and run to the market. If anyone asks why you were upset before, tell them you were panicked because you were out of fish and I told you that fish three times a day was necessary."

"Yes... Yes! Then they won't know... Sneaky women, plotting against the queen... We'll outsmart them! They won't know!" he said, and grinned. Suddenly, his grin fell. "But Corvid... Someone can get *in* here! They could poison the fish then I would have to eat it and I'll *die!*"



"That's why I'm going to talk to the queen, right now. Relax. It will be alright."

"Thank you! Thank you!" he yelled, hugging me tight.

"Come on - let's lock this back up, then you run to the market. And I mean *run*, it's getting near noon as it is."

"Yes! Yes! Let's go!" he yelled. Soon, he had locked the door behind us, then was running to the opposite door and yanking it open. "Guards! We need to go to market! Now! The queen needs fish for lunch! Hurry! We need to go right now!"

Doshta and I stood back, watching the chaos as the guards were gathered, a bit of gold dust acquired to purchase some fish, then the lot of them followed Pago on a mad dash down the hall and gone.

Doshta rolled her eyes. "Why do men always have to be so scatter-brained?" she said, then suddenly looked to me. "Err... Present company excepted, of course."

"Of course," I replied, smiling. "Doshta, I have to go, the queen asked me to meet her."

"Don't let me keep you!" she replied, grinning, and I turned and strode away down the corridor.

It took a bit of running, but I managed to catch Gonnakasi as she was walking to the royal courtroom. "Your majesty, we need to talk."

"Can it wait, Corvid? I'm expected," she asked, still walking, her usual attendants in tow.

"Possibly, I suppose that's up to you. You see, we men of the Southlands have rather a special power - we know when a woman is at the prime moment to conceive. Well, I suppose it's not *too* special, most male animals can tell it by smell. But, you know, this nose may seem a bit long and narrow by your people's standards, but it *does* have a purpose. And my dear, my nose says you are *ready*."

Gonnakasi stopped dead in her tracks, then looked to the nearest attendant. "Go to the court and announce I'll be delayed by an hour."

"Make it two, I've lunch coming for when we rest between times," I said, smiling.

Gonnakasi shivered. "Two hours. Go!"

"Yes, My Queen - and good luck!" the attendant added with a grin, then dashed off as the other attendants grinned. Their grins disappeared as the queen gazed at them.

Once she felt she had the proper respect again, Gonnakasi smiled at me. "Let's go, husband. Let's hope your nose is right."

"Oh, never fear, dear, I also have a special lunch coming, just in case it's wrong. You see, women in the Southlands who want to conceive eat fish three times a day, every day. So, that's what the cook will be bringing us for lunch."

"Blah, I detest fish," Gonnakasi replied. "Does it work, at least?"

"Every time, yes."

"Fish it is, then. I assume you told the cook already?"

"Yes, he'll be making it every day, three times a day until you conceive."

Gonnakasi grinned as we neared her chamber door. "I have a good feeling about this. Maybe today is the day!"

"Certainly it will be the day we remove any impediments there may be, yes," I replied as we walked through the door.

"What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you in a moment. For now, let's get your cloak hung on it's stand, and run everyone out of here - we don't need an audience."

"True," she replied as her attendants took her cloak from her and hung it up. Once that was done, she clapped her hands. "*OUT!*" she called, and shortly all the guards, attendants and musicians had left, the door closing behind them.

"Ooo, Corvid! I'm so excited! Is your nose really that sharp?" she asked, reaching for her loincloth.

"It must be, I managed to sniff out a conspiracy to keep you barren," I replied.

Gonnakasi froze, staring at me. "What?!"

"Come," I said, taking her hand. "Sit on the bed with me, and I'll explain."

It didn't take long to tell her what Pago had discovered, and explain the ruse with the fish. To say that she was furious was an understatement. She was livid. The veins in her temple visibly pulsed with fury. "Six *years!* Six *years!* I've been trying, and they've been using *silphium* on me?!"

"And apparently poisoning your cooks from time to time, yes. That ring has served you well, though two innocent people may have died from it. Who knows you have it?"

"Everyone knows I have it, it's part of the royal regalia! It's the royal seal, I seal the wax seals on documents with it!"

"Then likely your other cooks who died weren't trying to poison you, likely they were poisoned when they refused to continue participating in the plot."

"Damn them all! An extra key, and silphium in the black-sauce! I'll seal the palace and have it searched inch by inch! I'll-"

"You'll do *nothing*, because if you *do*, you'll tip your hand. Right now, only four people know about the silphium - Pago, you, me, and whoever put it there. If you start searching the palace for an extra key,

you *know* you're not going to find it."

"Well then what the hell am I supposed to do?!" she snapped.

"Three things: First, calm down. Between the two of us, *you* know the palace and it's politics better than I. Calm yourself. You can't out-think someone if you're too angry to think. Calm yourself," I said, taking her hand. I then reached out to her, putting a finger beneath her chin and turning her head, then kissed her softly.

"Better?"

"A little," she replied, fuming.

"We'll try again," I said, and kissed her again. I loved kissing Kushite women, their lips were quite pleasant.

When I let her go again, she was smiling. "Alright, I think I'm calm, now. No more, or I won't be," she said, and winked.

I grinned. "Good. Now, for the second thing: We have to make sure Pago doesn't get himself dead. Without him, we wouldn't know of this plot. And they may try to poison the fish to kill him, so they can try to subvert the next cook."

"That kitchen is already guarded. Whoever it is has subverted the guards."

"Or *is* a guard," I replied.

"True. And it could be any of them, I rotate the guard rosters at random to prevent boredom. A bored guard is easily killed by an interloper."

"Then my immediate suggestion is that if poison shows up in the food, assume Pago is innocent, and just throw it out."

"Agreed," Gonnakasi said, nodding. "What's the third thing?"

"Well," I said, reaching to the clasp for the chains that held her breast-plates in place, "since we now have removed what was likely the real source of your problem, let's attempt to address it right now," I said, lowering her breastplates and kissing her bared breasts.

Gonnakasi sighed. "Corvid... A woman who takes silphium every day for years on end takes months to conceive after she stops."

"Well, you know that, and now *I* know that, and likely everyone in Kush knows that. But how many people know about the fertile properties of fish, the magic powers of Southland men, and their incredible fertility?"

"Well, no one, you made it up," Gonnakasi replied, making a *moue'*.

"Precisely. But if you repeat it so they believe it, you may be able to force them to tip their hand by setting a trap for them."

"Alright... I can see that..." she said, somewhat distracted now as I toyed with her nipples.

"And dear, when we let your attendants back in with the fish lunch we have coming, they're going to expect to see a ruffled bed, a ruffled queen, and smell a room where a woman has coupled recently. If they don't, you won't be able to fool them."

"Well, perhaps, but this room is well ventilated..."

"And I should mention I still haven't shown you *everything* that Belana taught me. There's still quite a bit you haven't tried."

Gonnakasi nodded. "Alright, you've talked me into it," she replied, and immediately rose and reached for her loincloth as I chuckled.

Marilith and I had chatted for quite some time. I tried to make what I wanted clear - but, at the same time, she told me that there would be various problems and limitations with what I wanted. But, it was at least doable. Now, I sat upstairs at the table, thinking... And hoping...

I looked up the sound of light feet on the stairs - it was Eddas, coming up the stairs, a towel wrapped about his body and another wrapped about his head. He had his boots, gloves, hair-band and *nephni* tucked under an arm. "How are you feeling, Old Man?"

"Old," he replied, and chuckled briefly as he walked over to his cabinet and placed his clothes atop it. "Thank you for drawing the bath, I was quite exhausted."

"You're welcome, I'll get you a cup of *byallar* from the pot," I said, rising to my feet from the table. "How are you progressing?"

"I don't know. Sasha learned from a great teacher, and I can see it at times in how she speaks and holds herself. Other times..." he said, and sighed. "Well, she's Sasha, Joy. If you teach her something, particularly a physical skill, she learns what you teach her immediately, and she's tremendously strong - she literally has the strength of three men. She's part mermaid, it's just the way mer-folk are. Unfortunately, she doesn't know how to compensate for people who aren't the same. It's like with the strength training - she couldn't see that I had reached the peak of what this body can possibly do until she watched me break it's bones."

I winced, pouring him a cup of *byallar*. "I still don't see how you could do that."

"I did it because I had to, Joy," he replied, picking up his cup. "Every time I wanted to stop, I remembered that to them, Corvid is like you are to me. And if you were lost, I would do that to save you. And far, far more," he said, sipping at his cup.

"But... But doesn't it hurt?"



"Tremendously. But, small breaks heal quickly, and this body does not scar. It really doesn't even heal like a normal bone heals - the knot of *mana* that maintains this body literally jerks the ends of the bones back together, then repairs them as though they were never broken, just as my skin heals from a cut without a scar. The pain fades in a heartbeat or two for little breaks, it's nothing. Pulled ligaments and torn muscles take a bit longer, but still not long."

I sighed, looking at him. It just was the way he was. Once he had committed himself to something, that was that. In studying a bit of knowledge or esoteric lore, he would work until he understood it completely before he moved on, even if that meant not stopping to feed himself. In trying to accomplish the goals of the gods, he would strive forward to victory, even if he had to crawl there, bloodied and broken. It was just the way he was. He did not like living in that body, and at times, he hated it. If it was in pain, he simply walked on until the pain faded.

What could I say to him? How could I get him to understand? Finally, I just decided to say it. "Old Man, I want you to be a little easier on that body."

"Mmm?" Eddas said, looking at me. "What do you mean, Joy?"

"Well, I..." I said, and stopped, thinking. "Well, I just don't know how to say it. I've thought about it and thought about it, and I just don't know. Ummm... Perhaps I could use an example?"

Eddas shrugged. "I'm listening."

"Pretend for a moment that my body is like yours. I mean, in that it heals like that."

Eddas shrugged again. "Alright."

"Now, pretend I did exactly the same things you did - sitting down to do research and forgetting to eat, working at what Sasha is teaching you and breaking bones... How would you feel about that, if it was me doing it?"

Eddas started to reply, then paused. He sat back in his chair, holding his cup in both hands, thinking. After a long moment, he looked at me. "I'd be tremendously upset watching you do that. Staggeringly upset," he replied. "I see what you're getting at. It doesn't bother me, but it bothers *you*." He then set his cup down, and held up his arm, clenching his fist and flexing his upper arm. "But look at that, Joy! Look! Solid muscle! Almost like..."

"Almost like a man's arm?"

Eddas relaxed his arm, nodding as he gazed at his cup.

"Old Man, you have forgotten something."

"Oh? What?"

"It already *was* a man's arm," I said, and kissed him lovingly.

Eddas smiled at me when I leaned back. "Well... Thank you, Joy. I understand. It's just..." he said, and looked down at himself. "I don't know. I just wanted..."

"I know what you wanted, Old Man. And while that would be nice, we both know it's not going to

happen."

"No, it's not. The knot of *mana* that maintains this body is bound to my *Talent*. I've studied it, over the decades. I understand it fairly well, now. If things had been different, it eventually would have faded in a few centuries. Now, however, it's maintained by my *Talent*. So long as I live, it will be there. This body cannot change. I might be killed by having my head cut off - maybe. This body might just grow another, and I'm not willing to experiment to find out. A large enough explosion might kill me. Maybe. The pieces might just crawl back together. Jumping in bubbling lava might do it. That one seems pretty certain - if this body is turned to ash, it might not heal back from that. That would be *astoundingly* painful if it wasn't destroyed, however, so I'd rather not have to find out."

"Yes, you've told me before. And you've told me why."

Eddas nodded. "This is the body of the Raven of Yorindar. It's not going to change, and so long as I live and speak his name, Yorindar will never sleep. All of eternity lies before me, Joy. And it is, at times, a frightening feeling. I think, without you, I never would be able to endure that. Without you, I would face eternity alone. And that, I could not stand. I..." he said, and shook his head. "That's why I have to, Joy. Corvid is for them what you are for me. Without him, they face eternity with only each other. And I would not wish that fate on them. Marilith understands, Joy. She weeps each time she tries to reach Corvid in dreams, slipping into the palace in the plane of dreams. But, she cannot, the queen's bed is protected from intrusion by dream-creatures. She wants to just go to the palace and grab him - but she knows she cannot, Corvid still has things to do, there, and she would only complicate the situation for the gods, and possibly cost the Ocean her alliance with Esvina. Yes, Marilith understands. She weeps at the thought of facing eternity without a man to love her. But, the Ocean is wise. They do, at least, have each other."

"*Can* you get him back for them, Old Man?"

Eddas shook his head. "No, only Sasha can. All I can do is get her into the palace and before the queen so she has a chance to do it. Beyond that, it is entirely up to her."

I sighed. "And all from the trouble caused by this one wizard..."

Eddas nodded. "He'll have to be dealt with, as well."

I rose, reaching for my dress to take it off. "Let's get to bed, Old Man."

"Alright," he replied, pulling the towel from his hair. He grinned at me as he laid the towel on the table, then pulled the other towel from around himself. "And yes, Joy, after this is over, I'll go easy on this little body. My lifestyle and the knot of mana that maintains it quite keeps it fit enough. Besides, I hardly have the time to be spending eight to twelve hours a day just exercising, I *do* have other things to do, after all."

"Thank you, Old Man, I quite felt like a fat cow every time I looked at that," I replied, grinning as I picked up his towels, and he laughed.

Later, after placing the towels in the hamper and as I climbed into bed, I thought about Marilith, and our conversation earlier today. Would she remember? And if she did, would she do it? I did not know. I could only hope.

\* \* \*

I walked through the village I had lived in as a child. It was empty and cold, the ruins of the ancient Hyperborean city of Tholonir in the background. I could see the ghosts flitting about the ruins, but I was not afraid.

A dark shape walked up beside me, and resolved itself into Marilith. She looked around, smiling. "*This is a lovely place, Joy. What is it?*"

"My childhood village," I replied, shaking my head. "But what are you doing here?"

Marilith giggled. *"You asked me to come - but, you're dreaming, it's hard for you to think when your brain is asleep. Who are those ghosts?"* she asked, pointing.

"Dead Hyperboreans," I replied.

*"And they don't frighten you?"*

"They did when I was a child. Now, I've been with Eddas for many years... Eddas!" I yelped, a sudden thought occurring to me. "Can you take me to him? I don't even know where to look, here!"

Marilith smiled. *"That's what you asked me to do when you were awake. You were quite intent on it, it's not surprising you'd remember it asleep. I can take you into his dream, but I remind you, if you're planning anything naughty, well, I can't just let you go and leave you alone with him. As soon as I let you go, you'll awaken. And taking your projected form into another dream means that you will see his astral form - but, he will see yours, and that will shape the dream. That, I can't do much about. Manipulating his dream to the point where I could fix it would be a very strong imposition of my will upon his, and he'd likely fight it instinctively and awaken. He is a Great Mage, and he's quite skilled at Lucid Dreaming."*

I shook my head. "I don't understand what you said. I just want to see him. I want to hug him..."

*"I remember. And so will you,"* she replied, gesturing over me. *"There. When you awaken, you'll remember this dream, and vividly. As for hugging him... Well, it's best just to take you, and let you see for yourself. Come, take my hand,"* she said, holding her hand out. I did so, and she drew a door in the air, a flaming line with her finger that became a real door, then opened it. A moment later, I had a brief impression of being in the tower again, over the bed with Eddas - then, Marilith reached out with her hand, touching Eddas' forehead, and suddenly, we were somewhere else.

A blazing sun hung in a sky above, beating down like a hammer on the anvil of a black-sand desert. Ahead of us, a man in a robe walked through the sand, towards gleaming brass spires in the shimmering distance. *"Ooooo... So this is what the earthward reaches of the plane of fire look like... Very nice!"* Marilith said.

The man paused, turning at the sound of her voice. I gaped at him.

He was not at all what I had thought - and yet, in many ways, he was precisely what I thought. He was tall and dark of skin, with bushy eyebrows. He had a proud, noble nose that reminded me of an eagle. His beard was long and full, and dark as night. He gazed at us in curiosity. "How odd... Why am I dreaming of Marilith and Joy?" he muttered aloud, his voice deep and thrilling.

*"We're actually here, Master Eddas. Joy asked me to bring her to you. She wanted to see what you really looked like."*

"Ah..." he said, his gaze flickering behind him for a moment. "Sorry, this is actually one of my favorite dreams, it's difficult to concentrate. Entering the City of Brass in my first life was... Quite exciting." He then held out his arms to me. "Joy!"

I smiled, my heart pounding. "Eddas..."

"Ah, I wish I could embrace you, dear. But that's your astral form, and you're sixteen cubits tall. I think I can wrap my arms around a leg, if you'd like."

I knelt before him, then picked him up in my free hand. Holding him in my cupped hand, I kissed him carefully.

"Ah, the caress of a giantess. You are quite beautiful, my dear. I hope I meet your best expectations, as well," he said, sitting on my palm.

I smiled at him. "Funny... I always thought you'd be taller..."

Marilith giggled as she held onto my finger. Eddas snorted, then burst out laughing.

A shadow passed over the sun, and I looked up. Above us, a large shape loomed... Winged... Ominous... "What is that?"

"*Oh, my...*" Marilith said, gazing up.

"Oh, drat," Eddas said, and sighed.

A swooping flutter of nearly-silent wings, and suddenly an owl was perched on Eddas' arm. "*I would think you'd be happier to see me than that, Eddas,*" the owl said, in a golden voice that came from nowhere.

"Sorry, I was just enjoying my time with Joy."

"*I'll make this brief, then. It is time, Eddas. Ready or not.*"

"We'll be there come the dawn, then."

*"Remember - Sasha, Marilith and Corvid must be together to handle the wizard. You are re-forming the force-pattern. But our mutual opponent is moving. He will not let you simply overwhelm his pawn. He cannot stop you from luring him there, but he can make certain he isn't alone. Double or nothing, Eddas, the crown is a gold talent."*

"I'll handle the rest, they'll be alright."

*"Let's hope so, Eddas. This is a very great gamble. If you fail-"*

"We won't," Eddas replied, interrupting.

"Yorindar?" I said, staring.

The owl gazed at me, then nodded. *"By my accounting, I owe you a gift, Joy, to redress the balance between us."*

"You do?"

*"For the time I asked Eddas to take you away from Darian's bedside. For the time I had to ask Eddas to do what he did not wish to do, and you shouted at me in anger. For now, when I interrupt a special moment. For the dawn, when Eddas shall go into danger without you, and you shall weep in the silence of this tower that follows. Each time, necessity. If you were an ordinary mortal, it would be nothing. But, you are not just anyone Joy. You are the hilt of my sword. You*



*are the haft of my mallet. You are the focus of my alliance with your gods. You are the uplifting wind to the wings of my raven, the shield of his heart, the rock he rests upon, and his landmark in flight - for without you, he would lose his way. You are not mine, of course. You are a pawn of the gods of the giants, the Heart of the Mountain. Your gods are quite pleased with you. I am, as well - more than you know. But, you are not mine. I had to ask. And your gods have agreed, for they are pleased with you, and with what Eddas has done for them. A gift is in order, to redress the balance between us."*

"A... A gift?"

The owl nodded, then looked to Eddas. *"Eddas, have you ever considered the effects of Commutation on the formula  $E = C \cdot 0^4c \cdot H/T$  in reference to a lumenic transparency?"*

"No, I haven't, but that's an interesting thought, particularly if one combines it with a an eyelash hair..."

*"Exactly,"* the owl replied, and like a hard slap to the face, I was instantly awake.

I blinked, my mind dizzy from the sudden awakening, seeing our room in the top of Eddas' tower. I was lying in bed beside Eddas, and he was blinking and yawning. "Oh, bother. I just wanted..."

Eddas suddenly stared. "Aaaaah! Quick! Joy, where's my quill and ink?!"

"There, on the shelf where you left it, Old Man," I replied, pointing with one hand and rubbing my temples with the other.

"Have to hurry, write it down before I forget!" he replied, leaping out of bed with the kind of agility only his little half-elf woman's body could possibly possess, and sprinting naked across the room.

"Write *what* down?"

"Dreams don't last, Joy, they get fuzzy shortly after you awaken!" he replied. "Paper! Where's my paper?!"

"To your right, Old Man," I replied, lying back and pulling the blanket back over me.

Eddas grabbed his quill, inkwell and paper, darting to the table. "Good, good... Alright, here we go," he said, dipping the quill quickly. "Lumenic transparency... Glass, that must be it! And commutation is the higher law that applies to extract the spell formula," he muttered, scribbling quickly. "And the formula... The formula... E sub zero equals... Alright, that's standard for an enchanted object's formula, next would be a variable of focus... What was it...?" he said, then paused. "Damn! I can't remember!"

"Ummm... E sub zero equals C sub zero to the power of four low C times H over T?" I asked.

"Yes!" Eddas yelped, writing quickly. After a few moments, he stopped, poking the quill into the inkwell with a flourish. "There! Hah! Joy, do you know what this means?!"

"I haven't a clue, Old Man. Marilith made it so I'd remember that dream vividly, and I remember an owl saying that phrase... Yorindar, perhaps?" I said, and shrugged. "I remember it, yes, but don't ask me to tell you what it means, Old Man, I haven't the foggiest notion."

"Hah! Joy, it's the formula for an enchanted object! Once I derive the spell formula from this, I can... Aaaaah! I need my tables!" he yelped, leaping to his feet and darting across the room to his bookshelf.

I grinned, watching Eddas work in a bustle of excitement. I had only wanted to see what he really looked like. Yet, I knew in my heart I was seeing it now. The scholar, the researcher... It was really just another mask for the little boy inside the man, who was endlessly excited and fascinated by discovering something new.

#### The Raven - Nineteen.

Evening came at last, putting an end to what was a rather long day. Gonnakasi laughed as we coupled again before sleep, her mind dancing with ideas for who the true leader of the conspiracy might be, and how we might ferret them out. She kissed me many times, and whispered her love for me. I kissed her in return, and smiled in the darkness. She wanted to bear my child now, very badly. Not merely to solidify her rule, but for me. I wasn't entirely certain how I felt about that.

I accompanied Gonnakasi to her court after her two hour break. We had made love twice and eaten lunch between times, her advisors trying to keep the knowing looks off their faces. While they were out and we lay together, she discussed the possibilities with me, until she had a plan. And she wasted no time in implementing that plan. Throughout lunch, she gave me a girlish gaze for all her attendants to see. And, when we went to court after coupling again, she bore a beatific expression on her face which looked as alien on her as a smile on a panther.

Her demeanor in court had been similar, if not worse. She sat quite relaxed in her chair, an almost drunken smile on her face, and gazed at me lovingly many times, allowing her advisors and generals to drone on seemingly unheeded. Her spear of office she rested against her shoulder casually, and left her hands in her lap instead of gripping it. Twice, she reached out to stroke my cheek, and once, I thought she would kiss me in court, but she apparently thought the better of it.

At last, her exchequer seemed to be unable to take it any longer. A plainly dressed Enebua woman, her garb was little more than a white silk apodesmos and loincloth with the alternating red and blue trim of a palace functionary, plain sandals upon her feet. "My Queen, with respect... Should I simply present this report tomorrow?"

Gonnakasi turned to her exchequer, gazing at her down on the floor below, and smiled beatifically. "Well... Now that I think on it... It might be better, yes. I have never had such a tremendously enjoyable coupling as that. It was... Indescribable. Corvid is a man of the Southlands, and they are astonishingly fertile. Why, they breed like rabbits, I've heard said. And having experienced it, I can believe it. His touch is like the finest Palomean silk, his shaft like the finest steel. Before, with my other husbands, it often felt like there was something lying over me, something preventing their seed from taking hold. And yet, with him, it was completely different. It was not a mere warmth I felt at his climax, but a *punch* of heat," she said, clapping fist to palm for emphasis, "the strike of his seed against my womb, driving past that strange miasma that no other man could penetrate before!" Gonnakasi sighed, stroking my cheek again. "Ah, yes. This time I know it, I can feel it. They are magical people, these pale-skinned ones from a distant land they call the Southlands. Fertility magic is their specialty, and my husband is the best and most fertile of them all. Yes, I can feel it... A glowing warmth in my womb... The fertility magic of a man of the Southlands has given me a child." She then gazed down at her exchequer, smiling again. "Did you know that the women of the Southlands eat fish three times a day, every day when they wish to conceive?"

"I... No, My Queen, I did not know that..." the exchequer replied, utterly boggled.

"They do - and it always works. And so shall I do the same, to give his seed the warmest welcome it can receive," she replied, and rose from her seat. "We shall adjourn until tomorrow. Perhaps then, this warm and golden feeling in my womb that my magical, fertile husband has given me will settle a bit, and I can more properly concentrate on the affairs of state."

The entire court gaped wide-eyed at Gonnakasi as she handed her spear to the attendants. Such behavior had *never* been seen in their queen before - they had no choice but to believe it, it was too

unreal.

I told her later that I thought she might have gone too far, and built up expectations of a conception that she herself had told me would not happen. Gonnakasi had dismissed that notion immediately. She simply said that if her plan did not reveal the traitor within a few days, she would simply blame the missed conception on someone slipping her silphium, the switch in the pantry discovered and reported by the Royal Chef, but all too late. This would protect Pago, she said. If he suddenly turned up dead, it would be obvious he was murdered, and that a conspiracy was afoot. A change of power could not be accomplished by conspiracy once it was revealed, the people themselves would not stand for it, and would revolt. Gonnakasi ruled because she had the *right* to rule - she was the forty-fifth wearer of the Peacock Robe, a direct descendant of the Peacock Queen of antiquity who had smashed all the neighboring Kushite nations to carve out their homelands from the vast expanses of jungle that surrounded them. A usurper could not possibly win and hold the people's support if it were revealed they had taken power by conspiracy, the people would not stand for it and nearly every woman of Enebua was armed. Thus, with the conspiracy revealed, Pago would be safe - though it was unlikely Gonnakasi would find out who was behind it until after the conspirators fled the lands of the Enebua to avoid her punishment.

She was, of course, gambling that she could catch them by keeping the conspiracy hidden for a few days. If not, she was gambling that they would fear her enough to flee, rather than spark a revolt against her. And a sufficiently charismatic leader with a sufficiently good plan might just succeed anyway, despite Gonnakasi's belief in the support of the people.

I tried to warn her of this, but Gonnakasi's mind was elsewhere, and she dismissed my concerns. Yes, she loved me. Yes, she respected me. But in the end, I was a man, and she a woman of Enebua - habitually, she considered herself wiser than me. It was simply the way the Enebua were.

And, in truth, I still was not entirely comfortable with the rest of her plan, even if she *did* capture the conspirators. A woman who took silphium every day for years sometimes took months to conceive after she stopped, Gonnakasi had said. Then, there was no guarantee that the child would be the girl-child she needed - the odds were even that it would not be. Any tavern gambler could judge the odds for the flip of a coin, heads or tails, boy or girl. And given that most women at least required a month or two to recover between children, the odds were that I would be used for stud service for at least the next two years. Gonnakasi had no other purpose for me - I had no responsibilities around the palace, and other than time spent copulating with her, I was free to go anywhere in the palace I wished. I could not leave, of course - the guards at the gate smiled and were friendly enough, but they made it clear that they were under orders to keep me from walking out the gates, for my own safety. I was, in essence, a prisoner in a palace, given my freedom within the walls, but with nothing to do aside from servicing the queen.

I gazed up at the darkened ceiling as Gonnakasi drifted off to sleep beside me, her hand resting upon my chest. It was a fate to be envied, certainly. Kept within the palace for the purpose of coupling with the queen - who herself was beautiful, intelligent, and loved me. My future seemed clear, crystal clear. Stud service and companion to a beautiful queen, an occasional advisor, and a plaything at night. I had met many men in my life who would give their eye teeth for such a fate - and I could imagine it was a fantasy of many men, if not most. And yet...

And yet, in the end, I knew it would turn out to be tremendously, agonizingly boring.

I had often wondered why the nobility in the Southlands had the occasional dalliance. After all, they had everything, did they not? Wealth, power, position, glory... And yet, every now and again, some noble somewhere would be caught in some sexual indiscretion, disgraced and dismissed. Why had they done it, I wondered many a time. Yet, now I could see the answer clearly. Marriage, for the nobility, was often not a matter of choice, but political convenience. Love, for them, was a rare thing, cherished highly because it was experienced so rarely. Boredom, for them, was a constant enemy, gnawing at their soul, prodding them to do something - anything - to relieve it. Riding, hunting, games, literature, plays, operas... And the occasional dalliance, for those so inclined.

Would Gonnakasi grow bored with me? Possibly, but unlikely. The love of a woman was not like that of a man. Given a caress, a smile, and a loving embrace each day, they could be content. Given a rousing coupling where their lover tended to their needs carefully, bringing them to climax again and again and again... They would be devoted for life. This, Belana had taught me. But what she had not taught me was what I already knew - a man's ability to be content with a woman depended on her willingness to couple with him regularly, mutual enjoyment of the experience, and most importantly, the depth of his feelings for her.

And, unfortunately, I had none for Gonnakasi.

Oh, I cared for her, yes. She was a dynamic, exotic woman with many strengths. I had compassion for her in seeing what she had to do every day, and knowing that she hid her true self and her true feelings behind the iron mask of the Queen of the Enebu. I sympathized with her need for a companion, and I understood her need for a child to solidify her rule. And, certainly, the idea of being asked to couple three or four times a day with a beautiful, sensual, exciting woman was quite enjoyable.

But, the longer I thought about it, the more I realized I had to admit the truth to myself. Though she loved me, I simply did not love her.

Would I give her the lie? Would the words fall trippingly from my lips, to bring a smile to her face and hammer a spike home into my heart?

No, no. When she spoke the words, I would simply kiss her. Each and every time, without fail. Press my lips to hers with gentleness and compassion, sealing my lips with hers that the truth would not escape.

Ah, the truth. A rare commodity, around the palace. Very rare. And the truth was that I loved Sasha and Marilith, and they were dead.

Marilith... A strange, alien creature from another dimension I did not even pretend to understand. And yet, in her heart, a woman, in need of a gentle touch.

Sasha... The magical princess of my boyhood dream. The one I had wanted to find all my life.

Gone. Drowned and dead.

Truly, it was almost humorous. I lay in bed with a beautiful, wealthy and powerful queen who loved me, having coupled with her until she slept. I lay in her bed, her hand upon my chest, staring at the ceiling, gazing into the darkness above and thinking only of two women who were dead instead of the lovely queen beside me who was very much alive and very much in love with me. Any man I'd ever met would have laughed, and told me to grab the queen by the hips and hold on for as long as she was willing. I knew many women who would tell me the same, as well.

And yet, I wondered what Belana would tell me, were she able to advise me now.

Perhaps my feelings for Gonnakasi would change, over time. She was, in the end, a good woman. Perhaps...

A small sound caught my ear, like a clink of metal. *'What in the world was that?'* I wondered. Sleep beckoned, but I blinked it away, listening. I could feel the hairs on my arms rise. Someone was near.

A sudden shadow interposed itself between the bed and the moonlit archway leading to the balcony. A shape with a sword, raised to strike.

I closed my fist, willing my sword to my hand - to my surprise, it appeared. I knew not where it had been, I had barely even considered it for nearly a month - and even when I had, I realized that men were not allowed to bear weapons in the lands of the Enebua, I'd simply have to find someplace to hide it if I summoned it. But, there was no time to consider it now, either.

With a clang of steel on steel, I blocked the attack of the assassin, shoving Gonnakasi out of the bed and onto the floor with my other hand. Gonnakasi yelped, startled awake, and I rolled out of the bed and into the assassin's legs, knocking them to the floor.

Rolling to my feet, I jumped to the side to force the assassin to turn - if they kept the moonlight from the balcony behind them, I wouldn't be able to see their hands well enough to fight them. It was a guard, that much I could tell, but there wasn't enough light to see which one it might be. She lunged, and I parried reflexively, flicking a counter at her to test her speed. The sword in her hand a straight, double-edged weapon, two cubits of steel with a steel circle for a handguard, the grip long enough to be held in two hands - a duelling weapon of the Enebua. At her right hip, beneath her belt, she had another. Apparently, the queen's murder was to be covered up as some kind of duel. She parried smoothly, adjusting her distance back slightly, and we began.



She was fast, I had to grant her that. Her grip was right-handed, her stance refused, left foot forward. In this stance, she was vulnerable to a low cut from her right aimed at the shin - but when I tried one experimentally, I found she was skilled enough to parry it with ease, and counter immediately. I parried, then parried again. Greaves and vambraces, a helmet, and the loose scale hauberk of a guard. She would not be a simple opponent.

"*Guards!*" Gonnakasi screamed - but, there was no answer. They should have only been standing just outside the room, she had only ordered them to leave so we could couple and sleep without an audience. Apparently, however, they were nowhere near - either dead, or somehow lured away.

My opponent tried to work around to my left, to put the moonlight at her back and give her the advantage. She was skilled, and she was no fool. If she could shadow her sword at just the right moment and attack, she might get through my defense. If she did, I would likely die - I was naked, and the thin, light blade of the Enebua duelling sword was sharp enough to shear through an arm. I moved to follow to my left, refusing to allow her to turn me. She smiled, her eyes flickering to the right - she would work me into the wall beside the archway, it seemed. I lunged, then lunged again, forcing her to parry twice and step back. A quick feint to her left, then a renewed attack to her right, and we were slowly moving to my left again.

"*GUARDS!*" Gonnakasi screamed, again to no effect.

We were about to pass beneath the archway, and I could see in my opponent's eyes she planned to make her move then. Likely something that she thought would make me leap back, slam into the archway, and allow her to finish me when I stumbled. We traded cuts and parries, and her gaze twice more flickered behind me and to my left. We were close, now. It would happen anytime.

"Empty! My sword-case is *empty!*" Gonnakasi railed from off to my right.

Suddenly, it happened. My opponent's gaze went low, and she made a sweeping cut aimed at my groin, grinning broadly. But I did not leap back - I parried, then made a quick stop-cut to her arm, my blade cutting just below the ends of the sleeves of her hauberk, cutting her upper arm and striking bone.

She jerked back, staggering, and I pressed the attack, driving her onto the balcony. Her reflexes had kept her from losing the arm entirely, but it hung limply at her side. She changed her stance, loosely imitating my own presented stance, right leg forward, gripping the sword in her right arm. Enebuans fought sword-and-shield in war, but not with duelling swords. I could tell she had not fought presented or one-handed before, the Enebuan duelling sword was used in a two-handed style.

I stepped in to finish the fight.

She lunged, then lunged again, trying to put me off balance. I parried twice, then countered, slashing at her thigh below the protection of her hauberk and above the protection of her greaves. She leapt back, avoiding the worst of it, but receiving a slash atop her thigh for her trouble, slowing her. Her eyes flickered to the balcony rail. It was three stories to the ground. An expert acrobat might make the jump. She hardly looked expert, and was wounded. I could see her considering it. I waited, making simple cuts she could parry one-handed, to give her time to think about it.

Inside the queen's bedchamber, I heard the crash of a table being upended, then grunting sounds and the sound of splintering wood. I felt no danger from there, and kept my gaze focused on my opponent. Likely Gonnakasi was trying to make an impromptu weapon. It's what I would have done in her position. A table-leg isn't much, but you can smash a man's skull with it if it's large enough.

Suddenly, my opponent made her move, leaping back and turning to dash for the rail. I leapt forward, drawing back my hand as I moved, then smashed her in the back of the helmet with all my strength, the blow from the bell-guard of my sword sending her sprawling. Her helmet spared her the worst of it, and she tried to rise as I knelt over her - but a heartbeat later, I clipped her on the jaw with the guard of my sword, rendering her unconscious. As my old Mysantian sailing-master once quipped, *'dead men tell no tales, but live ones can be quite talkative at times.'*

Gonnakasi darted onto the balcony, a table-leg in her hands, then skidded to a stop. Gazing at the fallen guard for a moment, she grinned at me. "You got her!"

"She's just unconscious - fetch a sheet, we'll bind her wounds so she doesn't bleed to death."

"Bah, I'd rather cut her to ribbons, but my sword is gone!"

I reached down to the waist of the unconscious guard, pulling out the scabbarded sword. "Does it look anything like this?"

Gonnakasi gaped, taking the sword from me. "My sword! But why?!"

"Well, since Doshta said the other day that most of the city knows I can fight, my guess was your murder and mine was supposed to look like a lover's spat gone very, very wrong."

"Grrr!" Gonnakasi replied, starting to draw her sword, then thought the better of it and slapped it back into its scabbard. "Get the sheets, bind her wounds and tie her well! I'll go fetch my guards!"

I gazed at her a moment, then nodded. "Yes, your majesty," I replied, rising to my feet and walking into the bedroom.

Gonnakasi did a double-take as I walked away. "Wait! Wait!" she called, trotting up beside me. "I'm sorry. I agreed I wouldn't order you. And you'd just asked me to do a moment before what I just ordered you to do, now. I'm sorry," she said, wrapping her arms around me. "Please don't be angry with me, I'm really very happy you're alright!"

I smiled, lifting her chin with a finger, then kissed her. "I'm not angry. Now, let's get the sheets before that one wakes and escapes."

The task wasn't difficult to do by moonlight, though Gonnakasi swore profusely once she realized who I had defeated and captured - it was Jozen Anisha, the Captain of the Guards. Summoning Gonnakasi's attendants and guards again was somewhat difficult - Jozen had apparently ordered them all away, as none were in sight when she looked outside her quarters. Gonnakasi asked me to watch Jozen while she trotted away, looking for her guards, scabbarded sword in hand. I discreetly tucked my sword beneath Gonnakasi's mattress, then sat on the bed, gazing at Jozen as she was tied to the chair by strips of bedsheets. The strips of sheet I'd bound her wounds with were soaked with blood as she gazed at me in the moonlight.

"Why?" I asked, gazing into her eyes.

Jozen's bloody lip was swelling, and I was certain her arm and leg were quite painful, now. But, she made no sign of pain.

"You realize when Gonnakasi gets back here, she'll have you tortured to find out."

"What do *you* care?" Jozen spat, her spittle mixed with blood.

"Make me care, and perhaps I'll talk to the queen for you."

Jozen chuckled dryly, the laugh of the condemned.

"Why?" I repeated.

"The oldest reason in the world," she replied grimly.

"Love?"

"No, fool! Money! Idiot man, you're like all men, you think it's all about love! Waggle your wand before our faces and we'll all fall to our knees in awe and love! Bah... You're all the same."

"Who paid you?"

"That's something I'll carry to my grave, idiot."

"Your choice," I replied, hearing the sounds of rapidly approaching footsteps.

I sat in silence, watching as Gonnakasi returned, a dozen guards in tow along with her attendants carrying candle-lamps. There was a considerable amount of shouting that followed, and quite a bit of cursing from the queen. She slapped Jozen several times when she refused to talk, the signet ring on her hand laying open Jozen's cheek. I just laid back on the bed, propping up my head and shoulders with the pillows, and gazed at the ceiling again. Eventually, Jozen was dragged off by a half dozen guards to be tortured. The queen and her attendants followed, leaving me alone in the room save for the guards who were again hidden in their little niches, watching me. Likely Jozen would be tortured to death whether she talked or not, seeing how angry Gonnakasi was. As for me, I simply laid on the bed, staring at the ceiling. Now that Jozen had been caught, I no longer had a function. I was, again, just the queen's husband.

I gazed at the ceiling in silence.

Drowned. Why did they have to drown?

## The Ocean - Six.

Joy was waiting with us when Eddas came out of his tower. He was wearing his hair in a ponytail, as he always did, but not his robe. Today, he wore only his elf-chain *nepni*, his elbow-length gloves, and his knee-length boots. He wasn't wearing his feathers, but from what I knew he'd have to do, he'd just have lost them anyway. Joy had *not* been pleased with the idea she would have to stay behind, but as she had known it was coming for weeks, now, she made no complaint. Instead, she hugged Eddas for a long moment, weeping, and kissed him lovingly. "Be careful, Old Man, and come back to me."

"I will, Joy," he replied, and kissed her again.

"And as for *you*," Joy said, looking at me, "I want you to bring both Eddas *and* my *nepni* back to me," she said, and grinned.

I blushed, nodding. "Yes, Joy." Aside from my gloves and boots, Joy's *nepni* was all I was wearing. Wearing Joy's elf-chain undergarments was oddly very embarrassing, even though I normally only wore my scales (and was, as such, technically nude). I supposed I thought of my scales *as* clothes, now, and going without them made me feel very self-conscious. It didn't help that the *nepni* had a little chain that ran up between the cheeks of my rump that was *very* distracting - it had to be drawn up tight to hold the bottom in place. *Very* distracting. How Joy and Eddas stood it I had no idea - when I asked, they just said "you get used to it."

Eddas looked to Marilith, holding out his hand. "Shall we go, Marilith?"

Marilith nodded, taking his hand, and a moment later Marilith transformed into a Kushite woman. I had never seen a Kushite before, and I blinked for a moment, gazing at her dark, dark skin, flat nose and thick lips. "That... That looks very odd, to me."

"Actually, she's quite beautiful, I think," Eddas replied, looking her over.

Marilith smiled, holding out her hands. "Thank you, Master Eddas."

"Umm... Are you sure we won't look underdressed, there?" I asked, taking Marilith's hand. Marilith was only wearing her black loincloth and apodesmos, and Eddas and my clothes were even more revealing.

"Actually, no, it's really *very* hot and humid, there," Marilith replied, and nodded. The world blurred, and suddenly we were surrounded by a thick jungle. The heat of the air hit me like a slap to the face, and I blinked, startled. Marilith smiled, releasing our hands. Compared to the cool breeze of a fall day in Hyperborea I'd been standing in a moment before, the jungle here felt like we were standing in an oven. "You see? They have clothing that covers more than they sometimes wear indoors, but it's all very light and it gets sopped down with sweat outdoors. It's why you couldn't just wear your scales, Sister - everyone would be staring, because skin-tight armor like that would make you collapse with heat very quickly, they'd all realize you were using magic and they have laws against foreigners using magic in their city. Their guards sometimes wear scale, but it's very loose and light."

"Alright. Where to?" Eddas asked.

"This way to the road, then east to the city."

Eddas nodded, summoning his staff to his grip. "Good. Let's go, then," he replied, and turned, striding off into the jungle, Marilith and I following behind once I'd summoned my lance.

The road was a simple dirt trail through the jungle, widened by feet and cart-wheels. Marilith looked to Eddas. "Corvid said that spellcasters who arrive at the city have to report to the guards to receive special manacles, they suppress *mana* and prevent sorcery."

"Oh? They must have quite a bit of loose gold running about to afford that many enchanted items."

"Gold appears to be their main resource, yes."

"Interesting..." Eddas said, as the city walls came into view. "And to think that when I came through here last, eighteen centuries ago, it was little more than crude villages and people that had barely mastered copper. They've come a long way, since then."

"Corvid says they're a very proud people with a long history," Marilith replied, nodding.

Our appearance drew quite a few stares from the guards at the gate, particularly when Eddas announced that he was a sorceress and needed to be manacled to obey the law in the city. It took some doing, and Eddas had to also sign a document registering with the city, but eventually the guards let us back out into the street again. The officer in charge of the guards, a tall Kushite woman wearing little more than bits of bronze armor over her breasts and groin and a bronze helmet, nodded to us. "*When you're ready to leave the city, report back here and we'll remove the bracelets.*"

"*Quite kind of you, thank you,*" Eddas replied in her language, nodding his head, then turned and strode into the city, Marilith and I in tow.



We drew *many* stares from both women and men as we walked through the streets, and I felt tremendously self-conscious just walking around in Joy's *nephni*. Eddas, however, simply walked on. He spent a moment examining the copper bracelets he wore over his gloves, each nearly a hand long and polished nearly mirror-smooth. "Not bad. A simple spell of negation, very precise work in the enchantment. I saw half a dozen different sizes in there, this was the smallest and it fits quite closely. Only copper, though, and the lock doesn't look like much. A mage could remove them with a hacksaw or lockpick, if he really wanted. I could just shake them off, but I've a few advantages most mages don't. I suppose given that picking the lock or sawing them off would leave marks in the copper that could be easily seen, all these bracelets really do is mark the mage as one willing to obey the law so the guards know who *not* to shoot when bad things happen."

I blushed. "Ummm... Okay, I see a lot of men just wearing short breeches and a short tunic, and women wearing a loincloth and apodesmos, and we don't look *too* out of place, I suppose, but... They're all *staring!*"

"You and Master Eddas look unusual, here," Marilith replied. "They don't see many Arcadians and almost never any elves. Glower firmly at them, they'll stop. Staring is rude, here."

Eddas nodded. "You should have seen their reaction to a Hyperborean, back when I was here last. This place was just a walled village then, and everyone kept staring at my nose, wondering what I'd done to it. The leading theory was I'd fallen in bleach as a baby and it lightened my skin few shades lighter than theirs, then someone pulled me out by my nose. I tried to explain I was from another human nation, far to the northeast beyond the elves, but they'd never seen elves, either, and that got into an even longer explanation, and I finally just said '*yes, I fell into bleach as a baby and my mother pulled me out by the nose.*' Made things much easier, really," Eddas said, and Marilith and I giggled.

I tried as Marilith suggested, glowering at those that stared overly long, and to my surprise, it worked - an embarrassed look immediately came to their faces, and they looked away. A nearby woman bowed and muttered a brief apology, saying she'd never seen copper-red hair before in her life. I just smiled and said it was alright, and we continued on.

"Ah, there," Eddas said, nodding to a building in the distance. "There's the palace, it has to be."

"Ummm... You've seen it before?" I asked.

"No, I just know it must be the palace. It's the largest building I can see in this city, it's got a white dome atop it, and if it isn't the palace certainly those there know where it is. I'd be *very* surprised if it was a temple, though. As I told King Darian when I was teaching him to be a king a century and a half ago, a ruler who lets a city temple get larger than their palace has a serious problem with uppity clergy," Eddas replied.

"It's in the right area, yes," Marilith agreed. "From Hyperborea, the distance is very long... All I could sense was essences."

"It's alright, Marilith. Just remember, until we get to the throne room or wherever she holds court, you and Sasha only need to worry about one thing - watching my back. And Marilith, keep your conceal enchantment spell up, do *not* release it, maintain your obfuscation and do *not* cast unless I tell you to. Just stay quiet and unobtrusive. You're just an extra pair of eyes and ears, dear, and your main job is to keep track on the astral for invisible threats. And the both of you, no matter what happens, even if I lose and die, remain calm."

I shook my head. "I am *very* nervous."

"Don't be, try to relax," Eddas said as we drew nearer to the palace. "Yorindar explained this aspect of their culture to me - he had to, I had to know it to make the plan work. You're the challenger, I'm your second, Marilith is the neutral observer. Remember your roles, and you'll be alright."

"Yes, Master Eddas," Marilith and I replied, almost in chorus. Marilith grinned at me, and I managed a smile despite how nervous I was.

At last, we arrived at the palace gates. The gates were bronze, green with age and made of ornately styled bars. Behind the gates, four spear-armed guards gazed out at us curiously as we approached. Eddas stood before the gates, gazing at the guards, and spoke in their language.

"I am here as the second for this woman, who formally challenges the Queen of the Enebua for her husband!" Eddas shouted, loud enough so that passers-by heard the elf-woman's voice of his body. "She claims prior right to him! You, as the Queen's Guards, are her formal seconds under the law! Please inform the queen of this challenge, that it may be handled with all due propriety!" Eddas said, and bowed.

The guards gaped at him for a long moment, then burst out laughing.

"I presume this means you, as the queen's seconds, require proof of earnest for the formal challenge! So be it!" Eddas replied, gripping his staff in both hands, then swinging between the ornate bars of the gate and smashing the guard in front of him atop her helmet. She staggered, her bronze helmet deeply dented, then collapsed, unconscious. The other guards leapt back in surprise, and Eddas gazed at them calmly. "A proof of earnest has been supplied to the seconds for the queen! Are you prepared to allow us to enter?!"

One of the guards with a feather in her helmet spat, glowering at Eddas. "You little foreigner bitch, I'll give you a proof of earnest!" she yelled, yanking open the gate.

Eddas stepped back from the gate as the guard charged out, parrying her spear with his staff. He stepped in, whirling his staff in his fingers, and smashed her in the helmet, dropping her to the ground. Eddas then looked to the other guards, who gripped their spears tightly. More distant guards, seeing a commotion, began to trot over to the gate. "I am more than willing to face all of the queen's seconds one at a time, if that is necessary for a sufficient proof of earnest!" he shouted. "Shall we get on with it, then?!"

What followed could only be described as perhaps the most nerve-wracking quarter hour I had ever experienced. At first, the guards came angrily. Then, as Eddas defeated them one by one, they began to grow wary. A crowd was gathering in the street to watch, as disbelieving as the guards were. Eddas was fast with his staff - amazingly fast. It was just a short-staff, only coming up to the shoulder on his half-elf body. But despite the large advantage of reach the guards had with their spears, Eddas defeated each of

them, one at a time, most by smashing them in the helmet after trading parries and attacks with them for a few moments. Some, he struck in the arms or legs, breaking their bones, but most he was able to render unconscious. Eddas had told me that his staff was no mere shaft of wood, but a wizard's staff, an extension of his will. It must be true, for I couldn't see doing some of the maneuvers he did with an ordinary staff - one can't just twirl a staff that large between one's fingers fast enough to make it split the air with a *whoop-whoop-whoop* sound.

Eventually, the crowd started shouting, cheering Eddas on and demanding the guards follow the formal rules for a challenge. This apparently was *tremendously* humiliating for them, I could see that they were becoming *very* furious. At last, an officer with a feather in her helmet nodded, tossing aside her spear and walking up to Eddas barehanded. Eddas nodded, handing his staff to Marilith.

"Now, little thing," the guard said, gazing at Eddas, "now the real fight begins."

"Of course," Eddas replied, panting, his body sheened with sweat. He then stepped in, delivering a hard fast roundhouse kick to the tall Kushite woman's head, laying her out on the ground. "Next?" he panted.

The crowd cheered, the guards glowered in fury, and the next guard stepped up to take her chances.

Gonnakasi smiled at me as we shared a quiet lunch. She had begun by crowing about how Jozen had broken under torture, revealing the name of her accomplices - one of which being General Ashakazi, who had fled the city already. I wondered why she wasn't already chasing her, but Gonnakasi said it was better to wait and allow her to either flee Enebua, or gather her troops to fight.

The generals of her other legions had already sworn their loyalty to her again, and were mobilizing their troops to deal with Ashakazi should she decide to fight. Gonnakasi had eleven other legions, and at odds of eleven to one, Ashakazi couldn't possibly win - she would almost certainly choose to flee Enebua, and command of the tenth legion would fall to the next in line. Where Ashakazi went would, Gonnakasi explained, show where her real support lay, and which of the enemy nations that surrounded them were actually behind the plot. She had already sent messengers to the neighboring kingdoms, telling them that Ashakazi was an escaped criminal who plotted against the queen, and should they harbor her, this would be viewed by Enebua as an act of war (of course, should they deliver her head to Gonnakasi, this would be viewed quite favorably). As Gonnakasi would be facing them with twelve legions at her back, the eventual outcome would not be pleasant for any of her neighbors. Having averted the potential of a civil war, Gonnakasi was wholly and firmly in charge again. Gonnakasi had revealed to her generals and advisors the plot to feed her silphium to keep her barren, and explained the necessity of her trap to reveal the traitor. Her advisors now knew the truth - there was no child in her womb, I had no special powers of fertility, it had been a trick to reveal the traitor. They knew, however, that in time, there *would* be an heir. So, the nervousness over her heir would be resolved soon, there was no way her enemies could defeat her on the battlefield with all of her legions behind her, as far as she was concerned, the future looked quite bright.

I, however, simply smiled, suppressing a sigh. That she could so casually speak of torturing someone to death and engaging in a war with her enemies in which thousands might die was extremely depressing. Of course, the person she had tortured to death *was* a traitor who intended to *murder* her and her husband, so I had to admit she had cause. Still, it bothered me. A fair fight, ship to ship, blade to blade... That, I could understand. Torturing someone to death, even if they did deserve it... That just made me uneasy. I tried to tell myself she was justified. I tried to tell myself that it was completely legal, here. I made every argument I could, but in the end, it didn't help. It just bothered me. It was less than honorable, and it wasn't something I could really accept.

Yet, what choice did I have? She was the queen, I was her husband. It seemed my life was set.

"You look upset, Corvid. Is something wrong?" she asked, gazing at me as she worked on her fish.

"No, no," I said, and smiled for her. "Just thinking."

"Careful - men aren't meant for thinking, you can hurt your head," she said, and winked at me, giggling at her joke.

*'Or fighting, or having their own say, or sailing a ship around the world, or...'* I thought, and smiled at her anyway.

A guard trotted into the room, panting and out of breath. "My Queen!" she yelled.

"What is it?" Gonnakasi asked, resuming her iron gaze.

"There..." the guard panted, "There's a woman at the gates... She's challenged you for your husband!"

Gonnakasi blinked, startled, then laughed. "Drive her off, she's deranged."

"No, My Queen! It's a formal challenge! She's treating your guards as your seconds, under the law!"

Gonnakasi glowered at the guard. "So have the guards kick her second unconscious and drive her and her second off," she replied. "I'll not waste time with the insane."

"My Queen, we are *trying*, that little wench had run through fifty of us when Captain Kassa sent me to tell you! She defeated twenty of us with a staff before the crowd on the street started calling for us to obey the rules for seconds in a formal challenge! Then she's beaten the rest in hand to hand, all in accordance with the law! We're being *humiliated* at the gates before a crowd of the people by her *second*, My Queen!"

"Whaaaaat?!" Gonnakasi yelped, rising to her feet. "That's impossible!"

"I *swear* it's true, My Queen!"

"Run back out there and tell the captain I said to stop *immediately!* I can't have the commoners thinking my royal guards are worthless - *particularly* when it seems you are! I've enough problems right now without that! Have that woman and her second and her witness brought to the court *immediately!*" Gonnakasi snapped, and as the guard dashed away, she pointed to her attendants. "You, you, and you! Run through the eastern wings, beat on all the office doors, and tell my bureaucrats I need an audience as witnesses in the courtroom *immediately!*"

"Yes, My Queen!" her attendants chorused, and darted away.

Gonnakasi swore. "Corvid, come, please," she said, rising as her attendants ran over to fetch the peacock robe for her.

"Err... Me?" I asked, blinking. "What am I needed for?"

"Corvid, it's a *formal* challenge, not some stick-wielding brawl between two commoners! A formal challenge has seconds and witnesses and the man in question *has* to be present, it's the *law!*"

"Alright. I assume the law has a reason," I replied rising.

"Yes, it keeps the noble women from killing each other too often. Commoners are a pinch of gold a dozen, but a woman who knows how to manage a town or village is a bit more rare," she said, muttering as an attendant fetched her scabbarded sword from its case. "Stupid, stupid... Why now?! Everything's set! Everything's perfect! Why am I beset by madwomen *now?!*"

I smiled, hugging her. "You'll do fine, 'Kas. You're the best."

"Well, I certainly better be, if I'm not, I'll likely be dead. Come," she said, and strode towards the door.

I nodded, following along with her attendants. I didn't know what was going on, but I hoped she would be alright. The idea of suddenly becoming the toy and plaything of some strange woman did not appeal to me, I was only now getting used to Gonnakasi.

I sighed. *'Dammit, why did they have to drown?'*



Eddas stood, gasping, mired with dust from the street, sweat running from his little elven body in rivers. The guards carried off his latest foe, who was groaning in agony. He'd broken her leg, snapping the knee with one of his vicious grappling maneuvers. He was too tired to use much of anything I had taught him, now - though, at least, it had carried him this far. How much longer he could go on, I did not know. Not long. "Next," he called, still gasping.

An officer walked up, removing her helmet and handing it to one of the nearby guards. "You're tired. Rest a moment," she called - to which the crowd applauded. Hundreds of people stood in the street now, watching, and hundreds more behind who couldn't see a thing, only hearing the reports of the action from those in front of them. The street before the palace was completely blocked with people - the fighting had gone on over half an hour, now, certainly the entire city knew what was happening.

The guards were larger than Eddas - most were my height, some were taller. They also apparently knew some grappling as well as skill at armed combat. But, their skills at grappling were not honed, it seemed their main focus was armed combat (judging by the weapons they bore, likely with spear, shield and sword). If they had formal training in grappling, it was unscientific and poorly defined - likely a kind of tribal wrestling practiced more for sport and exercise than war, a non-fatal wrestling art that likely would be quite appropriate for the seconds in a formal duel to use. The seconds weren't supposed to be killing each other, they were supposed to be showing the earnest of the challenger in their challenge. But, Eddas' brutal art had been developed for war, not sport, and was superior to simple wrestling. Still, the guards fought bravely and well, and now, Eddas was exhausted. His art was designed for someone taller and more massive than the little half-elf woman's body he was in, and he was too tired to make the punches and kicks I'd taught him hit hard enough to take down the large and hardened women that made up the Queen's Guard. The outcome was inevitable.

"Thank you," Eddas replied, bending over and placing his hands on his knees. He panted, his ponytail plastered to his back by sweat, his eyes on his opponent.

The officer squatted, gazing at Eddas across the large circle that the guards had formed, holding the crowd back from the gates. "You fight well. I'm Captain Kassa of the Queen's Guard, recently promoted to command. And you are?"

Eddas gasped for a few moments, trying to catch his breath. "I am Eddas Ayar, the Raven of Yorindar," he replied, panting.

"The name sounds familiar - I think I've heard traveler's stories of you."

"I am well known, to some," Eddas panted.

"You wear the bracelets, so you're not doing this with magic. I'd like to meet your fighting-teacher, sometime, and learn from her. In fact, I'd like all my guards to learn from her."

"He's..." Eddas panted, still trying to catch his breath. "Most I learned from Master Kravmaga, he's been dead awhile. My other fighting teacher is a bit busy at the moment. I'll let her know you asked."

"Oh? What's she doing, now?"

"She's challenged the queen for her husband. She has a prior claim to him. I'm her student. I'm acting as her second."

The captain blinked, then looked at me. "You?! You taught her to fight like this?!"

I simply smiled, remaining silent in my role as challenger. Behind me, the crowd murmured.

The captain chuckled, looking at Eddas. "You know, you've crippled fourteen of my troops. They're being taken to the temple of Esvina for healing. Two would likely never walk right again without magic to

heal them."

"Knees are such delicate things, really," Eddas replied, his breathing a little easier.

"What's her claim to him?"

"She loved him first, and he loved her first. He's loved her since he was a child."

The captain nodded. "Claim enough," she replied, rising to her feet. She glanced behind her. "Nothing from the palace, yet. I suppose we have to continue."

"I'll try not to cripple you too badly," Eddas replied, straightening up and dropping into a ready stance.

"Thank you, I've actually come to like walking and feeding myself," she replied, grinning.

They circled each other carefully, slowly closing the distance. The guards had long since learned that simply charging in to tackle Eddas was not wise, broken limbs usually resulted. They had also learned not to try to grab Eddas' ponytail - Eddas had worn a full beard in his previous life, he knew many ways to break the elbow an opponent would extend trying to grip his beard, all of which seemed to work very well for those who reached for his hair. Eddas had reverted to his own style, he simply did not have the energy to fight the way Buntaro had taught me any longer. Speed he still had, but his strength was spent. He still remembered the joint-locks and pressure-points I'd taught him, and he used them well, but he simply lacked the strength now to overpower the much larger Enebua women he was facing.

Suddenly they leapt at each other. They struggled, grappling for several moments. Eddas had a lower center of gravity, but no mass to back it up, and little leverage. A heartbeat later, the two were rolling

together on the ground, each struggling to get a hold or pin on the other.

"Captain!" a voice shouted.

Eddas struggled, jabbing viciously with his elbow, but he had no strength left. The Captain of the Guards held him down on his belly with her greater weight, legs around him, an arm about his neck, slowly levering one of his arms behind him. Their legs pushed against the dirt street, Eddas trying to gain purchase and the captain trying to keep her advantage. I could see the inevitable result, and so could the crowd behind me. Shouts of encouragement for Eddas rang out from hundreds in the crowd and even several of the guards who had by now come to respect this dangerous, tenacious little fighter. Eddas struggled with all the strength that remained in his exhausted body as the captain levered his arm up a little further... A little further...

"Captain!" the voice shouted again, a guard breaking through the edge of the circle of guards near the gate. "The Queen orders you to stop immediately! The challenger, her second and her witness are to be brought to the court!"

The captain suddenly stopped, letting Eddas go. After a moment, she rose, then held out a hand to him. "I'd say I nearly had you, but beating someone after they've run through fifty-three others is no feat to crow over."

Eddas panted, holding out his gloved hand, and the guard captain hauled him to his feet. "Thank you, Captain," Eddas said, panting.

"I'd like to learn your style of fighting from you, so I can teach it to the Queen's Guard. I'd ask your teacher, but as she's facing the Queen, I'm afraid I have to assume she'll lose. If she doesn't... Well, then I'll have no need to learn, then, will I?" she said, and grinned as she took her helmet back from the guard nearby.

"I'll bear your request in mind," Eddas replied, taking his staff back from Marilith, then leaning on it

heavily.

"Come - the queen can't be kept waiting," the captain said, and waved a hand to the guards at the gate. They cleared a path, and opened the gate for us.

I grinned at Eddas as we walked through the gate, Marilith following close behind, the guards flanking us. "You did it!"

Eddas shook his head, leaning on his staff as he walked, his sweat-soaked dusty ponytail swinging limply. "No. *You* did it. You gave me the strength, endurance and training I needed to do it. I never could have done it otherwise, I'd have run out of endurance long before," he replied, and panted for a moment, wiping sweat from his brow with a dusty-gloved hand. "Good gravy... Winning Noril's tournament was easier, by far."

"I can't really take all the credit, you were a skilled fighter before I knew you. As far as I'm concerned, all I've done is teach you enough to round out what you knew, like honing a razor edge on knife that was already sharp. You provided the fire and spirit that made it possible," I said, smiling down at him.

"Perhaps," he replied, still panting. "I just kept thinking of Joy, and what I would do if I was fighting to get her back. I'm afraid that made me... A bit rough on the first few."

I grinned as we ascended the steps, but Eddas caught my grin, and shook his head again. "Don't get overconfident, Sasha. That was actually the easy part."

I nodded. "I know," I replied, my face grim as we walked to the palace doors. "I'm ready."

## The Raven - Twenty-One.

And then, she walked onto the floor, Marilith and Eddas Ayar in tow.

I hadn't expected it. My heart nearly stopped. I had been sitting on the stool next to Gonnakasi's throne, expecting... Well, I wasn't certain what I was expecting. Enebua Kushite women, at least. Possibly with one of them being incredibly large and extremely dangerous looking, judging from what the guard had said. A madwoman, out to challenge the queen for me. Ridiculous. Impossible.

But it wasn't a madwoman.

It was *her*.

"*SASHA!*" I shouted, leaping to my feet.

"Corvid, you *know* her?" Gonnakasi asked, gaping at me as she held her spear of office in her right hand.

"Kas, that's *Sasha!* I told you about her! She's the woman I was trying to rescue! We..." I shook my head, it was still impossible to explain. "I told you, we were to be married. I thought she drowned!"

Sasha gazed up at me as I jabbered at Gonnakasi, the audience Gonnakazi had assembled in the seats surrounding the floor muttering in surprise at hearing Sasha and I were to be married. Sasha had her lance in one hand, and she looked calm. Eddas walked up beside Sasha. Eddas was soaked in sweat and covered in dust, the sweat carving little rivulets of dust across the skin of that little half-elf's body he wore. Eddas took a deep breath, then looked up to the queen.

"I am here as the second for this woman, who formally challenges the Queen of the Enebuia for her husband!" Eddas shouted, his voice echoing in the royal court. "She claims prior right to him! I have defeated your seconds, the law requires you to address her!"

Gonnakasi rose to her feet, snarling. "What is her claim to him?!" she snapped.

"She loved him first, and he loved her first. He has loved her since he was a child."

Gonnakasi looked to me. "Is this true?!"

I nodded. "I told you that before, 'Kas."

"And do you still...?!" she said, then paused, her voice fading. She gazed at me, looking into my eyes. It was not a question she wanted to ask, for she knew the answer just from my expression.

A tear formed in the corner of her eye, and she blinked it away. Glaring down at Sasha, she bared her

teeth. "He is *mine!* I love him! I am *not* giving him to you short of *steel!*"

"So be it," Sasha replied, giving her lance to Marilith.

Gonnakasi pointed. "A sword! Give her a sword, now!"

Shortly, an attendant trotted out from the door to the south, bearing an Enebuan duelling sword. The queen reached beside her throne where she'd left her own, holding out her spear of office for an attendant to take from her. She then drew her sword, tossing the scabbard aside, and leapt down to the floor. "You are going to *die*, woman! He is *mine*, *I love him and I'm not letting him go!*"

Then, to my utter shock, Sasha nodded, kneeling on the floor and setting the sword she'd been given aside.

"What... What the hell are you doing?!" Gonnakasi snapped.

"I love him," she replied. "I cannot live without him. You are the Queen of the Enebua. I have no right to kill you - you are needed by your people. Without you, there will be war. You are the queen, and I am nothing compared to you. But I ask you, woman to woman... Give me my love back. Please. If you cannot, then kill me, I no longer wish to live with a broken heart," she said, and bowed her head, her red hair cascading over her shoulders.

I didn't know what to say. I didn't know if anything I could say would make any difference. All I could do was stare.

Gonnakasi clenched her sword tightly. "I love him! And I *need* him! I dreamed of him! I dreamed of a warrior with seed strong enough to give me an heir, and that is him! I love him!"



"So do I," Sasha replied, her head bowed. "But he is not the warrior of your dream. He does not love you. He loves me."

Gonnakasi glanced over her shoulder to me.

I simply gazed at her. There was nothing I could say.

And as she gazed at me, our eyes met.

In all the time I had stayed with her, I had never told her that I loved her. I would not give her the lie, hurting her. She told me many times she loved me. I had kissed her in return, each time. I hadn't wanted to hurt her. I still didn't. She was a good woman. She had her strengths and her flaws, her glories and her failures. She had saved my life, and I had returned that favor. She was a good woman. She did not deserve to be hurt.

But now, I could see on her face that I had hurt her anyway, despite not wanting to.

"No..." she whispered, then looked to Sasha and growled. "If it was not him, then *WHO?!'*"

Eddas smiled. "Queen Gonnakasi, have you ever heard of Eddas Ayar?"

"Yes," Gonnakasi replied, wiping her eyes, "what of it?"

"Do you know his story?"

"No, I've only heard he is a Great Mage, and lives in a land of monsters - what's your point?"

"Eddas is a man of Hyperborea - a civilization long gone, now. He was born over nineteen centuries ago 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 his youth he displayed a strong *Talent*, and was accepted as an apprentice by the Dyclonic Circle when he was twelve, entering the Black Tower to begin his training. As a master mage, he cast the Spell of Hidden Life, and upon his death, his soul entered his animuary. While he slept, war came to his people, and his civilization was destroyed, lost to the dust of the ages. Sixteen centuries later, a half-elf female entered his tomb, and he possessed her body. That body was nearly dead when he took it, however, a blow to the head having caused its owner's spirit to have fled just at the moment he took it. By the strength of his will alone, he forced that half-elf's body to live where its previous owner's will could not. Unfortunately, he fainted thereafter from the wound, and the part of the sorcery which would have allowed him to reshape the body into his own transpired without effect, lacking his will to guide it. As it turned out, however, this was all in accordance with a plan of Yorindar, a god of the humans of the Southlands. To that end, that body received its final forging in the heart of a mana-storm, and is permanently as you see it today. For you see, Queen Gonnakasi, *I am Eddas Ayar, a Hyperborean battle-mage, the greatest warrior of my day - and, in this body, the Raven of Yorindar.*"

"No!" Gonnakasi replied, gaping.

"Yes. Your dream was of me, Queen Gonnakasi. I have a spell which I can use upon you, which will give you a girl-child through me - for inside, I am still a man. And more, the child will be one with a sparkling *Talent*, allowing her to be a vast and powerful magess as well as a great warrior, equal to her mother. And even more, the child will be able to see the *soul*. None will be able to lie to her, trick her or plot against her, she will be able to see such thoughts just by looking at them, and know which ones are faithful, and which traitors. Under her leadership, the Enebua will grow to be the supreme power in Kush, crushing or absorbing all their foes within a single generation. In time, the term 'Kushite' will simply mean the Enebua, as all others will either be a part of your civilization, or will be gone to dust. The choice is yours, Queen Gonnakasi. Your dream was of me, but due to a quirk of fate and the gods, you ended up with Corvid, instead. He did his best for you, trying to help you. But your dream was never of him. It was of me, and the grand and glorious future of the child I can give you."

"How... How do I know this isn't all some kind of trick?!" Gonnakasi asked, her voice wavering, the point of her sword lowering.

"Ask the High Magess of the Temple of Esvina. She knows. She is waiting for your summon - Esvina has explained the mistake to her in a dream. It is not your fault, nor is it Corvid's fault. He is a servant of Yorindar just as I am, and Yorindar is an ally of Esvina. You saved his life, and he did his best for you in return. By now, he should have saved your life at least twice, once in this room and once in your bedroom. Ashakazi would have killed you, her ceremonial spear was poisoned with a drug to slow your reflexes and allow her to beat you."

"How did you know...?"

"You'd be surprised what I know," Eddas replied, and smiled. "Your dream was about me, Queen Gonnakasi."

"But I... He..." she said, and looked to me, her eyes moist with tears. "But I love him. If I agree... Then who is there for me?"

"That, I cannot tell you here. But, if you agree, you will have the girl child I promised you, and there is another for you to love that will follow, if you wish. You will not sleep alone."

Gonnakasi lowered her head, gazing at Sasha. "I give you my man, woman. Care for him well, he is far better than you will ever know."

Sasha lifted her head, smiling. "Thank you."

Gonnakasi looked to me, then waved a hand, beckoning me, tears rolling down her cheeks. I hopped down onto the floor, then walked over to her and hugged her, kissing her tears away. "It's alright, 'Kas. Everything will be alright."

"It damn well better be, Corvid Hremn. Never forget that I love you."

"I won't," I replied, and stepped back, holding her hands in mine. I kissed each hand softly, then let her go.

Sasha rose to her feet, and I turned to her, my arms open. "Sasha."

"Corvid!" she yelped, leaping into my arms.

I grinned, spinning her around and making her giggle, then looked to Marilith. "Come!"

"Oh, Corvid, I'm so sorry, I never meant for you to get hurt," Marilith said, weeping.

"Come," I said again, holding out an arm for her.

Marilith walked closer, hesitantly. I reached out, snatching her into my arms, and held the two sisters tight. "Now, I'm happy."

Gonnakasi clapped her hands. "All of you in the stands, we are *done*, get back to work! Guards, bring a mage-bracelet key to the guest quarters, remove the bracelets from Eddas Ayar and fetch a

sorcerer's permit I can sign for him! Attendants, have a bath and four meals prepared for our guests! Summon the High Magess to me immediately! Bring me my cloak, and as soon as Eddas Ayar has bathed and eaten, bring him to my chambers!"

And with that, Gonnakasi strode off the floor, out the door to the south, without a backwards glance.

I grinned, looking to Marilith. "I'm glad to see you and Sasha are alright. I thought you had drowned!" I said, glad to be able to speak my own language again.

Marilith giggled as the attendants walked up to us. "Drowned?! Corvid, she's a mermaid, she can't drown!" she replied in my language.

"Well, I can," Sasha said in my language, grinning as Marilith returned her lance, "but not that easily."

"What about you, Marilith?" I asked as the attendants bade us follow.

"Well, like I told you before, my body doesn't work precisely like yours, but yes, I *do* have to breathe and I *can* die if I don't," she replied as we followed the attendants through the door to the south. "I'm a being of the Will and the Word, and my will can sustain my body quite awhile, but... Well, I *am* a resident of the Prime Material, now, and I *do* have to follow the rules around here. Like with food, I can go without it for awhile if I have to, using my will, but not forever."

"How long a while?"

Marilith shrugged. "Perhaps a day, if I'm conscious and using my will, an hour or so if I'm not."

I chuckled as we left the floor, entering the hallway beyond, still following the attendants. After a moment, though, I looked to Marilith. "Ah, dear... About a certain promise we made...?"

"Yes? What promise?"

"A promise I made to you in a tavern."

"Ummm... Oh! I remember. I..." Marilith blinked, gaping at me. "You didn't!"

"Several times, I'm sorry. Three or four times a day."

"Ooooo!" Marilith growled.

"I *did* warn you I have a bit of a reputation in this city, dear. She even slapped a wedding band on me to make it legitimate," I said, showing my bracelet.

Eddas grinned at the three of us. "And it was the queen. I'm not certain it's wise to refuse a queen."

I nodded to him. "Not Gonnakasi, no. My father didn't raise any idiots."

Sasha blushed deeply as Eddas burst out laughing. "I am never taking my eye off you again for an *instant!*" Marilith yelped.

"Good," I replied, and kissed her lovingly. "That's precisely what I want." I looked to Sasha, and kissed her with equal passion. "You, too. That's what I want."

Marilith grabbed one of my arms, and Sasha grabbed the other, each laying their heads into my shoulders as we walked. As we neared the guest quarters, Sasha lifted her head. "Corvid, there's still one more thing..."

"Oh? What?"

"The wizard. We have to get him. To get you back, we had to make a deal with the gods. And part of that is that the three of us must get him."

"And me," Eddas said, "I'll be helping you."

I looked to Eddas. "That depends. What is that spell like, when you use it?"

Eddas shrugged. "For the woman, it feels like copulation, very intense and powerful. I feel nothing, however."

"Well, you won't be going with us for awhile, then," I replied, shaking my head. "There's the silphium they gave her for years, you'll have to deal with that-"

Eddas waved a hand dismissively, interrupting me. "That's nothing, I've a blood cleansing spell that

will take care of it in my grimoire. It was developed to deal with chronic lead and arsenic poisoning, common in painters and dyers in my day. We knew of silphium in my time, we got it from the elves, the spell should work fine on it."

"And," I said, continuing, "if that spell you told Gonnakasi about really feels like copulation, you and her are going to be very busy for awhile. If it's any good, she's not going to be satisfied with just once."

Eddas was tired, that much I could see, and it took a moment for what I was saying to sink in. "It's more than just good, to her it will feel like she's coupling with my soul, and..." Eddas said, then slapped his forehead. "Oh, bother," Eddas replied, and I chuckled as Marilith and Sasha giggled at him.

#### The Mountain - Four.

I folded the letter again, holding it in my hands. I wasn't certain what I could say. And yet, the timing was, as usual, perfect. The gods still played their games with Eddas, though he knew it not. This would tear at him, I knew. The days of fall were fading. Soon, winter would come. Perhaps the children... The little ones. Perhaps they would make him smile again.

"I... I'm sorry, Auntie Joy," Lyota said, and sighed.

"Sit, sit," I replied, putting the letter on the table, and rising to walk to the fireplace. "You have nothing



to be sorry for. It wasn't your decision."

Lyota nodded, sitting at the table. "Well... It was, partly. When they told us what they were thinking of, they asked us to take over their routes. They've got regular routes, now, walking between the giant villages."

"Yes, I know. They left your father alone to become wandering healers, like they'd been before. You'd think walking through the land and seeing the devastation here would have finally brought them to their senses, but it didn't," I said, lifting the pot from the hook in the fireplace and picking up two cups.

"No, it didn't. All they can see is what once was. They walk in memories, Auntie Joy. We've walked with them, of course. They are our mothers, we don't want to see them eaten by something nasty. Pelia..." Lyota said, and sighed. "Mother points to things as we pass them, and tells stories. '*Oh, there, Lyota, there was the village I lived in with my second husband. We raised eight strapping children together... Look there, there used to be a dairy farm, here, they made lovely cheese... Look there, that broken rubble there used to be a windmill, it's where I met my third husband...*' Like father's stories, really. But his stories don't leave you sad, feeling the pain of loss. Kyrie's fifteen, now. She said to me a few months ago before her birthday that she loved Father's stories, even the sad ones. She loved them because it made her feel that she was a part of it - she's Hyperborean. It made her feel like she was a part of a great and wonderful people of the past, who had risen again like a phoenix from the ashes, to build a new future. Different now than they were before, but like the phoenix, still the same in their heart. Father remembers the past, and honors it. Mother and her circle... They live it. They walk through it. They point to a broken stone and chat about a building and the people within as though they would magically appear at any moment. They live it, Auntie Joy. They live in memories."

"In some ways, I can't blame them, since Eddas showed me what they lost. In other ways..." I said, and shook my head, pouring Lyota a cup of *byallar*. "And what did you choose to do?"

"Well... We agreed. They are our mothers, we had little choice. We'd already been talking to them about more routes to check on the new centaurs and to check on Faral and the Dryads, Frarim and Haifa and her clan..."

"Which they couldn't even consider, of course," I said, pouring a cup for myself.

Lyota shook her head. "No, they couldn't. They don't want the present, or the future. They want the past. It's what they've always wanted. Mother told me what you told her. And you were right. They *have* just been sitting and hoping that father will one day discover how to fix everything with a wave of his hand, and all will be right again. But, he can't. As father said to me once, Hyperborea is not a cup or a hammer that can be fixed with a spell of repairing, it's a tree, struck dead by lightning. We are the seedling of a new tree that he and our mothers have planted. We must grow again."

I shook my head, listening, placing the pot on the pot-holder atop the table. "And so Vyleah's rabbit runs inside her little burrow, never to be seen again," I growled, then paused, gazing at Lyota. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it to sound like that."

"It's alright. Many of us feel the same. But she is no longer Vyleah's rabbit, Auntie Joy. I am."

"Oh?" I said, sitting across from her.

"Yes. Vyleah spoke to me in a dream, and told me what I needed to know. Vyleah always wanted a stronger pawn. Father trained me to be a battle-mage, and mother trained me to be a healer and physicker. Our circle encompasses all father's knowledge and that of mother's circle. And we learn, and write down our discoveries, and father tells us his discoveries, gives us copies of the books and treatises he writes... We grow, Auntie Joy. The acorn mother asked father to plant and water is now a strong oak sapling, and growing."

I shook my head, then lifted my cup to sip at it for a moment. "It must be nice, talking to your god. The gods of my ancestors haven't ever spoken to me, not even once."

"They don't need to, Auntie Joy. You are the Heart of the Mountain."

I rolled my eyes. "Whatever that means."

Lyota smiled. "It means that when you follow your heart, that little tiny voice inside you that tells you what is right... Well, that's them. That's their influence. They don't need to make an appearance in your dreams or before your eyes. You are the Heart of the Mountain. They forged you so that you *are* their best representative, and when you follow your heart, following the moral teachings of the giants, following the lessons your mother and father taught you as a child... Well, you follow their wishes whether you know it or not. Your heart and theirs are one," she said, and her eyes twinkled for a moment. "Besides, Auntie Joy, the giants have over twenty gods who have all agreed to act as one. Hasn't father ever told you of the problems of a committee?"

I rolled my eyes again. "No, but I was queen long enough to understand."

"Another reason you were chosen. If they ever *do* need to speak directly to you, you'll at least understand them."

"Let's hope that moment doesn't come soon, I loathed committees. I can just imagine Hraffar, our four-faced god of seasons and Loweena, goddess of wind getting into a knock-down drag-out scuffle over a resolution on the day the leaves of the trees turn brown and fall, it would be just like them."

Lyota smiled, but her smile faded as she looked at the letter again. "What are you going to tell him, Auntie Joy?"

"The truth. His courtesans are all worthless little-" I said, then bit back my words. "I'm sorry. I know Pelia is your mother, and I know you love her. It's just..."

"I know. We aren't happy with it, either. All of us are sad. Some of us are angry, as well. But, mother is old... Even older than Father. She had three husbands - men she met in her wanderings, settled down with, had their children, and grew old with. When they died, she restored her youth, and returned to

wandering. Some have had as many as five husbands, Auntie Joy. They were very old when the end finally came to Hyperborea. Very old, and very set in their ways... Like father was, when he first awakened."

"But he *grew*, he *changed*. His body does not change, but his mind *did*. When he first awakened, he was a crotchety old man tucked into that little body. He's grown beyond that."

"Not really, Auntie Joy. He still is what he is. The difference is that he was a battle-mage with an iron will who could look at the destruction, and shunt aside his feelings. He had the strength to carry on, to overcome the terrible pain and grief of loss. Only loneliness can kill him, Auntie Joy. It killed him before, in his first life, and nearly killed him in this one, twice. That's what made him crotchety and short-tempered, Auntie Joy. But now he has you to shield him from himself, to light the dark parts of his soul, and keep him from falling into the terrible dark depressions that he suffered out of loneliness," Lyota said, and sighed, shaking her head. "They were just healers. Mother, all her circle... Just ordinary women with the *Talent*. Ordinary women, aside from their abilities. They never learned to develop the iron will that father taught us, the will of a battle-mage. Millions of men in the Southlands, millions of elves to the east... Even *akmaran* dwarves who might be happy with them, were they to open their hearts and seek out new loves. Millions upon millions of men, all over the world, and all they had to do was go seek them. But they could never do that. They wanted Father to fix things for them, and have the body of a man again. He cannot - and even if he could, they would never have been happy sharing him. They wanted Father to bring the men of Hyperborea back to them, so they could resume their wanderings - speaking to them, meeting them one by one in hundreds of villages and towns, tens of thousands of Hyperborean men over the decades, until they found a new love and settled down again, as they had done many times before. And they cannot change, because they do not wish to."

I shook my head. "Heh. You've no idea how many times I've heard him say '*I am what I am and I cannot change.*' Usually just before he did something very brave, very noble, or very stupid."

"And that is true. He is still what he is in his heart, Auntie Joy."

"I know," I replied, setting my cup down and tapping the letter with a finger. "That's how I know this will hurt him. All he has done is give them kindness. And all they have done is hurt him in return. They hurt him when they tossed aside his plan without discussion. They hurt him by refusing to lie with him. And they hurt him by choosing to wander the lands instead of living with him, once the task of birthing you and your sisters was done. And now, this," I said, and shook my head. "He gave me my dreams twice, Lyota, and I love him more than life. I cannot even imagine hurting him. They said they loved him,

too - but they hurt him anyway."

"Because he could not give them theirs, Auntie Joy," Lyota said, quietly. "He could not just repair the lands, fix everything with a gesture, and bring everything they'd lost back to them. He could not turn himself into eighty-nine men, and give them their dreams, Auntie Joy. That's why. He could not give them their dreams. They talked it over for months, came to an understanding, and made a decision. Their understanding was that they would never be happy, here. Their decision, you already know. They gave us all their grimoires, the books they'd written, all their letters, everything they had written over the years. They gave us all their magic things, enchanted items father had given to them over the years, some from his old friends, some from his own hands. They gave it all to us, Mother wrote that letter for him, and..." Lyota said, her eyes tearing, and sobbed. "Oh, Auntie Joy!"

I rose, bringing my chair around to her side of the table, then sat beside her, wrapping my arms around her. I patted her back quietly, whispering "there, there..." and rocking her.

Lyota wept into my shoulder for a long time as we sat together, facing the western windows of the tower. I began to hum a little melody I remembered, patting her back and stroking her. As the sun sank towards late afternoon, sending golden shafts of light into the room, I rocked Lyota gently, humming to her. Slowly, her tears faded, and she rested in my arms, listening.

"I remember that..." she said, her gaze on the late afternoon sky. "You used to hum that for me when I was little, and mother brought me to visit."

"Yes. It's a very old song, a song of my people."

"It has words?"

"Yes," I said, and sang quietly.

*"Lovely child upon my knee,  
lovely child, before I die,  
lovely child hear my words,  
hear my words and remember me.  
Remember me, remember me,  
when the song is done and  
the fire has died.  
Remember me, remember me,  
when your own child is on your knee."*

I smiled. "It loses a bit in the translation to Hyperborean."

Lyota smiled back. "No, it doesn't."

We sat together in silence after that, watching the sun slowly fade, and the darkness of evening fall.

## The Ocean - Eight.

I shook my head, looking to Marilith. "I am *very* nervous."

Marilith was still in the form of a Kushite woman as she sat next to me on the bed in the guest quarters we'd been given. The room was very nicely appointed, with a large archway leading out to a porch for ventilation. "Should I leave?" she asked, smiling and crossing her legs, her voice a normal woman's voice rather than her usual demonic echo.

"NO! That would be worse! What if he... I mean..." I said, and blushed. "I mean, what if he wants to... Ummm..."

Marilith grinned, lying back on the bed. "Mmmm... He is *very* nice, Sister. He knew I was a virgin. He could tell. And he made it *so* special..." she said, and shivered.

"Ooooh, I am *not* sure if I'm ready for that!" I yelped.

"Then he won't do anything. He'll know when you're ready," Marilith replied, and sighed dreamily. "I don't know if Belana told him that, or if it's his own sensitivity and compassion, or... Oh, my! He might just have a special sailor's nose for it, and be able to sniff out a virgin a league away like he said! Hah! I just don't know! But don't worry. He'll know when you're ready."

"He can *smell* a virgin?!" I blinked, surprised.

Marilith grinned, sitting up again. "No, but it sure seems that way. He always knows exactly what you need, he seems to be able to just sense it. Maybe the same way he read the wind and tide sailing the

seas, I don't know. Soft, gentle, compassionate... Oh, if I was Gonnakasi, I *never* would have given him up, not even after Eddas Ayar's promises, not even knowing Eddas can give a girl-child guaranteed and make everything right, no, never. Never."

"You're certainly building up my expectations... Let's hope I'm not disappointed."

Marilith whapped my shoulder playfully. "Stop that! There's nothing to worry about."

"Ooooh... I do *not* feel comfortable meeting him in this *nephni*-thing!"

"Then don't - take it off and wear your scales," Marilith replied, giggling.

"I'm not sure I feel comfortable wearing my scales around him, either! I mean... What if he realizes I'm really naked?! That would send *entirely* the wrong message!"

Marilith rolled her eyes. "So pull your dress out of your bottle and wear that."

"What if he comes in while I'm changing? What if-"

"Will you *stop that?!*" Marilith yelled, rolling her eyes. Suddenly, she hopped to her feet. "Look, stay here, and don't move. I'll be right back," she said, and vanished.

"Ummm... Sister? Where did you go?"



*"Back to Round Island for a moment. Hush, I'll be right with you,"* she replied, her familiar voice in my ear.

"Ummm... Will you be back, soon? I mean... You've been gone a bit, the mer-folk might want to talk to you, and..."

*"Sister, it's barely dawn, here, they're all out hunting, nobody even knows I'm around and I'm going to come right back. Hush."*

I blinked - here, it was near noon. I knew the world was round, I'd swum around it. And I knew it turned to point at the sun, making day and night. Even so, it was still surprising to me every time I was reminded of it like this, I still tended to think of the world as kind of being a large flat ocean with islands and continents floating on it. After all, that's pretty much how I'd experienced it swimming around it as a mermaid.

A moment later, the air shimmered, and Marilith reappeared, a folded pink garment in her hands. "Here we are. Stand up," she said, and flicked it out, revealing my old dance dress.

"Marilith," I said, rolling my eyes. "I saved that because it has sentimental value to me, but I can't possibly wear it, I outgrew it long ago! And look, it's so old the cloth is falling apart and the ribbon about the waist is going to tatters!"

Marilith flicked the dress again, and the age vanished from the cloth. "Dear, an old blood-spot on the back right at the rump..."

I blushed, flustered. "Well... Yes, I had my menses when I was aboard the slaver ship, and..."

Marilith brushed at it with her fingertips, flicking the blood from the fabric with magic. "There we are. Now stand straight... Yes, like that," she said, holding the dress up. She tugged on the shoulders, and it seemed to stretch in her hands, growing wider. "Good, now hold this up to your front with your hands... Yes, like that," she said, kneeling and tugging on the hem. I could feel a tingling through my gloves as she tugged on the dress. "There we are, that should be the right length. Put it on."

"Ummm... What did you do?!" I asked, holding the dress out and gaping at it. It looked like it would fit, easily - but it was a dress of my youth, when I was sixteen. I'd outgrown it long before I was twenty, and today stood half a hand shy of four cubits tall.

"Like the sizing enchantment - it's just the spell, instead. It's just a transformation that alters dimensions, Sasha. Now hurry up and put it on before he gets here!"

I hurriedly pulled on the dress, and as soon as I had it, Marilith tied the ribbon about my waist. "There we are... Let's take it in at the waist a bit and let it out at the bust, you're more shapely now than you were at sixteen..." she said, smoothing the dress with her fingers. I could feel it changing atop me, then she stopped. "And there we are." Marilith looked around, and smiled. "Good thing there's no guards in here, they would *not* be amused to see me do that."

"Ummm... Okay, this dress is *warm!*"

"Of course it is, it's fustian and it's very humid here. Use your mer-magi belt to adapt to the heat and humidity, Sister, you don't want to get that dress all sweaty."

I did so, then looked down at the dress. "Fustian? I never knew that. It doesn't look it..."

"It was the best Hamat could afford, he quite went into debt for several months. Of course, what the

dressmaker could get in your little village wasn't much by the standards of the big city, but it's still quite nice."

I blinked. "He went into *debt* over this dress?!"

"Yes, he and Calla both thought of you as a second daughter. Even more so when Malik had the plan of forcing them to adopt you and stealing your farm, but that's as may be. Don't worry about paying him back, you *did* bring Orissa back to him, after all."

I smiled at Marilith. "You watched them, after."

"Yes. They are wonderful people, Sasha. I could only see the essences at that distance, but it was enough. I didn't watch them long, however, just a year or so after you were taken. I suppose if I'd watched them longer, I'd have seen the day Orissa left and where she went, and saved us a lot of trouble seventeen years later. Or eighteen centuries earlier, depending on your point of view," she said, and laughed.

"Ah," a man's voice called from the open door. "I hear laughter. Have I come at a good time?"

I smiled, turning to the door. Corvid stood there, dressed again in the clothes I first saw him in at Eddas' tower, months ago. He was still a handsome man - even more so, now that I knew he was *mine* by right and law, here. Dark-haired, clean-shaven, he was a pale-skinned Arcadian man with a strong jaw and sparkling blue eyes. He was dressed in a black leather doublet and breeches, black leather knee-boots, a long black puffy-shirt and short, fingerless gloves. He bore Vaddan's sword at his left hip again, the scabbard again hung in the sling of duelist's sword belt, his broad, dark crimson sash about his waist and over the belt itself. He looked dangerous... A fighter, a warrior... And he looked very exciting.

"Yes, this is a good time," I said, and attempted to curtsy as I remembered Calla having taught me, so long ago, hoping he wouldn't notice the goose-bumps on my arms or how silly my fighting gloves and boots looked with a young girl's dancing dress sized up to fit me and at least twenty years of style.

"My," Corvid said, as two attendants walked past him carrying trays of food, "what a beautiful dress, Sasha."

"You like it?" I asked, feeling very giddy.

"Lovely," he replied as the attendants set down the trays on a nearby table. "Shall we eat?"

The meal was a simple one of greens and diced, fried meat. Corvid picked up a small bottle that came with the trays and began sprinkling a dark, aromatic liquid over the meat. "What is that?"

"Likely the thing that will keep me coming back here from time to time - they call it 'black-sauce', it's quite nice."

"Err... Coming back here?"

"Well, yes - it's only made here."

"It's only made in the queen's palace?!" I yelped.

Corvid blinked at me, then laughed. "No, no! It's only made in Kush. It's an Enebuan meat sauce. Try it!"

I did so, still feeling flustered. The sauce on the meat was good, but I wasn't certain what to think about Corvid coming back here to get it. I still remembered what Marilith had said. If she were the queen, she said, she'd never have let him go, not even for Eddas' promises. I wasn't entirely certain I liked the idea of him being anywhere *near* Queen Gonnakasi. "How long will we be staying here?"

Marilith shrugged. "Until Master Eddas says he's done with the queen."

Corvid nodded. "I talked to him while he was taking a bath. He said-"

"You talked to him while he was taking a *bath?!?*" I yelped. I wasn't certain I even liked the idea of him looking at Eddas' half-elven body, either. After weeks of stretching and intense exercise, that little half-elf's body was frighteningly fit. Looking at it, I felt like a cow.

Corvid blinked at me, surprised. "Well, yes, what's the matter?"

"Well, he... I mean..."

Corvid's eyes widened in realization. "Aaaah, I see what you mean. No, I wasn't looking at him, that would embarrass him very badly, I think. I stood with my back to the bath as he changed and got in. The attendants fetched a blind shortly, and then we just spoke past the curtain."

"Oh, I see," I replied, now feeling very stupid.

"Well, anyway... He needed to know what I knew of her cycle - he guessed I'd be fairly familiar with it, as it likely had been rather an important topic of conversation of late - which, of course, it had been,"

Corvid said, and winked. Marilith giggled, but I did not. Corvid saw my expression, and continued on. "Err... Well, he said he thinks it will take about six days before he's certain the spell has taken and the queen is pregnant, but that's only a guess based on what I told him about her cycle. He won't know until he has had time to examine her. Much of the work, he said, will be in eliminating the residual effects of the silphium from her system. He has a spell for it, but he'll likely have to cast it several times, and if it doesn't work, we'll have to stay here another twenty-eight days or so."

"Err... Twenty-eight days?"

"Yes, so her cycle comes 'round again to her fertile period. Ummm... Didn't you know that?"

Marilith smiled. "Sasha hasn't had a cycle in almost twenty years, Corvid. The mer-magi belt changed her, she now has estrus like a dolphin."

"Marilith!" I gasped, shocked.

Marilith smiled. "He'll need to know eventually, Sister."

"Well, yes, I suppose, but..." I sputtered.

Corvid looked to me. "So you don't... Err..." Corvid shook his head. "Nevermind, terribly sorry, please forget I even mentioned it."

"I-I-I-I...." I sputtered.

Corvid smiled. "Really, Sasha - please, forget I ever mentioned it. I won't speak of it again."

"I should sincerely hope not!" I snapped.

Corvid gazed at me, started to speak, then stopped. He glanced at Marilith - she, for her part, was rolling her eyes at me. "Really, Sister, it's nothing, it's entirely normal and natural. Try not to be so self-conscious about it."

"That's easy for you to say!" I replied, now *very* flustered.

Corvid suddenly slapped his forehead. "Ah! Terribly sorry, Sasha, Marilith. I've completely forgotten there was something I needed to tell Eddas. I do hope I can catch him before he's too busy with the queen. Please excuse me," he said, then quickly rose to his feet, turned, and walked quickly out the door.

Marilith gazed after him for a moment, then looked at his plate of food on the table. He had eaten maybe three bites. Slowly, her face took on a look of anger.

It took me a bit to regain my composure, and I drank some water from the mugs that were provided. Finally, when I was calm again, I looked to Marilith. She still looked angry, but now her gaze was distant, unfocused. "What's wrong?"

"Me. You. Him," she replied, her voice tight.

I blanched. "You... You aren't unhappy at sharing him, are you?"

Marilith scowled deeply, her gaze still distant. "I am angry with myself. I should have realized that this is still a sensitive issue with you, and been more circumspect. But I'm angry with *you* for having this kind of reaction, too! You're thirty-eight, now, not sixteen! And now he's gone! He ran off to keep from embarrassing you further!"

"He did not, he said he had to talk to Eddas!" I objected.

"Sister, I am *watching* him, he's going to his room, he isn't going anywhere near Eddas!"

"But-but-but-" I stammered.

"Don't you understand?! He realized that you were deeply embarrassed, he realized there was no way to fix it, he realized that you were embarrassed because we were discussing this in front of *him*, and he left to spare you further embarrassment! *That's what kind of man he is!*"

"Oh..." I said, and sighed at my own foolishness. "Well... I'm sure he'll come back."

"I *sincerely* hope so, because around here, he is *your* husband, *I am nothing!* We can't tell everyone who I am or what I am, they'd all be afraid of me! I can't just go running after him and cause rumors to spread around here, we're going to need to be unobtrusive so that the Queen isn't constantly reminded of what she lost! I missed him so badly it hurt! I want to hug him and kiss him and make love to him until I faint with exhaustion, and I can't even touch him where others might see, I have to just sit here and watch you run him off!"

I started to word an angry objection, then stopped. I sat there for awhile, both fuming and wondering *why* I was fuming. After awhile, I felt my anger fade. I realized I was angry because she was right. I *had* been silly, and I *had* driven him off. I rose from my seat, sliding it over next to Marilith, then sat down beside her. "I'm sorry."



"I'm sorry, too," she said, blinking and looking at me. "I know it's partly my fault. But you really are going to need to put that aside, Sasha. You're thirty-eight. Eight years older than him. Don't act eight years younger."

I smiled. "We did hook a nice one, didn't we?"

"You have no idea. Gonnakasi wasn't kidding when she said she'd kill to keep him. I've felt his touch, Sister. He's worth it."

Marilith and I shared a hug for a moment, then her gaze became distant again.

"Where is he now? Is he going to come back?"

Marilith sighed. "No. He's taken off his sword, and now he's heading towards the Queen's Kitchen. The guards were looking at him oddly because he was wearing his sword - it's not legal for a man to bear arms, here. Now it looks like he's... Yes, he's gone to the Queen's Kitchen for food, the cook is frying a fish for him."

I sighed. "I wish you could tell what he's thinking."

"I could with sorcery, but that wouldn't be very nice. Peeping in on his thoughts? Besides, he's a bit distant for that, effects like that are very short ranged."

My stomach growled, and I slid my plate closer to me and resumed eating. "Let me know if he starts heading back here."

"Alright."

I had finished my plate of food and poured myself another mug of water from the pitcher when Marilith sighed. "He's not coming back, he's just wandering around the palace, now."

"Well, I suppose we just go get him," I said, rising to my feet. "Show me where he is."

"Sasha, what if he's not coming back because he's changed his mind? No man wants to think he's going to be married to someone who argues all the time or makes him feel uncomfortable all the time. I don't know if going to get him would be wise or not. That's what women around *here* do, they just go get the man they want."

"And this is a bad thing?" I replied, grinning.

"Well... Not from my perspective, no. But I'm not him. And... Well, there's a little part of me that *does* feel odd about chasing him. We are *given* the breath of life from our males, Sister. We don't hunt them down, throw them to the ground, kiss them and suck it out of them forcefully," she said, and I couldn't help but giggle at the imagery. "It's not funny! What if he doesn't come back?!"

"Then I chase him and throw him to the ground, tie him up and drag him back to us," I replied, and grinned wryly.

"Sister!" Marilith gasped.

I laughed. "Okay, no, I wouldn't really do that. But I will go get him if you come along to show me where he is."

"It's not that easy. What are you going to say to him?"

"Well... I'm going to start by telling him I'm sorry. I don't remember my mother, or my original father. I was raised by my adoptive father, and... Well, that whole subject was one that embarrassed him greatly, I guess I learned growing up that it was an embarrassing thing. He had to ask the women in the village what to do about it when I reached menarche, he had no idea. Vilandian women tend to hide that from their men, and they don't talk about it. It took him days to find out, Calla eventually told him and gave him a menstrual belt and some pads for me to use and wash. She told him the basics, but it was clear they both were very embarrassed about it, and my father was even more embarrassed having to explain something to me that both embarrassed him and was something he didn't really understand. Then, I was thirteen, I only knew what little my father told me, and I spent months fiddling with the belt and figuring out how to clean the pads and trying not to get my clothes bloody, and..." I shook my head. "It was very embarrassing to me, because of how I grew up. It still is."

Marilith nodded. "Here's a better idea. You just tell him that we're sorry we embarrassed him, we both want him to come back, and if he tries to run away again we'll break his legs."

I gaped at her, then burst into giggles. "Where did you get *that* idea from?"

"From Joy. She said that many times, that's what she does when something is embarrassing or uncomfortable for either her or Eddas. She grabs him and doesn't let him out of her sight until they've worked through it. Then, *after* we get him back to Round Island and we *know* he can't go anywhere, *then* you tell him what you told me."

"But it wasn't embarrassing for him, you said he just left to save *me* the embarrassment!"

"True, but let's not tell him we understand why he does things. Let him think he's still a bit mysterious to the both of us. Joy said it was better for a man to think he wasn't an open book. Particularly when he is," Marilith said, and grinned.

I grinned back. "Alright - let's go get him!"

Marilith hopped to her feet and took my hand, and we walked out the door together. Marilith and I did not have any problems sharing Corvid with each other - that was something we had discussed years before we ever met Corvid. Two-for-one, any man who accepted one of us had to accept the other equally, because neither of us wanted the other to be alone, and we refused to be separated. My time aboard the wizard's ship as a prisoner had only emphasized that feeling between us, neither one of us felt completely comfortable separated from the other. And Marilith had already accepted Corvid, and loved him deeply. I loved him, too, but needed time to get to know him better, and to learn about him as Marilith had. I didn't know how we would work things out with Corvid. But I knew that Marilith and I *would* work things out. He was *not* going to slip away again.

The Raven - Twenty-Two.

I watched as Sasha and Marilith sparred back and forth, Marilith rolling her eyes as Sasha's blush grew deeper and deeper. Now, even the tops of her breasts over her antique dancing gown were reddened. Having this discussion with me around was, apparently, *deeply* embarrassing to her. I started to word an apology, then stopped, snapping my mouth shut. This obviously wasn't anything I could possibly apologize for, and even attempting to word an apology would only prolong the discomfort for

her. There was literally nothing I could say - and even silence was little better.

This lunch was an utter disaster - what I thought was a safe course had now turned into a stormy one, and the reefs ahead were clear, large, and jagged. Only an idiot would continue sailing forward in these waters. Thinking quickly, I suddenly slapped my forehead. "Ah! Terribly sorry, Sasha, Marilith. I've completely forgotten there was something I needed to tell Eddas. I do hope I can catch him before he's too busy with the queen. Please excuse me," I said, then rose to my feet and strode out the door, hoping I wasn't looking like I was fleeing. Particularly since I was.

*'Stupid, stupid, stupid,'* I thought, striding down the corridors. The guards were giving me strange looks, and after a moment, I realized why - I was wearing my sword, and it was still illegal for a man to be armed in Enebua. I hadn't even thought about it, I'd simply been so glad to have my freedom and my normal garments back it hadn't occurred to me. I turned down the hall, heading for the room I'd been given. As Gonnakasi's former husband, it appeared I'd avoided arrest so far, but it was not wise to test her patience.

After securing my sword in the sword-case in my room, I considered my options. Going back was not an option. They'd expect me to tell them what I'd told Eddas - certainly they'd at least be curious. It was a poor excuse, but all I could think of at the time. My stomach growled at me, reminding me that three cubes of beefsteak hardly qualified as a meal. I turned, heading for the queen's kitchen and hoping I might catch Pago there.

Pago had been elated to see me, of course. I asked if he might toss a small fish on the fire for me, as I'd appeared to have missed lunch. Pago simply chuckled. "Women - they're all the same, Corvid. Clean the house, pick up after the children, wash the clothes... If you don't watch out for yourself, you don't get to eat! Why do you think I learned how to cook?"

I grinned. "Sadly, that is a skill I never mastered. I can manage a soup from stocks, and roast a fish on a spit, but that's about the limit of my abilities. I always hired a cook at sea - and, of course, always a man."

"Naturally!" Pago agreed, opening the pantry with his key and entering, waving me to follow. "Only a man can cook food right, women just aren't any good at it. Always thinking, always busy with their little

schemes against each other... They just don't have the heart to understand the true magic of cooking," Pago replied, waving to the meat locker. "Pick one you like, I've plenty."

"Oh, that one," I said, pointing at a large carp-like fish native to the rivers of Kush.

"Ah, a flat-head, you'll like him," Pago replied, pulling out a knife and removing the fish's head, then tossing the head into a small box in the corner of the meat-locker where it wouldn't spoil. "Here's something you probably never knew - save the heads. Boil them, they make a good stew, quite tasty," he said, putting away the knife and picking up the fish. It was already gutted, apparently either at the market or by Pago himself before he put them away.

"I don't think I can eat something staring at me," I replied, grinning.

"Oh, no! After you boil them for about an hour, you scoop them out and toss them to the pigs. Guts, too, throw the guts to your pigs. It's good for them, they grow large on it. Eat the soup, not the heads," he said, snatching up an orange tuber from the pantry as he led us out, then locking the pantry behind us. "I can see you've not lied, you've no idea how to cook. Shall I at least show you how to fry a fish properly?"

"I'd be honored," I replied, smiling.

"Well, then. First, the pan. Not just any pan, mind you! A good iron skillet. Settle for nothing less! Tap it when you buy it, it should sound like a gong. If it doesn't, don't buy it, it's not made well and will eventually crack. Oil the skillet in vegetable oil, *not* tallow, *not* pig fat. *Leepa*-bean oil is the best, but any clean vegetable oil will do. Vegetable oil over every inch, then put it in the oven to bake for a good hour. Pull it out, let it cool, look at it. If it doesn't look like this skillet here, it's not enough, do it again. You want it black as pitch, and you want it to feel like this. Feel it - feel the pan."

I did so, nodding. "I see."

"Do it right, nothing will stick. *Never* let anything burn in your pan. Wash carefully, don't scrub hard, and it will stay like this. Gently, with hot water and soap. *Never* scrape hard, if you're having to scrape something off, you've done something wrong, likely burned something in the pan. If that happens, let it soak in soapy water a good day to loosen it, gently clean it, then oil it and bake it again to repair it. I've six pans like this, all good and black, nothing sticks to them - but I've six because I was cooking for the tavern. You only need one, of course. But, get a good pan and treat it right, and she'll treat you far better than your wife *ever* will," Pago replied, grinning, and I grinned back at him as he continued his lesson.

You could learn a lot about someone just allowing them to teach you something. Pago was a meticulous cook - everything in his kitchen had a specific place, he did everything in a specific way. Filleting the fish was done with a knife so sharp it could split hairs, and done in a specific way so as to render the fish wafer-thin. Frying was done with the pan hot, the fish lying there only a few heartbeats - just long enough to brown before he flipped it over. He wielded his spatula like a duelist's rapier, the edge sharp and angle low. In short order, he had the filleted fish fried up, and tossed what was left - spine, tail and other parts - into a bucket to the side to be emptied when he was done. The pan was still warm as he quickly sliced the tuber he'd brought out, then tossed the thin slices into the pan to fry - he said it absorbed a bit of the fish oil, and not only made the flavor of the tuber better, it helped cleaning later. Before I knew it, he was done, and held a plate out to me with the fried fish and tubers on it. I grinned, taking it from him, and leaned on a nearby counter to eat, listening as he continued his lessons.

"Cleaning's just as important as cooking, Corvid. You're not one of us, you use swords where you come from. Would you let your sword get dirty between uses?" he asked, up to his elbows in soapy water.

"No," I replied, grinning as I picked up another slice of fish and popped it into my mouth.

"Well, there you are! You already understand more than most. Clean tools are better than dirty, rusty ones, and if your pan is cleaned after you're done with it, it's ready to be used again at a moment's notice the next time, like a sword. Do it right, don't burn food, and nothing sticks! Cook quick as lightning, and your woman will think you're a magician."

"I'll remember," I said, finishing the meal.

"Ah! You're done," he said, taking the plate from me. "Clean plates are good, too. The queen said filth can poison, she detects it with her ring. Well, she's right, I've seen it happen myself. Perfect meal, everything looks wonderful, but a bit of filth on the plates and everyone ends up with the trots and your reputation is ruined, your wife will likely beat you - ah! No, no, no! Clean, clean, clean!" he said, grinning as he washed the dish, then set it on a rack to dry. "And there we are. Now, you know how to fry a fish. Get yourself a good pan, Corvid. You'll thank me, later."

"No, I'll thank you now," I replied, and bowed. "Thank you."

"You're welcome! Come again! I could cook a mountain of food and never repay you for saving my life," he replied, grinning.

As I walked down the corridor, I thought about Pago. He was a good man - a truly good man. He deserved better than Doshta, who saw him only for the money he could make her in the tavern, and later in the palace. But, what could I do? I supposed it was just life for an Enebua man.

My own life didn't look much better. It was clear Sasha had led rather a sheltered life. The princess of my childhood dreams really *was* in many ways like a princess, even ordinary things seemed to upset her. She had the walk of a trained warrior, and the physique of an Enebua woman, fit and trim. Yet, she acted like a girl, blushing and giggly, and the same subjects that were taboo in the upper-crust societies of Vilandia or the Southlands appeared to be taboo with her. Her sister said she'd lived in Palome, where such subjects were considered fodder for ordinary conversation, and she'd trained to be a warrior and general there. Yet, where was the warrior-woman I'd heard of in her sister's stories, that night in Eddas Ayar's tower? Where was the general, the fighter, the brave creature who had literally swum 'round the world? Nowhere to be seen, that was certain. In her place stood a woman eight years my senior who looked to be my peer in age, and likely would look that way for centuries to come. A mermaid, Marilith had said. I knew little of the mer-folk, but their women did not have a reputation as warriors, their reputation was of vain things who laid about on rocks and waved to passing ships, luring sailors to their doom when they sailed onto hidden shoals and reefs, and laughing as the poor sods drowned. Likely those stories were much like stories told by the Enebua about the Mysantians, the Mysantians about the Kushites, the dwarves about elves, elves about dwarves... Biased, prejudiced nonsense. Yet, I saw little evidence of the warrior, and far more evidence of a prim, blushing, giggly girl.



The dress. By the gods, that was the worst. It wasn't pink, though it looked it at first glance. It was four shades of near-pinks, ranging from plum to rose, and trimmed with a blue ribbon at the waist. I'd seen them before - it was a dancing dress, quite a proper garment, worn by young girls to festivals in Vilandia. All she lacked was dancing shoes - though I'm sure those were about, somewhere. Yet, she sat to lunch wearing Palomean fighting gloves... I wasn't quite certain what to think.

Marilith, I could live with. In fact, I loved her dearly. She was a woman, though and through, despite her being born on another dimension. Mysterious, exciting, sensual... Yet, willing to fight for what she believed was right, not simply lay around and let her man do all the fighting for her. But Sasha? No, it would never work. The princess of my boyhood dreams *was* a princess, prim and proper and easily embarrassed. She would never be happy with someone like me, and I would constantly be walking on eggshells to keep from upsetting her. I'd met women like that before, of course. Women who needed to be placed on a pillar, and fed with a silver spoon to be happy. At the other end of the spectrum were women like Gonnakasi - and Marilith. Earthy, sensual, exotic... Unfortunately, it seemed that to have the latter, I'd have to accept the former.

How could it possibly work? I could easily see an earthy woman like Marilith accepting of her sister lying in the same bed while I coupled with either of them. But Sasha? No, no. It was impossible. She'd die of embarrassment to even mention such a thing. Even sleeping in the same bed with the two of them would likely be a bit much, even if the three of us *could* fit on that tiny bed in their cabin, which I sincerely doubted. I'd certainly have to build a separate cabin for myself, just to preserve Sasha's sense of propriety. And, any relations with Marilith would have to be handled with extreme discretion, so as not to offend her sister's delicate sensibilities. I remembered the two of them together, that day on the bridge. Marilith had been very nervous, but put on her little demoness' mask - a sly wink and a sensual smile. Sasha, however, had seemed tremendously embarrassed by the entire discussion, and hardly willing at all. Marilith had to talk her into it, in fact.

I paused in my wanderings of the palace, and leaned on a marble pillar, feeling it's coolness against my shoulder through my shirt. Could I live like that? Could I be the genteel, proper man for Sasha, never offending her delicate sensibilities with off-color stories or language, always having the most proper manners, the most perfect appearance...?

It seemed I had little choice, really. Marilith had made it clear, that day on the bridge. It was a two-for-one deal, either I accepted both, or neither.

I sighed. I would do anything for Marilith. Even pretend to be something I was not, that her sister

would be happy. And, I cared for Sasha, as well. The princess of my dreams was not anything like I expected her to be - not in the slightest bit. But, she was still a princess, and apparently expected me to treat her as one. She was a good woman, but quite proper. She would never be happy with anything less than an immaculate gentleman. I was hardly that, but... Well, to have Marilith, I would do anything. Anything at all, no matter how much it pained me to do it.

"Corvid!" a woman's voice called from behind. I turned - it was Sasha and Marilith, the latter still in her disguise as a Kushite, and the former still in her prim dancing dress.

I smiled, and made a full genuflection, bending deeply at the knee and spreading my arms wide. "Good afternoon, ladies."

Sasha smiled. "Come back, Corvid, we'll sit and chat."

Marilith, however, blinked at me for a moment, then grinned. "Yes, come back, sailor-man. And don't try to run away again, we'll be forced to break your little legs to keep you from leaving."

Returning to a cold meal when I'd already eaten did not sound appealing. Thinking of what Sasha might like, I smiled. "Actually, I've a somewhat better idea. You may find that the palace gardens are quite lovely, Sasha - countless beautiful flowers, each almost as pretty as yourself. Shall I show you?"

Marilith grinned, and Sasha blushed again. "Ummm... Yes, that sounds quite nice," Sasha replied.

I held out an elbow to her. "Shall we go, then?"

Sasha took my arm demurely, still blushing. I reached out a hand to Marilith, taking her hand in mine, and squeezed it. Marilith smiled at me - apparently, this was what the two of them expected.

So be it.

I put a smile on my face, and led the two of them through the palace, towards the gardens.

### The Raven - Twenty-Three.

I sat on the bed in the room that had been given me, thinking. Six days of precisely measured hell had passed, me courting Sasha carefully, my manners and bearing as impeccable as I could make them. She seemed to enjoy it, but that was all I could tell. There was still the risk that I might slip and say something that would offend Sasha, of course, but I had managed to avoid that so far with an old trick my father taught me - ask a woman what she's thinking, then shut up and listen. My father had said it was the best way to keep a wife happy, and it seemed to work well with Marilith and Sasha. Both of them seemed quite happy chatting at me while I smiled, listened, and nodded. Sasha was very easily prodded into telling me what Palome was like, the various things she'd seen there, what the people and culture were like... Yes, it was quite easy, so long as I remembered to simply smile politely, and nod at the appropriate points in the conversation. I could only hope that I'd be able to be with Marilith alone at some point, so I could drop this facade of gentility, kiss her until she swooned then ravish her until she giggled.

"Ah, Corvid, there you are," a woman's voice called from the door. I looked - it was Eddas, wearing his robe and waist-belt, and with his feathers tucked into his hair. "Come - time to go, then. Fetch your

sword, we won't be coming back."

"Ah - you've succeeded? Gonnakasi is pregnant?" I asked, rising.

Eddas nodded, smiling. "Yes. I've made arrangements for Joy and I to come back here next year and work with her guards, possibly improving what they know of fighting. I'll also teach them a few tricks that mundanes used in Hyperborea to overcome mages, should they ever need to know - but, nevermind. Come, time to go."

I fetched my sword and was about to put it into the sling of my sword-belt, then paused. "Damn - can you carry this for me? It's not legal for a man to be armed, here. I don't want to annoy Gonnakasi."

Eddas nodded, taking the sword from me and tucking it under his arm. "I'll carry it for now, but... Well, at this point, Corvid, you would have trouble annoying her if you set her feet on fire," Eddas replied, winking. "You were right, she *did* very much enjoy that spell, I had to cast it several times even after I knew she was pregnant, just to amuse her. She's quite an earthy woman, I'm surprised you survived your time with her."

"It was rather trying, yes," I replied, and we shared a chuckle.

"Really, that spell is quite an effort, it's as difficult as summoning a greater demon. Of course, seeing that I was a bit tired afterwards only increased her ardor. Joy will likely *not* be amused once I tell her the tale, but if I don't and she finds out another way, she'll be even less amused, so there we are."

"Joy seems a very practical type, perhaps she'll find it funny?" I replied as we walked out the door and turned to go down the hall.

"Perhaps. I do hope so, but women are sometimes hard to gauge in that regard," Eddas said, shaking his head. "Did you know Gonnakasi took Pago from your friend, Doshta?"

"No, I didn't," I replied, amazed. "What happened?"

"I told her what Yorindar told me - the man of Enebua who would make her happy was already living in her palace, and had already been given to her. She thought about it for perhaps all of an eyeblink, and shouted for Pago and Doshta to be brought. She told her she'd decided to keep Pago as a husband after all, paid the woman a stone in gold, and had her guards kick her out the front gate. It happened so fast, I was quite shocked."

I chuckled. "That's Gonnakasi, alright," I said, then reached out a hand to him, stopping him in the hallway. "Err... Wait a moment."

"Yes?" he replied, looking up to me.

"You're a bit older than I, you've dealt with many women... Perhaps you can advise me."

Eddas shrugged. "I can try."

"What on earth would one do to get a prim and proper princess to loosen up a bit?"

"Eh? Who would you know like that?"

"Sasha. She's quite the proper one, it's becoming immensely painful for me to maintain the facade. Poetry, the occasional flowers I manage to get the queen's gardener to snip for me, giving her my ear at all times, maintaining a perfect bearing and manner for her... Quite tiresome."

Eddas blinked. "Ummm... Why would you need to do all that for her?"

I rolled my eyes. "Oh, you've no idea. She blushes at even the slightest thing, she's really a very delicate creature - very prim, very proper."

"Ummm... We're talking about the same Sasha, yes? Arcadian woman, red hair, about three cubits three and a half hands tall?"

I sighed. "Yes."

Eddas shook his head. "I'd no idea she was like that..." he said, stroking his chin. He paused, gazing at his gloved fingertips with an odd expression of mild annoyance, then looked back up to me. "Well, all I can think of is this: Does she seem to like it?"

"She smiles and laughs, she seems happy with it."

"Then keep it up," Eddas replied, and waved a hand for me to follow again. I did so, and he resumed speaking. "Corvid, my best suggestion is that if she seems to like it, keep it up. She truly is worthy of you, and in the end, you'll be quite happy together. What happens between then and now, I've no idea. But I know that you three were literally made for each other. Keep it up, and have patience. Perhaps as time passes, she'll be less demanding."

"Oh, I sincerely hope so. Right now, I feel like I'm walking on eggshells every moment. Gonnakasi

was *far* easier to deal with, really."

Eddas looked up at me in surprise. "Really?!"

I nodded. "Really. Sasha is so painfully prim, it's beyond annoying. I keep wondering where the woman of her sister's stories is - the general, the warrior... I'm not seeing her."

"Well, you'll be seeing her shortly, because once we collect them, we're off after that wizard."

"At four to one, it won't be much of a fight. If that warrior inside her makes an appearance, it will only be for an eyeblink."

Eddas shook his head. "It will hardly be that easy, Corvid. Ukkug, like Yorindar, doesn't like to lose his pawns if he can avoid it," he said, then looked at me. "Oh - there was one other problem I had to address. One caused by you, unfortunately."

"Err... Me? What did I do?"

"It's what you *stopped* doing that was the problem, Corvid. Do you have *any* idea how much it itches when you *stop* shaving there?" Eddas asked, then rolled his eyes. "Good grief, Corvid, I thought she'd go mad with the itching! Fortunately, I had packed literally everything I could think of that might be of use, and my little depilatory stone was among the items I packed. Quite saved her from the brink of madness, I think."

I burst out laughing, and was still chuckling when we walked into Marilith and Sasha's room.

## The Ocean - Nine.

I leaned forward to sniff the bouquet of flowers again. It was fading slightly, but its scent still was lovely. The attendants had brought another vase, and after six days of flowers, our little room had a lovely scent to it, and three pretty groups of flowers. I sighed. "I love this."

Marilith smiled in her Kushite disguise. "Not quite the same as a shell-top or a comb, but still very nice."

I laughed. "It is kind of like that, isn't it? He even recites poetry to me. I feel like a blushing mermaid sitting on the rocks at the shallows, being courted properly - and gloriously well."

Marilith grinned. "He's trying to win your heart, I think."

"Oh, he has it, he has it. But I'm not going to tell him that, he might stop!" I replied, and Marilith and I shared a giggle. "Oh, Marilith - you were right, so right. He always seems to know just what to say and do."



"Yes, and with nearly all his attention on you, I'm starting to feel quite jealous," Marilith said, sticking out her tongue.

"Oh, no!" I yelped, stepping over to her. "You can't, please!"

Marilith laughed. "I'm teasing! I know how he feels about me. I can see it in his eye when he looks at me, and when he takes my hand. But he's spending this time with you, for now. I think after your experience on the ship, you certainly deserve it."

I smiled. "And I'm certainly enjoying it."

"It might be nice to get him to do the same for me, once we get to Round Island," Marilith said, and winked. "But, that's a discussion for another time. Today's the sixth day, Eddas might be done. Let me look around..." she said, her gaze becoming unfocused. "Ah - I see them. Eddas and Corvid are coming, and Eddas has Corvid's sword tucked under his arm," she said, then blinked, looking back to me. "Come, let's take off that dress for you and put it in your bottle. We'll be leaving today."

Soon, it was done, and Marilith and I were sitting at the table, chatting, I wearing my scales, boots and gloves. I heard a man's laugh, and grinned, rising to my feet. Marilith stood beside me, and a moment later Corvid and Eddas entered the room, Eddas carrying Corvid's sword. "Good morning, Sasha, Marilith. We'll be leaving today - have you packed everything you'll need?"

"Yes, we're ready to go," I said, summoning my lance to my hand. Corvid gazed only for a moment at my scales, then politely looked away.

"Good, good," Eddas said, looking to Corvid and holding out his sword.

Corvid slipped the scabbard into the sling of his sword-belt, spent a few moments adjusting it, then nodded. "I'm ready."

"Good - take my hand, Marilith, you take his hand, Sasha you take your sister's hand... Ah, there. Good," he said, and gestured with his staff, muttering a brief spell the world blurred...

...and suddenly we stood in a forested scrubland, dry grasses waving, and thorn-bushes dense and close. As far as the eye could see, there were the stumps of tree-trunks, but no standing trees larger than saplings. The older trees had all been snapped off near the ground, some entirely uprooted, and the logs lay all around, pointing to the west.

"Oh, my! What happened here?!" I asked, looking around.

"We did, about five years ago," Eddas replied, and began walking eastwards. "We're about ten leagues from the coast - I figured it would be safe enough that far out, and I'd walked all the way up to it from the west, so my spell of returning was usable."

I blinked, startled. "You mean..." I asked, following Eddas along with the others.

"Yes. Beyond that rise ahead, about ten leagues distant, is what used to be the Temple of the Sun."

I didn't know what to expect as we walked up the rise. But, as the sea slowly came into view, I found it was far more than I could have imagined. There, at the water's edge, was a tremendous gouge taken from the earth, a half-circle bay a league across. Downed trees radiated from the center, leveled by the blast years ago, and the edge of the bay was humped up, like a hill, all around the waters. "Oh, my..."

"Yes, it was quite an impressive blast. Fortunately, we weren't here to witness it," Eddas said, then sat on a nearby log. "Marilith, you can shed that Kushite's shape, you won't need it any longer."

Marilith nodded, resuming her humanoid-equine form. *"What now, Master Eddas?"*

"Cast your gaze over there, I seem to see a little spot of something on the southern side of the bay. What is it?"

Marilith gazed into the distance. *"A dock, Master Eddas. As heavily enchanted as that ship was."*

"Ah, good. If there's one thing our opponent is, he's consistent. He doesn't know we're here, yet, but likely that dock contains an enchantment to warn him if you arrived before him. Marilith, turn around, please, I'll need a hair from your tail."

Marilith did so, and Eddas drew his knife from his boot, carefully selecting a single hair of Marilith's tail, then cutting it before putting the knife away.

"Thank you. Now, we'll need someone to receive the effect. I've a spell that will transfer whatever hits Marilith to them. Most likely, it-"

"Me," I said, interrupting. "I'll take it."

"Alright, Sasha. Most likely it will be a spell to entrap her - he wanted her alive, not dead. It could be something more, however, and very dangerous. Don't make this decision lightly."

"I'm not. Me, I'm the one."

"Alright. Hold the hair in your hand," Eddas said, and I took the hair between thumb and forefinger. "Good. Now wait a bit while I fetch out my grimoire. I've never bothered learning this spell as a skill so I could cast it on the fly, I learned of it during my quest for Dyarzi, ages ago."

I nodded, waiting as Eddas pulled off his glove, then opened his thumb-ring and shook out a large sack a cubit across. Corvid blinked in surprise, but I'd seen it before - it was similar to the bottle I wore on my wrist, but with a smaller space. From the sack, he extracted his grimoire, then closed the sack and put down at his side. His grimoire was a massive tome a cubit long, a cubit wide, and two hands thick. Bound with straps of cowhide through six holes, the pages were thin vellum, and covered with neat streams of writing. He opened it to the index in the front, his gloved finger following the page down, then he flipped the page to look at the next. After he found what he was looking for, he flipped through the tome quickly, locating the page, and opened it, laying it carefully across his lap and turning to face me as he sat on the log. "Mmm... Yes, here. Good. Alright, hold still, please," he said, and began reading from the book, gesturing with his free hand.

It wasn't language that my bracelet could translate, but sounded much like any other incantation I'd heard him utter - only longer, and more detailed. It was as though he was describing something in a language I could not understand, a language of mathematics, and power. Slowly, I could feel a tingle building in my gloves - the enchantments in them warning me of a sorcerous effect building... Building... Eddas turned the pages rapidly, his finger following the neat, careful writing, reading it aloud... I could almost pick it out, now, there was a sense of rhythm to it. Like a speech in a foreign tongue, given to explain something complex. Simple concepts came first, then more complex concepts after, building atop the earlier concepts... My gloves were tingling stronger... Stronger...

Then Eddas flicked his hand out towards me. There was a sudden spike from my gloves, and I nearly leapt aside reflexively. Eddas looked up, and nodded. "Ah, very good."

Corvid gaped. "Eddas! What have you done to her?!"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"It's just the secondary effect, Corvid, don't worry about it," Eddas replied, clapping his grimoire shut and slipping it back into the bag.

"But she looks like Marilith!"

"I do?" I asked, looking down at myself - to my utter surprise, I did not see my scales, gloves and boots, but rather saw Marilith's equine legs, clothing, and ebon pelt. "Oh, my!"

Eddas nodded, putting the bag away and slipping his glove back on. "Yes, the spell has a secondary effect - a corona that makes the receiver look like the transmitter. I paid quite a bit of gold for it, as I was told it had the ability to transform and I was looking for a way to restore Dyarzi's body, perhaps to reflect her soul into a receiving target such as a deer or something. The mage lied to me, quite annoying, he was really just a thief of other's grimoires who heard of my quest and decided to make a few gold off my misery. Still, I kept the spell, the formula was valid. Besides, no spell is ever truly useless. So long as the spell lasts, she *is* Marilith, for the purposes of sorcery - any spell that affects Marilith will be transferred to her."

*"You look marvelous, Sister,"* Marilith said, grinning at me.

Corvid shook his head. "What did you do to the mage that cheated you, Eddas?"

"I showed him what a real transformation spell was like - I threw a Curse of Transformation on him, and turned him into a chicken for a year. Sadly for him, we were in my tower at the time, and he decided that he'd try to escape by flying out the door and off the parapet."

"Err... The problem with this being?"

"Chickens don't fly too well, Corvid, and he'd been a chicken all of perhaps three heartbeats, so he was particularly bad at flying. My tower was about the same height then as it is now - about five stories to the ground."

Corvid burst out laughing, but I just shook my head. "Now what, Master Eddas?" I asked.

"Now, we just go down there," he said, slipping the bag back into his thumb-ring and pulling his glove back on. "Whatever spell that wizard put on those docks to catch Marilith will be transferred to you, instead."

"Ummm... Marilith, don't get mad when I ask Eddas this, but..." I said, and looked to Eddas again. "Master Eddas, how long will I look like Marilith?"

Eddas chuckled as he rose to his feet. "I'm maintaining the effect with my will, it's really quite short, a minute or two. As soon as I release it, you'll be back to normal. You really haven't transformed, it's just a lumenic corona that makes you look like her. Secondary effect, entirely harmless. I could likely eliminate it by tweaking the palliations of the spell, but I never bothered as I saw little reason to fiddle with a spell I'll rarely use - the receiver has to be willing, or the spell won't work. However, I can't release the spell until we have made certain it will be safe for Marilith. There are several spells that wizard could have there meant to trap her that I wouldn't be able to get her out of with any kind of ease."

"Ummm... Then how do you get *me* out of them?" I asked, nervous.

"Simple - you're not her. If she's trapped, there's me, you and Corvid to get her out, and there's nothing that you two can do so it's really just me. If you're trapped, there's both myself and Marilith to work on the problem."

"Oh, I see..."

*"You'll be alright, Sister, really. Master Eddas knows what he's doing."*

"Even if he doesn't," Corvid said, smiling, "having two of you looking like that would not be a tragedy to me - Marilith is very beautiful, to my eye."

*"And I wasn't before?!"* I snapped, still a bit uncomfortable.

Corvid looked away, turning to keep his face from me. "Sorry, that's not what I meant. Yes, you were beautiful before, and still are now."

Eddas glanced to Corvid, then reached out to pat his forearm for a moment before looking back to me. "Sasha, please join hands with Marilith - you, too, Corvid," he said, and gripped Marilith's arm. "Marilith, take us all down to the edge of that bay."

A few moments later, it was done, and we stood on the hill-like edge of the crater, looking down. The bay below was pristine, and actually beautiful if one could ignore where it had come from. The docks were covered in strange runes and glyphs, and sat at the southern edge of the bay. The ground leading down to it was blasted, bare rock, with only tufts of grass here and there. "Marilith, lead us down to those docks, I'll watch Sasha. Corvid, help Marilith, these rocks will be a bit tricky with hooves," Eddas called.

"Alright," Corvid said, taking Marilith's hand and leading her ahead of us, helping her keep her balance. Eddas and I followed, Eddas walking behind me.

Corvid was very attentive to Marilith, keeping her from stumbling several times on the rocks. I felt a twinge of jealousy - having ordinary feet and leather boots didn't make the trip *that* much easier for me than her. Still, I followed quietly. Shortly, Marilith neared the dock, the tide lapping at the pilings. "Nothing seems to be happening," I said.

Then Marilith stepped on the wood of the dock itself. There was a tremendous warning spike from my gloves, and I knew nothing more.

#### The Raven - Twenty-Four.

"Is she alright?" I asked, watching as Eddas and Marilith studied the ground Sasha had been standing on a moment before.

"Mmm?" Eddas said, glancing to me. "Oh. She's fine."

"Where *is* she?!"

"Right about there," Eddas said, tapping the ground with his staff.



"What, very small?"

"No, under the ground."

Marilith nodded. *"About a fathom down."*

"Can we dig her out?" I asked.

"No, it's solid rock," Eddas replied, shaking his head. "Even if we did, we'd just hit the encystment."

"What's that?"

"Hmmm... How to explain... It's an encystment spell. It seals her up in a cyst within the earth. The cyst looks like an egg, made of stone. But it isn't ordinary stone, it's wennic obsidian, a magical compound that is created by and maintained by *mana*-energy. Inside, she's held in stasis. She feels nothing, and her life-processes are slowed to a near stop. She could stay like that for a good thousand years, perhaps more, before she'd die of suffocation."

I smiled. "Eddas, I say this with all due respect, but a bit of concern in your voice when you talk about Sasha's demise might be a bit comforting."

Eddas chuckled. "Nothing to worry about. She's fine."

"What are you doing now to get her out, if I may ask?"

"Right now, I'm just studying it. This wizard wasn't stupid, he knew Marilith might have help, I'm looking to see if there's anything I should be concerned about before I try to extract her."

*"I'm seeing three dependency-trails back to the dock, Master Eddas."*

Eddas nodded. "That one, there, is tied to an enchantment over there," he said, pointing. "Follow it down and assense it, I'll examine the other two."

Marilith nodded, walking back towards the dock carefully. She finally stopped and knelt, staring at the wood. What she was looking at, I had no idea, but there was a glyph in front of her eyes carved into the wood. Eddas knelt by another glyph, and shook his head. "Ridiculous," he muttered.

"What?" I asked, watching.

"The technique. Ridiculous. This is how the Mysantians were doing enchantments in *my* day."

"And this is bad because...?"

"It's like watching someone forge an bronze sword with a steel hammer and a steel anvil. They were all enraptured with the power of glyphs and runes, then. They thought magic was all about symbols. It's not. Magic is a force, *mana*. It's an inherent force in our universe, like the force which draws you to the earth, and the force which holds your body together. Glyphs work not because they have any intrinsic power, but from the power you put in them with the enchantment. If the glyph itself had power, a

mundane could use them just by scribbling on the wall with chalk. Circles of protection work not because they're a circle, but because the line represents a linked line of atomic change which the boundary limit for the circle springs from. You could draw one with your urine in the dirt and it would work. I knew a journeyman mage who did, too. Won a two-silver bet against another journeyman who didn't believe he could do it."

I blinked, then burst out laughing, despite myself. "What?!"

"Mages get drunk and make bets with each other just like mundanes, Corvid. That was the last time *I* did, though, I was quite annoyed to lose *that* bet. Who knew Gorol had *that* good an aim with his penis?"

I chuckled again, then squatted, watching them. "I wish I could be of more help."

"You can," Eddas replied, and pointed to the western slope of the crater. "Take your sword and scratch a circle in these rocks for me over there. The blade's invulnerable, you should be able to score the rocks and it won't damage the edge. It doesn't have to be neat, just fairly large and completely connected all around, no breaks."

"How large?" I asked, rising.

"Preferrably a good pace across, but don't worry if it's not even. It just has to be connected, a single line all around, no breaks."

"Alright," I replied, drawing my sword and walking over to where Eddas pointed.

It took a bit of time to do - the rocks were mostly basalt, and very broken and uneven. Scratching a

circle into them took repeated strokes with my blade, kneeling on the jagged stones and gripping the blade carefully, right hand on the hilt and left hand above the backblade, scratching the rocks. Eddas was right, of course, the blade was undamaged. Making the marks, however, was extremely tedious.

*"This one is a reactive enchantment, Master Eddas, it triggers the enchantment over there on that piling."*

"Bah, that one's another encystment, along with those two pilings over there. Idiot. What was he going to do, guess which one she was in, or just crack them like eggs to find out? Idiot."

I grinned wryly, still scratching the rocks. "You don't sound like you're impressed with this wizard."

"I'm not. I know he's a liche, even without Yorindar telling me he is. He has to be, there's too many signs he's from about my time. But if he was skilled enough to cast the Spell of Hidden Life, he should have been skilled enough to see through the flaws in Mysantian magic theory, back then. And he didn't. He's a rote thinker, poor on theory. Highly imaginative solutions to problems, yes. His ship was one solution to not knowing the Spell of Returning. This dock is a rather complex and inventive solution to not knowing spells of Abjuration and Alarum. But if he was any good at magic theory, he could have discovered those spells for himself. He's not. He's a rote thinker. If he has thirty spells in his grimoire, I'll be surprised."

I rose, wiping sweat from my brow. "I've got the circle done."

"Good. That enchantment on that board there should have caused him to know we triggered his trap, it's a destructive reaction, likely a ring or other item he wore has disintegrated. He *should* believe Marilith is in the rock, and start heading here. Marilith, go stand with Corvid inside that circle, and throw up an abjuration, please. If Corvid did the circle with no breaks, you should get at least double the protection out of it, if not more."

*"Yes, Master Eddas,"* Marilith replied, trotting over to me. She looked over the circle for a moment,

then grinned at me. "*Perfect*," she said, and tossed out her hands.

"Thank you," I replied, smiling. "Now what?"

"Now *this*," Eddas replied, rattling off a quick incantation and flicking out his hand. A bolt of fire shot from his fingertips, striking the dock and exploding into a ball of flame that splashed water, splintered wood and rock all about.

The dock was completely gone, little more than shattered pilings poking out of the water. I shook my head, my ears ringing from the blast. Eddas flicked water and splinters from his clothes with a gesture, then turned to us. "You can rest, now," he said, and Marilith lowered her hands.

"You're alright?" I asked, looking at him.

"Yes, the blast force doesn't reflect back to the caster. Rather annoying to cast a spell and accidentally kill oneself, it does your reputation no good at all."

I grinned at his dry humor, then looked to where Sasha was. "She's still not out."

"No, that just prevented us from joining her," Eddas said, nimbly hopping from rock to rock until he stood beside us. "Oh, nicely done, Corvid - that's almost even."

I grinned. "Thank you, I plan on signing my art later."

Eddas grinned back at me. "Stay inside the circle," he said, and cast a quick spell. I didn't see an effect, but he immediately began casting another.

A moment later, the rock rumbled, visibly shifting. A large chunk of it seemed to *flow* upwards, forming a creature of stone. I gaped in amazement at the thing.

It was roughly humanoid, in that it had two short lumps that connected it to the ground that could be mistaken for legs, and two long projections that dangled from near its top that could be mistaken for arms. Its head, such as it was, was merely a lump between what could have been mistaken for shoulders. It was basically a lump of rock - but it *moved*. And a moment later, more shockingly, it *spoke*.

"Who calls?" it rumbled.

"I do, Eddas Ayar."

"*Earth-friend and Wielder of Power, I serve thee willingly. What is thy bidding?*"

"There's a woman encysted over there. I can't dig her out myself without cracking the cyst. Can you *gently* lift the cyst out and place it in a shallow where it can rest for me to work on it?"

"*Easily, Eddas Ayar. One moment,*" the creature replied, and melted back into the ground again with a sound of grinding rocks. A heartbeat later, a shallow depression appeared in the rocks, glassy and smooth. A few moments after that, a long, brownish, egg-like object exuded itself from the rock, coming to rest in the depression. It gleamed in the sun, like polished stone. The creature rose from the rock again before us, and spoke again. "*Have you iron or steel, Earth-friend? I can cut the cyst with it, if you wish.*"

"I've my sword," I offered, somewhat boggled.

Eddas shook his head. "No, Corvid, he's an earth-elemental. He'd have to merge it with his body - basically, he'd have to eat it, and he can't, that's sword's invulnerable," Eddas replied, and looked back to the creature. "I can release her, friend. You have helped me tremendously already, I would hardly put you to any further trouble. You have my thanks - go in peace."

*"You are welcome, Eddas Ayar, it was an honor to serve you,"* the monster replied, and melted back into the earth again to the sound of grinding rocks, then was gone.

I grinned. "Alright, I'm impressed. Being a mage has it's moments."

Eddas grinned at me, then nimbly hopped from rock to rock, going over to the cyst. "Ah, nice, he turned her face-up. I didn't even think to ask for that."

"Will that make a difference?" I asked, helping Marilith to walk over beside the strange stone.

"Only in that she won't bonk her nose on the rock when I release her," Eddas replied, then pointed. "Kneel there, and get ready. When the cyst is gone, she'll fall to the ground, you'll want to keep her from whacking her head against the stone."

I moved over to where Eddas indicated, my hand on the stone. It felt cool like marble. "Here?"

"About there, yes. Her head's right in front of you, about in the middle of the rock. I'm just going to use the Spell of Disenchantment to dispose of the cyst - it will vanish all at once. Get ready to catch her head."

"I'm ready," I replied, holding out my hands and tensing myself.

Eddas nodded, then incanted briefly, flicking out his hand. Instantly, the rock vanished, like a soap bubble - it was simply gone. Sasha fell, and I shot my hands out to catch her, keeping her head and shoulders from hitting the rock. I held her for a moment, her red hair draped over my arms, and her eyes fluttered. She looked at me, and a puzzled expression came over her face. "Ummm... What happened?"

I grinned. "You got hit by a magical trap - but don't ask me to explain it, I don't understand it. Marilith or Eddas can explain it, I suppose."

*"Master Eddas freed you. Corvid and I helped,"* Marilith added, smiling.

"We'll have plenty of time to discuss it later," Eddas said, then gestured, incanting a brief spell. Once he was done, he then pointed to the west. "I've set an Alarum spell here, he's almost certainly going to investigate the damage, and when he does I'll know he's arrived, even if we're asleep. We'll make camp up there, on the center of the western side of the crater-rim. We should be able to watch everywhere from there."

"Camp?" Sasha asked, rising to her feet. "How long will we be staying?"

"Until the wizard gets here. I don't think he's just sold or scuttled that ship of his, he's put too much effort into it. He'll likely use it to sail here, along with whatever help he can get," Eddas said, then began nimbly hopping from rock to rock again, heading to the western slope.

I grinned. "He moves fast in that little half-elf's body."



"He hears pretty well in it, too!" Eddas shouted back, grinning.

I chuckled, taking Marilith's hand. "Let's go," I said, and began to lead her up the slope, watching her carefully. Her hooves slipped very easily on these rocks.

"Corvid?" Sasha called from behind me. "Can I have a hand, too?"

I suppressed my initial reaction, and managed a smile. "Certainly," I said, holding out my other hand to her.

The Ocean - Ten.

Eddas poked his head out from his sanctuary, his head and shoulders hanging down from the air, his hair hanging loose. "Alright, I've changed and washed up. Corvid, you're next, come on up."

"Coming," Corvid replied, pulling himself up the knotted rope with the ease of a sailor climbing a

ship's rigging. He stuffed his head and arms through the hole, and I saw Eddas' bare hands grab his shoulders. A moment later, Corvid slipped up into the sanctuary, vanishing into thin air.

I sighed, looking to Marilith. She sat beside me on the ground, gazing up at the rope that dangled from nothingness. *"I don't know... It just seems like he's mad at me,"* I whispered.

Marilith shook her head. *"For what?"* she whispered back. *"He can't be. You haven't done anything I know of. I think you're imagining things."*

*"Maybe..."* I muttered.

Eddas' voice came from above. "No, just hand me your clothes from behind the curtain, I'll clean them - yes, there we are. You're welcome."

"Bah, we *could* just all go up together," I muttered.

*"Sister, let's not annoy Eddas, please? I'd really rather not sleep on the ground, there's lots of little rocks here, it would be quite uncomfortable."*

"I don't want to annoy him, I want to..." I said, and blushed, grinning.

*"That isn't going to happen, either. Even if Corvid agreed, you'd make Eddas tremendously uncomfortable."*

"Not even a peek at him while he's bathing?"

Marilith just gazed at me, and I sighed. I was *ready*. More than ready. He had courted me, he'd been gentle to me, he'd been wonderful and sweet, I was *ready*. And I couldn't do a thing about it.

Marilith shook her head. *"There's another thing you're forgetting, as well."*

"Oh? What?"

Marilith held up her fingers beside her head, rubbing her thumb and forefinger together. *"Can you hear that?"*

"No, of course not."

Marilith pointed a finger at her long, equine ears. *"I can. Here's another example,"* she said, and looked up. *"Master Eddas?"* she said, very quietly.

A few moments later, Eddas poked his head out of his hidden sanctuary again, his black hair cascading down for a moment. "Yes?" he replied, also very quiet.

*"Just making a point for Sasha about elf-ears."*

"Ah. Corvid will be done, soon. Once he's dressed and I've cleansed the water buckets again with a filtration spell, you two can come up."

*"Thank you,"* Marilith replied, and Eddas pulled his head back in again. Marilith then looked at me, and I covered my face with my hands.

"I am *so* embarrassed right now."

*"You should be. My hearing is about twice as good as his, and his is about twice as good as yours. You've been told that before, and we're right below the entrance."*

I looked up. "Ummm... Sorry, Master Eddas," I said, quietly.

Marilith nodded. *"He just muttered 'Don't worry about it.'"*

I sighed. "Is there a really dark hole I can crawl into for awhile?"

*"Sister, we just got you out of one,"* Marilith replied, and giggled.

"I'm less and less certain that was necessarily wise."

Marilith giggled again, and Eddas poked his head out of the hole again. "Alright, climb up, you two."

Marilith and I hopped to our feet, and I let Marilith climb up first, boosting her up. It was difficult for her to climb a knotted rope with hooves, but she managed it after a few moments. I followed, pulling myself up into Eddas Ayar's hidden sanctuary.

It was very nearly as I remembered it, though there were more boxes stacked against the walls. A small circular stone room about four and a half paces across, it had a hole in the center of the floor about a cubit across. The walls and ceiling were mortared stone, the ceiling reinforced by two very broad oak cross-beams. Currently, a curtain was hung from some hooks along the inside of the crossbeams, cutting off a quarter of the room from view.

Corvid was sitting at Eddas' desk in a chair, across from Eddas, and between them was some kind of folding wooden case with a game board of alternating black and white squares, each square about a hand wide. It was two hands thick, and about two cubits square. Eddas, who was dressed in a loose robe with his hair hanging down to his rump, pointed to the curtain from where he sat at his desk. "Behind there is a stool and two buckets - one soapy water, one rinse water. There's a large sponge there, too. Relax, bathe, and when you come out I'll have some food for us all. Mind you don't knock over the boxes along the wall."

"After you, Sister," Marilith said, smiling.

"Alright, thank you," I replied, stepping behind the curtain.

"Have a seat, Corvid," Eddas said as I sat on the stool behind the curtain and reached for my boots. I heard a strange sound, like cards being shuffled. "This game is called *chatto*. Has Frarim taught it to you?"

"No, he said he was out of practice so long, he may as well have you teach it to him from scratch."

"Hah! Ah, well. It was very popular in my day - we often gambled on it. There's the board, I've already set up the initial eight pawns on your home row, the rest are in the drawer below the board on

your side and mine. I'll explain how they work in a moment. You're playing white, I'm playing black. We deal the starting hand of cards like so..."

\* \* \*

"Okay, so I can forge this piece against mine or yours?" Corvid said, pointing.

Eddas nodded. "Theoretically, yes, but I'd have to see your cards to know. You have two cards you set aside for movement, peek at their color and rank and see which would be best to choose. Black cards allow you to end your move on black squares, white cards allow white squares, half distance if you have to use black for white or vice versa. If you forge against your piece, there's no draw or change in the cards, you get a silver ring for his staff. Fill the staff with eight silver rings, you pull them off and put a gold ring on the bottom - it's now easier to fill the staff and get another. If you forge against mine, you have to choose whether you destroy it or not. If you do not choose to destroy and just do a peaceful forging instead, we contest it with a draw from our forge stacks. Win, and you pull off any silver rings he has, you get a gold ring and the ability to take one of my cards. Lose a peaceful forging, and nothing happens. The risk, however, is that you'll be next to my oiliphant there, and he might crush you on my turn - he has an astonishing bonus in attack."

"How astonishing?"

"He treats all squares as being his color in attack, and like the mage, all cards used for attacks as being his color. Defense for him is normal, however, and like the dragon, he treats all movement cards as being the wrong color for wherever he wants to go. You round down on movement but you can't move less than one square, so he can get there no matter what card I play for movement. With his attack bonus, even if I play a white card from those I set aside for fighting, he'll treat it as black - my color. And considering he's got two gold rings on his staff, that means he'll have two from his rings, one from the square and one from the card in attack - four. Even a little one white card would give him five in attack, and if I played an eight black, he'd have twelve. Twelve is devastating in attack, you don't have a piece on the board that could survive it even if you played an eight white in defense. Ending your turn next to that oiliphant is not wise, unless you're convinced I have low cards for fighting and you have high cards. Oh - on your side, he's not the oiliphant, he's the giant instead. Joy always plays white so she can stomp me with the giant, she finds it quite amusing."

"I see," Corvid replied, grinning.

"Why the difference?" I asked.

Eddas smiled. "Well, it's just the way we Hyperboreans looked at things. We couldn't ever see a giant fighting a giant, so black has the oiliphant, instead. For the same reason, I have an axeman who looks quite a bit like a dwarf instead of the archer Corvid has with white, who looks suspiciously like an elf," Eddas said, and winked.

I grinned, and Corvid chuckled as Eddas turned to look at him, pointing at the board again. "Now, if you choose to forge and destroy my piece or just launch a simple attack, I can allow it or contest it. If I allow it, he's removed from the game and your turn ends, even if you could have played more cards, your piece ends up in the square mine was in if he wasn't there already, and you remove any silver rings from his staff and get a gold ring. Despite that it forces your turn to end, this is a good thing. It permanently weakens my force and the removed piece counts towards your score - quite a bit, because he was promoted once to reach oiliphant and he has two gold rings - and your piece ends up stronger. If I contest it, we use those three cards there you set aside for fighting. Note, however, you promoted that one to chariot the last turn. It can move twice, and can pick up a friendly piece whose square it enters, carry them as long as it wants, and drop them in any square next to the one it ends a turn in if there's an open square, or have both pieces fight on one fight card - that means they're treated as one piece, and any gold rings they have are added together. For example, it could move, pick up that piece there, and move again carrying that piece, stopping here next to mine to forge, or stopping in the same square to attack. If you try to forge against my piece, it's very risky, that oiliphant has two gold rings and your pieces have none because you just promoted both of them recently and haven't had a chance to forge them again - that gives me a two point bonus in forging, where colors don't count. Win, you pick a card from me, you pull off any silver rings on their staves and get a gold ring for each, I don't get to replace the card you took until the beginning of my next turn, then we see whether or not my oiliphant dies with a fight card from each of us - I have three, but if I had one and you chose it and left me with none, he loses and dies. Lose the forge, you *don't* get a ring, I pick a card from *you*, you play down a card until your next draw at the beginning of your next turn, and we see if your chariot *and* it's passenger dies - both at once on one fight card from you. And remember, when you take a card from me, you choose from either of the three stacks; fight, move or forge."

"Hmmm... Question: Is there ever a time you would allow a destruction?"

"Well, that depends on the player, the board position, and what cards they're holding. Keeping track in your head of what cards you've seen played lets you guess at what would be left and the odds your opponent has a high card to play, you might do it if you're expecting to draw a high card on your next turn and don't want your opponent to get it. But, that only matters until the deck is empty, then we shuffle the discard stack and put it back over there to draw from again. Largely you would do it so as to end an opponent's turn before he can do something serious, giving you a chance to recover from a bad position - you sacrifice one piece to move or forge others. For example, I could allow the oiliphant to die if you attacked, ending your turn and preventing further damage, then forge this knight, here on my turn - he's just two squares away, nearly any card will get him next to you. A peaceful forging against an enemy is contested, but if I win, I get a gold ring and a draw of your cards - if I lose, nothing happens. Then, since he's a knight, he can then use a second movement card to run away so you can't smash him. I can keep the gold, forging him even stronger, or I can promote him to either battle-mage or warrior - if I promote to warrior, however, since he's already moved, he couldn't move again. I'd choose the ring and run away, however, to keep him away from you and keep him stronger than you. The limitation is that if I do all that, the Oiliphant is gone. I can't promote my mage over here to Oiliphant to replace the one I lost and continue working up that promotion line - you'd have destroyed that piece, he's placed by your side as retired for the rest of the game and counts as part of your score to win, and the mage is just stuck where he is in promotion. He can still earn rings, but he can never be promoted further. I could, however, promote the knight to warrior or battle-mage, and retire the knight piece to my drawer to be pulled out later when I promote another piece."

I shook my head. Marilith was still bathing, and I had been watching Eddas and Corvid work through Corvid's first game. It was an *immensely* complicated game, from my perspective.

Corvid stroked his chin. "Ah, but you *wouldn't* sacrifice that oiliphant, I'd end up in his square, and that could put your king at risk. At four squares distance, there's a lot of cards that could bring my piece within striking distance. Lose the king, and you lose the game."

"Well, yes - the crown is heavy, whoever has it can only move one, regardless of what card you play to move. The only way I could avoid a loss is to immediately transfer the crown marker to an adjacent piece before you get there and try to get him into one of my castles. My nearest castle is my forest, and right now, my priest is the only piece who could even reach the king for the transfer, and you'd slap him silly the following turn long before he made it to the forest, his entire purpose is forging other pieces, he can't fight worth a damn," Eddas said, and winked.

I shook my head again. "I'm not even sure how you win at all."



Corvid grinned. "That's the easy part to understand - the longest way is to win on score at the end of an agreed time. Scoring is one for pawns, and eight for mage, fighter or merchant, sixteen for the next rank up, and so on - plus one for each gold ring on the staff. You get score for each piece of yours on the board, plus each piece you've destroyed of the enemy. The other ways to win are by capturing all your enemy's castles, or you can win by making the other player lose. You lose if you have no pieces on the board, or if you lose your king."

Eddas nodded. "Right. See that little gold disk my mage is sitting on, Sasha? That's the crown, it means he's my king, currently. Theoretically, you could promote a piece to something useful, then forge it to eight full gold rings - virtually indomitable - then make them king. If the king can't be beaten, you can't lose that way. It's not wise to do it, however, you'd be wasting a lot of valuable forging time you could be spending on pawns to build them up, and the resulting piece would be burdened by the weight of the crown, and far less useful than he otherwise might be. Better to have the king marker shift from time to time, to keep it out of reach of your opponent. Meanwhile, with one ultimately powerful king and the rest weak little pawns, your opponent could sweep all your pawns while you're fiddling with just one piece, then bring all his forces to bear against that piece at once by shifting cards to his movement stack to bring them all together in one turn, and have them all fight on one card. When two or more pieces fight on one card, the attacker chooses which piece is leading the assault, and they total all their rings together. The king falls, and you lose. Or they could just withdraw to their castles and defend if you're near the time you agreed to stop - the four castles in your home row are on squares of your color, Fortress, Forest, Mountain, City. The Tower, sometimes called the Outpost, is your fifth castle. You can place anywhere on your half of the board in your first turn, it doesn't move thereafter, but it works the same as the others. In addition to the color bonus for the square, a piece in a castle can't lose drawing from an empty stack, they just draw from one of the others. If you've had your enemy sweep all your pawns except your king and he then hides in his castles to wait for time to expire, well, they'll win on score. One of the largest parts of the game, however, is keeping one's face absolutely smooth. You don't want to let your opponent know what kind of cards you've drawn, and you don't want your gaze to reveal where you're really thinking about moving."

"How do you even know how many cards to draw?" I asked, still boggled.

Eddas smiled. "At the beginning of your turn, if you have less than eight, you draw from the top of the deck until you do have eight. If the deck runs dry, you shuffle the discards and move them there to form the deck again. You then assign the cards in your hand to the three stacks - fight, forge or move - and you can change them at the beginning of each turn. Controlling your expression and gaze is critical, there. You just do *not* want your opponent knowing what you're planning, or being able to tell that you're saving a particular card for something."

Corvid nodded. "The promotions were the only complex thing to understand - eight silver rings to get a gold, then you only need seven, then six, and so on until the last one is a given. Instead of a gold you can promote, which costs you the rings but improves the piece. Pawns have no staff, they can't gain rings, but they promote on any forging that doesn't kill them. Pawns go up to one of three categories - fighter, mage or merchant, who have bonuses to move, attack, or forge, respectively. Fighter goes up to archer for white or axeman for black, they go up to knight, knight goes up to chariot, and chariot goes up to warrior. Mage goes up to oiliphant for black or giant for white, oiliphant or giant goes up to catapult, catapult goes up to dragon, dragon goes up to warrior, again. Merchant goes up to scholar or craftsman, scholar or craftsman goes up to mason, mason goes up to priest, and priest goes up to warrior, again. The top three tiers of mage move at half, the top three tiers of fighter have half penalty to forge, and the top three tiers of merchant have half penalty to fight."

"Correct, but remember that in forges between pieces on the same side, scholars and craftsmen give one extra ring, masons and smiths give two, and priests give three."

"Smiths?" I asked.

Corvid nodded again. "Each line has a "spur" which goes nowhere, but allows different abilities. Catapult can "spur" to ship which can't promote further, but can carry another piece like the chariot and doesn't have a movement penalty. Mason can "spur" to smith, which can't promote further but has no penalties to fighting. Knight can "spur" to battle-mage, which can't promote further but has no penalties to forging."

Eddas grinned. "That's right!"

Corvid grinned back. "The one thing I don't understand is why warrior is considered the highest promotion. Well, I understand it from the point of the game - no penalty to move, forge or fight, and the warrior can't lose to an empty stack, he just draws from another, it's like he's got a castle around him all the time. If you can't force him to lose through an empty stack, but instead an empty stack allows him to choose at will from the other stacks, that makes him *very* deadly. But why the name 'warrior'?"

"Well, that's because in your language, you just say "warrior". In Hyperborean, the word is *Krigat*. He isn't just a warrior, he is the warrior. It's part of our culture - we had a concept of the 'ultimate

warrior', the character appeared in our literature, plays and songs quite a bit. Sometimes he's a mage, other times he's a mundane, but he's always the best, indomitable. He's always marked in some way, so he's seen as being lesser than he is. A scar, missing one arm, missing an eye, something. And he has a weakness - the *Krigat* in our literature and plays is only ever defeated through his weaknesses. He's always a tragic hero, and even when he wins, there's always something he lost doing it."

I shook my head. "That game is too complicated for me."

Marilith stepped out from behind the curtain, dressed in her loincloth and apodesmos again. *"I think you should try it, Sister. As Master Eddas has said, in many ways, the conflict of the gods is much like a vast chatto game, played with interconnected boards, in more than two dimensions, and with billions of pawns and many more ranks of pieces than the twenty-four of Hyperborean chatto."*

I looked to Eddas and Corvid. "Well, if that's true... Well, Corvid has his ornithopter... He would be the chariot, I guess. And that would make Master Eddas the warrior, right?"

*"Exactly,"* Corvid and Eddas both said at the same time, and I felt a chill run down my spine as they said it.

Corvid made a *moue'*, and looked to Eddas. "Does that happen a lot being a pawn of Yorindar?"

"You'll get used to it," Eddas replied, and grinned wryly. "Come - it's your turn."

Corvid nodded, studying the board. "Alright, that Oiliphant looks a bit risky, I think I'll just forge this chariot against my fighter, instead..."

\* \* \*

Master Eddas summoned dinner for us using sorcery. It was rather nice, actually. A roast fowl and slices of vegetables along with cool, fresh water. Eddas' game with Corvid had drawn to a close around late afternoon, with Corvid managing a win by capturing Eddas' king. I thought Eddas was being rather easy on him since it was his first game - it seemed *very* unlikely Corvid could actually beat Eddas at this game the first try. Unfortunately for me, Eddas then suggested that I take the next game against him, with Marilith and Corvid advising me what to do. In short order, I had the two of them seated at my sides, whispering into my ears and peeping at the stacks of cards every now and again between whispering to each other. Eddas had very sharp hearing, I knew, but he promised he would deactivate his ring of translation. That would allow us to speak in Vilandian (a language he said he didn't know but Corvid did) when considering our moves. Such a promise seemed rather hollow, given he was an expert at reading expressions and gazes while controlling his own, but I had no choice but to trust him, I had really no idea what I was doing.

"Mmm... Not that one, the other one," Corvid said.

"Which other one?" I asked, looking at the board.

"The one with the bow - your archer. He's got six silver rings, if you forge him against your scholar, he can promote to knight and give you the reach to strike deeper into Eddas' territory next turn. The scholar can bump a piece to forge himself or he can be bumped to forge the piece that moved to him - this is like any other piece. The scholar is along the merchant line, he specializes in forging. He's a second promotion, he gives two rings, and he can forge a piece by moving into it. But, if he moves to that archer, he'll be closer to Eddas' knight and might be lost, so it's best to keep him back and have the archer bump him."

Eddas looked up briefly from the book he was reading at the sound of his name, but as it was obvious we weren't speaking to him, he went back to reading a moment later. I knew he was a *tremendously* experienced opponent, he already had six of his starting eight pawns promoted, whereas I'd only managed three.

"But what about-" I said, lifting my hand, and Marilith grabbed my wrist.

*"Careful, Sister. He said he wouldn't listen, but he certainly will see you point."*

I nodded, thinking, trying to understand. Part of me saw it only as an extremely complicated game - and a somewhat frustrating game, since I didn't really understand it well. The mental abilities of a mermaid had allowed me to pick up the rules just watching and listening, but it was still confusing. And yet, the game the gods played with our own lives was even more complicated, and I understood it even less well.

Pawns... Ordinary people, living their lives, doing the best they could, then tapped by the gods to serve them as greater beings. Learning, studying, practicing... And fighting. All to improve, to train, to learn. The game took ages to play, slowly building up one's pawns, striking at the enemy, wearing them down... And yet, the right move could end the game immediately, through capturing the enemy king.

The enemy king...

"We can't kill his Oiliphant. We have to *capture* him," I said, realization dawning.

"Err... What?" Corvid asked, looking at me in confusion. "It's the same thing, in this game."

"No. Like this," I said, reaching for the movement stack. Picking the middle one, I turned it over. "Three white," I called. "This scholar moves to the archer and forges him to a knight."

"Alright," Corvid said, and made the move for me, then put the card in the discard pile. I waited until he'd removed the rings and put them back in the drawer on my side, replacing the archer with a knight from the drawer and putting the archer away in its little padded slot. Eddas, noticing I was moving, looked up from his book and watched.

"Five white - the knight moves over to the square next to the oilphant."

"Err... *Next to?*" Corvid asked.

"Yes, the white square to the right."

"*Sister, what are you doing?*" Marilith asked.

"Taking a gamble," I replied, as Corvid moved the piece.

"You're going to forge against him?" Corvid asked.

"Yes, and I want to capture him after. He's got two cards set aside for fighting. I can do this," I said, and picked up a forging card, glad I'd placed the less useful black cards in the forging pile.

"*She intends to destroy, Master Eddas,*" Marilith said, in Hyperborean, my bracelet letting me understand her.

Eddas nodded, reaching out to the board and moving my knight into the square with the oilphant, then picking up the oilphant and setting it to the side. "*And that ends her turn,*" he replied.

I blinked, and Marilith looked at him as Corvid slipped a gold ring over the staff for my knight. "You're just going to let it go?" Marilith asked.

"Naturally," he said, then looked at me, and smiled. "A nice thought, Sasha, but I'm not going to allow you to take my king that easily," he said in Vilandian, apparently having activated his translation ring again.

"But... But how did you...?"

"You smiled too much when you laid down your fight cards. I think you've got a pair of eights, there," he said, and winked. "Forge to distract me, fight to get me to expend a good card to save the piece and lose it anyway, then charge the king in my city when I've only one card left that likely *isn't* an eight? It seemed obvious. If you were bluffing, however, I congratulate you on an excellent bluff, you cost me a piece and a line of development."

"But... But it seemed like the answer! I mean, to both!"

"Oh? How do you mean?"

"Capture the oiliphant, find out where the king is, then go after him!" I said, then sighed. "Sorry, I guess I was being stupid."

"Hmmm..." Eddas replied, stroking his chin with a gloved hand. "Perhaps not so stupid, Sasha. But you presume the oiliphant knows who the king is. He might not."

"I appear to be missing part of this conversation," Corvid said, scratching his head.

"Me, too," Marilith said, looking at me.

I shook my head, looking at Eddas. "Well, he had to have *someone* in mind to be in charge of that... 'Theocracy'-thing you said he was thinking about setting up."

"Aaaaah, now I understand," Marilith said, nodding.

"I don't, but don't let that stop you," Corvid said, smiling wryly.

"Possibly, Sasha," Eddas said, "but it's more likely he intended to be in charge, himself."

"But that would make the oiliphant the king!"

"Yes - but that plan is put on hold until after this particular conflict is resolved, here. He may not necessarily be the king, now."

"What if he *is*?"

Eddas shrugged, drawing cards for the beginning of his turn to replace what he had used in the previous turn. "Then we can expect a rather dangerous fight. The God of the Desert would not surrender him easily," Eddas said, scooping up all his cards, sorting them, then laying them out in three stacks again. He then waved a gloved hand at the board. "But this is just a game, Sasha. A game of men. The game of the gods is not the same. So long as at least one person whispers his name, the God of the Deserts is awake. So long as at least one person follows him, his game continues. In *chatto*, the warrior is the most



powerful piece. In the game the gods play, it is thousands of lowly and otherwise inconsequential priests, quietly spreading belief. Also, the God of the Desert could sacrifice his oilphant just as easily as I did, if it was necessary to keep his game alive. Bear in mind that doing so may allow him to do something like this," Eddas said, and turned over a movement card. "Four white, right next to your knight," he called, moving his fighter next to my knight. "Forge," he called, selecting a card from his forge stack. I looked at the cards in my forge stack, then pulled one out, holding it in my hand. Colors didn't matter in forging, and it wasn't a bad card. When I was ready, however, Eddas flipped over a white eight.

I sighed, laying down the black five I'd selected. Eddas nodded, reaching to my fight stack and drawing a card, and leaving me with one. "Since that was a forge against an enemy, I get a gold rather than a silver," he said, pulling off the silver rings from his fighter, then slipping a gold ring out from the drawer on his side of the board and dropping it over the empty staff of his fighter before putting the silver rings away. The card he drew from me, he placed in his forge stack, then drew another card from his movement stack.

"Five white, right beside your knight," Eddas called, moving his knight four squares to settle it beside the square mine was in. "Forge and destroy," he said, pulling out a card from his forge stack and holding it. It was not the card he'd taken from me, I still had a chance. I looked at what I had left, and selected the highest card I had. Eddas then laid down the white six he had selected. I sighed again, showing the black five I had selected. "You have one gold ring and I have none, colors don't matter in forging. Tie - second card?" he asked, picking up the card he'd gotten from me before. I turned over my last forge card - a black two - and Eddas nodded, showing the white eight. Eddas again drew a card from my fight stack, leaving me with none, and placed a gold ring on the empty staff of his knight.

"And now the fight for destruction," he said, and laid down the card he'd just drawn from me - a white eight. "You have none in the pile, and that isn't a castle," he said, and reached out to my knight, taking it and placing it to the side. "Yes, sometimes a lightning strike will work, if your opponent is inattentive, or risks too much at once. But the gods are rarely inattentive, and their risks are very precisely calculated, Sasha. And yes, the God of the Desert may just sacrifice his oilphant to prevent you from doing to him precisely what you were thinking of doing to me," Eddas concluded, scooping up the used cards and putting them into the discard pile.

I sighed. "Alright, Master Eddas."

Eddas then smiled at me. "I should tell you, however, I'm quite proud of you."

"What? Why?" I asked, blinking at him.

"Because you're beginning to see the larger picture, now. As you get better at it, you'll be able to apply your skills as a general and a warrior to it, and begin to win," he said, and winked at me for a moment before returning to reading his book.

"Well, thank you. Err..." I said, then grinned. "Marilith, how do you say 'thank you' in Hyperborean? I suppose I could just use my translation bracelet and tell him, but..."

"*Takya*," Marilith replied, grinning.

"*Takya*, Master Eddas," I said, grinning at him.

"*Valkya. Dit drag*," Eddas replied, turning a page in his book and continuing to read.

Marilith giggled. "*He says you're welcome, and reminds you it's your move.*"

I nodded, drawing from the deck to make up for the cards I'd lost last turn. "Okay, Corvid, I understand the basic rules but I think you're better at strategy for this game than I am, you're a lot more sneaky than me. What do you think our best move should be from here?" I asked, scooping up my cards and fanning them to show him my hand.

Corvid chuckled. "Well, if you're trying to out-sneak Eddas, I don't know if that's even possible. But, here's what I would try..." he said, and began to explain.

## The Raven - Twenty-Five.

The wind rippled through the thorn-bushes of the grassy plains behind us, the ocean lapping at the rocky shores of the bay. It was a lovely day, here, though the crisp air foretold of winter's chill to come. I handed the branch I'd been working on to Eddas for his examination. The branch we had selected was straight and long, and Eddas had carved it with his knife to smooth out the twigs and knots. Fixing the leather cap to the end was rather difficult - it had to hold the wadding in place to provide some kind of useful padding. Still, once it had been done, it was merely a matter of wrapping wetted rawhide thongs about it to hold it in place, then letting them dry. Eddas examined my work near noon, then nodded. "Quite nice, yes. This will do quite nicely."

I smiled. "Thank you, I plan on getting rich selling them when we get back to civilization."

Eddas looked to me, then grinned, tossing the stick to me. "Practice, Corvid. You've spent a month in the queen's boudoir, you're as soft as butter."

Eddas was wearing only his gloves, boots and chainmail *nephni*, his hair up in a ponytail. As he began doing stretches against the ground, reaching out to touch his toes, I chuckled, pointing the practice sword at him. "No, I'm only soft compared to *that*," I replied.

Eddas reached out, both legs before him, and touched his toes with ease. "And I'm merely a mage, you should be horribly embarrassed. We sit on our rumps all day long, don't you know?"

I laughed again, and began working on some stretching exercises to limber up my legs. My father had taught me that footwork was paramount for a good swordsman - and he was right, of course. The exercises my father had taught me were fairly simple; standing with the legs spread wide apart and bending at the knees from side to side as though lunging, but slowly, to stretch the muscles. "You know," I said, watching Eddas bend again and again until he could grip his feet in his hands, "I don't think I've *ever* touched my toes without bending my knees."

"But you do stretch and limber up, yes?" Eddas asked, now putting a leg straight behind him and repeating his bending stretches.

"Yes, of course. You have to, if you expect to remain fast."

"And have you ever lost?"

"Only to my father, when he was training me," I replied, placing my arms over my head and stretching from side to side.

"Then clearly, you don't need to," Eddas replied, winking at me. "Besides, joking aside, you've the perfect physique for a swordsman - strong, lean, and fast."

I grinned. "Thanks. I suppose that's true, my father warned against bulking up - it slows you down. 'A *good swordsman should have the physique of a message-runner, not a logger,*' he always said. His exercises were all about being limber and having speed and endurance, only the wrist and shoulder needs to be truly strong so that you can move your blade with a thought. And you're a mage, and likely have certain advantages anyway."

"True - and that's something you should never forget. A good mage is always a lot stronger than they look. The power of *mana*-energy flowing through us adds to our physical strength - it's not just the mind that calls upon *mana*, but the body, and every cell of the body. A mage who casts spells every day, exercising their abilities every day, grows stronger in will - and stronger in body."

"What's a cell?" I asked, hands on rump as I stretched my spine.

"The smallest unit of the body. They come in different shapes... Round, oblong, irregular... Many shapes. The somatoplasm of the body is held within each cell. Think of it like a box or jar, containing the liquids that make up your flesh. But very tiny, smaller than your eye can see."

I raised an eyebrow. "And that's all? We're just... Liquid in little jars, all linked together?"

"Yes and no," Eddas replied, still stretching. "If you look very closely at a ship, all you see is wood and nails. But a ship is more than wood and nails."

"True. Without the men who built her, the men who stocked her hold and the men who sail her, a ship is nothing. Far larger elements are a part of a ship than just wood and nails."

"Exactly. If one uses an *occhiolino* or the spells I've been fiddling with to duplicate and improve on it's effect, gazing at the smallest parts of the body, it's much like looking very closely at a ship - so closely that all you can see is wood and nails. A ship is more than that, and so are you. You are body, mind and soul - just as a ship is wood, sailors, and canvas to catch the wind."

"Which is predominant, though?" I asked, stretching my shoulders. "I mean, I've seen men struck in the head badly enough to crack their skulls. If they recover, sometimes they're drooling idiots."

"Because the mind works through the brain to think, just as your hand works through your sword to fence. If the brain is damaged, the mind functions poorly. Draw them forth with the Spell of Astral Projection, however, and much of that clears up and you can speak to them. There are several spells in my grimoire that I got from the White Mountain Healers that can repair such damage, as well," Eddas said, and hopped to his feet, summoning his staff to his hand. "Ready?" he called.

I nodded, wagging the practice sword we'd made to test its balance. "I suppose so, yes. Do try not to leave me a drooling idiot yourself, Eddas, I've quite enough problems without that," I replied, and winked.

Eddas grinned. "I swear, any bones I break, I will repair. Eventually," he said, and winked back. "Now... When you're facing a mage, if you're beyond the distance you can lunge or do a *fleche*, the best thing to do is get out of their view. Not just run, but run *behind* something. A tree, a rock, a wall, something solid. Most offensive spells travel from caster to target, and if you get something in the way, *it* will take the damage, not you. Of course, some of the spells I know will blow through anything you may be standing behind and kill you anyway, but that's as may be. The end result is that if they can't see you, they normally can't cast on you. Alright?"

"Beyond range for a *fleche*, hide. Got it," I replied, nodding.

"Now; the simplest solution a mage can apply to you is this," he said, and gestured. Suddenly, I felt myself lifted into the air, and was floating a few hands above the ground. "This is telekinesis."

"And I am helpless," I realized, looking down. Without being able to touch the ground, I couldn't move towards him, I couldn't attack, nothing.

"Not necessarily. There are two things you can do from here. The first and most obvious is the moment you feel yourself being lifted, throw your sword at them."

I grinned. "Eddas, a man who throws his sword at an enemy only announces that he'd like to be killed quickly rather than slowly."

Eddas grinned back. "Maybe," he said, and let me down. "With practice, however, you can hit and kill, but that's not the point, for you. For you, the objective is to just hit them to break their concentration so they drop you - whether you impale them with the blade is moot, you're trying to break their concentration. Once they drop you, you can summon your sword to your grip again - that particular enchantment was common for the weapons of the better Hyperborean swordsmen and bodyguards, though the spell used a ring you wore to summon it back to your grip. Only an artifact like your sword works by simple attunement to the wearer. Again, however - whether you impale them or not is moot, the point is to hit them hard enough to break their concentration so they lose their grip."

I nodded. "Alright, I can see that."

"Now, I have an enchantment that lets me do telekinesis easily. Most mages do not, they'll have to take a moment to actually begin an incantation. But, telekinesis enchantments on rings or other items were common for mages in my day, they made life *much* easier when you didn't have to rise from your chair to fetch a book from the shelf or a pot of *byallar* from the fire. And since as a tool of the gods you are often likely to run across mages of a bit higher caliber, it's safe to assume you will encounter this more often than you'd wish. So, if you feel yourself being lifted, don't wait - respond. Lunge as soon as you feel the effect. Your forward motion will carry you to your enemy before they can stop it, and you'll be in range to attack. It takes a bit of concentration to lift you up, though less to hold you. While we're concentrating on picking you up, we *aren't* concentrating on blocking. Attack, and attack instantly. If you can distract the mage, they may lose their concentration before they can fully grip you with the spell, and end up dropping you back on your feet. Try it - as soon as you feel yourself being lifted, lunge at me."

"Alright," I replied, and stood ready. Eddas again gestured, and as I felt myself being lifted up, I kicked out with my legs, attempting a lunge. It was clumsy, and felt slow, but I poked Eddas in the abdomen with the padded point of the practice sword, and felt myself drop to the ground again as he staggered back. "You alright?"

Eddas grinned. "I'm fine. But the point is that even though I *knew* that was coming, we *talked* about it, I *knew* you were going to do it, I *still* couldn't do a damn thing to block it or stop it. I *have* to

concentrate to lift you up. If you were *already* moving, I could *feel* that movement as I grip you and stop you. But, you weren't, you began moving *after* I began to lift you, and that takes me a moment to compensate for. That's the key - beginning your lunge *just* as you feel me picking you up, not before."

I nodded, grinning broadly. Knowing that I *could* do something against a mage was actually a refreshing feeling. "So the key is timing."

"Yes. Again, though, begin your move *after* you feel yourself being lifted, not before. I can compensate if I feel you moving as I grip you, and you'll never reach me. Now, step back a bit to lunging distance... Yes, that's right. Another thing is don't thrust for my belly or chest, thrust for my head. Even if you miss, a near shot to the eyes will make the caster flinch, and again, they'll likely drop you."

"You need a practice mask, Eddas. If you don't mind, I'd rather *not* poke you in the eye with this thing, I'm fairly certain it would hurt, and might blind you."

"Actually, you could tear my eyes out of my skull and they'd grow back in a matter of a few heartbeats, Corvid. Still, you make a good point. I'd rather not have you poke my eyes out either, that would be remarkably uncomfortable," he said, and chuckled. I didn't see the humor in it, the image was rather grisly, but I smiled politely. "Come - we'll straighten up one of those logs and drop it into a hole in the ground for a pell, then you can thrust against it while I lift you."

I followed as Eddas walked away from the dangling rope of the hidden sanctuary. "I'm afraid I don't have a shovel."

"Oh, don't worry about that. I've a spell that digs deep, narrow holes. It's what I used to make our latrine over there behind those bushes. I needed it as a battle-mage, you can't very well just defecate out the bottom of your hidden sanctuary, that's quite nasty to step in when it comes time to climb down and fight."

I chuckled. "Alright. That one looks about the right length, if we can put it in a cubit-deep hole."



"Easily done, grab that end and I'll dig the hole."

Awhile later, I had been practicing lunges against the pell, responding to Eddas' instructions. He was, he said, teaching me the techniques used by Hyperborean warriors to defend against mages. I found that the largest part of the technique was to use trained, lightning responses to break their concentration, and put them on the defensive. A mage could gesture with either their hands or their staff, but they still needed to gesture for most spells. If their hands and staff were busy parrying a warrior's weapon, they weren't doing much casting.

Finally, Eddas nodded. "Good, you've got it. It's not just moving like lightning, it's moving with timing to interrupt."

I nodded. "Actually, it's kind of like making a stop-cut. As soon as the opponent begins a move, you execute a faster move that stops them."

"Yes. Now, this same technique applies to any spell they may cast, but the timing is a bit different based on what they're doing. If they're gesturing with their staff, for most offensive spells, they'll move like this," he said, and held his staff in one hand, gesturing with the tip. "Watch... Pulling like tugging on a fishing rod, this is the drawing. Circle, circle... This is the gathering... Then point - bang, you're dead."

"Alright - and I lunge during the circling motions?"

"Right. Now, with both hands on the staff, it looks completely different. Watch," he said, and pointed the butt of his staff at me. "Look at the end above my shoulder. Draw like sweeping, circle, circle..." he said, then juttied the butt towards me. "Point - bang, dead again. Some mages have a spike at the bottom of their staff so if it looks like they're going to be interrupted with a lunge, they just stop casting and lift the butt up to impale you. Do a ballestra in, then cut at the head as you come down."

"Do that again, let me try it," I said, and he began again. He started to circle with the end of his staff over his shoulder, and I leapt in, then tapped on the top of his head with the padded end of the practice sword, landing right in front of him.

"Quite nice, Corvid, you're quite acrobatic. Almost looked like you floated over," Eddas said, smiling.

"Your maneuvers always look best when people aren't distracting you by trying to kill you," I replied, grinning.

"Yes, that's always a nuisance," Eddas said, grinning back. "Now... Step back again... Yes, there. Now, with one hand, most offensive spells will begin like this," he said, and began to gesture. "First the draw, all spells have that. Hand comes back. Now, the gathering, notice the rotation of the hand, fingers pointed towards you..."

"Like you were doing with the staff, yes."

"Then, there's a flutter here. This flutter will vary, it's based on what we're trying to do. For example, with the Spell of the Elemental Explosion of Fire, I move thus, thus, and thus. Then, a final swirl, and thrust the hand forward - bang, you're dead again. Very dead, in fact, the Spell of the Elemental Explosion of Fire causes a blast of intense heat and pressure that will reduce you to burned and flaming fragments - and anything else within the area, which is variable from the size of an egg to several paces across."

"Hmmm... It would seem it's faster to cast with your staff, then, given all else you had to do. Is it?"

Eddas shrugged. "Well, not for me. I was trained as a battle-mage of Hyperborea, Corvid - specifically, I was trained by the Dyclonic Circle, following Master Dyclon's techniques. We toss all our spells back-handed, using Dyclon's simplified gestures. For me, with that spell, the gesture is this," he

said, making a sweeping gesture in front of him with his right hand, beginning at his left shoulder. His fingers opened and closed as he brought his across and down to his waist, as though sweeping up something into his fingers, then his hand flicked out as though tossing something forward - the same quick gesture I'd seen him make when he destroyed the dock yesterday. "You see, Dyclon discovered that the key to simpler gestures was understanding what the Rune Weavers had discovered, twelve thousand years before - the movement of somatic gestures is the shaping and directing of energies you summon with your will. Of course, the Rune Weavers did magic with great and incredible gyrations and contortions of the body that looked like a drunken epileptic trying to dance, but that's as may be," Eddas said, and winked as I grinned. "Dyclon realized that combat spells would require smoother, faster gestures if his circle was to dominate as the best of all the battle-circles. The gestures he developed for battle-spells are not necessarily as precise as the standard gestures, but one overcomes that with the will, a strong *Talent*, and practice. Frarim in his prime could cast a blast of lightning while sitting down, completely relaxed, by doing little more than reciting the terminal incantation while drawing his hand in, then flicking out his hand - and strike a man with it a hundred and fifty paces away. I eventually learned to do the same, but it took a tremendous amount of practice to master the technique. Practice, practice, practice. In short, however, Dyclon discovered that with a strong enough *Talent*, a trained will and sufficient practice, the gestures of drawing, gathering, shaping and releasing for battle-spells could be combined into one single, smooth gesture, making the casting of a spell as smooth as the tossing of a *kanto*, and almost as fast."

"Wait - what's a *kanto*?"

"A weapon of the ancient Hyperboreans. It was a metal ring about half a cubit wide with a hole in the center, the ring being about two fingers across. The edge was razor sharp, and a skilled warrior could toss one a good hundred paces, though hitting anyone that far away was out of the question unless you were aiming at a company of men. Thrown hard and accurately, a skilled warrior could take off an enemy's head at a distance of twenty paces, easily."

"Gah," I said, shaking my head. "I assume you used shields in war to stop that."

"Or we ducked, yes," Eddas replied, and we shared a chuckle for a moment. "Well, regardless, there's only one other mage in the world today aside from me, Frarim, Faral and my daughters who knows the technique Grand Master Dyclon developed for battle-sorcery, and that's Mage Arella-tor, the Court Wizardess of Larinia. Since none of these people are ones you'll ever be fighting, we won't worry about it. The technique is unknown, today, and all other mages use the more basic methods I'm showing you, now - which actually are *far* easier, and do not require nearly as great a *Talent* or as much practice."

"Wait, there's Marilith - I've seen her cast. She doesn't even speak an incantation, she just tosses out her hands."

Eddas shook his head. "Not the same thing - her magic is the Will and the Word, she just makes it happen by applying her will. Her only limitation is she has to conform her will to the Laws of Magic as they apply to this plane of existence, or nothing happens."

"Ah. But what if your secret got out, though? Perhaps through a book you've written that gets spread around?"

Eddas grinned. "Do you teach your father's secret maneuvers of swordplay to just anyone who asks?"

I grinned back. "Well, no."

"There you are. It actually takes a strong, sparkling *Talent* to use Dyclon's technique, it's *far* easier to use the more traditional gestures, so it's not likely to be rediscovered by accident."

"Ah, alright. So for other mages, casting with the staff *would* be faster?"

"To an extent. I'm doing this slowly, so you can see it. If I was actually casting, it would be like this," he said, and smoothly and swiftly ran through the same motions, taking a mere two heartbeats. "It's a hair faster with a staff, yes. But, less precise. You've a nail you must drive into wood. There are two hammers you can use - a one-pound mallet, or a carpenter's hammer. Which is better?"

I shrugged. "Well, the mallet might get the job done in one whack, but you'll mar the wood doing it."

The carpenter's hammer is for precision. I see what you're saying - one is fast, one is precise. I suppose, though, if I just wanted the nail driven and didn't care about precision, I'd be using a mallet."

"Exactly. And if I'm using my staff and need precision, it actually takes me a little longer - not much, however, because I've been doing this quite some time. A less experienced spellcaster would take noticeably longer, perhaps a heartbeat or two. But, still longer. Now, telekinesis spells always start like this, no matter their formula. Drawing, again, that's with all spells. Then the clenching... When you see the hand do *this*, it's telekinesis, he's going to try to pick you up."

"Wait, your hand opened, it didn't clench," I said, for Eddas was holding out his gloved hand in a claw-like gesture, fingers spread.

"It's a clenching of mind and will, the hand is tensed for the somatic of gripping."

"Ah. Do go on, sorry."

"Well, there's gestures that follow that differ based on the spell formula, but if you see this gesture following the draw and you're not within lunging range, ballestra to it, then lunge when you feel the effect hit you. If you are within lunging range and you see this, just wait, then lunge when you feel the effect. Remember, if you're moving when the effect hits you, he can feel the movement as he grips you and stop you easily. As before, you need to lunge *when* you feel the effect, not *before* it with telekinesis. It's the difference between catching a ball someone throws at you, and trying to pick up a ball and having it suddenly leap from your hand."

"Aaaah, I see. That *would* be more difficult, it's something you're not expecting."

Eddas grinned. "Right! Now, I'll stand behind the pell and gesture, you practice the timing. Watch my hand."

"Wait - question; what does it look like if they're using a staff to gesture, instead of their hand?"

"Like this," he said, gripping his staff in both hands, palms up and staff vertical at his waist, making a drawing movement up with both hands to lift the staff to the level of his chest, then gripping the staff tightly before himself, the muscles of his arms, chest and abdomen visibly clenching. He then relaxed, holding his staff in his left hand again. "But, Corvid, a staff isn't precise enough to grip you, moving. Certainly, I could lift a log or a stone or something else not moving - very easily, in fact. But, not a moving thing. If someone is idiot enough to try that against you, you'll slip from their grip. Can you catch a ball I throw at you with a stick in both your hands?"

I nodded. "No, I'd have to at least let go with one hand to do it. But it really feels like that, to you?"

"Very close to that, yes, but it's with my mind and will, not my hand."

"Alright. Sorry, sorry, just curious - let's go on and practice it," I said, taking my stance facing the pell.

"No, no! Don't be sorry, it was a good question. Never hesitate to ask questions of me, particularly on anything regarding keeping you alive," Eddas replied, grinning. "Now, here we go..."

We worked at it for awhile longer, Eddas having me practice both lunging at the pell and lunging at him. Several times I was certain I bruised him despite the padded tip of the practice sword, but his skin never bruised - the redness of the wheal I'd left on his skin faded in heartbeats instead of darkening. Finally we paused, and sat on a log to rest. "You seem to do better when I'm actually *trying* to cast on you, even if it's just a minor spell that would only knock you about a bit," Eddas said. "I think it's your innate ability of Danger Sense."

I nodded. "I think so. Marilith tried to explain how it worked reading from your book, but I'm no mage, I don't understand her explanation."

"Well, it's one of the manifestations of the *Talent*. Yours is a manifestation that's just called 'Danger Sense' by those in my day who'd studied it. It's the one that's the most elusive, because it relies on a sense of the future, and the future is always in flux as the gods struggle one way or another. But, what you're really sensing is immediate temporal possibilities, which is subject to temporal mathematics."

I shook my head, grinning. "You're just going to confuse me again."

Eddas shook his head. "I'm not trying to, really. Hmmm... How to put this..." he said, stroking his chin. "Well, when the possibility of injury or death exists in the immediate future, you get a feeling for it. The strength of the feeling is based on temporal mathematics - the closer the event is in time, the stronger it is. The more dangerous the situation, the greater the possibility of injury or death, the stronger it is. The type of situation is reflected in how you feel about it. Things requiring you to duck or dodge or move feel one way, such as a prickling of the hairs on the back of your neck when someone's sneaking up behind you. Decisions you are considering feel another way... Gut feelings, where you know that something would be a bad decision. Dangerous roads or paths you are following feel another way, like a hemmed-in sensation, a sensation of pressure from around you so long as you go in that bad direction. All correct, yes?"

I shrugged. "Well, yes, all that's true... I hadn't thought about it much, I just went with my feelings, but... Well, yes."

"Corvid, all that can be assessed using temporal mathematics in relationship to applied Talent. Those different feelings are because the *chakra*, the energy points of your spirit, respond to different lines of flux in both the flow of *mana* and in the temporal stream - and as they respond, they cause sympathetic feelings in corresponding areas of your body."

I grinned again. "I have absolutely no idea what you just said."

Eddas chuckled. "Unfortunately, I can't explain it any better myself - it's not an ability I have. I can tell

you the mathematics of it, I can explain it in non-mathematical terms as I have, but I can never have a true understanding of what it is you feel, because I don't feel it myself."

"You don't? But I thought someone of your ability..."

Eddas shook his head. "I wish, but no. If I did, it would have saved me a lot of trouble, many times. Like that time Dorian speared me to the ground. If I had your ability, I'd have *known* something was wrong and possibly avoided his attack - that nearly killed me. I could imitate the effect with a spell, I think, and likely put it on a ring. But, even if I did, I'd never be as good at it as you are. Sasha has an enchantment on her gloves that tells her about dangerous spells, but it's only moderately useful, and has failed her twice that we know of. Your ability is *far* more powerful in that regard. Trust your instincts - if your gut feelings tells you something is wrong, something is wrong. If you feel you should duck, duck. You are no mage, but your *Talent* in this area is strong. With what I've shown you here today and your own ability of Danger Sense, you have the basics you'll need to understand how you can avoid most spells, and how to confront a mage. We'll practice this more as the days progress, to give you the best chance against that wizard."

"Alright," I replied, grinning. It was *still* a very pleasing sensation to know I had an ability that Eddas respected, even if I didn't understand it. "What now, though?"

"Now, lunch," Eddas replied, rising from the log we sat on. "I can hear Sasha and Marilith coming up the slope from the bay, they should have a few fish with them. Nobody's better at catching fish than a mermaid."

"And then more practice at *chatto*?"

"Yes," Eddas said, walking towards the dangling rope of his hidden sanctuary as I followed.

I grinned at him. "You're doing that for a larger reason than just passing time."



"Doing what?" Eddas asked, his face a perfect look of innocence.

"Having Sasha play while Marilith and I advise her. You have some other reason for it than staving off boredom, I think."

"Me? Have ulterior motives?" he replied, and sniffed. "I can't imagine what would lead you to that conclusion."

"A short conversation you and I had back in Gonnakasi's palace yesterday involving a certain very prim person."

Eddas grinned at me. "I can see why Yorindar picked you. He's a god of wisdom, don't you know? All of his pawns are quite intelligent."

I grinned back. "Thanks - but I don't see what difference it will make."

"With luck, it will let you see her other side. I've walked with her doing the work of the gods twice, Corvid. There *is* another side of her you haven't seen."

"I sincerely hope so, because I am truly sick and tired of-"

"Ssst!" Eddas hissed, waving a hand sharply at his waist. "Marilith," he said, tapping his ears.

I nodded, falling silent as we reached the dangling rope of his hidden sanctuary. A moment later, Sasha and Marilith came over the hill, Sasha bearing her lance. On the tip of her lance were half a dozen good-sized fish, impaled and still. Marilith and Sasha waved, and Eddas waved back. I, of course, did a full genuflection, bowing at the waist and bending my knee, one leg back and spreading my arms wide. Sasha grinned to see it, but Marilith gazed at me curiously. Ah, well - time enough to explain to her another day.

### The Raven - Twenty-Six.

The days slowly turned into a week, then two, Eddas gradually and patiently working with all of us. Eddas' little trick of how to overcome telekinesis was one of the first things he taught to Sasha, but she seemed to throw a fit once she learned it, and I couldn't imagine why. More delicacy, I supposed - or, perhaps, simple annoyance, as she couldn't use her lance at all against Eddas when practicing, anymore than I could use my sword. And, when Eddas wasn't working with Sasha or myself, he worked with Marilith. The difference there, however, was that much of his work with her, I had no idea what they were doing. Often Marilith would simply sit, listening, as Eddas would ramble on about some Law of Magic, eventually turning into a lengthy and complicated discussion of mathematics that completely flew over my head. How  $A$  could equal  $B$  or be a function of  $C$ , I had no idea. I could do addition and subtraction, multiplication and division. One had to be able to do that as a ship's captain, or your ship's purser could rob you blind and you'd never know. And, I could do basic trigonometry - which one had to be able to do to master navigation. But what in the world was calculus? It was a mystery to me.

The times we played *chatto* were enjoyable - and Sasha's skill at the game rapidly improved, to where twice she nearly pulled off a victory against Master Eddas. Once, she nearly captured his king, and a second time, she nearly won on score. Eddas said he considered the second to be a far more telling result, and promised her that he would quite buckle down in future, and not be so easy on her. But,

if Eddas expected me to see the warrior or the general behind the prim and proper woman... Well, I still didn't see it. *Chatto* was, in the end, just a game, and Sasha's skill at it was, to me, not reflective of anything other than skill at a game. Certainly, I could see she was quite intelligent - her skill at the game rapidly surpassed mine, to the point where my own advice was required less and less frequently. But I still did not see a warrior or a general - just a beautiful woman who was very intelligent. Of course, this was an improvement over a blushing, giggling girl, so I could hardly complain.

Unfortunately, all this meant that my time with Marilith dwindled to nothing. When Eddas was working with me in the mornings, Marilith and Sasha would swim in the ocean, catching fish. Or, more correctly, they'd swim *beneath* the ocean, as Sasha could transform into a mermaid, while Marilith could form a mermaid's tail with sorcery to follow her. How they caught the fish, I had no idea, but they never came back empty-handed. The only time I really had available to even speak with her was when Eddas was working with Sasha - and when he did, Marilith would always sit close by, watching. This made trying to have a private conversation with her impossible, much less anything more. After all, how could I tell her I wanted to go off and talk to her quietly without Sasha hearing it and potentially becoming jealous?

I had reached the point where I was certain that my life with Sasha was going to be quite miserable. Yet, the more I looked at Marilith, the more I knew she was worth it. She was, truly, worth anything. Any difficulty, any pain, any discomfort, anything.

And so it was that three weeks later found me sitting on the rim of the crater, gazing out over the bay, my eyes on the ever-changing sea. Eddas and Sasha were again working with each other, Eddas having Sasha whack at the pell while he taught her various techniques warriors in his day used to combat mages, and Marilith sat nearby and watched. They were a good fifty paces away, I was alone. I sat there hoping I would see the triangular sail of the Mysantian wizard's tartan, but I knew it was a slim hope. *'Waiting for the Oiliphant,'* Sasha had said. And, I supposed we were. The wizard was powerful, but slow - he simply did not know the spells Eddas knew to travel thousands of leagues in an eyeblink. But, he would come, eventually. Of that, Eddas was certain.

*"Excuse me, kind sir, but is this rock taken?"*

I looked over my shoulder, to see Marilith grinning at me. "No, have a seat," I replied, grinning back.

Marilith sat beside me, her legs dangling off the edge of the crater, like mine. *"It's good to have a moment to chat with you."*

"I'd rather do far more than chat, but I'll live with that," I replied, winking at her.

*"Oh? And just what were you thinking of, sailor-man?"*

"If there were trees around here that were more than blasted stumps, I'd drag you off into the forest and ravish you to within an inch of your life."

Marilith shivered, her eyes closed, then looked at me and grinned broadly. *"Well, if you're taking orders for your first few merchant shipments in that ornithopter of yours, put me down for a large order of ravishment, with a bit of kissing and cuddling before and after, please."*

"Done," I replied, "but what can I expect in return for this trade? After all, a good and proper ravishment isn't cheap, my dear."

*"One adoring demoness who loves you dearly."*

"Hmmm..." I replied, stroking my chin. "That's a rather unique commodity. You'd hardly be getting a fair trade, and I'd hate to ruin my reputation as a trader before I even began. You should get at least three or four good ravishments out of that trade."

Marilith burst into giggles. *"Done! I want that trade!"*

I started to laugh - it was quite funny. But, then I realized - Sasha. It wasn't as though she'd just wander off and read a book, or something. Even after we got back to Round Island, I'd still need to build a cabin somewhere for Marilith and I to discreetly meet, so as not to offend her or make her feel jealous. And, of course, I'd have to continue my romancing of Sasha, to keep her happy. Likely once she did finally decide I might be worthy to grace her bed, she'd then want Marilith to discreetly fade into the background - she hardly seemed the type to want an audience for her first time with a man, after all.

*"Your smile was so pretty - where did it go?"* Marilith asked, looking at me.

I smiled at her again. "Sorry, just thinking."

*"About what?"*

I paused. Could I tell her? Would she understand? I considered it - she *was* three thousand years old. Even if she had spent a good portion of that time in a magical prison, she still was far older and wiser than her sister. Of course, to even have a chance of sneaking off with her on Round Island, I would *have* to tell her what I was thinking. I sighed. "Sasha."

*"And what's wrong with Sasha?"* Marilith asked, her eyes narrowing.

A good captain can read the wind and waves by the slightest things. Reading a woman was considerably harder, but required similar skills. Marilith may have been a demoness, but she was a woman at heart. And she was, in my estimation, not even *slightly* amused by the notion I would be disappointed in Sasha in any way. I smiled disarmingly. "Nothing's wrong, nothing. But, you know, Sasha expects so much, I worry I'll not live up to her expectations."

Marilith gazed at me for a moment, as if gauging me. *"Well... She does have high expectations, yes. But, I don't think you'll disappoint her."*

"What do you think would be the best way to treat her after we get back to Round Island?"

Marilith shrugged. *"The same way you've treated her now, Corvid. She's quite happy with you, and very much in love."*

'Oh, wonderful,' I thought, but smiled anyway. "Naturally. Do they have flowers there, this time of year?"

*"Well, no, nothing blooms until the spring, there. Most of the plants are Vilandian, seeds that floated on wind or water to arrive, or were carried in the guts of birds. There's some cork there, too, but you know about that."*

"That could make things a bit difficult. What do the mer-folk give each other instead of flowers, then?"

*"Oh - things they make, usually. Shell-tops for the breasts, often strung with pearls. Pearl necklaces, things like that."*

Necklaces, in the plural. I knew I certainly wasn't going to be able to dive for pearls, I'd have to buy them. I ran a quick estimate on the cost of a moderately-sized pearl necklace, and shook my head. I had some gold stored aboard the ornithopter, but not *that* much. I could see where the profits from my first dozen or two annual voyages would be going - assuming I made that much. The only reasonably steady source of pearls in the world was Palome, where common white pearls could be had for a silver each, and even rare black pearls were usually no more than ten gold each. But, by the time they got to Vilandia or the Southlands, however, even common white pearls were hideously expensive.

*"You look disappointed."*

I smiled. "No, no, dear. Everything's fine. A necklace or two will take me a bit, but yes, I can do it."

*"Well, yes, I suppose it might, it takes a mer-man months to finish one."*

*'Good, maybe the prissy little princess won't expect them once a week, then,'* I thought, and smiled again. "One of my larger concerns is, as you would imagine, making certain not to hurt her feelings in any way. I mean, well, you know her best, she is a bit prim."

*"Prim?"* Marilith asked, her eyes narrowing again.

"I... Ah... Well, I'm concerned that she might be embarrassed about certain things. After all, you saw her reaction to my little adventure with Gonnakasi, that quite embarrassed her deeply."

Marilith's eyes flashed anger for a moment, then she looked away. *"Well... Yes, and I was a bit annoyed with you, as well. But then, I realized it was my fault for putting you into that situation to begin with. My stupidity got you mortally wounded. If it wasn't for her, you'd have died. An arrangement of the gods, Corvid - Eddas was supposed to go out to her next year, perhaps with you flying him there, since he'd never been there in this body and couldn't just use a spell of returning to go there. When you were wounded, the gods had to make a quick deal to save your life, and fulfill the needs of her goddess, which was for Gonnakasi to have a child. All my fault."*

"It was an accident, Marilith, please don't worry about it."

*"An accident that nearly killed you, and earned you a scar. Some repayment to the man I love for saving my life."*

"It's nothing, really. It healed quite well."

*"I should work on it myself once we get back, so it will be healed without a scar, like you did for me."*

*'And have the little princess see you treat me half-naked? Perhaps to throw a jealous tantrum, or maybe just run off in embarrassment? Oh, that seems very unwise,'* I thought. Still, it seemed the best opportunity to broach the subject of a separate cabin for private trysts. "Well... We'll have to have a place where you can do that comfortably. And, perhaps, receive partial payment on the ravishments you've ordered," I said, and smiled.

*"Oh? What did you have in mind?"*

"Well... I was thinking perhaps a small cabin, perhaps on the western side of the island where we can watch the sunsets... With a large bed, of course."

*"Mmmm... The western side of the island is pretty hilly, not many good places for it. And most storms come from the west, also. All the mer-folk's houses are on the eastern side, and the island is five leagues across. Sasha would never be happy having to walk that far."*

I shook my head. Apparently, I wasn't making myself clear - yet, I had to put this in a way that wouldn't offend Marilith to begin with. It was clear she did *not* like the notion I might not be completely satisfied with Sasha, and I hardly wanted her to think that. "Dear, ah..." I said, trying to think.

*"Yes?"*



I sighed. This was frustrating beyond belief. My original understanding from Marilith was that I was to be the mate for each of them - but clearly, that would never work. While Marilith might be more than happy to share me with Sasha, I couldn't envision someone like Sasha being willing to share me with anyone, despite what her sister may think. She blushed profusely at even the smallest thing, and the only behavior from me that seemed to make her happy was that of the perfect, proper gentleman showering her with praise, poetry and gifts - when I acted myself, she seemed utterly disinterested in me, or worse, embarrassed or offended. I loved her, of course. She was my childhood fantasy, come to life. But it would be difficult keeping the princess of my boyhood dreams happy, at best - and impossible if she was boiling with jealousy all the time. My only hope was that Marilith might know some way to keep her happy, if I could only find a way to ask her without having her think I was disappointed in Sasha.

Mer-folk... They might be the key, if Sasha really considered herself one of them. Perhaps something in their culture might offer me a clue - and, through learning about them, perhaps I might get some insights into how Sasha viewed herself. "Marilith, how well do you know the culture of the mer-folk on Round Island?"

"Very well," Marilith replied, smiling again.

'Ah, safe waters again - good,' I thought. "And they do take mates with each other? I mean, they don't just breed like fish, or something?"

Marilith giggled. *"No, they take mates. Usually each male has one or two mates - two being common. Since males do the majority of the hunting and all of the fighting, they take all of the risks, and suffer most of the losses to orcas. The females agree to share a mate, rather than live alone. This has been improving of late, as the mer-folk of the Windward Isles have come to dominate the seas thanks to Sasha, but it will likely be several more generations before there are enough males to where the ratios are one-to-one."*

"Ah - and Sasha is aware the males take two mates, of course?"

Marilith grinned. *"Yes, of course, you silly! She was once in a relationship with Yanar and Bright-eyes - you've met Yanar. Bright-eyes is his mate."*

A small glimmer of hope, perhaps the flame of a lighthouse pointing to safe harbor? "And... Ah... How did this relationship turn out?"

*"Oh, they parted amicably - they're all still friends, and their children all call her auntie. But, Sasha couldn't have a child by Yanar, unfortunately. The mer-magi belt that made her what she is didn't quite make her a full mermaid in that regard - but, she's not fully human, either. She thinks of herself as a mermaid, and really, she is. But, she can't have their children, her reproductive system is more like a dolphin. And, she didn't really feel comfortable sharing Yanar with Bright-eyes, particularly since that meant I was left all alone."*

No, it appeared the fire of *that* lighthouse warned of some rather jagged reefs. Sasha had estrus, Marilith had told me before. Yanar had failed to give her a child, but it didn't seem likely I'd succeed, either - and that lack would doom the relationship, eventually. Worse, however, was that if Sasha didn't like sharing Yanar with Bright-eyes, it didn't seem likely she'd be enchanted sharing me with Marilith. This only confirmed what I had already concluded about my prim and proper princess. I sighed again. "Well, I suppose that's why you had to talk her into it, that day on the bridge."

Too late, I realized I likely had erred and run aground. But, to my relief, Marilith smiled slightly. *"No. I had to talk her into it because..."* she said, then sighed. *"Vaddan. The Hyperborean man who bore your sword, originally. She met him when we went into the past with Eddas Ayar, and fell in love. He's dead, now - he's been dead some eighteen centuries. But, to us, it was... Well, it was less than a day since we learned he died. We found out at night, we left the following morning and arrived when you saw us, then we spoke to you on the bridge the next day."*

She said it calmly, with only a hint of sadness. But, it hit me like a punch to the belly. Now, at last, it all made sense. "How... How *could* you...!" I replied, stunned.

*"Mmm? How could I what?"*

I fell silent, shaking my head. No, it all made sense to me, now. Marilith having to nearly beg Sasha to agree. Sasha needing to be showered with poetry and flowers and now pearls just to smile at me... Her aloofness, her primness, her constantly seeming embarrassed or offended... Particularly the day that she was embarrassed talking about her cycle - or, lack of one, as it turned out. That made the most sense of all, now. Of *course* she was embarrassed. She couldn't have a child with Yanar, and that eventually had meant the relationship ended. Her physical changes were likely a *tremendous* source of both embarrassment and misery. All of it made sense now. All of it. The man Sasha loved was dead, and not even cold in the ground. Well, he'd died eighteen centuries ago, but he wasn't cold in her mind. Marilith, the "older sister" of their relationship, loved me - and she loved her sister, and was trying to tack Sasha onto this relationship to make her happy, as well. No *wonder* Marilith glowered at the thought I might not be happy with Sasha. But, Marilith was still a demoness, not human, and some things about human relationships were apparently still alien to her. Sharing me with Marilith wasn't what Sasha wanted, not at all. Sasha didn't love me. Really, she couldn't. She was still mourning Vaddan, a man of the past who had accepted her as she was, then died. She still mourned him. Likely, she always would. And she had already attempted a shared relationship like this before, with Yanar, and it failed.

Yet, what to *do* about it? Yes, I'd give her the pearls she wanted - even though I could see it would quickly drive me to financial ruin. If that made my little princess smile, so be it. I loved her, I'd loved her since I was a child. But, she would never love me in return, nor could she ever truly be happy with me. Having this relationship thrust upon her by her well-meaning but misguided sister would be a constant source of irritation to her - and, eventual sadness. No, this needed to be handled with the utmost delicacy, the most extreme care. She didn't love me - she couldn't. But if Marilith was right when she said she *had* fallen in love with me, she was still hardly the kind of person who would be willing to share me with her. "Marilith... There's really no way around it. We'll have to have a second cabin. Preferably someplace discreet, such as on the western side of the island."

*"What? Why? I already told you Sasha wouldn't like walking that far."*

I shook my head. Sometimes, you just had to point the ship towards the shoals, and hope you could find a safe avenue to slip past them. "Look, Marilith... Sasha would never be happy just sitting around twiddling her thumbs and watching us couple, either."

Marilith blinked at me. *"Well, no, of course not!"*

"And I wouldn't want to make her feel embarrassed - I mean, she blushes like a little girl when the topic of copulation comes up at all, even circumspectly."

"Well, yes, she can't help that, it's how she was raised. The subject embarrasses her a bit."

"That's what I'm talking about, Marilith. If we're going to keep her happy, we'll need a place where we can be circumspect about it, so as not to offend her sensibilities."

"Circumspect about what? Conversation? Corvid, she'll get over that in time."

I gritted my teeth. *'Is she intentionally being dense?'* I wondered. "No, dear, circumspect about copulation," I replied, trying to control my temper.

"Well, yes, that goes without saying - the mer-folk do live there, too. But what's wrong with the cabin we have?"

And at that, I finally snapped. I had put up with a lot these last few weeks, but that was the limit. "What's wrong with it?! She'd *catch* us, and that prissy little princess would just die of embarrassment or murder one or the other of us in jealousy!"

Marilith gaped at me. "Whaaaaat?!"

"Marilith, you've known her most of her life, she couldn't *possibly* stand to catch us doing something like that! She can't even *talk* about it, or any subject even *peripherally* related to it! And now you tell me she's fallen in love with me?! If that's true, then the *last* thing she would *ever* want to see is you and I together, *someone* of the three of us would die, likely me when she rams that enormous lance of hers up my bum for lying with you! Marilith, I love you - you are wonderful, you are beautiful, I would do anything for you! You made it clear that I had to make both you *and* her happy, and I have done my damndest to do so! She doesn't want *me*, she's not in love with me, she never was! She's in love with

*Vaddan*, that's why you had to talk her into this in the first place! I realize you're a demoness, some things about human relationships are going to be a bit alien to you. I understand, I don't blame you for it. But you've got this notion that she might be happy in the kind of relationship she had with Yanar, and I'm telling you, she won't be! That relationship fell apart because she wasn't able to have his child - and she has estrus, she's completely changed, there's little chance *I* would be able to give her a child, either. And more, that relationship failed because she didn't feel comfortable sharing Yanar. Like I said, I know you're a demoness, some things about human relationships are going to be alien to you. But Marilith, she's already uncomfortable with the idea of sharing a man, she's already had one relationship fail from it. Even if she *is* in love with me like you think, she's *still* not going to be happy sharing me. But she's *not* in love with me, she *can't* be. She was still mourning *Vaddan* when you dragged her into this, it will be a *constant* source of irritation and sadness for her. Marilith, there *has* to be some kind of discreet distance so she doesn't get upset with you and I being together! You say she loves me, but really, that's just impossible. Even if she did love me, which she doesn't, she's just not the kind of person who could accept a relationship like that, she's really *very* prim, and if she *did* love me and she caught us together she'd either be miserable or kill one or the other of us in a fit of jealousy! Marilith, I love you. You told me that you wanted me to make the two of you happy - that was the deal, two for one. And I love you, and I love her, so I've done my best to make her happy. I've showered her with flowers, praised her considerable beauty to the heavens with poetry, held myself on my best possible behavior, and now you tell me that isn't enough, she's now in love with me, and I'm going to have to give her *pearls*, now! *Pearls!* Have you even the *slightest* notion just how damnably expensive a pearl necklace is?! A gold an inch is typical in *Vilandia*! A single-string choker I could trade for the finest warhorse in *Arcadia*! But if that's what she needs, fine, if I have to go back to sea after slavers again for a few years to earn that kind of money then fine, she'll get it, because that's what it takes to make her happy and you asked me to do it and I love you and her so there we are! The finest pearls, the finest dresses, the finest furniture - whatever she wants! She wants a large mansion on that island next? Not a problem, just give me a few years to earn the money hunting slavers again and I'll hire the men to build it and the ships to bring out what they'll need to do it! I love you, I will do anything for you, you've told me to make her happy, and *Yorindar* knows I've loved her since I was a child, so yes, I will do it. But yes, Marilith, there will *at least* have to be a separate cabin, because you've just told me that she loves me, and if she does that means that if that prissy little princess saw you and I together, she would either die of embarrassment or murder one or the other of us in a fit of jealousy, likely *me* - and much as I love you, Marilith, I think asking me to put myself in a situation where *Sasha* will stick me on the end of her lance like a flopping fish is *really* stretching the limit a bit!"

Marilith gaped at me, her lambent red eyes wide as saucers.

I turned my gaze back to the sea. I wished my little rant had made me feel better, but really, it hadn't. The idea that I would even have to explain this to her was both annoying and depressing. *'Well, she has spent a good portion of her life in a magical prison that used to be right in front of me before Eddas blew it to bits, somehow. Maybe she'll get better at understanding people as time goes on.'*

After a few moments, Marilith finally found her voice. *"Ummm... Corvid... Ummm... Wow... That*

was... *That was a lot.*"

I simply nodded, my gaze on the gleaming horizon of the sea.

*"Ummm... Okay... Let me see if I understand... You love me, and you love her."*

"Right," I said, my eye catching on a single gleam of the sea.

*"And somehow, you think that Sasha doesn't love you because she's still mourning Vaddan. And even if she did love you, you think that she's so prim she'd never be happy sharing you, she'd be hurt or jealous to know we lay together. And either way, you think that keeping her happy is going to drive you to financial ruin."*

"Right," I said, shielding my eyes from the sun. *'Damn... I wish I had my spyglass...'*

*"And somehow you think that I had to drag her into this arrangement, she's not really comfortable with it. You think I did it because I was trying to make her feel better after Vaddan's death. You think she's already tried this before with Yanar and because it failed, she's never going to be happy with the same with us."*

"Right," I said, squinting.

*"Ummm... Oh, my... Corvid, you're going to have to talk to Sasha, I'm afraid none of that is even close to true."*

I shook my head, rising to my feet. "Wrong."

Marilith blinked at me. "*Wrong?!?*"

"Yes. It'll have to wait," I said, and turned to face back where Eddas and Sasha were still practicing, cupping my hands around my mouth for a shout. "*SAIL! EDDAS, SAIL HO!*"

Eddas and Sasha came trotting over as Marilith rose, looking out at the sea. Eddas stood beside her, muttering an incantation and gesturing, then gazing with her. "Hmmm... This is just the Spell of Farsight. I can tell it's a long, low ship with a triangular sail, but that's all at this distance. Marilith?"

*"It's him, Master Eddas,"* Marilith replied, her gaze distant. *"I am looking at the ship, now. He is aboard the ship, and many men with him. I can't count how many at this distance, he's near the horizon, and my vision starts to become a matter of essences at this distance. At least a dozen, but less than four dozen. They are strong, some are sorcerers. They are prepared for anything, or feel they are. They will be here in perhaps two hours. The greater reality above them is clear - they come intending to capture me, and rebuild the Temple of the Sun, if they can."*

"Right, then," Eddas said, blinking, then looking to Marilith. "Marilith, start working on your layered defensive spells. Protections, then Armor, then Resists. Don't forget the Spell of the Mental Shield. We already know he has a stun spell and a mental domination spell, and he's good with both. Cover all three of you, doing yourself first - and take your time with it, to make the spells as strong as you can. You have plenty of time. Corvid, Sasha, keep an eye on Marilith and that ship. I'm going to go change," he said, and trotted to the dangling rope that led to his hidden sanctuary, scrambling up it with the ease of a spider up a thread.

Marilith began slowly gesturing over herself, her expression one of concentration. I glanced to Sasha. She looked tense, her fire-red hair fluttering in the ocean breeze, the sun gleaming off her skin-tight scale, her lance gripped in her hands. I turned my gaze back to the ship, and crossed my arms. There was nothing for me to do but wait.

## The Ocean - Eleven.

The ship was close, now, and I could easily see its familiar lines. Part of me was ready - I wanted revenge for what happened to me. Part of me was more nervous than I ever had been. As they drew closer, Marilith had said she could tell there were three spellcasters - the wizard in red with the red turban who had captured me, and two others in black. With them were forty warriors, each armed with tulwar, small shield and light chain armor. The Oiliphant had not come alone. But, then again, we hadn't really expected him to.

Marilith seemed more nervous than I, however, as though something was on her mind. I had seen the two of them sitting together while Master Eddas was teaching me, earlier, and I had heard Corvid yelling. Apparently, they'd had some kind of fight - but I couldn't tell what it might be over. I'd asked Eddas what they'd said, but he simply gave me a droll look and said he heard them but wasn't paying attention to what they said, as eavesdropping on the private conversation of another was quite rude. That made me blush deeply - he was right, of course. Just because he could hear them didn't mean he had a right to listen. If they wanted to share what they were talking about, they would have talked while sitting next to us instead of while sitting apart.

Yet, I was concerned. Marilith had an expression on her face that was more than just nervousness about the coming battle. *Something* had happened. Corvid had seemed annoyed with me from time to time, recently. Was he perhaps annoyed with Marilith, now? And if so, over what?

I had to know, my curiosity was nibbling at me. "Marilith?"



"Yes?" she replied, her gaze on the ship. It was now only a few leagues offshore.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

I glanced to Corvid. He stood beside Eddas, talking about the ship. He was very familiar with that type of ship, and magical or not, it had a specific draught and specific capabilities. There were only a few ways they would approach, and Corvid was gesturing as he discussed the possibilities with Eddas. By now, the enemy could see the destroyed dock, and if they had a spyglass, likely they could see us waiting for them. They would be planning, too. I looked back to Marilith. "Sister, *something* is wrong. I heard him yell at you, though I couldn't tell about what. What happened? Is he mad at you, too, now?"

"No," she replied, still watching the ship. "Well... *Maybe. Or at least disappointed.*"

"Disappointed? What happened?"

"*Nothing, nothing,*" Marilith said, shaking her head as she watched the enemy ship. "*He loves you, he loves me.*" The ship was tacking, sailing back and forth, as the wind was coming off the land and out to sea, to the east.

"Sister, don't lie to me, we've known each other too long and he's too important to both of us. Just tell me."

Marilith sighed as the ship finished another turn, now heading southwest as it slowly edged its way towards the shore. *"Alright, but you have to promise to keep your voice down, they're standing just over there,"* she said, her voice hushed.

"Alright," I muttered, nodding.

*"He thinks I dragged you into this. He thinks you don't love him - not at all. He thinks you're still mourning Vaddan. And he thinks that even if you did love him, you're too prim and proper to ever tolerate sharing him with me, you'd go mad and murder one or the other of us if you ever caught us together,"* she said, her voice a quiet mutter.

I started to shout *"Whaaaat?!"* but managed to clap my mouth shut in time.

*"And,"* she said, continuing quietly, *"because I didn't understand what he was asking and said something stupid, he now thinks he's going to have to buy pearl necklaces for you to keep you happy. Pearls are very expensive, sister. He loves you, and he wants you to be happy, but he thinks he's facing financial ruin."*

"Ummm... Okay..." I muttered, thinking. "Pearls are nothing, though. Yanar is good at seeding oysters, he could show him how to do it."

*"Sister, he's not a merman nor is he a trained pearl-diver of Palome. He can't dive for pearls, he'd either drown or give himself the bends and die trying, like pearl-divers sometimes do,"* she said, and sighed. *"The largest thing you and I are going to have to keep in mind about him is that he is a man, sister. He is not a merman, he is not a demon. Certain things we take for granted are not a given with him."*

"Like common sense," I muttered, glancing at him before looking back to Marilith. "How could he possibly think I don't love him?"

*"Possibly because you've never told him?"*

"What did he think kneeling before Queen Gonnakasi and telling her I loved him was all about, then?!" I hissed.

*"Getting him free of her so Eddas could give her the child that the gods had intended before, perhaps?"*

I blinked. "Oh," I replied, and grinned. "I'll tell him now," I said, and started to turn when Marilith grabbed my arm.

*"Let's not, sister. Let's not have him distracted before the fight, too. It's bad enough that the two of us will be."*

"Marilith, it's like Buntaro taught me - you put other feelings aside."

*"He was not trained by Buntaro. Besides, that wouldn't solve anything, he thinks that even if you did love him, that only makes it impossible for him to be with me without sneaking behind your back. He thinks you're too prim and proper to stand him lying with me, you'd murder him or me in a fit of jealousy."*

I paused. "Ummm..."

*"Later. We'll talk to him later."*

"What if there *is* no later?!" I hissed.

Marilith gazed at me, her expression sad. *"Then it doesn't matter, does it?"*

"Sasha, Marilith," Eddas called, walking towards us with Corvid at his side. "Corvid thinks they're going to beach to the south, rather than attempt a landing in the bay. He says that without the dock, a landing would be difficult on these basalt rocks, and it should be obvious to them that we're waiting. I agree. We should move to the south, and try to catch them there."

"Ummm... That's where I came ashore last time, it is easier, yes."

"Then we're agreed - let's go."

The thorn-bushes were thicker than I remembered - of course, without the occasional tree to shade them, they had more room to spread and reach for the sun. With the armor spells Marilith had laid over us, the thorns didn't catch, they simply skated off instead of hooking us. As for Eddas, they didn't seem to slow him down at all, either - I presumed he had similar spells. Soon, we had crept up closer to the beach, and were kneeling behind the bushes near the shore. "There they are," Corvid said, pointing.

Eddas nodded. "I see them. It definitely looks like they're going to attempt to land, here."

"Can you hit their ship from here?" Corvid asked.

"Easily, but it would have little effect. That ship has several enchantments to protect it from being attacked by spells or boarded by enemies. It's literally as well-defended as the tower of a battle-circle, and quite a bit more mobile."

"They're lowering sail, it looks like they're going to put ashore in a boat," Corvid said, pointing again. "Their warriors seem ready... Yes, they're dropping anchor, and some are readying that pinnacle. Wait - look there, near the stern. The wizard and the two others are doing something near the stern."

Moments later, a fanged and horned horror appeared between the three spellcasters, and Eddas snorted. "No, no, we're not bringing in help, do it yourself," he muttered sourly, then rattled off a brief incantation and flicked out his hand. Instantly, the creature vanished.

The consternation on the wizards was evident, even at a distance of a hundred paces. Orders were shouted, and the pinnacle was lowered, chain-armored men climbing into it quickly.

"You know," Eddas said, watching them, "one of the things we figured out back in my day was that a man wearing armor at sea needs enchantments on it to lighten it, or he can't swim. I wonder if these Mysantians know that?" he said, and muttered another incantation, flicking out his hand again. There was a loud *-CRACK!-* of smashed wood I could hear even at this distance, and a splash of water near the bow of the pinnacle.

"Feh. He's still an idiot. A simple telekinetic bolt should not have had that dramatic an effect. Likely now that wizard is probably wishing he'd put as much work into the pinnacle as he did his ship. Ah, well, as the elves say, *'hindsight is always far clearer than foresight.'*"

I managed to suppress a giggle as the pinnacle quickly foundered and sank, the men aboard splashing madly in the water, trying to reach the ship. Lines were tossed from the ship to the men in the water - most survived, but some went beneath the waves and were gone.

"Ah, now he thinks to up-anchor and just beach the ship. It's what he should have done in the first place. Of course, I'd bombard the beach with fire and lightning to set these bushes afire and push back my enemies, but that's just me," Eddas said, glancing to us. "Be ready." Marilith and I nodded, and Corvid drew his sword as we crouched behind the thorn-bushes.

Moments later, the sail on the ship was raised, and caught the wind. It turned, heading towards the beach - slowly, at first, then picking up speed. The two wizards in black trotted to the bow, beginning to cast.

"No, sorry, should have thought of that earlier," Eddas replied, incanting quickly, then flicking out his hand again.

Streams of fire leapt from the fingers of the wizards, to wash over an invisible sphere that Eddas had thrown up around us. It was very large - at least twenty paces across - and the streams of fire played over it, then vanished.

"Sad, really, the state of Mysantian sorcery, today. Just like the old days, not a lick of improvement. It appears my friend Gritela ate the best mage in Mysantia," Eddas muttered, and rose to his feet. Corvid, Marilith and I rose to stand beside him, and Eddas cast again, the wind fluttering the feathers in his hair. More blasts of fire came from the wizards at the bow, as well as lightning - to no effect. "That's right," Eddas muttered, holding his staff before him in both hands, palms down, as more blasts of fire and lightning washed over his shield, "keep casting, keep your hands up in the air..."

The ship slammed into the beach and slid up the sand several paces. One of the wizards at the bow managed to catch himself, but the other went tumbling off into the sand. Eddas quickly rattled off an incantation, releasing his staff with one hand, then flicked out his fingers, a bolt of lightning leaping from his fingertips to strike the black-robed wizard in the sand. The clap of thunder staggered me for a moment, and I blinked, my eyes dazzled. When I looked again, the wizard in the sand was gone - there was a small, smoking hole in the sand where he had been, his limbs and robe lay blasted and torn, scattered nearby.

"I like to think I'm doing my part to improve their bloodlines by eliminating the less intelligent," Eddas said, and grinned.

The warriors with swords and shields leapt from the ship and onto the sand, running towards us. I took that as my signal, and charged them in return. The first I took in the chest, my lance smashing through his shield and through his chest. He cried out, falling, twisting my lance out of my hands. I leapt back to avoid the slashing sword of the nearest, summoning my lance to my hand again, then parried and snapped out with the butt, smashing his leg. As he went down, I speared him through the chest, my lance piercing his light chainmail easily, then dodged another's attack.

Claps of thunder and blasts of fire swept about me as I fought, dodging, stabbing with my lance, and moving constantly to keep from being surrounded. Peripherally, I was aware of Corvid fighting nearby, but was too busy to pay him much attention. A scimitar slapped my scales from behind, staggering me - I rolled with the blow and into the legs of an enemy before me, bowling him to the ground. Flicking out my thumb-claw on my left hand, I scratched him across the neck, then rolled to my feet as he began to spasm, summoning my lance to my hand to block another slash from the one who'd struck me from behind. A parry, then another, then suddenly he paused, a sharp, gleaming length of steel protruding from his chest. I blinked, just as surprised as he, and he collapsed - revealing Corvid standing behind him, bloodied sword in hand. Corvid winked at me, then turned to attack another enemy. I grinned, and did the same. A new enemy parried, blocking with his shield and slashing at me, only to be struck with a blast of fire an eyeblink later. He screamed, totally engulfed by flame, then collapsed - I glanced up the beach to see Eddas and Marilith casting again and again, sending fire and lightning into the enemy ranks, carefully and precisely killing the enemy one by one.

A furious moment of fighting... Then two...

...and suddenly, I stopped, realizing I had no one else to attack. Corvid stood over the last of his opponents, panting and gazing at the ship. I turned to look - the two remaining sorcerers stood near the bow, gasping for breath.

"Let's get them," I growled, and started for the ship.

"No, Sasha!" Corvid yelled, leaping forward to grab my arm. "The ship is still enchanted, if you try to board you'll be killed!"

Eddas and Marilith walked down onto the beach as the two enemy wizards gazed at us. The black-robed one spat, muttering a profanity, while the red-robed one just shook his head. "So hard to find good help these days," he muttered, my bracelet allowing me to understand him.

"That's why I train them myself," Eddas replied, standing on the beach and gazing up at him.

The red-robed wizard gestured, muttering an incantation, then pointed his hand at Eddas. "Why don't you kill your friends here for me then, woman?"

Eddas sighed. "No, no. *This* is how you do a mental domination spell," he replied, then gestured at the black-robed wizard, uttering a brief incantation. He then glowered at the black-robed wizard. A long moment of silence passed, and the black-robed wizard trembled, his grip on the rail of the ship becoming white-knuckled.

Suddenly, the black-robed wizard's eyes widened, and he turned to the red-robed wizard, snatching out a long, curved knife from a scabbard at his waist. "Ukkug is Mighty!" he shouted, stabbing at him.

The red-robed wizard leapt back, his frenzied companion following. Suddenly the black-robed wizard shrieked in agony, then burst apart into bloody fragments. Bloody bits of him pattered down onto the sand a moment later.

"What...?" I muttered, gaping.

"That's what the enchantments on the ship do to one hostile to the ship or the wizard, Sasha," Eddas replied. "He just stepped back and let his opponent walk into an explosive rune."



"Ummm... Corvid?" I said.

"Yes, Sasha?"

"Thanks for stopping me, that looked painful."

Corvid grinned. "You're welcome."

The red-robed wizard wiped his brow with his hand below his turban, then nodded to Eddas. "It is regrettable we did not meet under better circumstances, woman. I can see we would have had much to learn from each other."

Eddas rolled his eyes. "As *if* you would have traded knowledge of sorcery with an elf-maid. It was hard enough for me to talk to your people eighteen centuries ago as a Hyperborean - and I was human, male, and didn't look that much different from you."

"Aaaaah," he said, and bowed. "Eddas Ayar, I presume?"

"The same. And you are?"

"Dawud Abbas, at your service."

"Dawud? The same who served the Wahhab of the Uthman Clan in the time of Darrad Qasim?"

"I once held that honor, yes."

Eddas rolled his eyes. "No wonder you're an idiot. Wahhab Darrad wasn't the wisest man in the world, but he was smart enough to know it, and as such he never surrounded himself with people smarter than him."

Abbas glowered at Eddas. "Why, you-"

"You're a rote thinker, Abbas. You'd never have made it past Journeyman in my old circle, particularly considering how poor you are at magic theory. You may have been the best of the best in your little tribe of desert nomads eighteen centuries ago, but you were nothing compared to a Hyperborean battle-mage, and in today's world you hardly rank as the best. Oh, you know a few spells and you're good at them, but without sufficient skill at magic theory, you'll never develop more. No, you're a rote thinker, Abbas. You follow Ukkug's instructions well, but you don't think too well on your own. Yes, you are good at enchantments. Quite good, in fact, possibly among the best in the world today. But I'll bet it's only now that you've considered how in the world you're going to get this ship back out to sea again so you can escape."

Abbas started to reply, then paused. After a moment, he nodded. "A good ploy, Eddas Ayar. For a moment, I considered leaping down to challenge you for your insults - which would have played right into your hands. No, I think I'll stay right here. If you wish to trade insults, I can think of several to keep us amused while we wait for the high tide to lift my ship from the beach again. But, I am protected here, and my ship is protected. There is nothing you can do, and someday, we *will* meet again." Abbas then threw his head back, and laughed. "Hah! You Hyperboreans... Always thought you were the best. You weren't. Mysantian sorcerers developed the spell of Hidden Life just as you did, many of us knew it! Traded quietly among our number along with our other secrets... Why, I've nearly *fifty* spells in my grimoire, Eddas Ayar! The most of any sorcerer of my day! Pathetic fool, at least *I* had the strength to reshape the flesh of the interloper who entered my tomb into my own - whereas *you*, obviously, did not! Perhaps you did resist my spell of domination, perhaps through a protective spell I know not of, but no matter! The truth is evident in your flesh - your will is a feeble candle compared to mine, your knowledge is a shadow compared to mine, and you are helpless to prevent my escape!"

"Actually," Eddas replied, dryly, "there are several things I could do. Your ship is protected from outright assault, so I can't blast it to bits. However, were I willing to spend the time, I likely could have most of your glyphs and runes disenchanting long before the tide comes in to save you, then let Corvid board your ship and kill you, as Yorindar and the Ocean originally intended. But, I'd really rather not waste that much time on you, you really aren't worth the effort," he said, and looked to Marilith. "Rested enough now, dear?"

Marilith nodded, the sun gleaming off the sweat dappling her ebon pelt. She reached up, wiping sweat from her broad forehead, then gazed at Abbas. "I think so, Master Eddas."

"Sasha, stand beside your sister and give her your shoulder, this is something Corvid is supposed to handle, not you. If you try, you will lose and die. Understand?"

"Yes, Master Eddas," I replied, stepping beside Marilith and putting her arm around my shoulders.

"Good," Eddas said, and nodded to Marilith. "Marilith, go ahead."

Marilith nodded, glowering at Abbas, and spat out a *word*. I had heard her speak it only once before, and it still chilled me to hear it again. Again, I could feel it. I could feel the power, the stunning force of it. I could feel its meaning, in the back of my mind. It was, again, dark... Harsh... And *final*.

Marilith sagged against me, and I held her up as she panted, exhausted. Abbas, however, still stood, and chuckled. His ship creaked as the waves rocked it. The tide was coming in. In a few hours, he would be free of the sand, and gone. "It appears you failed, demoness. Not that this is surprising, my ship protects me from Words of Power from your kind. And quite a bit more."

"Ah," Eddas said, smiling, "but did you think to protect the ship?"

The ship creaked again, and as I gazed at it, I realized it was not the waves moving the ship. The wood of the ship was *warping*. Warping, boards popping loose to fling rusting nails into the air, the ship itself was rapidly rotting before our very eyes. The canvas of the sail cracked, tattered, then fell to powder as the wood of the ship began to disintegrate. Abbas started to shout a profanity when the boards beneath him gave way, and he disappeared, falling below the deck as the ship began to fall apart. The wind caught pieces of the rapidly disintegrating ship, blowing it out to sea in a flurry of rotting wood chips. By the time Abbas had pushed himself to his feet, the ship was gone, merely a few brown flecks of rotted wood across the sand and a few boxes and barrels floating in the surf.

"I suppose the answer is *'why, no, Master Eddas, I did not,'*" Eddas said, and smiled again.

Abbas shouted an incantation, gesturing rapidly, then held out his hand - a scimitar of flame appeared in his fist, and he leapt to the attack. Corvid intercepted him, parrying the vicious cut at Eddas, then countered, thrusting. The wizard parried, leaping back, and the two of them began.

I had never truly watched Corvid fight. He was, really, awe-inspiring. Fast, agile, he traded cuts and parries with Abbas with ease. I could see that he was simply testing him, gauging his skill before he got serious about trying to kill him. Abbas, for his part, had the advantage of a magical blade that he moved as though it weighed nothing to him, like a mere stick - yet, it met Corvid's blade with a clang of metal to metal. Abbas swung his flaming scimitar quickly, yet he did not seem to possess any particular skill with it, simply relying on the speed of a weightless, magical blade to carry him through. But, he was incredibly fast with it.

Corvid lunged, then lunged again, forcing Abbas to parry twice. Corvid then feinted high and slashed low, cutting Abbas' thigh through this robe as he leapt back. Abbas threw himself forward again, making a furious series of unskilled, overhand slashes that Corvid easily parried.

"Careful, Corvid," Eddas called calmly. "He's a liche, and he doesn't fear death."

Corvid made no reply, parrying Abbas again, when Abbas suddenly leapt back out of range, then laughed, panting with exertion. "True! If I die, I'll simply return to my animuary! This cause is lost, I can

see it. Even if I win, I've nowhere to go, and it only frees the rest of you to attack. Even if I killed you all, I'd only starve to death out here afterwards, my food barrels are awash with sea water and my water-barrels have sunk below the surf. On foot this far from civilization with no supplies, I'd not last long. So come on, kill me then!" he said, opening his arms. "I'll be back! A year, perhaps a decade, it matters not. When Ukkug needs me again, another will enter my tomb in the desert for me to steal their body, loot their supplies and ride forth again. Yes, kill me! I'll return, someday, and get my revenge! Come on! Get it over with!"

"Eddas?" Corvid called, watching Abbas.

"He can do nothing," Abbas called, looking to Eddas. "You can't kill me, it's fated! Try, Eddas Ayar, and you'll fail!"

Eddas smiled. "Actually, I might win, though it would be a close thing. The blade conjured by the Spell of the Flaming Sword is faster than my staff, but I've better reach and I'm actually trained in melee combat, where you are not. If I tried to cast on you now, you'd be upon me before I finished a spell, and it would be your conjured blade versus my staff. Still, there's little need for me to try my luck when there is already someone Yorindar sent here to kill you. And now, he can."

Abbas blinked. "What?"

"Well, as you pointed out, I'm in the body of a half-elf woman. The largest reason this is so is because this body was nearly dead when I took it, a blow to the head having caused it's owner's spirit to have fled the moment mine entered. I forced this body to live instead of die, my will being far stronger than the little thief it once belonged to - but, then I fainted from the wound, and the concluding portion of the enchantment to allow me to reshape the body transpired without effect, lacking my will to shape it. Once I had this body stronger, I might have eventually had the strength to re-shape it's flesh... Ah, but that's where the Skull of Hyarlanoth came in."

"The what?"

"Well, Abbas, there was a little artifact of my people from days of yore called the Skull of Hyarlanoth. Quite an interesting little enchantment - made by a Great Mage of antiquity, ages before either of us were born. And, as you know yourself - or should - once you have the formula for any effect from an enchantment, you can derive the spell formula, don't you know? Yes, it's a bit more difficult for an artifact, as you'll need to have mastered the Deep Magic to even understand how to extract such a spell, much less have the power to cast it, but... Well, I've had quite some time to study it's effect on me, and extract the spell formula from the enchantment formula that did it. Over a century and a half of time to study it, in fact. People today don't call me a Great Mage for nothing, Abbas. When your ship came close enough, I cast the spell. It's not directed, it's an area of effect. And the area is about a league in radius."

"Bah, your spell failed, then! Nothing untoward happened when we approached!"

"Ah, but it did. The spell nullifies the effect of the Spell of Hidden Life if either an animuary or a liche is in the area of effect. Quite a nasty little enchantment - and given that the Skull allowed one to command the dead with ease and raise armies from graveyards at a word, it's clear Hyarlanoth was a rather unpleasant individual, sad to say. Of course, the spell can't effect me because it already did, over a century and a half ago. Sadly, that's why I was researching it, originally. I wanted to know if it could be reversed. It can't - and you, it can and did affect. Your soul is now bound to that body, not your animuary, and your animuary is a pile of dust back in your tomb, somewhere in the desert. If you die, you move on - likely to hell, for having failed Ukkug by losing. Part of the score the gods keep among themselves in the vast game they play, sorry to say - even if Ukkug loves you dearly, if you lose, he has no choice but to cast you to hell. Oh, and I hope you like that body's appearance, you'll be stuck with it, just as I am stuck with this one's. Well, you'll be stuck with it for what little time you have left to live, that is."

"You... You can't do that!" Abbas shouted. "This was fated! Ukkug told me!"

"Yes, but you chose to bring along help instead of coming alone to meet your fate. Ukkug's suggestion, but your choice as part of your free will. That allowed me to be here, as the conflict was supposed to be between you, your swordsman, and these three. That your swordsman died to Corvid and Sasha was recovered and healed to face you doesn't change it. But, you did not bring just anyone - no, not hardly. These were the best wizards, the best warriors you could find in Mysantia - all men you had selected as your core for a larger plan, all men I was fated to oppose at some point in the future. The overthrow of the caliphates, and the establishment of a theocracy, all from a core of revolutionaries who would ride forth in Ukkug's name. Your plan was to hopefully forge them into a stronger group if you won this encounter. Perhaps, had Sasha and I failed five years ago, Ukkug would be stronger, his power growing stronger still. But the loss of the Temple of the Sun marked the beginning of a decline in his

power, and his ability to reach into the past. Thus, you are hardly anywhere near my equal in sorcery, and never will be. At best, you were Marilith's equal - but now, with her greater understanding of the Laws of Magic, she has surpassed you. Now, in you, Ukkug gambles, double-or-nothing. Had you come with a better plan for how to fight, or simply landed on the coast out of sight to the south or north and marched here to sneak up on us, you might actually have won. But, you did not - you couldn't leave your enchanted ship behind, you use it as your tower. Having never played *chatto*, I suppose it's natural for you to not know that sometimes, you must abandon the tower to your opponent. You're really a rote thinker - Ukkug's oiliphant. All offense, little defense. Sadly, you aren't much of an important piece in Ukkug's game, and your loss alone won't end the game for him. But, by bringing those men to me now where they could be slain and end Ukkug's plan for the Greater Hajja Theocracy, it is the beginning of the end," Eddas said, and gazed icily at Abbas.

Abbas looked to Corvid, raising his flaming scimitar again. "So... My fate was to meet you. But now, this fight shall not just be for Ukkug's future, but to decide which of us shall live or die."

Corvid smiled. "*Exactly*," Corvid replied, and I felt a chill pass down my spine as he said it. Only he and Eddas did not shiver.

Abbas firmed his jaw. "So be it, then. *Ukkug is mighty!*" he screamed, and threw himself at Corvid, his flaming sword raining down cuts.

Abbas whipped his flaming sword back and forth, as though it was little more than a willow-switch in his hand. Corvid literally could not launch a counter-attack, Abbas was simply too fast. My heart thudded in fear for him, watching. But Corvid parried carefully, precisely, letting Abbas push him back. He was waiting... Waiting for something... But what?

The clash of metal against metal filled the air as Corvid was slowly pushed back, past the little flecks of wood in the sand that marked what was left of Abbas' ship, down towards the surf. If the water made him stumble, he would die beneath Abbas' whirlwind attack. I took a deep breath to shout a warning to him, but Marilith clapped a hand over my mouth.

"*Sister, that's the mistake I made,*" she said, her gaze tense. "*He knows where he's standing, he is an expert swordsman who keeps himself aware of what is around him, and he feels any danger*

*around him. Don't break his concentration."*

I nodded, and she let me go.

Corvid continued parrying Abbas' furious assault. As I watched, I saw again that Abbas had no real skill with the blade - he was simply using it like a switch, raining a series of lightning-fast overhand blows at Corvid's head and shoulders. That conjured, flaming scimitar made him so fast, it seemed unlikely any man had stood before him for long.

Until now.

I watched as Corvid slowly turned, still moving backwards, the waves sloshing over their feet, dampening the hem of Abbas' red robe. Now they moved along the beach, Abbas still raining blows down upon Corvid, while Corvid parried carefully, precisely, and with great economy of movement. A single slip, and it would be over - I had no doubt that flaming scimitar could kill him in a single stroke. Eddas walked along the beach, following them, and Marilith and I followed. Corvid still seemed to be waiting for something. But what?

At last, I saw it. Eddas had stopped again, and Marilith and I stood beside him, watching the battle. And now, it was clear. Abbas' sword may have weighed nothing in his hand, but moving his hand and arm was still tiring. Abbas was beginning to slow.

Suddenly, Corvid made his move - it was so fast, it barely registered in my mind that he'd done it until it was done. A parry, then a circular sweep of his sword, taking control of his opponent's flaming, magical blade - a flick of the wrist, and he'd disarmed him. The flaming sword turned end over end through the air for a moment, then vanished, the spell broken by it leaving Abbas' hand.

Abbas leaped back, rattling off a quick incantation in a panicked flurry of words, his hand drawing back, then spreading like a claw as the muscles of his bared forearm tensed, as though raising the claw to strike Corvid down at the end of the incantation. Corvid started to lunge, then paused, waiting a



heartbeat. My heart thudded - then, as Abbas released the spell with a twist of the wrist and a sudden gripping of his hand, Corvid lunged, thrusting his blade through Abbas' heart.

I gaped - the spell had done *nothing*.

Abbas gasped, falling to the sand, the surf washing over him for a moment, and taking the turban from his head. He looked up to Corvid, and coughed once, blood speckling his beard, his hair now dangling long and sodden from his head onto the sand. "Ukkug is mighty... He is the One True God... He will triumph, in the end..."

Corvid gazed at him, his blade pointed towards his downed enemy. "Somehow, coming from you as your dying breath, that fails to worry me."

"*Ari feh sabahak!*" he replied, and spat bloody sputum. I blushed at the translation my ring gave me of that.

"You even *have* a penis to do that with?" Corvid replied with a grin.

But the wizard made no reply, the surf washing over his lifeless body.

Corvid reached to his sash to wipe his bloodied blade, then sheath it. Eddas Ayar nodded, tucking his staff under a shoulder, then clapped his gloved hands together in applause.

As Marilith and I cheered, waving our hands over our heads, Corvid grinned and bowed.

"Oh, very good, Corvid. Quite good, indeed," Eddas called as Corvid trotted over.

"You were right, Eddas. Lunge when you feel the effect of telekinesis, and you slip from their grip," he said, then reached out to hug Marilith, kissing her firmly. He then reached to me, taking my gloved hand and lifting it to his lips, kissing it in courtly fashion. Compared to what Marilith got, I felt quite cheated.

"I knew you'd master it quickly, Corvid. You *are* the best, after all," Eddas said, walking over to the bodies of the warriors. "I'm afraid you'll not be seeing Frarim for awhile. He'll be quite busy as 'Father Patience' in Mysantia, yes, indeed. And things will be much easier for him, now. This one was the one slated to try to kill him in Majapur," he said, poking a corpse with a lance-hole through its chest. "This one to try in Jalas-Ab'Habba..." he said, poking a loose head with his staff. "Hmmm... Oh, dear... We seem to be missing one. Has anyone seen a corpse of a little man with a bent nose?"

*"Ummm... Did he have a little mole on his cheek, too?"* Marilith asked.

"If I remember the dream Yorindar gave me correctly, yes."

*"Ah - he's the crispy one, over there."*

"Good, good. That's all of the Hajja-cult thugs, then. Quite saves Yorindar the trouble of arranging things to block them or having me accompany Frarim to kill them, as well. Come, let's head back to my sanctuary and collect your things before you go back," Eddas said, and began walking up the beach, the rest of us following.

Eddas smiled at Marilith as we made our way through the thorn-bushes. "You did quite well, too, Marilith. You paced yourself well, and controlled your attacks precisely."

Marilith smiled broadly. "*Thank you, Master Eddas.*"

"Oh, just 'Eddas', dear, I think you've quite shown you're my peer, don't you?"

"*Thank you, Eddas,*" Marilith replied, her grin so large it looked painful.

"Ah, Eddas, I'm a bit curious about something you said a moment ago," Corvid said, scratching his head as we walked along. "Why would Frarim need to wander about as 'Father Patience' in Mysantia?"

"As I said to Sasha a few weeks ago, Corvid - *chatto* is a game of men. In the game of *chatto*, the king is the most valuable piece. In the game of the gods, however, the most valuable pieces are the thousands of small, individual priests, quietly spreading faith. In *chatto*, the weakest piece is the pawn. In the game of the gods, it is the most powerful - and that is what Frarim will be making - hundreds of pawns, who will create thousands more themselves, who will create tens then hundreds of thousands as the years pass. So long as there is at least one person who speaks his name, the God of the Desert is awake. So long as there is at least one who follows him, his game continues. But, eventually, there will be none who follow him, and none who speak his name. Double or nothing, Corvid, the crown piece was a gold talent. Unfortunately for Ukkug, he placed it beneath his Oiliphant. And Abbas simply wasn't up to the task."

I was still annoyed over receiving a kiss to the hand when Marilith got a kiss to the lips and a strong hug. "Corvid, we need to talk."

"About what, lovely Sasha?" he asked politely - far too politely for my liking.

"About you and me and Marilith," I growled, even more annoyed than before.

Corvid winced. "Ah... Can it wait until after we're back on Round Island?"

*"I really think it should, Sister,"* Marilith added, nodding.

"Speaking of which," Eddas added, "I need to be taken there by Marilith, sometime, so I can use my spell of returning to visit you, when necessary. Or just to be friendly," he said, and smiled at us.

*"We can take you with us now, Eddas,"* Marilith said, smiling back. *"I can bring Corvid back to your tower later, to pick up his ornithopter."*

Eddas nodded. "Alright - as soon as we've fetched your things from my hidden sanctuary and you've stored them in your sister's bottle, we'll be on our way."

*'And none to soon, for me,'* I thought, glowering at Corvid as we crew nearer to the dangling rope for Eddas' sanctuary. Corvid took one look at my expression, then sighed, looking away again. That only made me more angry.

They did well, very well. I could see that Corvid, Sasha and Marilith would make a good team - in time, they would be indomitable. Marilith had the power, and now she had the basic tools and understanding she needed. In time, if she was able to master the intricacies of the Deep Magic, her power would surpass any of her clan, and likely approach that of her clan-father. Corvid's skill with the blade was unmatched, and Sasha's bravery and honesty would see the three of them through whatever tests may lie ahead. I picked up the book on magic theory I'd given Marilith - the last of their belongings - and handed it down to Marilith through the hole of my hidden sanctuary, re-aligning it with the temporo-spatial location outside the sanctuary with brief effort of will before I released it to her hands. I had to chuckle. In many ways, I felt like they were my children. And yet, I could see that they were no longer that, nor were they ever, really. They were my students, and now they had learned, and approached me as peers. Marilith, of all three, was the most powerful. She was my peer now, and would certainly be even more so in a few years, if she could master the Deep Magic. Corvid was already my peer - not my equal, perhaps, but certainly my peer. Sasha... Well, Sasha was Sasha. She would always be a gentle mermaid, at heart. She was, in the end, a Daughter of Ocean. In more ways than she would ever likely understand, at least until she was a century or two old.

I climbed down the knotted rope from my sanctuary, Dyarzi's boots and gloves making the task a simple one, then grabbed the rope and willed the spell to end. As it fell limply to the ground, I coiled it up again, then looped the ends around the coil and knotted them so they wouldn't tangle. Slipping off my glove, I returned the rope to storage inside my thumb-ring, then pulled my glove on again. Corvid and Marilith waited patiently, but Sasha looked quite impatient, perhaps even angry. Well... Sasha was Sasha. I summoned my staff to my grip, then held out my hand. "Shall we go?"

Marilith smiled, taking Corvid's hand, and he took Sasha's as Marilith took mine. "Here we go!" she called.

I felt the rush of her will as the world blurred, then steadied. I found myself standing on a quiet beach, several mer-folk sunning themselves in the sand nearby. There were immediate shouts and chitters of recognition and joy - mer-folk actually had an elegantly simple language, it was only regrettable I lacked the organs necessary to speak it. My ring allowed others to understand me and I them, but that was hardly the same as wrapping one's mind around another's language, and learning how they think from it. Likely Corvid's largest advantage over me was simply his mastery of language. Palomean, Vilandian, the language of the Southlands, the language of the Enebua Kushites, Mysantian, Centaur, even a bit of elvish and a smattering of dwarvish. He spoke several languages, and had no fear of learning more. Through working with Frarim and Haifa, he'd even managed a rough grasp of Hyperborean, soon to be the common language of our lands again. Each language gave him a window into the minds of the speakers - even my own.

As I was introduced to the various mer-folk, I couldn't help but glance at Corvid's sword - once Vaddan's sword. The sword I had forged at my father's forge, using my father's tools, and tempered with my tears over the loss of my family, my people, my culture, everything I held dear. And yet, looking at Corvid, I could see that he, too, was Hyperborean - through those Hyperborean women of long ago the Golannin had taken. He might not look like our people did, and his culture might be completely different, yes. But, I could see in him the heart of honor, the soul of nobility that had marked the men of Hyperborea. Yes, like my daughters, he and his people represented a rebirth of what Hyperborea once was. He was not Vaddan, no. But he was of the same spirit, the same strength, the same manhood.

I smiled as we sat beside the clan-leader for the mer-folk of Round Island, a lovely and voluptuous mermaid who called herself 'Pearl' in Vilandian. She had a set of scars about her hip and belly, but they were faded, and did not detract from her beauty. "So, you see, Corvid can take what you gather from the sea, particularly things like pearls and coral, and trade them to Mungim and Taliad and other traders, obtaining things you need. Orichalchum is very simple for the elves to make, they would be happy to trade it to you. And, of course, you can trade with me to enchant orichalchum spear-heads, which will increase your ability as hunters. The dwarves would be happy to trade crossbows and similar weapons you can use to defend your island, if someone tries to attack you. They're much easier to fire from the ground than a bow, and have a much greater range than the little bows you make. And, if you like, you can trade with me through Corvid again to enchant the bows so they can be used underwater. This would dramatically improve your ability to hunt and defend yourselves. Even your poisons are valuable."

Pearl blinked at me. "Truly?"

I nodded. "Truly. Though it fades after awhile, a vial of your poison would be of great value to me to study. From what I have read in elven books on the subject, it's very similar to manticore poison in effect, though they never have stabilized it. A whole host of knowledge lies in learning why it is fatal, and why it fades in sunlight or air. Even more knowledge lies in studying your people, yourselves, and learning why poisons affect you not at all."

Corvid grinned. "Frarim told me once that knowledge is to Eddas what gold is to a dwarf."

Pearl grinned at Corvid. "I have never met a dwarf, nor do I know what they are, but I take it that means 'immensely valuable,' yes?"

I chuckled. "Yes."

"Well, as Corvid means to stay here, we can discuss what we can trade through him, and for what. I thank you, Eddas Ayar, for taking the time to speak with me, and explain."

"It was a pleasure meeting you, Pearl."

Marilith grinned. *"Come, Eddas - let me show you the cabin, and I'll conjure some food for you before you go. Sasha and I fiddled with it quite a bit."*

I smiled. "Certainly."

"Corvid," Sasha said, taking his hand, "I *really* need to talk to you."

"My apologies, dear heart," Corvid replied with a sweeping bow. "Shall we chat after Eddas leaves?"

"No, we should chat *now!*" she yelled, and tugged him after her. "Come on!"

I looked to Marilith. "Should we follow?"

Marilith smiled, taking my hand and leading me. *"They're heading for the cabin, but I'm sure it will be alright for me to at least show it to you from the outside while they chat."*

The cabin wasn't far, just a few dozen paces beyond the edge of the beach, in the forest beyond. Sasha, however, had apparently forgotten I have better hearing than her - or, perhaps, she was too angry to care. "Listen, Corvid," she snapped, tugging him along behind her, "I don't know where you got the idea I am some kind of prim little woman, but I'm *not!*"

"Well, dear-" Corvid replied, but Sasha didn't let him continue.

"I am *not* going to be jealous sharing you with Marilith, that's what I *want*, you oaf!"

"Well, dear-"

"I am *not* going to murder you for sleeping with her unless you continue thinking I'm too prim and proper to be there with you - *then*, you're in trouble!"

"Well, dear-"

"I want *exactly* what she gets from you! *Exactly!* And do you know why I'm mad at you right now?"

"I haven't the foggiest, dear."

*"Because I damn well didn't get it! What in the hell possessed you to hug her and kiss her when I*



get just a peck on the hand?! *What the hell was that?!*" Sasha yelled, dragging him up the steps to their cabin.

"But, dear, I thought-

"I know what you thought! And you thought *wrong!*" she shrieked, opening the cabin door and dragging Corvid before her. She then grabbed him and wrapped her arms around him, kissing him hard as she tackled him through the doorway and onto the floor - she *did* have the strength of a mermaid, and that made her significantly stronger than Corvid. I heard a distinct crash of furniture.

"Ah... Marilith," I said, looking to her, "should I leave, and perhaps come back later?"

*"Well, no, I think they just need a moment."*

There was a sound of ripping cloth and a male yelp, then Sasha's voice rang out. "Marilith, get in here and help me take his stupid trousers off, it's got too many buttons!"

"I'll be leaving, now," I said, nodding to Marilith.

*"That does seem best, yes. Sorry!"* Marilith replied, darting over to the cabin.

I chuckled as I cast my spell of returning. With luck, Corvid might survive to morning. If he was as skilled in bed as he was with a sword. Of course, Gonnakasi told me he was, so there was at least a slim chance he might live.

## The Mountain - Five.

I watched him as he sat at the table, reading the letter.

He'd come straight upstairs, happy and laughing, ready to tell me of what had happened, their victory - and apparently something amusing that happened thereafter. I had to stop him. I knew him well. It would only hurt him worse to tell that story, then have me hand him that letter. He needed to hold that bit of happiness inside him for a little longer, to give him what little strength it may provide.

It wasn't a long letter, really. Just a single page, folded thrice. It lacked the formal seal, but of course, that wasn't surprising for Pelia. Once she made her decision, consequences be damned, she would do it. She should have sealed it in proper blue wax, marking it with a signet ring. Or something. If I remembered how such things used to be done, back in Eddas' time. It might be red or pink or white wax, for all I knew. My people were never much interested in what their neighbors, the Hyperboreans, had done - we were more interested in who they were. Some aspects of their culture, however, we weren't completely familiar with. Legal documents being one of them.

The document just angered me, every time I read it. It was formal, it was impersonal... And it was utterly a lie. It said that Pelia and all the other courtesans officially terminated their relationship with Eddas because he had entered into a marriage without consulting them. Which simply was not true. Eddas and I weren't married. Even if we were, that wasn't why they were doing it. They knew it, and I knew it. And judging by Eddas' face, he knew it, too.

I could see in his eyes he was no longer reading it. He was just gazing at it and thinking, now. His fingers stroked the page, and a moment later, he reached to the ponytail behind his head, pulling his feathers from beneath his magic silver hair-band and laying them beside him on the table. He had six, now, though he usually only wore two or three. How he chose them, I did not know. It was based on his mood. Sometimes he wore just two of different lengths, cocked at a jaunty angle when he was happy. Other times, he wore all six, spread out in a fan behind his head when he was feeling formal. Usually, around the tower, he wore none. I tried to remind myself that taking them off did not mean anything for him, other than that he had no expectations of going anywhere or meeting anyone anytime soon. I reached to the feathers, picking them up from the table, and took them to place them in his drawer where he kept them. He looked up for a moment, nodding to me in silent thanks, then leaned back in his chair, sipping at the cup of *byallar* I had given him, his gaze distant.

"Old Man?" I asked, sitting across from him.

"Mmm?" he said, looking to me.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, Joy. I assume they took the route of *Juvan-lato* afterwards, yes?"

"Yes," I replied, quietly.

"It says here they'd given all their possessions and writings to Lyota, as head of the Eddasic circle, it seemed the logical reason to do so. What did she do with them?"

"The magic things she distributed among the Eddasic Circle, so their daughters would receive an inheritance under the law. As for the writings... Well, they've turned their old tower into a library and memorial, to keep everything they ever wrote. Everything - songs, letters, poetry, their grimoires, books

of herblore... Everything."

"Ah. A good decision," he replied, rising to his feet. He strode over to his shelf, fetching his dwarven chop and a blue sealing candle, an inkwell, a sheet of parchment, and the tube containing his magic elf-quill. Setting the tube down, he opened the inkwell, then pulled the cap from the tube and carefully extracted the magic quill. Setting it into the inkwell and laying the parchment beside it, he leaned back, thinking. "I hereby bequeath this letter to the memorial library of the White Mountain Healers, as administered by the Eddasic Circle," he said aloud, reaching for the blue sealing candle - a fat, low candle that filled his fist. The quill leapt from the inkwell, writing what Eddas said, then leapt back to the inkwell again. Eddas snapped his fingers, lighting the candle, then set it down. He then picked up the quill, and signed his letter. His hand was steady.

"Dry for storage," he called, holding the quill over the inkwell. The quill obediently let out a large drop of ink, and Eddas slipped it away in its tube again. Soon, he had the quill and ink put away, and was sitting at the table. Once he folded the letter properly, placing Pelia's letter inside it, he held up the sealing candle, dripping a neat blob of wax over the join. He then picked up his chop, carefully pressing it to the wax, then releasing it after a moment. Blowing out the candle with a puff, he rose to put the candle and chop away.

"Joy, if Lyota or one of my other daughters arrives and I'm out, please make certain they get that?"

"Shall I put it on the mantle?" I asked, watching him. He seemed utterly calm.

"Yes, please, that would be fine."

I did so, then looked at him. "Are you certain you want to just give it away? I mean... It's all you have left of them, Old Man."

"It's quite a bit better than my first reaction, which was to burn it in the fire and scream," he replied, sitting at the table again and reaching for his cup.

I sat across from him again, reaching my hand out to him. "Old Man, you should talk about it. Let it out."

Eddas looked at me, his expression calm. "Let what out, Joy? I've nothing to let out. I've known something like this was coming. After all, Lyota said the last time we spoke that Pelia wasn't interested in discussing expanding their healer's routes to Wilanda Forest, or to the Gorgon's outpost in the Yeldring Bog. Likely she balked at *any* change to her routes, including changes to check up on the new centaurs and the lamias to the west of us and several other places that held no interest to her. Vyleah *needs* my daughters to be able to connect to all of Hyperborea and become a part of what we're doing, here. Pelia's refusal to chance her women seeing Frarim or Faral again and deal with Yorindar's servants meant that she would be replaced as Vyleah's rabbit. The gods don't just replace key pawns on a whim. Pelia and her women were intentionally refusing to obey Vyleah's commands and weakening the strength of her alliance with Yorindar, *that* was not going to last. I knew something like this was going to happen, somehow, though I was expecting them to just wander off into the wilderness and never return. Or wander off into the lands of the elves and seek men. Or the Southlands. Or somewhere. Yes, I guessed from the signs that something was going to happen. Likely Lyota is Vyleah's rabbit, now, and the only reason Pelia and her women aren't *burning in hell is because they are liches, they sleep the dreamless sleep in their animuaries!*" Eddas suddenly snapped.

"Yes, Old Man, Lyota is now Vyleah's rabbit."

"See? I guessed right. I knew it was coming, I could read the signs."

"You look angry."

"Angry? Angry about what?" he replied, then shook his head. "Oh, alright, I admit, perhaps a bit of anger. Anger because they chose to take the route of *Juvan-lato* rather than live up to their responsibilities as my courtesans. Perhaps even *fury* because they at last have finally realized they had *shamed themselves for years by violating their vows* and shaming me, by humiliating me through refusing to lie with me because of my *deformity!*" he snapped.

"You are *not deformed!*" I snapped in reply, squeezing his hand.

Eddas squeezed back, then sighed. "Sometimes, Joy... Sometimes I feel that way. Sometimes I feel like a eunuch. Other times..."

"Yes?"

Eddas smiled slightly. "When I wore that *barab* in Iron City. That felt... Incredible. To a dwarf, a female wearing a *barab* is treated as a male, both by law and tradition. It's an extremely formal, ritual garment. And to them, I'd just answered an age-old prayer - a cure for *Melti-ubo*, and a possible end to the *akmaran*. To see dwarves incline their head and touch their beards, the sign of respect given to a revered elder in their society... To look at me and speak to me using the tone and inflection in their language used for extremely formal speech... It was a tremendous feeling. Like for a moment, I had recaptured my manhood."

I smiled at him. "You never lost it, Old Man. As I've told you many times, what's between your legs isn't what makes you a man, and never was."

"Perhaps," he said, and looked into my eyes. "But just once, Joy... Just once, I would like to ride you until you faint with exhaustion."

"Use your spell, then," I replied, grinning. "I'm sure you used it on that Kushite queen, yes?"

"Well... Yes," Eddas replied, looking away from me with a blush on his cheeks.

"And gave her a rousing good time and firmly planted a young one in her belly?"

"Well... Yes."

"Did she ask you to do it again?"

Eddas blushed deeply. "Yes. Several times."

"Because she could *feel* it, Old Man. Pelia told me, once. That spell feels like you are coupling with them with your *soul*. They could *feel* the emotions you had in your heart for them. And what did you feel for that Kushite queen?"

Eddas still couldn't look at me. "Respect. What she was willing to do for her people... She was willing to go to any lengths for her people, even taking a complete stranger of a totally different race to her bed. Not for pleasure, not to satisfy some curiosity - she did it entirely for her people. She loved Corvid, Joy. Truly. And then, she was willing to let him go, because the woman he truly belonged to asked her to. I had nothing but respect for her, Joy. She is a fine woman."

I nodded, squeezing his hand again. "So use the same spell on me, Old Man."

Eddas shook his head. "Joy, you'd explode and die, you're a giantess. The child would be the same size you were when you were born. And though you were small for a giant, you still weighed almost a stone and a half."

I laughed. "For you, Old Man, it would be worth it!" I squeezed his hand again. "Do you know that I love you?"

Eddas smiled. "Yes. I love you, too, Joy."

"Good! Now, I realize you have committed adultery against me, but I'll forgive you - I know you didn't have a lot of choice."

Eddas gaped at me. "Joy, I didn't-!" he sputtered, but I interrupted him.

"Didn't you? You've planted a young one in the belly of some Kushite Queen, she enjoyed a rousing good time while you did it, and she asked you to do it again, several times, just for the pleasure of it. That sounds like adultery to me!"

"Joy, I *swear*-!" Eddas yelped.

I laughed again, interrupting him. "I know, Old Man. But can't you at least see it my way, a little?"

"Well..."

"You're not deformed. You're not a eunuch. You're a man. A man I love, in fact. And I enjoy the tender moments we share together, and the special caresses Arella taught you. Very much, in fact. And given that you now have added yet *another* daughter to the four thousand and some you've already had, I think it's safe to say that though you can't see it yourself, you have a staff that is the envy of any satyr in Hyperborea, and stones large as mountains!" I said, grinning at him. "Four *thousand* daughters... Hoop-la! I wish I knew the real total, I'd have it posted outside the door of the tower for all the men who came by to gawp at!"



"Four thousand, five hundred and two, counting Gonnakasi's child," Eddas said, grinning and blushing deeply. "Ummm... And about five thousand grand-children and another eight hundred great-grandchildren, and a dozen great-great grandchildren on the way, last I heard. Oh - and I'm Godfather to Jhumni's child, I'll be naming it in a few more weeks."

I roared with laughter. "I'll make a sign and nail it to the door tomorrow!"

Eddas finally laughed. "No, please, don't. Really."

"With a picture of a drunken satyr on it with a staff as long as he is tall and stones the size of his head that drag the ground!"

"No! I'd die of embarrassment!" Eddas roared, laughing so hard tears came to his eyes.

"Alright, I won't do it - but there's one condition, Old Man, and if you don't agree, then Taliad and Mungim will *definitely* have something to gawp at when they come by in the spring!"

"Anything, Joy, I swear!"

I waited until his laughter had finally subsided, and he could tell by my face I was serious.

"Joy?" he asked, looking at me curiously.

I squeezed his hand again. "Old Man, *I* want to be your courtesan. By your old laws, only a man could have a courtesan. I read that letter. It's a legal, formal document indicating that your courtesans have decided to formally terminate their relationship with you. As far as I'm concerned, that leaves you free. I want what Pelia so casually tossed away. I want that. And yes, I'm serious."

Eddas gazed at me for a moment, reaching up to brush a loose strand of hair behind a delicately pointed elven ear. My eyes saw only the outside - the raven-haired elf-maiden his spirit possessed. An ethereal beauty, a surreal beauty. The mask of the Raven of Yorindar. That was all my eyes saw. But my heart saw only the man inside.

"Under the old laws, we can't, Joy."

I blinked. "What?! Why not?!"

"Because under the old laws, when an unmarried man had lived with an unmarried woman longer than five years and they had shared the same bed, they were legally considered married. This was to preserve the honor of any offspring they may have had, and to give the woman the rights of a wife under the law. Becoming a courtesan would be... Well, a demotion. A courtesan is a trial relationship, intended to preserve the honor of both parties from any social stigma."

I grinned. "You mean..."

"Yes - under the old law, you've been my wife for fifteen years - no, sixteen, now," he said, and smiled. "That's the legal reason she terminated her relationship, Joy. She was my courtesan first, as were the others. When you told her you and I had slept together, and we weren't simply companions... Well, if I was going to marry anyone, legally, I had to marry them, first. I entered into a marriage without consulting her, and that gave them the right to either continue as my courtesans with the rights of a wife, or terminate the relationship, with my daughters retaining their rights to my name and a place at my hearth."

"That makes me very happy, Old Man. I can't wait to talk to Lyota about it when she and her sisters come here at the end of fall with the little ones."

Eddas blinked. "The... The little ones are still coming?"

"Of course! Old Man, your daughters love you, they'd never deny you that!" I replied, and snorted. "What, you think that just because Pelia and her women have decided to crawl off to their tombs that your loving daughters will leave you alone?! You silly old coot! That would *never* happen! Your daughters are *nothing* like their mothers. They see who you are."

Eddas smiled, reaching for his glove. "Yes, they do. And now that the subject's come up, you should, too."

"Hmmm? What do you mean?"

"I made this while we were waiting for the Mysantian wizard to arrive. The four of us were playing *chatto* to pass the time, the three of them against me, and I worked on it between moves one night. Sasha and Corvid had no idea what I was doing, but it quite distracted Marilith, watching," he said, extracting his bag from his thumb-ring. After a few moments, he fished out a smaller bag from within, and held it out to me. "I've put an invulnerability enchantment on it, too, so you can carry it at your belt, if you wish."

"What is it?" I asked, picking up the little bag.

"Do you remember that formula Yorindar gave me?"

"Well, yes. Not precisely, the dream has faded a bit from time, but I remember it happening."

"That's the item it makes," he said pointing, then rested his chin in his hands, elbows on the table, giving me an eager, expectant look - like a little boy, waiting for his beloved to open a present.

I grinned at him, opening the bag. Inside was a strange object - it was a stone loop with a short handle, with a piece of glass inside the loop - the glass about a hand wide. It resembled a small hand-mirror, save that the glass was transparent. "Ummm... It looks a bit like a hand-mirror... Or maybe that magnifying glass thing you showed me in your laboratory, Old Man. Except it's flat, not rounded."

"Mmm-hmmm. I made the stone with the same dwarven stone-shaping spell I made your bracelet with. The lens is a piece of pane-glass I use for experiments in the lab, cut into a circle with another dwarven spell. Try it."

I looked at my hand with it. My hand had an odd glow, but that was all. "Hmmm... Makes my hand look funny, Old Man."

"Try looking at me," he replied, sitting up and smiling at me.

I did so, and nearly dropped the glass.

Looking with just my eyes, I only saw the elf-maiden, grinning at me. Looking through the glass, I saw what I'd seen in my dream - a man of ancient Hyperborea, handsome and tall.

But, unlike my dream, he had an olive green glow to him, with bright-blue sparkles everywhere, most prominently on his fingers, where he wore his rings, and in a tremendous glowing knot of energy that seemed to emanate from his chest, flowing in and out and around, seemingly a part of him. Gold and silver sparkles fluttered around him, rising and floating away, the gold ones much like butterflies. His body

was well muscled, his beard long and thick, his nose proud, his eyes sparkling with mirth.

And, also unlike my dream, he was naked.

I gaped. "Oh, my goodness..."

"That's what that formula does, Joy. It gives the user of that object the same vision that my daughters have. You can see the astral with it, and see the soul with it. I'll spend time learning it as a skill so I can cast it on the fly, it seems a useful spell."

"Umm... Stand up, please."

"Hmmm? Why?"

"Just do it, Old Man."

Eddas did so, and I gawped at him. "Alright, now turn around..."

Little yellow-green blotches flickered for a moment across him, then disappeared as Eddas shrugged. He turned around slowly, and I held out a hand. "Stop."

He was facing away from me, and I just gaped at him.

"What?" he asked, looking back at me.

"Mmmm... Okay, turn slowly again..."

Eddas chuckled, silver sparkles floating up from him in a flurry. "Oh, *I* know what you're looking at."

"Hush, let me savor the moment," I replied, gazing at him as he turned to face me again. He simply laughed, the silver sparkles flurrying again.

I put down the glass on the table, covering my eyes for a moment.

"Joy? Are you alright?"

"Old Man, I am putting up the drawing of the drunken satyr anyway, it fits."

Eddas burst out laughing, and I rose from my chair, stepping over to him and kneeling to bring my head down to his. I hugged him tight, then kissed him passionately. "I love you, Old Man."

"I love you, too, Joy," he replied, grinning.

"And I want you to not be sad about Pelia and the others."

"I'm not. Not anymore," he replied, smiling.

"And I want you to tell me all about your adventure to get that Mysantian wizard - particularly what you had to do with that Kushite Queen. I want to dream I'm her, Old Man, bearing your child."

Eddas smiled. "I will, Joy."

"And I want you to tell me the funny story about Sasha and Corvid and Marilith you were going to tell me before."

Eddas grinned. "I will, Joy."

"And I want to know why you didn't tell me before we'd been married fifteen years!" I snapped.

"Because I didn't want you to think I ever considered you anything less. From that night you came to me, and slowly turned around in the moonlight, then shared yourself with me... I've been yours since that night, Joy. You are my love, my life, my heart, my breath, my soul, my mate. I didn't want you to think I ever considered you anything less than a wife."

My heart melted. "Awww..." I replied, and hugged him.

Eddas hugged me back, patting me. "Also, I thought it was rather silly of me to even bring up the old laws in the first place, since legally a man with a courtesan can't just take an unmarried woman to his bed - people can get hurt that way. Usually the man, and usually after his courtesan sews the sheets shut

around him while he sleeps and wakes him by beating him with a frying pan."

I snorted, then burst out laughing, hugging him tight.

### Epilogue I - Hammer and Forge.

I could not help but to tremble as I held my daughter in my arms. Karadin stood by my side at the altar, the heat of the coals within warming my face. Karadin, my brother, my father, my husband and all the males had instructed Eddas very carefully in our religion over the last two weeks - and he took copious and rapid notes with a magic quill he had, filling in a book he had brought along. He had to know, of course - and he was the first outside our race to know. But it was impossible for it to be otherwise, everyone agreed there was no other way. The child could *not* be named by anyone other than Eddas Ayar, to even *consider* anyone else would be to demean the vast gift he had given our people, and perhaps even dishonor him. No, it was impossible, he *had* to be the godfather, thus, he *had* to learn of our religion, our ways.

He had no beard-hair to pluck for the ceremony of manhood, just a fine down, a woman's down. The priest could have him recite the pledge of manhood - to live life with honor, to obey the law, and to cherish our women higher than life itself - but could not wrap his finger about a hair, to pluck it upon his recital of the vow. But, the priest was wise, very wise. He had fetched a pair of tweezers and plucked a tiny, thin hair from Eddas' chin, then placed it in the ceremonial box to be stored with the other beard hairs of our men in the temple, and buried with them upon their deaths.



No one expected him to perform perfectly, of course. But, he did. Truly, his soul was that of one of our own people, Hyperborean or not. Perhaps it was as old King Gunim wrote, and the Hyperboreans may not have been dwarves, but their lives and honor showed they had Moradim's blessing, nonetheless.

The doors to the temple opened with a hiss of steam, coming to a stop with a boom. His tread as silent as ever, Eddas Ayar walked down the iron-clad stone aisle of the temple, my father and Karadin's father in tow. My mother, Karadin's mother, and all the others of our families and friends seated in the temple gazed at them, the men touching their beards respectfully, the women touching their foreheads. Eddas' *barab* looked perfect, immaculate, and he loomed over my father and father-in-law like a tall, dark tree.

At last, he stood before us, and my husband and I bowed to him, my daughter yawning. The priest raised the hammer, gazing up to Eddas. "Who do speak for this child as godfather?"

"I do, Eddas Ayar, son of Dikta Ayar, grandson of Garnung Ayar, speak as Godfather for this child," Eddas replied, gazing at him calmly - far more calmly than I myself felt.

"Hail to ye, Eddas Ayar, we do yet know ye as a Dwarf-Friend, a true ally of our people, a saint, and honorable man," the priest called, bringing the mallet down upon the altar sharply.

"Hail, Moradim," the audience called, bowing their heads and making the fist-to-palm clap of hammer to anvil.

The priest then reached behind him, holding out the bowl of ceremonial ashes from the forge. Eddas removed his glove, laying it over one arm, then dipped his index finger into the ashes. "I see before me the child of a dwarf, forged well and true. Here be the hammer," he called, reaching out to place the mark of the hammer on Karadin's forehead with the ashes, "and here, the forge," he called, placing the mark of the forge on my forehead. "With such sound a hammer and stout a forge, this child can do no less than grow to be a pride of her people," he said, and the priest held out the bowl of holy water. Eddas dipped his middle finger, and touched it to my daughter's forehead. "Feel the temper of my touch, child. Moradim's holy waters do cool and harden ye, and do give ye the Soul of Iron. I do name ye Bettara, after me own nephew's wife," he said, making the mark of Moradim on my daughter's forehead with the

water. When he was done, he lifted his head and spoke in a loud voice. "Here and now I do call this child my own kith, as her Godfather. Any that do yet shame her and do yet survive her father and brothers must yet survive me. Hail Moradim," he called, and clapped hammer-to-anvil.

"Hail, Moradim," the audience replied, bowing their heads and doing the same.

Eddas then bent to give little Bettara the kiss of acceptance, holding his *barab* to his chest with his bare hand, the many rings glittering. Bettara, naturally, tried to reach for his *barab* - she was at the grabbing stage - but I was ready for it, having been through this ceremony several times before. I gently occupied her little fingers with my own as Eddas kissed her. To have his goddaughter tug off his *barab* would *hardly* be appropriate for the ceremony.

Eddas then straightened up, and gave me a look with a twinkle in his eye. I nearly grinned back, and had to struggle to keep my face smooth. Then, Eddas pulled on his glove, bowing to Bettara in my arms. He then turned and walked away up the aisle again, my father and father-in-law following.

I watched him, pride swelling in my heart. *There* was a dwarf. Oh, he may have been born to the wrong people, raised in the wrong time, died and came back in the wrong body, yes. But he was a dwarf, through and through, and a true saint of our people. With one such as Eddas Ayar at our side, the future for my daughter and my people could be nothing less than bright and happy.

The priest concluded the ceremony, and Karadin led my daughter and I out of the temple, and into that future which danced in my head.

## Epilog II - The Ocean.

"*Did I tell you?*" Marilith said, grinning at me.

I lay back on the porch of our cabin, letting my legs dangle from the edge, enjoying the sun. "You told me. You lied, though."

"*I lied?*"

"Yes. It was better than that," I replied, and grinned at her.

Marilith giggled, lying down beside me and gazing at the clouds, above. "*It was wonderful, yes. The best.*"

"Should we tell him?"

"*Mmmm... I'm tempted to say 'no', because my instinct is to be like that. But I think we've had enough problems trying to be coy with him. He needs honesty and openness if he's going to understand us. He is, after all, only a man,*" Marilith said, and giggled again.

"*Hmmm... Honesty like.... 'Do that thing with your tongue again for both of us, or Marilith and I will both tickle you to death?'*"

*"Mmmm... Yes, that kind of honesty. But let's not tickle him to death. Just short of death, maybe. Really, Sister, once they die, men are pretty dull."*

"True. Poor old Barro's lain outside my cabin for ages now, he's never said a word."

Marilith giggled. *"Maybe we could ask Eddas to have him tell us what he thinks?"*

"Mmm... No, if I'm going to ask Eddas anything, I'm going to ask him one thing..."

*"Yes?"*

"Can Corvid give me a child?"

*"Hmmm..."* Marilith replied, sitting up and gazing at me. She looked at me in silence for a long while, then finally shook her head, laying back to look at the clouds again. *"Maybe. I can't tell, myself. Eddas has studied it more than I have. All I can tell you is you're not in heat at the moment. That seems to happen to you in the spring."*

I laid back, shaking my head. After a moment, I sighed, smiling. "Goddess... He even accepted me when I shifted to my mermaid form. That time in the water... With you helping... Oh, my..."

Marilith grinned. *"I liked shaping a mer-tail and you helping him with me, after. That was pleasant."*

"I think now he's pretty convinced I'm not going to kill him if I catch him with you. Well, actually, I would - it would mean you two are having fun without me," I said, and giggled just as the cabin door opened.

I looked up - Corvid was leaning his head and shoulders out the door. "Is there anything to eat? I'm afraid I'm starving. Some conjured gruel would be alright, Marilith."

I grinned at him. "Mmmm... Marilith and I have something better than that."

Marilith rolled on her side, grinning slyly at Corvid. "*Mmmm... Yes, we have something much better for you to nibble on than that.*"

"Please, no jokes," he replied, exasperated. "I mean it. I'm hungry."

"No joke, silly! Fish!" I said, raising the string of fish Marilith had caught earlier that dangled at my side off the porch.

*"Although the other offer is still open, if you like,"* Marilith said, a wicked grin on her face.

I giggled, and Corvid rolled his eyes. "Are you going to cook it, at least?"

"Cook? Fish? Why would we do that?" I replied, smiling innocently.

"Do I *look* Palomean? I don't eat raw fish."

"You should try it - it's a mer-folk delicacy."

Corvid sighed. "You know, Gonnakasi at least fed me. I could fly back there, maybe she'd feed me again."

I smiled sweetly. "You do, and you'll have to pilot your airship with two broken legs."

"*And* we're done," Corvid replied, and closed the door.

"Aww, Corvid, come on! We were just teasing!"

"*Come on out, Corvid, we'll make food!*" Marilith called.

"*I'm busy eating my boots, please go away!*"

I blinked. "Is he?"

Marlith gazed at the cabin, then stuck out her tongue. "*You are not, you're getting dressed!*"

*"Stop peeking in on me!"*

We waited, but he said nothing more. I looked to Marilith, and she shrugged.

"Corvid!" I yelped. "Come on out!"

A moment later he did, still tying his sash. But he didn't stop, he hopped down from the porch and started walking off.

"Hey! Where are you going?!"

"I'm going to get some damn food!"

*"Corvid, you ate all your supplies aboard your ship, if that's where you're going!"* Marilith shouted after him.

"I know!" he shouted back.

Marilith and I gaped at each other, then scrambled to our feet and dashed after him. By the time we caught up to him, his two golems were carrying his ship back down to the beach. "Corvid, where are you *going?!'*" I yelped.

"I already told you. I'm going to get some food."

*"Corvid, we have fish, really, we were just teasing!"*

"Uh-huh. And please tell me, Marilith, in all the time I have known you, when I teased you the same way?"

*"Umm..."*

"Or slammed you to the floor and tore your clothes off?"

"Hey!" I yelped.

*"Well..."*

"You know what? That hurt, too. I didn't say anything, then. I realized Sasha was upset, and it didn't take me long to realize the reason why. I had the wrong idea about you two. But you know what? You've got the wrong idea about me. You've treated me like a toy these last six days. And you know what? I'm not a toy."

"Ummm... Look, Corvid, we don't think of you as a toy, honestly."

"No, you think of me as something lesser than you. And I am. You're about twice as strong as I am,



and you don't mind using that strength, even if it hurts me."

I gaped, stunned. "Umm..."

"And Marilith is a demon, she'll live forever. My life is a damn eyeblink compared to her age, and I'll grow old and die before she even notices," he said, following the ship as his crew carried it to the beach.

*"Corvid, really, we-"*

"And the both of you treat anything to do with Gonnakasi as somehow being my fault. And you know what? It wasn't. She was more powerful than me, too. About as strong, and queen of an entire nation, she could have had me tortured or executed on a whim just by snapping her fingers. Ultimate power, just like you two. And you know what? She treated me gently, with respect, just like I treated her. You two haven't. You've ridden me like a two-silver horse," he said, pointing an accusing finger at me, "and you let her do it," he said, pointing at Marilith.

"Corvid, I'm sorry!" I yelped.

*"Really, we both are!"* Marilith added.

"You said I'd have to fly with two broken legs?" he said as his golems put the ornithopter down in the sand. "Fine. This thing doesn't need legs to fly."

He started to climb into the ornithopter, and I grabbed his sash. "Dammit, you just wait one minute, here!" I yelped, pulling him back to the beach. Corvid fell back to the sand and cried out, collapsing.

"Dammit," he gasped, clutching his ankle.

Marilith gasped. "*Sister!*"

I gaped at him, horrified. "Corvid, I'm so sorry! It was an accident!"

Corvid gritted his teeth. "Still one leg left. Break it and get it over with so I can leave. I've got enough water to make it to Vilandia and maybe get some food."

"Noooo, please, it was an accident!" I wailed, dropping to my knees.

"Red, Blue, pick me up, we're going," Corvid called, and his golems hopped to the sand to comply. "Gonnakasi treated me far better than this, Sasha. She told you to care for me well, and you haven't. I won't be back," he said as his golems deftly lifted him into the boat.

"Please, please, I'll do anything you want, I'm so sorry, please don't go!"

But it was to no avail. Soon, his ornithopter lifted into the sky with a flurry of flying sand, then turned, flying away, growing smaller and smaller against the sky.

"Noooo... Come back...." I wailed, sobbing.

Marilith walked up beside me as I knelt on the beach, and looked around. *"Sister, what is... Oh, my. This is a bad one."*

"Come back..." I whispered after the swiftly-disappearing ornithopter.

*"Hmmm... No, this isn't really repairable, it's gone too far. Wake,"* she said, and touched my forehead.

Instantly I was awake, lying in bed, curled against Marilith, a familiar warmth curled up behind me. Marilith turned her head, looking at me. *"Better, now?"*

I burst into tears. "Oh, Marilith! It was so horrible!"

"Mmmm? What?" Corvid muttered from behind me.

*"She had a bad dream, Corvid."*

Corvid hugged me from behind, the hair of his chest tickling my back. "Aww... You poor thing. I was having a rather pleasant one with Marilith, she should have pulled you into it."

*"She'd never get any rest if I did that, Corvid. I told you before."*

"What happened, Sasha?" Corvid asked, kissing my neck.

"I... I dreamed Marilith and I were mean to you, we used you like a toy between us, just copulating all the time and you were very unhappy!"

"I was unhappy copulating all the time? Okay, that *had* to be a dream," Corvid said, grinning as he rose up on one elbow.

"No, we were mean and cruel and treated you horribly and I hurt you because I was stronger! And-and-and we didn't feed you and you had to eat all the supplies in your airship and finally you got sick of being treated like a little slave and you left!" I sniffled.

Corvid grinned. "Well, I am a bit sore after that last time..."

"Corvid, I'm sorry! I'll be really gentle!"

"And I am a bit hungry..."

"Food! I'll get some food right now!" I yelped, clambering out of bed. "Nibble-fish are easy to catch, I'll get one now!"

"*You're a cruel, cruel man, Corvid,*" Marilith said, glowering at him.

"You love me anyway, though," Corvid replied with a grin, kissing her.

"*Sasha, come back, he's teasing you,*" Marilith called as I picked up my lance.

"I don't care, I love him, I want him to be happy!" I replied, starting for the door.

"If you love me and want me to be happy, you'll come back to bed right now," Corvid said, firmly.

I dropped my lance to the floor of the cabin with a clatter, darting back over to the bed. Leaning over Marilith, I kissed Corvid over and over. "I want you to be happy, Corvid! I love you!"

"*Heartlessly cruel,*" Marilith said, looking at him.

"And you *still* love me anyway," he replied. "Sasha, come - lie here, let us cuddle you again."

"Please tell me you won't leave!" I replied, weeping as I climbed back into bed.

"Never," he replied kissing me. "Come, lie between us again, we'll get the blanket... There we are," he said, his arms around me again as I cuddled between him and Marilith, the three of us like three spoons. Corvid kissed my neck. "Marilith, can you arrange a nice dream for Sasha? Pull me into it, and we'll play together."

Marilith grinned. "*How nice do you want?*"

"Very nice. Having you show me all the interesting places there are where you came from was pleasant, but I think Sasha needs something else."

*"Mmmm... Okay, I've got one. You'll both be a bit tired in the morning, though, I'll not only be manipulating your dreams, I'll have to actually use a spell to put the two of you to sleep to time it right so we have the most time together."*

Corvid grinned. "That's fine, Sasha can nap sunning herself on the rocks with the other mermaids in the afternoon, and I can nap on the porch towards noon after I finish my fencing practice with Blue and Red."

"A nice dream?" I asked, still sniffing.

*"Very nice,"* Marilith replied, reaching back to squeeze my shoulder.

"And you won't leave?" I asked, looking to Corvid.

Corvid grinned at me. "Sasha, I'm never going to leave. You two are stuck with me, forever."

*"I'll keep you at about thirty, you had a gray hair at thirty-one,"* Marilith agreed, nodding.

"I did?" Corvid asked, blinking. "Where?"

*"Right in the back of your head. Now lie down again and get comfortable, I'm going to cast a*

*sleep spell, then I'll join you in your dreams and we'll both enter Sasha's dream."*

Corvid kissed my cheek, then I felt him snuggle up close, his arm around Marilith and I. He gave Marilith's breast a squeeze, and Marilith giggled.

"Me!" I yelped, then grinned as he squeezed mine, in turn, tweaking my nipple for good measure. I giggled. "I love you, Corvid."

"I love you, too, Sasha. You and Marilith. Now and forever."

Marilith giggled again. *"Alright, everyone comfortable again? Yes? Good, here we go!"*

### Epilogue III - The Raven.

Arella grinned, gazing at me through Joy's looking glass. "So *that's* what your daughters see, looking at you!"

I smiled, the sounds of the crackling fire masking the quiet whisper of the winter wind outside. The snow was falling again, but it was deliciously warm at the top of my tower. "Not precisely, of course. For them, it's a natural ability that acts in *addition* to their normal senses, and their minds blend their senses together - remember, for them, they don't just see the astral, they are astrally sensitive with all their senses, and they can feel the astral essences with their minds wherever they focus their perception. Lyota said once that she sees the soul *inside* people, like the flame of a candle is inside a lantern. Joy's little looking glass presents the astral as a combined view of all three aural layers. How things *really* look to them, I can't tell. It should be fairly close, however."

"Can you take a look through and compare, Melia?" Arella asked, holding the glass out to her.

Melia winced. "Ack! No, thank you. I tried looking through Auntie Joy's looking glass when I came with the little ones, it gave me an *instant* headache. Even looking *at* it, I just see it's glow as an enchanted item, when I look through it, it doesn't look clear to me. It's opaque, like stone, and glows."

"No headaches for me, but I can't see through it, either. Of course, I can't see as well as you!" Swift-wing cackled from his perch on Arella's shoulder, preening his feathers.

"None of my daughters or their daughters can look through it, the Law of Commutation renders it impossible," I said, sipping at my cup of *byallar*.

"Aaaaah, because the purpose of the item is to view the astral, down to the third aural layer - which they can already do. So their eyes see through it, but their astral vision tells them it's opaque, giving them a headache from the difference," Arella said, nodding as she gazed at Melia again with the glass. "You know, you're even more beautiful, this way."

"Thank you," Melia beamed. "Now maybe you can see how we all tell each other apart, too, despite that for us, daughter looks like birth-mother."



"Oh, easily, the difference between souls on the astral is clear. Even mother-to-daughter, with you, there's still differences."

"Look at me!" Swift-wing squawked, fluttering to the table. "Look at me! I want to know what my soul looks like!"

"Very handsome," Melia said, smiling. "You look like a raven, of course - but a raven just has a tiny little spirit, just a quiet gray inner aura, really. Your spirit is larger, because you share your spirit with Arella, and she with you. She has a green glow to her inner aura, perhaps with a tinge of yellow, where yours is definitely yellow. Sometimes, when you turn just right or you're doing sorcery, you gleam and glow with power. Othertimes, I see a peek of a different sort. There's an impression of a little old man, wise and funny - like a child of Arella, grown, aged, and wise in his age. Sometimes, when you're being funny, I see the same flare I see when two ordinary ravens are playing, just very much larger."

"Hmmm..." Arella said, looking at him. "I just see a raven with a yellow glow, and a line of power connecting him to me, going from his head to mine."

"Yellow?!" Swift-wing squawked. "Yellow is an absolutely atrocious color for a raven!"

"Well, no, you don't look yellow, no," Arella said, grinning. "You have a yellow glow. Like a gleam of gold that comes from inside."

A small thunder of little feet came up the stairs, and six of my grand-daughters ran into the room, squealing and giggling. "Swift-wing! Swift-wing! Play with us! Play with us!"

Swift-wing squawked, flying around their heads. "What shall we play?"

"Anything that doesn't involve running up and down stairs, they could get hurt," Joy said, following up from below.

"And not hide and seek, the little rascals find me too easily by my tie to Arella!" Swift-wing replied, hovering for a moment until Joy held out a finger for him to perch on.

"Snow-golem! Snow-golem!" the girls squealed.

"Ack! Do you little scamps know how bloody hard it is to animate snow?! Why, I'd drop dead!"

"Grampa did it!" little Tekia replied, pointing at me.

"Your Grampa is quite a bit stronger than me!"

I grinned. "And I cheated, I didn't animate the snow, I summoned a water elemental and asked him if he'd like to amuse the children by singing the songs of his people for awhile. He said he'd be pleased to, he had offspring of his own. So he danced about a bit and chased them and tossed a few snowballs for good measure."

"Ack! Summon an elemental?! That's even harder! I'd die! Aaaaah!" he said, fluttering to the floor, then lying there still on his side. "See? Dead." he said, lifting his head.

"Awww!" the children replied, looking quite downcast.

"Why don't you tell them stories?" Arella offered, grinning.

"Yes, stories!" little Kanika yelped, and soon all the children were chanting "Stories! Stories!"

Swift-wing fluttered up, landing on Tekia's head. "Oh, alright. Shall I tell you the story of when Eddas and my mistress and Darian met? It's quite an exciting story - why, before you knew it, we were fleeing an army of invasion, heading north into the wilderness of Hyperborea, with giants and dragons and chimeras galore to gobble us all up!"

"Silly!" Tekia replied, looking up at him, "Giants don't eat people!"

"Well, *we* hardly knew that, now did we?" Swift-wing cackled. "I was so frightened, I'm surprised all my feathers didn't fall off! And my mistress wet herself when we met our first dragon!"

"I did not!" Arella yelped, and the children squealed with laughter.

"Well, very nearly!" Swift-wing replied, to renewed giggling.

"Well... Yes, there was a bit of a dribble, but I squeezed down and stopped it in time!"

"And sat in damp bloomers all night with him!"

"Not *all* night!"

"Most of the night!" Swift-wing shot back, to renewed giggling.

"Well... Yes, it was a bit before I thought to use my spell to clean them, I was just a tiny bit frightened."

"A *tiny* bit?!" Swift-wing cackled, and looked down to Tekia. "He taught her two spells, and you should have seen that section in her grimoire before she cleaned it up, the letters were all shaky and big as my head!"

"Bigger, actually," Arella replied, sticking out her tongue at him. "Well, it's hard to be calm when you're talking with someone whose mouth is bigger than your whole body and he's constantly picking bits of horse from between his teeth while he's waiting for you to write things down!"

The girls all burst out laughing, and Tekia looked up to Swift-wing again. "Stories! Definitely stories!"

"Alright, stories! Let's run downstairs-"

"Let's walk downstairs," Joy interrupted, glowering at Swift-wing.

"Let's walk downstairs," Swift-wing continued smoothly, not losing a beat, "and sit with the others, and I'll tell you all stories!"

Soon the children and Swift-wing had trooped down the stairs under Joy's watchful eye, and I chuckled, turning to Arella and Melia again. "And how are you two doing, these days?"

"For me, better," Arella replied, and gazed at me. "I understand... A lot better than I did before. And I'm sorry. Swift-wing was right. In the end, I was still mourning Mariah. I wanted you to be her. And so, I kept on trying to make you into something you weren't. And the more I understood what you were, the more hopeless I realized it was, and the more I pushed you away." Arella lifted Joy's looking glass, gazing at me again. "You are a man, in there. The body doesn't change that. In fact, the spells that bound you... The Spell of Hidden Life, and then the effect of the Skull of Hyarlanoth, and then that great knot of *mana* within you from surviving that *mana*-storm... Well, it makes it impossible for you to change in that regard," she said, and lowered the glass. "I was wrong, Eddas. I was wrong for years and years... I hurt you, because I couldn't accept you as you were. And I'm sorry. Very deeply sorry."

I smiled. "*Forglamma*, Arella. It never happened. We shall not speak of it again after this moment."

Arella smiled at me. "Thank you, Eddas."

"What I meant, however, is how you two are doing between each other."

Arella and Melia grinned, gazing at each other. "Well," Arella said, "I still have a lot to learn. When I first visited, I thought it would be..." Arella said, then laughed. "Well, I don't *know* what I expected. A sapphire colony, lounging about and playing music and writing poetry, or something?" she said, and laughed again. "I don't know what I expected. I didn't even know why Pelia's women were called the White Mountain Healers, but the mountain is called Iolo Mountain - I didn't *know* that 'Iolo' means 'White' in your language!" she said, and shook her head. "No, I didn't know what I'd find. But when I got there, what I found was just a small town in the mountains. Scarecrows as golems watching the crops and keeping the birds away, a few walking about and pulling weeds. Brooms that swept the streets, keeping things clean... Lanterns on the corners, lighting the streets at night with a cold, heatless flame... Elegant architecture that looked... Ancient, delicate, lovely. Sharp roofs that swept upward, to keep off winter's snows. And everyone who lived there was female - women, mothers, children, babies. It was very strange, to my eyes. No men - but, it didn't look like there was a hole where men should be but were missing, nor did it look like a nunnery, where men had been excluded. It just looked like... A town of women. A new race, a new people, living their lives, building, growing... It was very beautiful."

Melia grinned. "Remember what you said when you were there and saw Frarim visiting?"

"Oh! Eddas," Arella said, looking at me and patting my hand, "I wish you could have been there. I had just come on a visit to Melia, and Frarim was in town, chatting with Lyota. Pelia and the others... Err..." she said, pausing and looking to Melia.

Melia smiled. "It's alright, you can talk about it in front of me, Arella. We view what happened to them as an important lesson from Vyleah, a very critical one to our survival. Those who get set in their ways, mentally, can die from it. We're all very sad about it, of course, but we understand the importance of the lesson, and we'll take it to heart."

Arella nodded, and managed a smile as she looked back to me. "Well... Pelia's women... They didn't want to meet with Frarim, they all hid in their tower and pretended he didn't exist. This was while you were gone. But your daughters - oh, my word! They all welcomed him like a long-lost brother come to visit. Haifa was with him, along with several of her clan-mates. Haifa they treated like his wife, and her clan-mates, they treated like sisters. It was a joyous thing, they all danced and sang for him, there was a tremendous feast, I think poor Frarim had to eventually escape just to keep from gaining fifty stone!"

I laughed, and Melia giggled.

"It's true!" Arella said. "But, that wasn't what struck me about it. What struck me was how *natural* it was. They just accepted him as part of their large family of Hyperboreans. He was just there to visit, nothing formal or anything... But..." Arella shook her head. "I look at a man, and many things go through my head. I think about the man that hurt me. I think about Cordo, who nearly killed me. I see my father, who disowned me. I see a lot of things. They just saw Frarim. And they were glad to see him, a fellow Hyperborean. They welcomed Haifa as his wife, and whipped up a lovely dress for her, quite elegant, her hair writhed for hours and hours after she put it on. And I could see what they saw in her, a little bit. She was a woman. She looked different, yes. But she was just another woman. And Frarim was a man. And that was all. And I told Frarim that. And then, Frarim smiled at me, and he said '*Life's much easier when you shed the unnecessary baggage in your mind, isn't it?*' And I just looked at him and said '*You mean, your whole visit was just for me?*' and he said '*Exactly*' - just like you say it sometimes, speaking with Yorindar's voice. And I dropped to my knees and thanked Yorindar for letting me see, and understand. And Vyleah, for making it possible. They have a lovely temple to Vyleah on Iolo Mountain, Eddas."

I smiled. "I've seen it."

Melia grinned. "Maybe you'll see it again, Father," she said, glancing at Arella.

Arella grinned at her. "Well... Maybe. That's one thing I wanted to ask you about, today," she said, looking back to me. "There's still no way I can publicly marry in the Southlands, unless it's to a man. I'm the Court Wizardess of Larinia, the scandal would be just outrageous. And I don't think that's going to change."

I shrugged. "Not likely, no."

"But... Well, Yorindar came to me in a dream, and said that Melia needed to be with me in the Southlands, to begin to build stronger relationships between the people of the Southlands and the growing, multi-racial society you have here in Hyperborea. He said that Parial's death is an \*Event\* he's been working towards, and told me when it was. Paradox, I can't tell you. You'll get a sign, though, and you'll know when to come - and it will be soon. But, Parial has lived so long that his heir, Lurvim, is already sixty-one. Parial intends to designate one of his grandchildren as heir, to try to insure stability through a long reign - Yorindar's influence, he came to Parial in a dream seventeen years ago, and told him that his true and proper heir was being born as he spoke. It was an \*Event\*, and that heir is his great-granddaughter, Lyssa. She was the royal child being born that night. But, Yorindar told me that the designation of Lyssa as his heir will cause "a bit of unrest," as he put it. What kind of unrest, he didn't say, but I can guess."

I chuckled. "Yorindar is *still* the master of understatement. I can make a couple guesses, too, Arella, and none of my guesses would be pleasant. You'll definitely have to head off any competition for the throne. If you're not careful, you could have a civil war on your hands."

Melia nodded. "And somehow, I'm to be part of helping Arella prevent that. Mother has already told me, she's Vyleah's rabbit."

"So," Arella said, "we come to you. How can Melia be with me 'round the clock in the Southlands without rumors starting?"

I shrugged. "Have her come as an ambassador and friend from the Witch-Women of Hyperborea. Then, tell the truth - the Witch-Women of Hyperborea are a separate race, like elves or dwarves, except they're a race of only one gender, like lamias, dryads, gorgons, and others."

Melia shook her head. "The question of how we reproduce will come up, Father."

"Tell them the truth again - you reproduce through sorcery, inducing parthogenesis, like lamias, dryads, gorgons... There's even a few species of mundane lizards in the desert which are like that, the phenomenon is not unknown. You are my daughters, and you are Hyperboreans, but you are also your own race, as different from Arella as an elf or a gorgon. You are your own people, and you are developing your own culture."

"One not too far from your own, Father. At least, we hope not - we would never want you to visit and feel we were alien to you. Or Faral or Frarim, either."

I smiled. "Well, I've been there several times, now, and every time, I like what I see more and more. In many ways, you've gone beyond us. Only the wealthy could afford golems for farming, with us. For you, it's fairly normal - and you even have golems sweeping the streets and helping with construction. We used gaslights to light the streets, but you're using magic. I've given you all my notes on semi-golems, and I'm certain that soon you'll be building ornithopters and other things we had back then, as well. Yes, in many ways, you've gone beyond us. As far as differences..." I said, and shrugged. "Well, the largest differences I can see is that you don't have the wealthy riding down the streets past merchants hawking their wares at the top of their lungs, nor do you have the poor lying in the gutters. Everyone is a member of the Eddasic Circle you founded, which also functions as your government. Despite that you've nearly ten thousand, now, the atmosphere in your little town is very relaxed. No competing guilds of merchants and craftsmen, no thieves, no... Well, everyone knows what they're supposed to do, and for the most part, your lives are fairly self-contained, there. Like myself, you've no need of money, you trade with the traveling merchants to get things from outside that you can't make yourselves. There's a bit of bustle there as you go about your daily lives, but... Well, everyone knows everyone, or is related in some way, and everyone has their daily tasks to do. There's a more relaxed, friendly feeling to what you're building..." I shrugged again. "I can't describe it better than that, other than to say it feels much like visiting the *Gossak* nunnery did. They made wines, traded with traders, they were widely-reknowned scholars... They had a



little village of sorts, really. A very quiet, ordered and peaceful life of worship, study, and work. Yours is the same, just on a larger scale, and you grow medicinal herbs instead of making wine. I suppose the only other differences is that you also didn't have to suffer through a thousand years of war, and don't have many of the traditions that developed from that. The *Fridmagga* or the *Kor'na'lagbar*..."

"Or the *Juvan-lato*," Melia said, and sighed. "That, we will never do."

I nodded silently, sipping at my cup of *byallar*, and Arella wisely held her tongue.

"Still, Father," Melia continued after a moment, "we will remember those traditions. They are written in our books of history, and we will not forget them. As Lyota told you when we came, we want to grow at about twenty-five a year from now on. We want all of our children to have the same experience of coming here in the winter and living with you, and they really can't if we grow faster than that. I know it will embarrass you to say it, Father, but we view you as our ideal, our model citizen, the father of our race. We want all our children to meet you, touch you, hug you, hear your stories from your own lips, and come to love you. We know you can't be here every year - there are going to be times Yorindar calls you away. At twenty-five a year, however, when you get back, those that missed you the previous year can meet you the next. You've enough bunk-beds for twenty-eight on the first floor, Father, and I remember you once fit enough bunk-beds down there to handle a hundred apprentices during those years you were helping to train us all. We want all our children to meet you, to hug you, to kiss you, to love you as we do. We want our children to grow to be as we are, and see you as the Father of our Race, and see your life as being our highest goal."

I felt the heat of a blush on my cheeks. "Well... Yes, I suppose..."

Melia grinned at me. "As far as our city, Father... Well, we know we can't rebuild what was of Ancient Hyperborea. Really, even if we tried, it wouldn't suit what we need to survive. As far as structure, we're envisioning a sort of walled, stepped city in the mountains, with managed forests and large terraces for agriculture like the dwarves use. Since we don't use the Spell of Hidden life but instead just reverse our aging using the spells our mothers knew, we'll only be adding about twenty-five thousand every millennia. We think it should take us about forty millennia before we completely fill the western slope of Iolo Mountain and have to start looking at alternate plans for growth. We don't want to encroach on the territory of the giants or the dwarves, after all."

I nodded, smiling. My daughters truly *were* their own race of people - even the *elves* didn't have plans that stretched forty millennia into the future. My daughters were *definitely* ready to join the Seelie court, and I was certain the elves were just champing at the bit to have them, now. "Well... The end result is that this is what you should tell them: The Witch-Women of Iolo Mountain are a separate race of people, a race of one gender who survive and grow on the power of their sorcery. And, most importantly, a race of people with a different culture. Perhaps once the people of the Southlands accept that and trade agreements have been reached, you can spring some technicality upon them... Oh, I don't know, say that due to some obscure law, Arella *has* to marry you, or the Witch-women will be offended. You can take a decade or five to think about it, and work something out after you've headed off any struggle over Parial's heir. In time, once the people of the Southlands are used to the notion of the different races here in Hyperborea and their different cultures, you'll be able to make something like that work. As far as avoiding scandal, just don't sleep in the same room together or kiss each other in public, and you'll be alright."

"Ah!" Melia said, brightening, "we could even bring a few gorgons, lamias and others along, to help get people used to that, and help them get used to the types of different races there are, here!"

"*Exactly*," Arella and I replied, in chorus.

Arella then shuddered, shaking her head. "I *hate* that. It's happened nine times in the last hundred years or so, usually when I'm talking to the king, it's amazingly uncomfortable!"

"Dear, you're only a hundred and eighty-eight, you'll quite get used to it, eventually," I replied.

Arella and Melia gaped at me, then burst out laughing.

\* \* \*

Arella placed a drop between the king's lips, then leaned back from the king's bed, putting her small

potion-dropper away. "He'll waken briefly to say goodbye, but not for long."

I nodded, kneeling beside her and taking Parial's hand. It was midwinter's day of seventeen ninety, and outside the king's castle, the noonday sun glistened on a blanket of fresh winter snow. Soon, in less than two months, the lands surrounding Steelgate would bloom anew with endless fields of flowers, the majesty of winter replaced with the wonder and glory of spring. But, Parial would not be here to see that day, for this day would be his last. After a moment, his eyes opened. They were old, yellowing, and rheumy. He smiled, the mass of wrinkles around his eyes shifting - his teeth were still strong, but now were long and yellowed with age. "Dame Raven..." he whispered.

"I am here, Your Majesty."

"You haven't changed. Not one bit. You still look the same as you did, that night you found me in the cell in the dark-elves' kingdom..."

"I am still who I am, your majesty - and I am still the Raven of Yorindar. Now and forever."

"You know... I always wanted to go on another adventure, with you..."

"An adventure, your majesty?" I replied, smiling. "Nasty, scary, uncomfortable things, adventures. Make you late for dinner - maybe make you never come home at all. You were much better off staying home and being the king, Parial."

Parial chuckled, his gaze on my eyes. "Perhaps... Perhaps I was denied going on an adventure with you again... But, perhaps I go on to another adventure, now... One where you can never follow..."

My eyes misted with tears, and I blinked them away. "Perhaps so, Parial. Just as you escaped the

cell, but I had to remain to fulfill my destiny."

"Does my grandmother still live?"

"She does, Parial. The Queen Mother of Larinia still lives, in Hyperborea."

Parial smiled. "I remember her, and the village of giants... Is she still beautiful?"

"Yes, Parial."

"Ah..." he said, then looked to his right. "Jorgan?"

The king's seneschal leaned over the bed. "Yes, sire?"

"My vision is clouded. How many are here?"

"Ten, sire. Your son, your daughter, four guards, Dame Raven, your court wizardess, your scribe, and myself. Your scribe is writing your words down as you speak, sire."

Parial nodded, taking a measured breath. "Before these witnesses, I hereby confirm both my public proclamation, and my will. My heir is my great-granddaughter, Lyssa, named after my mother. Guard her with your life, Jorgan," Parial said, his weakened voice clear.

"I will, Sire," Jorgan replied, bowing his head.

Parial looked back to me. "You taught me the important things, Dame Raven. And I remember your lessons. You were to finish her education this year, as you once did for me, and have done for each of the heirs of the line. Please finish her education, and continue to do so for her heirs, and those that follow."

"I will, your majesty."

"Eddas Ayar, Raven of Yorindar, knighted Dame Raven and Defender of the Realm, I also ask you to guard and guide my granddaughter through her transition to power."

"I will, your majesty."

Parial visibly relaxed. When he spoke again, his voice was soft, and his scribe bent closer to the bed to hear his words. "Ah... Just Parial. My father always said that 'highness' and 'majesty' weren't necessary between friends. I would like to go to the afterlife knowing... That you were my friend... Eddas Ayar..."

"You are, Parial."

His gaze flickered past me, looking beyond my shoulder. "I can see him... Yorindar... He speaks, now... But he speaks not to me, but to you... He says... 'And now, Eddas... The game begins again...'"

Parial let out a slow sigh, his gaze becoming distant and glazed. He did not breathe again.

Arella gestured at me, and I stepped aside. She leaned in, pressing a finger to the side of his neck, beneath his jaw. After a moment, she swept her hand over his eyes, closing them, then looked to the king's seneschal and nodded.

The king's seneschal bowed to the bed, then turned and strode to the door, opening it. Taking a deep breath, he shouted at the top of his lungs. "*THE KING IS DEAD, LONG LIVE THE QUEEN!*"

As his shout was echoed and re-echoed by the guards of the castle, passed along throughout all of Steelgate, his daughter, Princess Kassa, broke into sobs. Prince Lurvim, however, did not. Gray-haired and sixty-one, he glared at his dead father, then swept his cloak about himself and strode out of the room.

I reached up, adjusting the new feather behind my headband as I watched Lurvim stride away down the hall. After a moment, I nodded. '*Alright, Yorindar. The game begins again.*'

*End.*