

The Wench of Woe
(The Spider and The Ocean)
(Book IV of Mage)

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Prologue.

The old man sat quietly in his rocking chair, gazing out from his porch past the beach, at the eternally restless sea. The Bright Sea, as it was called, was hardly bright today. Ominous clouds loomed on the horizon to the east - it seemed yet another spring squall was headed towards the green, forested lands of Vilandia.

The old man had never been a sailor, though like most Vilandians, he was still familiar with the sea. The sea was, in truth, the life's blood of their nation, and the Vilandian navy was renowned as the most powerful and most advanced navy in all the world. Sleek fishing vessels like swift greyhounds that plied the coastal waters of Vilandia, harvesting the seemingly endless bounty of the sea... Vast warships with hulls of stout oak that prowled enemy waters, war-bred mastiffs that rained a hail of ballista-bolts and catapult-stones upon enemy fortifications... No, he was not unfamiliar with the sea. Indeed, the Vilandians worshipped the sea as a goddess - a strange, mysterious goddess who could be immensely kind one moment, and immensely cruel the next. And now, gazing out over the sea at the dark clouds gathering to the east, the old man knew that the sea might soon once again be immensely cruel to a small town named Woe.

But no, the Old Man had never been a sailor. His life had been spent as the village master, the leader of the village. It was not an elected position, of course. His father had been the village master before him, and his father before that, for eight generations. His son would have been the next village master...

The old man sighed, thinking about his son. The Goddess could be cruel at times, indeed. Cruel enough that ten generations before, on the site of a tragic shipwreck, his little village had been founded, and named Woe. But, perhaps it was as the priests said - all men were mortal, and sinned. All men deserved punishment for their sins, and the Goddess punished sinners in her own time, in her own way... And usually when they least expected it.

The sound of hoof-beats over the surf caught the old man's ear, and he turned his head to look down the beach. There, in the distance, a vision appeared to his age-dimmed eyes which caused his heart to catch in his throat.

A flame-haired woman, her fiery tresses streaming behind her as she galloped along astride a black steed. Yet, as they drew closer, the old man could see the hellish fires of the steed's glowing red eyes, the wisps of black smoke which escaped its nostrils as it galloped, and the cold fury upon the woman's face.

Yes... The Goddess punished sinners in her own time, and her own way... And today, it seemed his time for punishment was finally due.

The old man hung his head. He did not question the Goddess, sending an angry retort to the heavens asking why. He knew why. He did not ask why the loss of his son had not been enough. He knew that each mortal faced their own destiny. No, he simply hung his head, and silently prayed that if it was not painless, that it would, at least, be swift.

The sound of hoof-beats slowed to a trot, then a walk, then finally stopped, the steed snorting as it stood before the porch. The old man did not look up.

"I have returned, Malik," the woman said, her voice like ice.

The old man simply nodded.

"If you thought to hide from me, you should have moved farther away from Woe. Everyone I met in the Village of Woe still knew who you were, and where you were - some even remembered who I was, as well. No, this little house you've built is only half a league down the beach from the village. You were not that difficult to find."

"I was not hiding," Malik replied quietly, his gaze in his lap.

"You know why I am here."

Malik nodded again. "To avenge the wrong I did you, so long ago."

"So you *know* it was wrong?"

Malik lifted his head, gazing into the woman's green eyes. For a moment, his words caught in his throat. She was radiantly beautiful. His own people, the Vilandians, were an auburn people, their skins bronzed by the sun for those who worked outdoors most of the year. She, on the other hand, had skin like cream, and hair like fire. The metal-scales of her armor gleamed like fine mithril, a second, metal skin, and she bore a long, spirally fluted lance in her right hand. Six cubits in length, it was not the handiwork of man, but looked more like the long, slim horn of some fantastic beast. Cuffed, calf-high boots of a soft leather graced the feet that clung lightly to the steed, and cuffed, forearm-length gloves of a similar material graced her hands. And yet, as beautiful as she was, the steed was equally as fearsome.

It was a lean beast, and apparently a mare. Yet, there the resemblance between it and ordinary horses ended. The woman rode the mare bareback - but, this did not seem to be a beast who would permit a saddle, anyway. The mare's coat was the color of night, and seemed to almost absorb the sunlight which fell upon it from the cloudy skies. Her eyes flashed with a red, hellish fire, and a trickle of smoke came from her nostrils as she panted from the run. Her hooves gleamed like black steel, and she flicked her tail in agitation as she awaited the outcome of this encounter. And more, the mare gazed at the old man not with the look of a dumb beast, or even the restrained aggression of a war-trained steed - no, she gazed upon the old man with intelligence... And hostility.

Malik ran a trembling hand over his bald pate before replying. "Yes, I did. I know it was wrong, now. I did at the time, as well... But I was angry. Now, I am old, and I have had time to reflect on the deeds of my life... Time enough to regret..." he said, then sighed, and hung his head again. "I am sorry."

"*Bah. He is sorry,*" the mare said, her voice feminine, yet eerily hollow and unearthly. "*I suppose*

that makes it all better, now, and we can be on our way."

"Hardly," the woman replied, and slipped from the mare's back, to stand before Malik. With a precision showing years of skill, she flicked the sharp tip of her lance beneath Malik's chin, tapping it to get him to lift his head.

Malik said nothing, simply gazing at her.

The woman paused, gazing back at him. "You do not beg or weep?"

"I wept all the tears of a lifetime the day my son died... I have no more tears left. And as for begging..." Malik replied, and sighed. "I only ask that you make it swift. I am old, now. Woe has a new master, Absor. I chose him ten years ago. I have nothing left to live for, really. The last ten years of my life, I have spent here, watching the sea, and waiting... I knew not what I was waiting for. My son was gone, and would not return. My wife died decades ago, as well you know. Still, I waited, though I did not know what I was waiting for. Now, I know. I was waiting for you."

The woman raised a flame-haired eyebrow. "Yanar is dead?"

Malik nodded, feeling the needle point of the lance lower from his chin.

"How did he die?"

"A few weeks after you..." Malik said, then sighed. "He disagreed with my decision. He was sixteen, old enough to sign on with any private ship. So he ran away to Soldan city, to the north. He signed on as an apprentice seaman with a trade-ship bound for Palome, hoping perhaps that somehow he might find you, and rescue you."

The woman rolled her eyes. "Impossible. A foolish notion," she replied, her weapon lowering even more.

"He was young."

"Then what happened?"

"A storm, off the Coast of Skulls. They never even left Vilandian waters. The ship went down, and all hands were lost. Only the wreckage that washed ashore told the tale."

"*How tragic,*" the mare quipped, her eerie voice dripping with sarcasm.

"So it was all for nothing," the woman said.

"Yes," Malik replied, and sighed deeply. "I meant to hurt you, to take you out of my son's life forever... And ended up losing my son, instead. The whole village knew... And for years thereafter, few would speak to me, save when it was necessary, as I was still master of the village, by the law. But, now Absor is master, and none speak to me at all. I am shunned, now... And, I suppose, rightly so. I feed myself with a small garden out back... A little fishing on the shore from time to time with my net... But all the while, I am alone," Malik said, and lowered his head. "I... I see you have grown powerful. You must have become a mighty sorceress to be able to summon and ride a creature such as that, and to keep the fire of youth alive on your face. I am sixty, now. You must be what... Nearly forty? Old Ehbrahal was wrong about you."

The mare nickered in obvious amusement, and the woman rolled her eyes. "Hardly, Malik. Ehbrahal was right - I haven't a trace of the *Talent*, myself. Marilith accompanies me because she chooses to, not because I use sorcery to force her to. As to my appearance... Well, that is a long story."

"*Bah. Never talk with your prey, just kill them and eat them and be done with it,*" Marilith snapped, with an air as though repeating an old cliché.

"If I were one of your people, I believe I would, Marilith," the woman replied, resting her lance upon her silver-mailed shoulder. "But, I am not. I can see Malik has suffered every day since his son died, knowing that he died because of what he did to me. I can see that the whole of the village of Woe turned against him after that day - as they should have - and he has suffered in loneliness since then. I would say, Marilith, that his debt to me was paid long ago, by the Goddess. For ten years, now, he has sat here, waiting for me. Waiting for me to end his life... Or perhaps to forgive him. Well, I shall do neither." The fire-haired woman glared at the old man who cowered before her.

"I just want you to know, Malik... If you had not done what you did twenty years ago... I'd probably have walked to your house today with your grandson in tow, ready to kiss you and greet you as the beloved grandfather of my children. Your son would be at my side, and you would still hold the respect of the entire village. Instead, I rode here on the back of a nightmare, ready to kill you. Your son is dead. You have no grandchildren, and never will. You will die alone, Malik, with not even an enemy at your side to see you off, and none to care that you are gone, or even bury your rotting carcass. That, I think, is the worst I could do to you in payment for what you did to me."

Malik shuddered, and the mare nickered in amusement. *"Very sweet. I like it,"* the mare said, then tossed her ebon mane. *"Shall we be off?"*

"Yes," the woman replied, hefting her lance in her right hand, and turned to mount again.

The image of dying utterly alone, with not even someone to tend to his bones, horrified Malik. His mind scrambled for something, anything that might avert that fate. "Wait, Sasha!" Malik cried, rising to his feet.

The woman paused, gazing back to the old man in surprise. "You... You remember my name? My *real* name?"

"Yes, I do," Malik replied, startled by her reaction.

The woman stared at him for a long moment before she spoke again. "All my life, I have been simply 'The Wench of Woe'. At first, it was a taunt, cast in my face by children. Then, a taunt cast by my opponents. But I transformed that taunt into a title to be feared. Now, my enemies tremble when they hear that the Wench of Woe approaches," Sasha said, and glared at Malik. "Only my friends know my true name, and only my friends may use it. With the death of your son, I only have one friend here in the village of Woe, and that is Orissa - I go to visit her, now. What gives *you*, of all people, the right to call me by my real name?"

"You will not find her, Wench," Malik replied, ignoring her question. His mind had grasped at a thin straw of hope, and he would not let go. "Orissa is gone."

"What? Gone? Where is she?"

Malik smiled. "That is a long story. Perhaps we should sit awhile, and exchange stories with each other?"

Sasha peered at Malik silently. After a long moment, she opened her mouth to speak, but was interrupted by the rumble of the approaching storm.

"A storm is coming, anyway. It might be better to wait it out inside my house. I can warm some tea, if you like. I still have a bit saved up..."

"It's a trick," Marilith snapped. *"Don't trust him."*

"No trick. Just a simple exchange of stories. If Wench will tell me her tale, I will tell her the story of Orissa. By then, the storm should be past, and you can continue on your journey."

Sasha thought about it for a long moment, then shrugged. "I doubt there's anything a feeble old man can do to hurt me, Marilith, even if he wanted to. Besides, I know you loathe rain as much as I do. His offer seems alright to me."

"Bah. I know more of the hearts of men than you do, sister," Marilith replied, and as Malik watched, her body shifted, becoming humanoid in a matter of a few heartbeats. She still had the head, hooves and hind legs of an ebon horse, smoke drifting from her nostrils, and her body was still covered with the same ebon pelt, but now Marilith had a torso and arms like that of a sensually shaped, nude woman. Malik stared at her nudity in open astonishment, but Marilith seemed not to care - she simply crossed her arms beneath her furry breasts as she continued speaking. "But, I think this is something you will have to deal with yourself. Likely to his regret." Marilith chuckled darkly. "I think I'll go amuse myself for a bit. Call me when you are ready to leave."

"I will, sister," Sasha replied, and without a further word, Marilith puffed into a cloud of foul-smelling smoke, which dissipated in the rising storm-breeze that came off the ocean.

"Shall we go inside?" Sasha offered.

A few minutes later, Sasha was seated at the little table inside Malik's house. Sasha nodded at the teacup Malik placed before her, but did not touch it. "Well? What happened to Orissa?"

The storm rumbled outside, and Malik eased himself down onto his bed, to sit - there were no other chairs in his small, one-room cabin. He had filled a teacup with tea, and drained it all in two long swallows before he spoke. "You first, Wench. It's been a long time - I'm sure you've probably been wanting to tell your story to someone, and never had the chance to in all your days."

"Actually, I have told my story to a friend once before."

"Oh? Who?"

"Well, that in itself is a long story."

"We-" Malik began, only to be interrupted by a loud crack of thunder, and the patter of rain atop his roof. After a moment, he smiled. "We appear to have time."

Sasha nodded, lifting the teacup before her and drinking it down, then setting the empty teacup on the table again. After a moment, she rose and walked over to the window, gazing out at the storm-whipped waves that now crashed into the beach. "Well... As you know, I wasn't born here in the village of Woe. I was washed ashore as a baby, tucked inside a sailor's trunk."

"Yes. A shipwreck at sea - some other flotsam and jetsam washed ashore at that time, as well. We never figured out where the ship was from, though our best guess was Arcadia," Malik replied, and bowed his head. "The Goddess was kind to you, that day."

"Perhaps... Well, the man who found me adopted me as my father, and raised me as his own daughter. His wife had recently died in childbirth, and he had no children of his own... He'd gone to the sea to pray to the Goddess that day, and saw the trunk I was in, washed ashore."

"Yes, Kashuah. He was a fine man. He died of the flux when you were fifteen, I believe."

"Fourteen, actually," Sasha replied dryly, her eyes still on the ocean.

"Well, our ancestors didn't name our town 'Woe' for nothing, you know. Sorrow seems to be a common thread of all the stories of our village."

"Do you want to hear this or not?!" Sasha snapped, glancing over her shoulder at Malik.

"Sorry. Do go on, please," Malik replied, bowing his head.

Sasha returned her gaze to the ocean. "Well... I suppose it all started one day shortly after I turned

sixteen..."

The Ocean - One.

I rubbed the sore knuckles of my right hand, struggling to hold back the tears as I glared down at Absor. "You *take that back*, you dung-headed little wart, or I'll *knock you down again!*"

Absor was the same age I was - sixteen. The miller's son, he was the biggest boy in the village. And as I stood there, furious, nearly in tears, it suddenly struck me that he *was* the biggest boy in the village, and I was suddenly afraid. He was bigger and stronger than me. He might even beat me senseless.

It was stupid. Why had I done it? Who cared if he called me Wench? Nearly everyone did, nowadays. I was tall for a girl, and I looked nothing like any of the others in the village. Their hair was brown or black - mine was red, like fire. Their eyes were brown, while mine were emerald green. A tall, gangly, odd-looking girl, obviously an outsider... I was a perfect target for taunts and bullies.

Jocko, Cashuah and Marko, his friends, stared down at Absor in shock and surprise. They hadn't expected this to happen. And, judging by Absor's face, neither had he. Absor reached to his lip, which was split and bleeding, and already beginning to swell. '*Oh, Goddess, they're going to laugh at him, now, and he's going to get up and beat me to a pulp to look big in front of them again.*'

And indeed, a heartbeat later, Jocko snorted, then all three of them burst into laughter as they gazed down at Absor. I was doomed. I awaited the inevitable with balled fists and thudding heart.

Absor suddenly looked sharply at Jocko. "You laughing at *me*?!"

"Ummm..." Jocko replied, taken aback.

Absor rolled to his feet, then lashed out with a meaty fist. With a loud *smack* of fist on chin, Jocko went down, unconscious.

"And *you*!" Absor growled, glaring at Cashuah and Marko. "*Are you laughing at me?!*"

Cashuah and Marko's faces instantly took on a look of fear. "N-no, Absor. Honestly," Marko replied.

Absor nodded, then turned to look at me. The blood trickled slowly from his swelling lip, and I was terrified. But I wasn't about to back down, now. Maybe I wasn't born in this village, but I was still my father's daughter. Win or lose, I wasn't going to run away.

"And as for *you*..." Absor growled, looking me over.

"Y-yes?" I replied, trembling.

Absor stuck out a meaty hand. "Pals," he said, and grinned.

It took me a moment to open my hand and take his in return - and when I did, he nearly crushed it in his grip. I firmed my jaw and squeezed back as hard as I could, with hands strengthened and callused by years of chopping wood and tending my father's fields.

Absor grinned at my grip. "You're alright, Wench," he said - but the last wasn't said with the same taunting hostility he'd used before. Now, it was said like he would a friend's nickname.

I bit back my angry reply. Father always said that the first thing a farmer learns is that sometimes it was better to settle for a small victory than no victory at all. He wouldn't stop calling me Wench - and really, I knew that no one in the village would. They'd all begun calling me that a year ago, when I insisted that my father's house and lands were mine, and I was damn well going to work the fields as best I could now that he was gone. It had been an enormous effort just to keep up with the weeds, much less grow enough food simply to feed myself. But, I had managed - and I'd refused Master Malik's demands that I sell the land, and move in with a family who would take care of me and "raise me properly." It was a small victory, but a victory nonetheless - just like this one, today. "My name is *still* Sasha, Absor."

Absor grinned broadly. "I know," he replied, then let go of my hand and turned his back to me. Jocko groaned, as he was just waking up, and Absor kicked him in the rump. "Get up, Jocko, I didn't hit you that hard. Let's go fishing in the creek."

I watched them walk away, my knees trembling. It was a long moment before I could stoop to pick up the sack of grain I had come to buy, and heft it onto my shoulder again.

"Sasha, wait!" a girl's voice called. I paused, smiling, and let Orissa catch up to me. She was holding the hem of her skirt up with one hand as she ran - all the girls of the village of Woe wore skirts, with a little apron on top. Well, all except me. I still wore the leather trousers and linen tunics my father got me for working in the fields. *'A skirt would just get in the way, Sasha,'* he said. *'We'll get you skirts and other frilly things later, when you're older and get interested in boys.'* Well, now it was later, and sometimes I was interested - but father was gone, and I hardly had the money to afford one. At least with a dozen chickens and a cow, I ate moderately well. Eggs and milk every day.

Finally Orissa caught up to me - though when she did, she was quite out of breath. "Sasha! That was amazing!" she said, once she'd caught her breath.

"What?"

"That fight! I saw it all!"

I grunted, shifting the sack of grain on my shoulder. "Can we talk as we walk? This grain is heavy, and I have to get it home so I can start planting tomorrow."

Orissa grinned. "Sure!"

As we walked towards my father's house, Orissa laughed. "I can't believe you knocked *Absor* down! You hit him right in the mouth!"

"Pfft. I was aiming for his nose," I replied sourly. "Father never taught me to fight. I wish he had."

"Really? Why?" Orissa asked, amazed.

"Because then maybe I wouldn't have been so *scared!*" I replied, and burst into giggles.

Orissa laughed. "You were *scared?!?*"

"Oh, yes! When I saw him sitting there, his lip bleeding... I was *sure* he was gonna get up and beat me until I had to *crawl* home!" I replied, and laughed.

Orissa giggled. "Well, I don't think that's ever gonna happen. I think Absor likes you, now. Like you were one of the boys."

"Bah."

"Bah? What? Did I say something wrong?" Orissa asked, looking at me curiously.

"No, it's just..."

"Just what?"

"Well, I don't *want* Absor to like me," I replied, then paused. "Well, I *do*, if that's what it takes to get him to leave me alone, but I mean... Well, I'd rather Yanar liked me."

"Yanar?" Orissa gaped. "You like *Yanar*?!"

I glowered at her. "Yes, I do. What's wrong with that?"

"Well, nothing, of course. He's very cute and terribly sweet. But..." Orissa replied, then giggled. "Well, I mean, he's the Village Master's son! He'll be the next Village Master in a few years, when his father steps down. His father would *never* approve if he knew. Master Malik does *not* like you!"

I made a face. "I know. He wanted me to sell my father's lands to him, and go live with one of the village families. Yours, I think. He never said which."

Orissa nodded. "It was ours. He had it all arranged and everything. My mother and father had already agreed to take you in. I think they were just going to have you sleep in my room with me, since we're about the same age."

"Really?!" I asked, surprised, and Orissa nodded.

I was silent a moment, and Orissa looked at me as we walked. "What's wrong?"

"Well..."

"Come on, you can tell me," she said, and grinned.

"Well... If he'd just come out and *told* me I would have been your sister, I might have said 'yes' instead of telling him to go to hell," I replied, and made a face again.

"Aww..." Orissa paused, and hugged me a moment. I hugged her in return with my free arm, and she patted my back. "You can still be my sister. Maybe not a real sister, but a sister of our hearts," Orissa replied, and smiled. "You're my best friend, Sasha. I've got four brothers and no sisters and I would love to think of you as my sister."

"Thank you," I replied, my eyes misting. "You're my best friend, too." We started walking again, and after a long moment, I sighed. "I just couldn't, you know."

"I know. The farm is all you have left of your daddy. The farm and Mimi the cow and the hens. That's all. You couldn't just sell it, even if it *would* give you a nice dowry."

I nodded. "He was a good man. And someone should take care of his lands, not just let mean ol' Master Malik have them," I said, and made a face again. "My father always said he didn't trust Malik. He

said he thought Malik..." I said, then shook my head. "Well, nevermind. Maybe Master Malik *was* trying to be nice to me, like he said. But I still think he just wanted the land."

"I think so, too," Orissa replied, then giggled. "Did you *really* tell him to go to hell?"

"Yes. I stood right up on my tiptoes and looked him right in the eye and told him he could take his idea and shove it where the sun don't shine."

Orissa burst out laughing, and I grinned. "No *wonder* he was so mad at you! Fifteen, *and* a girl, and you talk to the Village Master like *that?!"*

I nodded. "The look he gave me, though, I wasn't sure I'd make it to sixteen," I replied, and giggled for a moment. "But, here I am."

"And here we are, too," Orissa said, because we'd finally reached the gate for the little fence that marked the edge of my father's land. It was only three acres, and the house was near the gate. Orissa opened the gate for me and we walked the few remaining paces to my door. I dropped the grain by the door, then sat on it to rest. "Are you doing alright?" Orissa asked, carefully sitting on the grass next to me.

"I'm fine," I replied, rubbing my shoulder. "Just a little sore."

"No, I meant with the farm."

I thought about it. "Well, it was *very* hard last year, but it's a little easier this year. I'm a little bigger, and a lot stronger. I keep Mimi and the hens fed with weeds I scythe down, and doing that helped make me stronger, too. I think it will get easier as I get used to doing it all myself."

Orissa smiled. "My momma says that your daddy always wanted a son-" she began, and I looked at her sharply. Orissa simply giggled. "No, I don't mean it like that. I know you dress like a boy and all, but that's not what I mean. I think he got something better. I think he got *you*, instead. I think the Goddess sent you to him as an answer to his prayers, and to help keep his little dream alive."

I smiled. "Maybe..." I looked down at myself for a long moment, then sighed. "But sometimes..."

Orissa nodded, but said nothing.

"The spring festival is next week."

Orissa grinned. "I know. I already have my dress all ready for the dance. It will be *very* grand."

"I won't be going."

"Why not?" Orissa asked, then grinned. "Yanar will be there, you know," she said teasingly.

"Because I don't *have* a dress, and I can't afford one. My father thought that when I was older and ready for such things, he'd go buy me one, but..." I said, and Orissa nodded. "And even if I had one, I've no idea how to fix my hair so I'll look right, or anything. I've just been putting it up in a ponytail to keep it out of my way."

Orissa and I sat quietly after that, me resting and she thinking. Finally, Orissa brightened. "Well, we can fix that!"

"What? How?"

"Well, I have a very nice dress I wore to the spring dance last year. I could wear that instead, and take the one I made for myself this year and let it out for you," she said, and looked me over. "You've got broader shoulders and hips than me, and your bustline is bigger. You're taller, too, so I'd need to add a long trim at the bottom so it fit right. Hmmm... I might have to ask my momma to help me get it right in time for the dance. Or maybe just help make you a new one from scratch - you're about as big as my momma is, really. It might be easier to ask her if she has an older dress you can wear, instead. Either way, we'll ask," Orissa said, then grinned. "And as for your hair, I can help with that."

I gaped at her. "But... I... Well, I couldn't! I mean... Well, your mother doesn't like me at all, probably she'd turn the idea down flat! And I'm sure your father would take a poker to me and run me out of the house!"

Orissa whooped with laughter. "What *ever* could give you such an idea?"

"Well... I mean, last year, they had that big fight... I was coming over, I thought I'd visit you for a bit, and I heard some of it. They were fighting about *me*. I heard my name several times... Well, then I ran away," I replied, and sighed.

"Oh you big silly!" Orissa replied, playfully batting at my shoulder. "They weren't arguing over you like that! My daddy thinks the world of you! You work *very* hard to keep up your father's lands, just like a son would - and that's what the fight was about!"

I blinked. "It was? I don't understand..."

"Well, my momma thinks that if you do nothing but grow up alone and working like a boy and dressing like a boy and all that, you'll never find a husband of your own. My daddy disagreed - and that's what they were fighting about. Momma understands your situation, but she thinks a girl has to have time to be a girl, too. That's why she thinks it's a good idea I am your friend and am around you a lot. She thinks I'll be a good influence on you," Orissa said, and giggled. Orissa then looked around. "Do you have any more chores that need to be done today?"

"No, I milked the cow again and fed the chickens before I left to get the grain. I just have to put this away and I'll be done for the day. I thought I'd use the extra time to get ahead on some of my chores for tomorrow."

"Well, hurry up and put the grain away, then, and let's get going!" Orissa said, hopping to her feet.

"Ummm... Are you sure about this?"

"*Very* sure. I mean, you *are* my sister, after all," Orissa replied, and beamed a smile at me. "Come on!" Orissa said, holding out her hand.

I grinned, putting my hand in hers, and Orissa pulled me to my feet. "Alright, sister," I said, and we exchanged a hug.

The Spider - XXII.

"Kill her!" a man's voice snapped.

I blinked in confusion as I staggered to my feet, gazing at the woman. She, in turn, gazed silently at me.

An elf of some kind, that much I could see. Her ears were sharply pointed, and her aquiline face held the alien, ethereal beauty of all elf-maids. Yet, she was no race of elf I had ever seen or heard of before, of that I was certain. Her skin was indigo, her hair as white as snow, and her eyes black as night. The tattered brown rags the woman held about herself fluttered in a soft afternoon breeze, and as she gazed at me...

...I realized she was the most beautiful thing in the entire world.

From my right, a man in ringmail armor stepped forth, raising his broadsword to strike the woman down. A flash of sunlight gleamed off his sword. The woman's eyes never left mine, her expression remained calm.

I raised my sword as I stepped forth, blocking the man's stroke - then stood there a moment, gazing at the sword in my grip in surprise. I was armed, though I had not known it prior to this moment - a longsword in my right fist, and a long-hafted, single-bitted axe in my left. More, I was armored in what seemed a light, crudely-made chain armor, the thick, hammer-forged links easily large enough to slip a fingertip into - though where I had obtained such armor, I had no idea. A tartan kilt of some kind was about my waist, and stout studded-leather boots and gloves adorned fists and feet. It was, in many ways, as though I had only just awakened - I had no recollection of anything that might have happened in my life prior to looking into the woman's dark eyes.

"She's bewitched him!" the man shouted, and spat.

"She'll have him on us in a moment," another snarled.

"Well, at least he's on his feet again," the first replied sourly. "What with the scream, I thought he was dead from her spell, a moment ago."

I looked around, my back to the woman. There were four men, all in ringmail hauberks - steel rings sewn to a stout leather backing, the armor was proof against much, covering their torso, their arms down to almost the elbow, and the legs down to almost the knee. Beneath that, they appeared to be wearing woolen trousers and tunics, with boots of crude fur lashed about the ankle and calf by simple leather thongs. Atop their heads, each wore a simple nasal-helm, comprised of a hoop of beaten metal about the

head, a half-circle of metal running front to back and another from side to side, all riveted together over a stout leather cap. Each bore a well-used wooden shield on their left arm, the rim shod in iron. Behind them, at least a dozen small corpses lay - I stared in shock for a moment, thinking the corpses to be children, then realized after a moment they were goblins. Small creatures, half the size of a man, but no less ferocious or tenacious than any human warrior. Between and among them lay the corpses of several men - spent arrows in some, bloody sword wounds in others.

"What shall we do?" one of the men asked.

I looked around, my mind full of confusion. We were in a wooded, hilly area, and near a small path. As I looked, it seemed apparent that a vicious battle had been fought here - and not too long before this moment. But as to which side I had once belonged, I could not say.

"If we kill her, the spell may be broken," the first man said, glancing to the woman behind me.

Had the woman bewitched me? Perhaps she had. Certainly I could recall nothing before this moment. Sweat from exertion trickled down my face, and I had obviously been fighting only minutes before... Yet I could not tell whether I had fought beside these men, or against them. No matter - I could not let them kill the woman so casually. "Wait..." I called, then my voice faltered, for I knew not what else to say.

The man paused a moment, then smiled at me, a broken, gap-toothed grin. "Relax, my old friend. It's alright. We've known each other many years, now - come - stand aside from the wench. Once we've shortened her by a head, you'll be your old self again."

"No," I replied, and gripped my weapons firmly.

"To hell with this," one of the others growled, and started to step past me, his sword raised. With hardly a thought, I lashed out with my sword, the blade flickering above his shield, below his chin, and through his neck.

The stump of the man's neck geysered blood as his head tumbled to the ground, an expression of surprise forever fixed on his unshaven face. The body staggered, then collapsed, spasming, as I lashed out with my axe at the next one. The axe-head smashed him across the cheek, staggering him in a spray of blood and broken teeth as I stepped in, left foot behind and crossing the right, then spun, lashing out with my sword. With a meaty *-WHOP-* sound, the second's head flew off to join his companion's.

"He's killed them!" one shouted, astonished - but no more so than I. I had not known I was capable of fighting with such skill, nor did I know where or how I might have learned it. My body just seemed to *know*, and I responded without thinking, as though performing the tasks of a lifetime's training effortlessly, reflexively. The strength and speed I'd displayed also surprised me - but I had little time to ponder it.

"Take him!" the first man replied, and the other nodded, leaping in. I parried his slash with the haft of my axe, then flicked my sword out at his chin - a feint. He raised his shield to block, and I slashed down, the blade biting into his thigh just above his knee, below his stout hauberk and through his woolen trousers. He grunted in pain, his shield-arm reflexively jerking down, and I slashed horizontally with my axe.

The second man staggered back, his sword falling from nerveless fingers as he clutched uselessly at his slashed throat, the sick gagging sounds of his drowning in his own blood only beginning. The first man, however, would not be taken so easily. In a furious rain of steel, he drove me back, his sword flashing here and there, forcing me to parry and dodge again and again.

In desperation, I leaped back, out of his range. Shouting a battle cry, my opponent leaped forward, stabbing brutally in a mighty lunge. I tried to parry, but his lunge was simply too swift - I felt the sword bite through the crudely-made chainmail I was wearing, a deep wound just below my ribs. In shock, I realized I was mortally wounded.

"Kill *me*, will you?!" I roared, and slashed down with my sword, shearing through flesh and bone, severing his sword-hand at the wrist. "By the *gods*, I'll make *damn* sure you go, first!" I screamed as he staggered back, gazing in shock at the stump of his right wrist, the blood spurting freely. Enraged, I slashed with my sword, beheading him.

As I gazed down at my fallen opponents, I felt the blood pour from the wound to my belly. I was dying - and I knew it. No mortal being could survive a deep thrust to the abdomen. I let the sword and

axe fall from my grip. It was obvious I would not need them again.

I knelt on the soft grass, watching the pooling blood stain the kilt I was wearing over my crude chain leggings. Clan colors - my clan, I realized - though I knew nothing about them. Mostly green, with woven threads of red and yellow and black... Now, all were slowly being dyed red by my own life's blood. I raised my head, and looked to the woman. She still gazed at me silently, her dark blue face utterly calm, the breeze fluttering her snow-white hair...

...and she was still the most beautiful thing in all the world.

"I am dying," I said, simply - and with the utterance of that truth, I suddenly felt *immensely* tired.

"Are you?" she replied, a slight smile playing at the corner of her lips.

"Tell me, woman..."

"Yes?" she said, her voice the soft sounds of a dove.

"Were you worth it?"

The woman smiled, then laughed. "*I* think so, barbarian."

She knelt beside me then, one tiny blue hand carefully holding the tattered rag about her to cover herself, and the other lightly stroking my wound, my blood flowing over her fingers. She muttered quietly, and I *felt* something... I could *feel* the flow of blood slowing... I could *feel* the wound closing, the flesh knitting...

"Mmm..." she said softly, her eyes lifting to gaze off into the distance, a faint smile lighting her lips. "Feed from the strength of my body, Barbarian, and grow strong..."

"But..."

"Shh..." she muttered, an odd smile on her face. "Sleep now, Barbarian..." she said, and gestured negligently with her bloodied hand.

And in that moment, the world dimmed, and grew dark.

The Ocean - Two.

Orissa's mother, Calla, looked me up and down, and I trembled beneath her gaze more than I had with Absor. Finally, she put her hands on her hips. "Impossible, Orissa. We'd never get your dress altered in time. She's too big. She's as big as your brother, Nardo," Calla replied, mentioning her oldest son.

My heart sank. "Well, I-"

Calla peered at my feet. "And *slops* to the spring festival? I think not. She'd need a pair of *nice* shoes if she's going to turn the boy's heads."

"Well, that's alright. It was just a thought, anyway, and I guess I don't really have to go after all. I-"

"Rubbish! Who said you weren't going?"

I blinked. "Umm..."

Orissa simply giggled at me - she was used to her mother, and I was not. Calla, for her part, simply turned and shouted to the back room of their house. "Hamat! Come here, please!"

A few moments later, Orissa's father stepped into the room. "What is it, dear?"

"Do you still have that money we set aside in case Sasha wanted to go to the spring festival?"

Hamat nodded, grinning at me. "Aye, that I do."

"Well, good, we'll need it. She wants to go, and she'll need a dress and shoes."

Hamat laughed. "You were right again, as usual, Calla!" he chortled. "Well, I saw Nandi the Dressmaker walking by when I came in earlier - shall I go fetch her?"

"Yes, please. We'll take her by the shoemaker later, as well," Calla said, then beamed at Orissa. "And actually, *Orissa* was right, she was the one who mentioned it first. I simply agreed."

Hamat nodded. "Alright, dear. Back in a bit," he said, and trotted out the door while Orissa and Calla shared a smile.

I gaped in open astonishment, hardly able to believe what was happening. "I... I can't possibly pay you for-"

Calla glowered at me. "Pay? Pish! It's nothing, dearie," she replied, waving a hand dismissively. "Now - I was drawing a bath for Nardo, but he can wait. You're absolutely filthy, child - you look like you've been working all day."

"Well, I have," I replied wryly.

"Well, let's get you out of those dirty clothes and into one of my old dresses so you at least have *something* to wear when the dressmaker comes. You can wear it home, as well. Come," Calla commanded, crooking a finger at me.

I followed dutifully, grinning from ear to ear, and Orissa tagged along behind, giggling.

Two hours later, having been properly soaked and scrubbed and brushed, dressed in one of Calla's old dresses, measured by the dressmaker and taken for a quick visit to the shoemaker's shop, I was now sitting in Calla's kitchen, watching and listening as she explained all the "do's and don'ts" I should observe at the dance.

"And remember - women *curtsey*, not bow. Besides that women look silly bowing, your dress will be square-cut at the top, like this one, but a bit lower. Do *not* bow to the boys, you might fall out of it."

"Yes, ma'am," I replied, flushing with embarrassment as Orissa burst into giggles.

"You curtsy like this. Watch," she said, and grasped her dress below the hips, dipped her left knee while putting her right foot behind herself, and bending at the waist a bit. "Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good, now you try."

I rose and mimicked her actions, but Calla just rolled her eyes. "No, no. With *poise* and *grace*. Like this," she said, and showed me again.

I tried again, and Calla nodded. "Good. You'll need to practice it more, however. Orissa, I leave it to you to show her properly in the next week."

"Yes, mamma," Orissa replied, grinning.

"By the Goddess!" a boy's voice yelled. I looked, and saw it was Nardo. He had walked into the kitchen while Calla was showing me how to curtsy, and he now gaped at me, wide-eyed. "Is that Wench?!"

"My name is *Sasha*," I growled.

Nardo help up his hands in surrender. "Hey, sorry. I saw Absor's lip after you got through with him, I don't want the same."

Calla, however, completely ignored the exchange - or seemed to, to me. "Ah, Nardo. I'm glad you're here. I'll need someone to show Sasha the basic steps of the dances she'll be doing at the spring festival, and you'll do nicely."

Nardo rolled his eyes. "But *Ma!*"

"But *what?*" Calla replied, and glowered at him. It dawned on me that in this house, Calla was Queen, and the kitchen her throne-room - and she would brook no objections to her rule. I grinned. I wanted to run a house like that someday, myself.

"I only came in because father wanted to know when dinner would be ready!"

"It'll be ready when it's ready," Calla replied imperiously, "and your father already knows that. We've been married twenty years, he had better have learned by now. Now come. I need you to show her the steps while I cook," she said, then glowered at Nardo again. "Or do you want dinner to be later than it already is?"

"No, Ma," Nardo replied, stifling a sigh with an obvious effort, then walked up to me. He looked me over for a moment, obvious appreciation in his eye, then looked back to his mother. "Where should I start?"

"Not with the brans'l, we don't have the room and I'll not have that kind of dashing about in my kitchen. Start with the pallad'e and work from there," Calla replied, and turned her back on us, bending to the fire to check her pots.

"It's alright," I said, smiling. "I know it's late, I can just head home, now, and you can finish cooking. I can learn the steps another day."

Calla stood and looked at me. "What?! Turn someone from my kitchen this close to dinner with no food in their bellies?! I won't hear of it. You're staying, and that's that."

And, indeed, that *was* that. Calla wouldn't listen to any other suggestions. As each of her four sons poked their head into the kitchen one at a time to learn when dinner might be ready, she simply let the previous one go and snatched the next up, and had them teach me something else I'd yet to learn - all the while, each of them gaped at me in astonishment.

Dinner was an interesting experience. All four boys kept stealing glances at me, which only made Orissa and Calla grin. Hamat, for his part, wanted to talk with me about how I was doing, what my plans were with the farm, and so on. Finally, he turned to his wife and grinned. "You know, Calla... I think that Sasha, here, will make a fine catch for some boy, someday. She's got a good head on her shoulders, she's strong, pretty... It's only too bad our *own* boys never noticed any of that before, like you and I did. Why, I'll bet she's already got her heart set on someone already, and it's none of our boys."

I blushed deeply as the boys looked embarrassed, then blushed again when Orissa spoke up. "Oh, yes, daddy. She's already interested in Yanar."

"Oh? Does he know about this?"

I blushed furiously as Orissa shook her head. "No, but I think he was going to find out at the spring festival," she replied, and grinned impishly at me.

"Ah, Sasha," Calla said, shaking her head. "You're setting yourself up for a disappointment."

"Aye," Hamat agreed, nodding. "There's not a chance in hell Malik would allow it, once he found out."

I simply nodded silently, too embarrassed to speak.

"Well... I wish you the best, of course," Hamat said, nodding his head to me. "The Goddess works in her own ways, and if it's her will you be Yanar's wife, then it will happen whether Malik likes it or not. But if not," he said, and waved a spoon at his four sons. "At least give these boys a chance, Sasha. They're good boys. And I think today has opened their eyes a bit, and made them realize you're more than just the girl everyone calls "The Wench of Woe", but are in truth a fine young woman."

Nardo and his brothers nodded. "And how," Nardo replied, looking at me.

I blushed deeper, too embarrassed to speak.

Calla smiled mysteriously. "Well, I think that's enough for now. If she blushes any more, I think her face will catch fire. Besides - she's done eating. Sasha, it's starting to get dark outside. Would you like one of the boys to lead you back with a lantern, or will you be alright by yourself?"

"I-I'll be alright," I said, standing up quickly. "I... Umm... Well, I thank you for everything, really I do."

"You're quite welcome, dear. Now - your shoes are over there, by the door, and I've placed your clothes just there, on the chair nearby. You can keep that dress you have on - it's an old one of mine that doesn't quite fit me any more, but it looks alright on you. It will give you something nice to wear when you come to town, if you like. And don't forget to pick up your dress the day before the festival from the dressmaker. Orissa, you remind her."

"Yes, mamma," Orissa replied, grinning.

"Good. Well, goodnight, Sasha," Calla called, and her words were echoed by everyone at the table. I curtsied - it seemed the appropriate thing to do - and Calla grinned broadly. It was an effort not to simply run out of the house, I was so flustered and embarrassed. But, I managed to pick up my belongings and walk out with what I thought was at least *some* degree of poise.

I walked home in the growing gloom of sunset, my mind awl with all the day's events. I hadn't expected *any* of it - and yet, it had all been so wonderful and exciting, I thought my heart would burst

with happiness. Before I knew it, I was already out of the village, and nearly to my own little farm.

"You there! Girl!" a man's voice snapped, heavily accented.

I jumped, and was so startled I nearly dropped everything I was carrying. I had been so happy, I literally wasn't looking at anything around me, and hadn't seen the man at the edge of the road, near the trees, until the very moment he called out to me. I looked at him now - and found he frightened me terribly. He was human, of that there was no doubt. His ears were rounded. Old Ebrahal, the traveling sorcerer and healer, had once said that humans were the only beings on our world with round ears - all others had pointed ears. Yet, he was unlike any other human I'd ever seen in my life.

His eyes were slanted, the iris dark, and his hair was black and cropped short. His skin was paler than that of any Vilandian I'd seen in the Village of Woe, with an almost yellowish cast. He wore a suit of gleaming armor finer than even that of the Duke's men I'd seen ride through town one day, and the hilt of a strange, curved sword could be seen projecting from the sash at his waist. The stallion he sat upon was a lightly-built animal with a pale white coat, who gazed at me silently from the roadside. "Tell me, girl," the man repeated in his strange, thickly accented speech, "is this the village called Woe?"

"Y-yes," I replied, trembling.

"Good, good. And where might I find the one called Master Malik?"

"H-h-he..."

"Come, come, girl! Out with it!"

"I-if you follow the road th-th-that way and t-t-take the first turning to the left, y-y-you will find his house the fourth on the right," I stammered in reply.

"Very good," the man said, and started to lift the reins to his steed. Then, he paused, looking me over. "You're quite the pretty one."

"Th-thank you."

"How old are you?"

"I'm sixteen."

"And you live here, in Woe? You hardly look like a local girl, but more like a foreigner."

"Y-yes, I live here," I replied, now trembling like a leaf.

"Tell me..." the man said, leaning forward in his saddle and smiling. "Are you married, fire-hair?"

"I... I..."

"Yes?"

"Yes, I'm married. To a very large man, even bigger than you! And he has six brothers bigger than him! And they're all waiting for me back home and if I don't get there soon they'll come looking for me with blood in their eyes!"

The man leaned back in his saddle, and laughed. "Well, I certainly wouldn't want to risk angering such a dangerous-sounding family. I shall bid you good evening, fire-haired wench," he said, and laughed again, flicking the reins of his horse. The horse obediently turned and walked off, towards the village, and I turned and ran all the rest of the way to my house.

It was an age before I could stop trembling and checking all the bolts on the doors to my little house over and over, and finally just sit down and try to relax. "Palome..." I said, the words of my father suddenly coming back to me. "He was from Palome..."

My father had described seeing men of Palome occasionally visit Master Malik. A strange people, unlike the Vilandians at all, with a culture totally different from ours. Their nation was far to the east of us, father had explained, and their lands were unknown. What little was known of them was from their traders, and their raiders. When I asked how you might tell the difference between the two, father simply said "their traders don't wear armor."

"Malik is dealing with their raiders, Sasha. I've seen them, three times, now. They think I'm just an ignorant farmer, and I don't know what I'm seeing. But I wasn't always a farmer, Sasha. I once was a sailor. I've been places... And I've seen things. So whatever you do, don't trust Malik. He's up to something... But I don't know what."

My father's words, from two years ago. I believed my father then, and I still believed him now.

But what to do about it?

The Ocean - Three.

"Come, now," Ebrahal said in his elderly, creaking voice.

My heart was bursting with the impatient enthusiasm of youth. An entire week of nervous preparation had led up to this moment, the first dance of the festival. Orissa had even come by this morning to help me do my hair properly - I looked as good as I possibly could - and now Ebrahal wanted to take me aside to be tested for the *Talent*? I wanted to scream. "I'm sorry, but-"

"No 'buts', dear," Ebrahal insisted. "It's the Duke's law. Those who have *Talent* must be found, and sent for proper training. We've too few trained sorcerers in this duchy, and that's a fact. The Duke feels that the war between the Larinians and the Arcadians shows that true sorcery will have its place in future battles - and, perhaps he's right," Ebrahal said, then grinned a gummy grin. "Besides, dear... It will only take a moment. Come. Sit."

I sighed and sat next to Ebrahal, watching the boys and girls of the village as they gathered together in small groups, each side eyeing the other with youthful nervousness. "It's almost noon - the dance will start without me," I said, and pouted.

"Hardly, my dear. Master Malik knows I've the task of assensing the astral aura of all those who come of age, and have every year for fifty years. Nothing will begin until I have had the time to examine each and every one of you who is of age this year," Ebrahal said, then paused. "Wait... You *are* sixteen this year, aren't you? Or did I miss you last year? You're quite tall, young lady..."

"Yes, I'm sixteen this year. My birthday was last month - though it's only a guess my father made, as I was found on the beach when I was a baby, floating in a sailor's trunk."

Ebrahal nodded. "Yes, dear, I know the story well. Now just sit still a moment, and let me concentrate. A weak talent is sometimes hard to see, but even the weakest of talents would be of some use to the crown."

My glance caught upon Ebrahal, who had closed his eyes, and now breathed softly. Yet, he was not asleep. His face bore a look of concentration, and his fingers twitched slightly in his lap as he did something sorcerous I knew nothing of. Finally, his ancient eyes flew open, and he shook his head. "Nothing," he said sourly, then laughed. "Of all the young men and women I have examined, little one, you are probably the *most* mundane of all. There isn't the slightest trace of the *Talent* in you."

"Well, good!" I said, somewhat flustered. To be found to have the *Talent*, the innate ability to master the forces of *mana* and do sorcery, was a truly life-changing event. By the Duke's law, the child was sent away, cloistered away at the Academia Magica nearby the Duke's castle. From all reports, it was a good life, though a hard one. Studying day and night to master arcane knowledge taught by hard teachers... Yet they fed their students well, and those who managed to graduate were guaranteed to have lucrative employment either with the Duke, or with many other nobles around Vilandia. Many youths dreamed of such a life - and, in truth, sometimes I did, as well. In Vilandia, the only way a girl would ever get an advanced education was to either be born to a noble house, or to be found to have the *Talent* and be trained at the Academia Magica. Yes, many times I thought that I might want to learn, to have a real education. To learn *why* the sun rose in the morning, and why the moon changed phases... But not today. I wanted none of that today - today, I simply wanted to *dance*.

"Are you done yet, Ebrahal?" a man's voice asked peevishly. I turned, and my blood ran cold. It was Malik.

He was dressed in his finest garb, of course. Blue satin breeches, a pale silk tunic, and a feathered cap upon his head, he looked very much the part of Village Master. Yet, the scowl he gave me sent chills down my spine. Malik waved a hand at me dismissively. "If you're done with Wench, then let's get on with it. The young ones are getting restless, and their yawping is driving me to distraction."

"I'm quite done with Sasha, yes, Master Malik," Ebrahal replied. "She hasn't a trace of the *Talent* in her, she's as mundane as a stone."

"Good, it's best. I've hardly the time to bother, otherwise," Malik replied. I knew what he meant, of course. If I had been found to have the *Talent*, I would hardly be a problem disposed of simply. No, it would be his responsibility to care for my lands and my animals while I was away at the Academia Magica, and that would be a commitment of several years, at least. As he wanted my father's lands for himself, having to tend to the very lands he wanted until I had completed my training and returned as an adult to dispense with them would hardly be a task he would enjoy (though, of course, he would

probably hire someone to do it, rather than do it himself). "Get going, Wench, you've held up the whole village long enough."

I bit back an angry retort and dashed over to where the other girls stood. Father said that patience was often the best revenge, though it was often the hardest course to follow. I knew in my heart that father was right. Someday, Malik and I would have an accounting of all the slights he had done me... But not today. Today, I would *dance*.

And dance, I did.

All the steps that Orissa and her brothers had shown me, all came easily. Though I was nervous at first, I found something in the dance... Something inside myself that let me push aside the problems of my life. The farm, Malik, Absor, all of it - all shunted aside as the music swept me up, and carried me away. I danced most often with Yanar, of course, for I found him attractive. Yet, the music struck a chord deep in my soul, and I found I minded little when the gyrations of the 'exchange' dances brought another partner before me. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the adults in the village looking on - the women smiling and the men appraising me with a new eye, as they saw the grace that somehow, magically, the music imbued into my feet. Perhaps I was an outsider. Perhaps I was not of their race. Perhaps I was still the Wench of Woe. Yet, for that brief span of time, none of that mattered. I was no longer even a girl, in truth - I was a woman, dancing the dance of her youth.

My heart pounded to the rhythm of the music. My soul felt light, all the troubles of my life vanished upon an uplifting wind of song and dance. For one bright, shining moment, the world was perfect.

Then, in what seemed a mere matter of heartbeats, it was over. The music faded into silence, and the applause of the village. Yanar stood before me, grinning broadly - he had danced with me for perhaps the last half hour, yet I hardly noticed. But as the warmth of his smile fell upon me, I found myself grinning back with joy and happiness - and then grinning even more broadly when I realized I had just shared the most profound moment of my young life with someone I cared about. "You were fabulous, Sasha," Yanar said, and sketched an awkward bow. My heart bursting with emotion, I reached out and hugged him tight.

Suddenly a strong hand grasped my shoulder, and threw me back - I landed painfully on my rump, startled and surprised. Malik stood between Yanar and I, his face twisted into a snarl. "Not with *my* son, you don't!"

Yanar looked just as surprised as I. "Father, what are you doing?!"

Malik spun on his son and struck like a coiled snake, his hand lashing out to slap his son's face. "*Don't* think you can play innocent with *me*, boy! I've heard you talking about her, and I *damn* well am not going to have you dilute our blood line with this pasty-faced, fire-haired wench! She is *not* one of *our* people, boy, she's an outsider! An Arcadian, most likely, but no matter - she's *not* one of us! You are my only son, and I will *not* have you marrying some pasty-faced wench and producing a litter of mongrel offspring with her!"

My anger rose to the surface as I sat there in the dust, and I sputtered with outrage for many heartbeats, unable to even speak. But as angry as I was, Yanar was even more furious. He was, in truth, his father's son, and had his father's temper. "*Marriage?! What the hell are you talking about?! It was just a dance!*" he roared in return. "And even if I *did* want to marry her, *what the hell gives you any idea you'd have any say in that?!*"

Father and son screamed at each other for many moments thereafter, and I felt a hand at my shoulder, helping me up. It was Orissa. As I looked to her face, I saw she was weeping. I looked around, and the other villagers were staring at me, and the scene Malik and Yanar were making. And as their gaze fell upon me, I could see it in their eyes. The magic of the dance was gone, never to return.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to weep. I wanted to ball my fists and beat Malik to within an inch of his life - though he was a full-grown man, and I doubted he'd have to do more than simply knock me down again. The most magical moment in my young life had been, unfortunately, the briefest - and now would forever be tainted with this.

I turned, tears streaming down my face, and ran away.

I heard Orissa's voice calling after me, but I did not stop. I could run very fast when I wanted to - and I wanted to. Soon, her voice faded into silence behind me.

The Spider - XXI.

I awoke to a sanguine sky of sunset, the loud buzz of insects, and the heavy smell of death. The chill of an early spring evening was upon me, yet, oddly, it did not bother me, even though the crude chainmail I wore was hardly any kind of protection from the elements.

I sat up, and saw I had not moved - I was still in the forest, beside the small path. The corpses of goblins and men lay about me, blow-flies already at them. A small hand-cart I had not noticed before had been drawn near, its contents disgorged on the ground - mostly food in a few wheels of cheese and loaves of bread, and several large skins of drink. The indigo-skinned elf-woman sat atop a small blanket she had apparently pulled from the wagon, holding her rags to herself with one hand, and shivering.

The memory of what had passed between us earlier flickered across my mind - but try as I might, I could recall nothing before the moment I looked into her eyes. I gazed at her now, but she did not return my gaze. Instead, she simply finished stuffing the bread and cheese back into the leather bag they apparently came from, pulling the drawstring tight, and laid them aside.

"You shiver," I said, simply.

She looked up at me, then, glancing at my face, then nodded. "Yes, Barbarian. It is quite cold."

"It does not seem so, to me."

She smiled, her teeth chattering. "I do not suppose it would."

"We must find you a blanket, or something, lest you catch chill," I said, looking at her. Her blue skin was covered with goosebumps, and she shivered even more strongly as I watched. "And start a fire, I think."

"As to the former, there is little but the small blankets of the goblins. Each is too small to cover me. As to the latter," she said, and chuckled. "I am a necromancer, Barbarian. I know no spells to spark fire in wood, though I can make bones burn were there any near, and have no skills at using the little tinderboxes the goblins had."

I shrugged. "Wrap yourself in that blanket you sit upon, there, and I will gather tinder for a campfire," I said, snatching up my weapons and rising to my feet.

"I cannot."

I sheathed my sword in the leather scabbard that hung at my left hip, and gazed at her oddly. "Why not?"

"I am accursed, Barbarian. A great punishment from my people, for studying the forbidden arts. The touch of life is painful to me, Barbarian, and the grass beneath this blanket is alive. The curse is such that each blade of grass that touches my skin leaves no mark, but burns like the kiss of a razor."

"Is that why your skin is indigo?"

"Yes - and why my hair has turned from its natural shade of ebon to one of pure white. I am a Dark

Elf, Barbarian, and my skin was once white as bone and my hair black as night, like any other of my people. Necromancy is an art forbidden to our people by ancient law and custom - yet, not to our allies, the goblins, who are masters of the art. I studied among the goblin necromancers, and learned much over a span of years greater than the length of your life. Then, one day, I was caught by my people. Tried and sentenced, I was duly dropped into a vat of *Lobh'dath*, which caused all my hair to fall out and the deep blue stain of the *Lobh'dath* to seep into my skin, that all my people forevermore would see the criminal that I am as I suffered my eternal punishment. Yet, I was still of some value to the goblins, as a necromancer of my skill is a rare thing among their people, so I went to live with them while I recovered. In time, my hair grew back to my shoulders, as you see it now - but white as snow," she said, and shrugged. "Eventually, the High Necromancer of the Council of Death, the ruling council of the goblins, heard of my skill. He ordered me to be brought to him last week, that I might serve him - yet, the dwarves have had some recent successes in their endless battles against the goblins, and the tunnels that led where I needed to go were now quite dangerous. The High Necromancer sent a dozen of his personal bodyguards, and once they had me in their charge, we set off across the surface lands. On our fourth day of travel, we encountered you."

I blinked. "Me?"

The woman smiled despite the chill. "Yes, Barbarian. You and your friends apparently meant to rob our little caravan. The battle was fiercely-fought, but in the end, you slew my bodyguards and tore my threadbare robes from my body, apparently intending to rape me and kill me. Or, perhaps the other way around - it was difficult to say, as it all happened so swiftly," she said, and smiled wryly as she continued. "No matter - I decided I did not wish either result to occur, so-

"So you bewitched me," I finished.

The woman smiled again, though she shivered with cold. "It was more than a simple charm, but yes, Barbarian. I'm sure you have been wondering just who you are and where you have come from - I'm sorry I cannot tell you more than that, or perhaps fill your little head with all sorts of lovely thoughts that you were some brave and noble hero before I laid my spell upon you, but the truth is that so far as I know, you were a bandit and a rapist. Though I do not know your history, it is obvious from your size and garb you are a man of the Snowy Wastes to the far north. I would guess it likely you were a wanderer or even an outcast from your own people, who traveled south to enrich yourself on the gold that you might find in the pockets of the people you ran across," she said, and shrugged. "Nor, for that matter, can I lie to you and tell you some fanciful tale about how I am a sweet and gentle princess you rescued. I am a Dark Elf - a race of people shunned by the surface-dwelling races as evil and abhorrent. I am also a necromancer, punished and shunned by my own people for the crime of necromantic sorcery."

"Perhaps... But this is only what *you* say," I replied, narrowing my eyes. "You could un-do what you have done to me... Remove your spell. Then, I would know the truth of myself."

"And you would kill me, of course, for having bewitched you in the first place," she finished, and shivered again with the chill of the coming evening. "Is that what you want?"

I gazed at her in silence for a long moment, and she returned my gaze calmly. There was no fear in those dark eyes. She was cold, yes, and her body shivered from time to time. But she was not afraid. And as I looked at her...

...I realized she was, still, the most beautiful thing in the world.

The woman mistook my silence for an answer, and laughed. "No matter, Barbarian. Even if I wanted to, I cannot heal what I have done to you. I am no Noetecist, who studies deep and subtle spells of the mind, nor am I any Ayurvedician, whose skills at healing sorcery might repair this. No, Barbarian - the spell I used had all the subtlety and grace of a sledge hammer - and the effects are just as permanent. Unfortunately for you, it was the only spell I could use at that moment, in that situation." She then shivered strongly, and turned her gaze from mine, looking down to the ground. "I am cold, Barbarian. Start a fire for me, please."

I nodded, and set about doing just that.

An hour later the sun had set, and the bowl of the heavens hung above; the glittering diamonds of countless stars gleaming from the ebon silk of the night sky. As the blue-skinned elf-woman huddled by the fire, shivering, I worked quietly, stitching the little blankets of the goblins into something larger, and more useful to her. A wooden-handled punch-needle and a spool of coarse thread were easily found in the contents of the little hand-cart, apparently intended to repair soft leather items, and it pleased me to see the skill was, at least, something I was not utterly incompetent with. At last, I examined my work, returning the needle and thread to their little case. Satisfied it would, at least, not fall apart immediately, I rose and wrapped the woman up in it carefully, winding the long blanket about her twice.

"Thank you," she said quietly, her gaze upon the fire.

"You are welcome," I replied, and sat down on the opposite side of the fire from her. The coolness of the early spring night bothered me not at all - which, somehow, seemed odd, given her own reaction to the cold. I supposed my people, far in the north, were better adapted to cold... Or, perhaps, simply immune to it.

We sat there in silence thereafter, I gazing at her, and she gazing at the fire. Finally, she chuckled softly.

"What is it?" I asked, peering at her.

"Ah, nothing of note. It simply dawned on me I could have told you a far more adept lie, rather than simply telling you the truth."

"Oh?"

"Yes. You are a barbarian of the Snowy Wastes, those far-off lands where the snow falls most of the year. Your hair, like mine, is as white as snow - though for different reasons, of course. All your people are as you are, whereas none of mine are as I am."

I blinked in surprise, then reached behind my head to the ponytail that I could feel hung behind. Flicking the long hair over my shoulder, I gazed at it - and saw she spoke truly. My hair was as white as hers. "Interesting..."

"Yes, I could simply have told you some fanciful tale about being your sister, accursed by the gods... A grand and noble tale of how you have sought me for ages, coming down from the northlands to search among the myriad cultures of the south... Or perhaps something else equally ridiculous but easily believable in your state."

"Why didn't you, then?" I asked, flicking my hair behind me again.

"Because there seemed no need, Barbarian. And more, I would have begun our relationship with a lie, and had to maintain it with a lie. And stacking lie upon lie is much like stacking dish upon dish - eventually, the pile grows so high that no matter how carefully balanced, it collapses under its own weight," she replied, and smiled. "The truth seemed easier."

"But is it really the truth, or only as much of it as you are willing to share?" I asked, narrowing my eyes.

The woman smiled. "So suspicious, are we, Barbarian?" she said, and laughed. "I suppose it is the nature of your people, for he who is not born wary will hardly survive in lands as harsh as your homeland. They say that in the portions of your lands that are the farthest to the north, snow covers the lands year 'round, and the ground is not earth, but ice over immensely deep, immensely cold ocean... They say that some parts of your lands, for three months of the year, the sun does not set, but rather hangs low in the sky even at midnight - and there is another three months of the year when the sun does not rise, as well. I would ask you the truth of those tales, and what indeed *did* bring you to the southlands, but..." she said, and laughed again.

I shrugged. "But I do not know, thanks to you."

The woman smiled. "No matter, Barbarian. In answer to your question, I need you, and you need me, thus, it is apparent we will have at least some sort of relationship. Though the High Necromancer of the Council of Death thought to honor me, I have little desire to serve as someone's lackey for the rest of my days simply because my own people shun me and I know not the skills of survival in the wilderness, either above or below the earth. I have other plans for my life, and other places I need to go - particularly since I wish to find a cure for the curse of the *Lobh'dath*, which makes the touch of living flesh upon my own agonizing. I need *you* to get where I wish to go. In turn, *you* need *me*, though you do not realize it yet. More, my own spell has rendered you as ignorant as a child. You know not where you are, what lands might lie around you, what dangers might lie before you..."

"Not *completely* ignorant," I replied, glowering, and waved a hand at the corpses which lay nearby.

"The scent of those corpses will draw wolves in a bit, and I have no shovel to bury them with. I may be able to fight off one or two, but some in the pack will be able to reach you. What will you do *then*, woman?"

She simply rolled her eyes at me, brought a shapely blue arm out from beneath the blanket I'd wrapped her in, and gestured negligently to the corpse of the man whose throat I'd slashed with my axe. "Get up, you've rested long enough."

The hairs at the nape of my neck stirred, and I felt a chill of fear run down my spine as the corpse rose to her command. The gaping, mortal wound I'd inflicted in his neck was still there, a bloody, second mouth below his chin, and his eyes gazed vacantly at us, the dull, lusterless eyes of the dead.

"Start cleaning up these bodies - pile them over there, away from us. Gather the weapons and other equipment, and place them in the cart, there. Defend yourselves and us from any predators that attack, as well. Once all has been gathered, begin digging graves for the bodies, and bury them. Do it now."

The dead man nodded, then turned and shambled off, his shuffling, puppet-like gait the movements of a nerveless thing from beyond the grave.

"And you, and you," The woman said, gesturing to a few others of the more intact corpses. "Join him. Get to work," she commanded, and three more of the dead rose, and obeyed.

"There," the woman said, turning back to look at me as she pulled her arm beneath the blanket again. "Once the corpses are all cleared up, they'll begin digging a grave for them with their hands. It will take most of the night, probably, but they do not sleep or tire, so it is of little import. Any wolves that come by they are more than capable of driving off, since a wolf's fangs will hardly suffice to rend the Un-Life from their bodies, and as fresh zombies, the strength of their thews is easily twice that which they had when alive," she said, and shrugged. "As for me, I doubt any normal animal will attack me at all. My scent is that of a *necromancer*, Barbarian, a dealer in the powers of death and darkness. Normal animals will *hardly* approach me, as they are usually *far* smarter than that. No, only fell beasts would dare approach me, Barbarian, and as they are rare, I have little to fear in that regard. You, on the other hand, have no such protection - thus, you are right. The corpses must be buried."

I gazed silently at the zombies as they worked, and found I could not suppress a shudder of revulsion and fear. Perhaps her people *were* considered 'evil' by the morals of the surface-dwelling races, but if they considered this type of sorcery to be forbidden, then perhaps they were not entirely lacking in redeeming values.

I looked again to the indigo-skinned elf-maid, and saw her expression was one of exhaustion. "You are tired..."

"Yes, Barbarian - you are quite perceptive," she replied, and smiled, hiding her exhaustion again behind an aloof disposition. "My own wizard's staff was lost months ago. I snapped it to try to kill the queen's hounds that were sent to bring me to 'justice' - though the blast killed a few, I was captured anyway. Lacking the reserves of endurance it could provide, I must rely only on the strength of this body - and raising four zombies is quite tiring, despite having rested from my earlier exertions," she said, and yawned. Oddly, though her skin was indigo and her lips a dark magenta, the inside of her mouth was colored normally - pearl white teeth, red tongue, and so on. I supposed when her people tossed her into the vat of magical dye, meant to curse her with pain eternally, she'd simply kept her mouth closed. "But enough," she said, finally managing to stifle her yawn. "Guard me while I sleep, Barbarian, for I am, indeed, quite tired."

I nodded, rising to my feet and drawing my weapons, then stood, gazing off into the darkness of the night-shrouded forest. Awhile later, her breathing became soft - I glanced to her, and saw she had fallen asleep.

The night passed slowly, a gibbous moon sailing across the star-filled seas of the heavens above. The wolves did come - a small pack of six. The zombies simply drew their weapons and shuffled towards them. A human might have run - but the wolves could smell the blood and rotting meat, and could not resist. With powerful sword-cuts driven by the strength of their dead thews, the zombies rent the life from two of them before the pack slunk off to lick their wounds elsewhere. The zombie's ragged wounds did not bleed, though one oozed dark, curdling blood for a few moments as they shuffled off to resume their work. For her part, the woman slept through it all, apparently completely exhausted. I simply stood, guarding the woman. There seemed little else I could do.

The Ocean - Four.

There was a log on the beach by the sea. It was fairly large, and gnarled from drifting in the sea for years before it washed ashore. Years ago, my father and I often would come and sit, and he would tell me tales of the sea. The sea was everything to the people of Vilandia - and the sea had even given him his only daughter, me. Now, I sat on that same log, dearly missing my father, and wept.

"Why?!" I cried out to the uncaring surf. But there was no answer, of course. The goddess was mysterious, enigmatic - and did things for her own reasons, in her own time. No, there was no answer to my weeping shout, no divine revelation to put the universe in perspective for me. Only the constant sussuration of the waves upon the shore.

The soft sounds of hooves on the sand went unnoticed to my ear. Perhaps, if I had heard them, my life would have been much different after that day. But, I did not.

"Why? An interesting question, fire-hair," a man's voice said from behind me, his accent thick.

I leapt to my feet, spinning around - it was the man from Palome, astride his pale horse. He was smiling at me in a way I did not like. Not at all.

I started to step sideways, intending to run past him. "Ummm... I have to go now, my husband and brothers are expecting me home to cook dinner, and-"

The man shifted his knee, and his horse side-stepped, blocking me. "Hardly, Fire-hair. I've spoken to

the village master, and he told me all about you. No family, an orphan girl. Not liked much in the village, either - or so he says. Even better, you apparently defeated one of the village lads today in some kind of fight. Yes, you're precisely what I'm looking for, Fire-hair. If you've half the spirit Malik says you have, I can easily fetch a hundred gold for you - perhaps more. I sincerely hope so, I've already paid Malik twenty to not report your disappearance."

He smiled chillingly. I knew I had to run, but I could not escape him. He was mounted. But, horses had very sensitive noses. I remembered my father telling me that, one time. I lashed out, slapping my hand down across the horse's nose as hard as I could.

The horse whinnied, startled, and reared. The Palomean man fell backwards, landing on the sand with a clatter of armor and a loud *oof!* I did not wait to see if he would rise - I turned and ran down the beach as fast as I could.

It was a league to the docks at the village, easily. But it was better than the league and a half to my home. Perhaps, if I could make it there, I could hide inside Orissa's house. Perhaps they could help me. Perhaps...

My breath came in ragged pants. I could hear the sound of swift hooves behind me, closing. I risked a glance behind. The Palomean man was whirling something over his head, his eyes fixed on me as he rode closer. I turned forward again. "*Help me! Somebody help me!*" I screamed, hoping against hope that someone might be near enough to hear.

Something wrapped itself about my shins, and smacked them painfully. I stumbled and fell, tumbling into the sand. In a heartbeat, he was upon me, leaping down from his horse. I struggled, but it was no use - he was far stronger than I, and skilled at wrestling. In a trice, he had easily tied my ankles and wrists together, my arms behind my back. I took a breath to scream - he only filled my mouth with a gag, tying it in place behind my head with an ease that showed he'd done this many, many times before. Lifting me easily, he tossed me over his shoulder and started walking back to his horse. I struggled, but this only made him laugh.

A few moments later, he had me laid across his horse before him. Turning away from my village, he began riding down the beach at a leisurely pace. "Quite a bit of spirit, Fire-hair. I'd say I made a good investment in you. With luck, I'll interest the owner of the Yellow Lotus in you," he said, then paused. "Wait - you *are* a virgin, aren't you, Fire-hair?"

I blushed furiously, struggling to escape.

"Ah, good. That easily doubles your value - and if the owner of the Yellow Lotus does take an interest in you, I could easily retire on your price," he said, patting my rump through my dress.

Soon, we rode past a turn in the beach, and I could see a three-masted Palomean junk sitting at anchor in a cove, its silk sails slowly fluttering in the ocean breeze. At the sight of the alien-looking ship, I broke down and wept, sobbing behind the gag.

"There, there, Fire-hair. Save your tears. You'll have plenty to cry about later," the Palomean said, and chuckled darkly.

The Spider - XX.

Morning came, the dawn breaking slowly as the woman yawned and stretched beneath her blanket. She said nothing to me - I supposed she simply had nothing to say. Instead, she simply looked over the low, crude mounds of dirt which revealed the zombies' haphazard work. They had even buried the wolves they had killed. After a moment, the woman nodded. "That will do. Rest," she said, gesturing idly. Instantly, the dead collapsed, like puppets who'd had their strings snipped. They lay sprawled on the ground thereafter, motionless.

"They sleep, now?" I asked, curious.

"No. The dead do not sleep, Barbarian. I released them - they are simply dead again," she replied, already digging through the leather sack she had found the day before. Withdrawing some of the bread and cheese, she had a simple breakfast with a skin of water. She did not offer any to me - yet, oddly, I was not hungry, either. Nor, for that matter, was I tired from my vigil. That, too, struck me as odd.

"Come. Sit, Barbarian," she called, gesturing.

I nodded, sheathing my sword and slipping my axe beneath my broadbelt again, and sat opposite her, across the cold ashes of the campfire. I watched her eat, and drink... And still felt no hunger or thirst, myself. "How odd..." I muttered.

"What?"

"I do not hunger, or thirst, or tire. That seems... Very strange, to me."

The woman smiled. "When you were first wounded. Do you recall? I cast a spell which tied your body to my life. So long as I am alive and strong, you will remain as you are - and, eventually, grow stronger. Should I die, or release you, however..." she said, her voice trailing off into a dark chuckle.

"Will I eventually remember who I was?"

"What you do or do not remember is of no consequence, Barbarian. That life is behind you, now. From now on, you are simply my companion. I am Brionnach - you may address me as that, or simply as 'mistress', as you prefer."

I glowered at her. "And if I choose *not* to be your companion?" I growled.

Brionnach simply smiled. "Is that what you wish?"

I gazed at her silently. She was, still, the most beautiful thing in the world. More beautiful than the stars in the night sky, more beautiful than the sunrise. More beautiful than the silent trees in the forest about us, or anything else in my brief memory of experience. I turned my gaze from her eyes and shook my head silently, unable to say what was in my heart, for I did not truly understand my heart's feelings, myself.

Brionnach chuckled darkly. "I didn't think so."

I was under her spell - that much was obvious. Yet, the more I looked at her, the more beautiful she seemed to me. Like a soft, blue rose with sharp thorns, the danger of the thorns did not change the flower's beauty, or the elegance of it's fragrance.

She ordered me to begin gathering what little supplies there were, and pile them into the cart so that we might be off. I complied quietly - I could refuse her nothing. Yet, my compliance was not from a dark force which dangled me at the end of some invisible puppet-strings, like that which had forced the zombies to comply. No, I complied because I *wanted* to.

Part of me loathed her. She was, by her own admission and by her actions, a mistress of dark and terrible arts that unnerved me deeply. She had, by her own admission, used her dark powers upon me, and caused me to forever forget who I once was. And yet...

And yet, as I glanced at her from time to time as I worked, I found I could not deny it in my heart. She was supremely beautiful...

And I loved her.

"Very good," she said, looking over my work an hour later. She winced and gasped as she stepped across the green grass, her bare indigo feet leaving tiny footprints in the still dewy grass as she clutched her tattered rags to herself. Finally, she settled herself upon the small seat of the little two-wheeled hand-cart. "Hand me my blanket," she said, pointing at the blanket she had left behind her. I did so silently. "Now, Barbarian, take up the shaft, and let's be off."

"Which way?" I asked in reply. "Where are we going?"

Brionnach simply smiled. "East, Barbarian. We head to the Utter East, beyond the lands of the elves, beyond the Inland Sea, beyond even the deep deserts of Mysantia. East, barbarian. Towards the rising sun."

I nodded, tugged the cuffs of my leather gauntlets for a better fit, took up the shaft of the little cart in my hands, and began walking.

The Ocean - Five.

"Are you awake?" a voice whispered in the darkness.

"Yes," I whispered in reply. Here in the hold, it was pitch black, light only brought when the Palomeans came down to feed and water us and empty the waste buckets once a day. The quiet creaking of the ship's timbers and the lapping of the waves was all that was heard. The weeping and wailing had been loud and long the first three days - afterwards, most of us simply sat in our little cages silently. For the first few days, I had been violently ill from the ship's motion - apparently, so were most of us, so the Palomeans hadn't bothered feeding us the first three days. Now, however, I'd gotten used to it along with everyone else. The cages didn't seem that strong, they looked to be made of some kind of wicker or rattan. But, they were strong enough to keep a sixteen-year-old girl inside them. On the inside of the cage, there was a thin layer of closely-woven wicker. I thought to kick it loose, but small scurrying and squeaking sounds at night made me change my mind. There were rats in the hold, and I hardly wanted to let them in until I figured out how I might escape, myself.

"I'm Manira, from the village of Lesho. Who are you?"

I sighed. "I'm Sasha, from the village of Woe."

"Do you... Do you know what they're going to do with us?"

I shook my head in the darkness. "No."

"Did... Did your parents sell you to them, like me?"

"Your parents *sold* you to them?!" I asked, shocked.

"Yes. We needed the money to pay taxes. They can't just come in and take us, it's not legal. The Duke's ships would scour the waters for their slave ships and sink the lot. He's not to be trifled with. But the Duke's law allows them to buy us."

"Well, my father's been dead for years, and I have no mother. The captain said that the village master sold me. Is that legal?" I asked, hoping it wasn't, and perhaps I might be rescued.

"No, but if the village master sold you, I doubt he'll report himself to the Duke," Manira replied, and I sighed, the brief hope dashed.

We sat there in silence for awhile. I could hear the whispers of other conversations nearby. I knew not how many of us were here... Perhaps no more than twenty.

Finally, Manira sniffled. "Maybe it won't be too bad. The Palomeans... They train us to be dancers and entertainers. It's not legal for women to do it in their society, my mother said. So they buy young girls as slaves, and train us to do it instead."

I nodded. "Hmmm... Well, I hadn't intended to spend my life as an entertainer, but maybe you're right, maybe it won't be that bad..."

"Not that kind of entertainer," Manira replied quietly.

My eyes widened in shock as I realized what she meant. After a moment, I growled in anger. "No, no, no!" I snapped, shaking my head. "Not me, I'm not going to do it. No. I'm going to escape."

"Escape? How?"

"I don't know. But I'm going to try anyway."

"But... But there's nowhere to *go*! We're *leagues* away from shore, you could never swim back, you'd drown or be eaten by sharks or..."

"A far better fate than this, I think," I replied, my jaw firm.

Manira said nothing after that. I sat in darkness, waiting. Sooner or later, they would have to open the cage again to give us food and water. And when they did, I would make my break.

Hours passed, the constant sounds of wood and waves being broken only by quiet whispers, and occasional tears.

A hatch above opened, and daylight streamed in. "They're coming!" Manira hissed.

I nodded, peeking through the tight wickerwork that kept the rats out. A group of four Palomean sailors went from cage to cage, opening each to pull out the waste buckets, replace them with empty ones, and put in food and water. I pulled my dress up above my knees, then crouched, waiting. They worked their way down one row of cages on one side of the ship, then the other. I was to be last, apparently.

Finally, they stopped before my cage. Taut as a drawn bowstring, I waited. The door opened, and I launched myself out, leaping upon the nearest one with a scream, punching and kicking.

We rolled around for a moment, then I was free. I rose to my feet, intending to dash to the ladder leading out, when a bare foot caught me behind my knee and I went down. Rolling over, I saw I was in the grip of an elderly sailor. He couldn't possibly be as strong as I was. I reached up to claw his face with my fingernails...

And suddenly he grabbed my hand and twisted, and I screamed in pain. Holding me at arm's length, he took the second knuckle of his right index finger and jammed it behind my jaw, just below my ear. I screamed again - the pain was immense. He held me there against the deck after that, a bare knee against my ribs, one hand gripping my right hand and bending it painfully while his other fist was jammed below my ear. He said nothing, just holding me there and letting me howl in agony for a long moment while the other three men finished with my cage. Finally, he released me, and as I sobbed in pain and misery, the four men simply stuffed me back inside the cage. The old man chattered something at me in his language, and the four sailors laughed as they went about their work. Soon, they had finished, and all climbed up the ladder again. The hatch closed, and the hold was again plunged into darkness.

I sobbed in the darkness for a long time after that. Some of the others who had seen the fight also sniffled. We were helpless.

The Ocean - Six.

A lifetime passed, mostly in darkness. I knew not how long it was, but it was several weeks, at least. Each day they fed us and watered us, like little animals in our cages. Little bowls of boiled rice, and pitchers of water. With me, they were particularly careful, watchful should I try to escape again. But, I didn't - it was obvious to me that I couldn't. The sailors had overpowered me with ease. I might be able to knock down a village bully, but in the end, I was still just a sixteen year old girl. More, they knew some kind of magic - they could cause incredible pain at a touch, and I could do nothing to escape it. If I was ever to escape these people, it was obvious I would have to bide my time, and wait for a better opportunity.

My days were spent in darkness, and my nights were filled with nightmares of fear and despair. Orissa standing by a beach, weeping. All my chickens dead of starvation, for lack of me to feed them every day. Mimi the cow lowing in pain, needing to be milked. And Malik, laughing, laughing...

What would happen to me? I did not know. My thoughts often turned to Orissa. Did she know what happened to me? Did she miss me? I did not know. The animals of my farm needed tending. Was anyone caring for them? I did not know. I had to escape. I had to get home...

Finally, after being at sea for weeks, I realized the impossibility of it all. Even if I could escape, what then? I could never get home again. I doubted that anyone in Palome would even understand me when I spoke, and it didn't seem likely anyone would simply offer me a ride on their ship back home just because I asked. Malik had taken his revenge on me, and a truly complete revenge it was, indeed.

For many days, I sniffled miserably. I knew my situation was hopeless. I'd had one brief, shining moment of happiness... And it appeared that the price for that was a life of misery thereafter. The rare lights through the open hatch when they came to feed us showed me that the lovely dress I'd worn to the dance was now filthy with weeks of captivity - and worse, my menses had come and gone once already during the voyage, utterly ruining it. My friend Orissa, most likely, had wept once she realized I was gone... But now, weeks later, there was little anyone would be able to do about it. Probably Malik had already taken my lands and my animals, and disposed of them as he saw fit. No, my old life was gone, never to be reclaimed.

My days I spent trying to stretch my legs. I found that if I placed my back against the cage wall and bent my head down, I could stretch my legs out full. That eventually caused my neck to hurt, however, and I would have to lie on my back with my knees bent until that pain eased. Unfortunately, this only caused my legs to hurt again, and forced me to repeat the process. Manira whispered that the other girls did not have this problem - they were smaller than I, and could simply sit with their legs stretched out. I, however, was quite tall for sixteen, and found the cage an endless torment. One day, shortly after they fed us, I again curled into a little ball and tried to sleep. Completely exhausted and utterly miserable, I simply hoped I would awaken on my little farm, and discover this had all been just a horrible, horrible nightmare.

Malik laughed, his face alternately flickering to that of the Palomean captain, then back again. Another nightmare - I ran and ran, weeping. The low fence that surrounded my farm came into view. I went through the gate, looking around. My animals were dead, of course, having long since starved without me to care for them. I went inside my house, and found it was a maze of cobwebs, the remnants of my old life dead and gone. I wept again.

"Help me..." a tiny voice wailed.

I looked around in my dream, startled. The voice had not been my own.

"Help me..." the voice called again.

I searched. The voice was small, and quite faint. Three more times it called before I found it. Outside my house, it was dark, midnight. A stone sat in a quiet corner of my yard. In a hollow of the stone, a small creature stood. It was a very tiny girl, perhaps no taller than the length of my thumb. She was all black, as though carved from a lump of coal, and I saw she was bound to the stone in a way I could not understand... She was both tied to it, and at the same time supporting it. Her image flickered confusingly in my dream... She was an ebon butterfly trapped in a spider's web of light. She was a woman, chained to a stone. She was fire, shackled to ice. She was a hope, chained to a nightmare. I simply did not comprehend her at all. *"Help me..."* she wailed again, her voice tiny and soft.

"Help you? How can I help you when I can't even help myself?"

"If you will help me, I will help you..."

"What can you do, little person?"

"Child of Man... Daughter of Ocean... If you promise to help me, I will do everything I can to help you. If you promise to free me, I will do everything I can to help you be free."

I looked, but I did not comprehend her, or what she was bound to. "I... I don't know how to free you. I don't really even know what you are."

"I am shadow, chained to light... I am wind chained to water... Your mind is asleep, you cannot understand... And I cannot explain, even were you awake... Swear to help me, Daughter of Ocean, and I shall swear to help you..."

"Alright. I'll help you. What do I have to do?"

"Reach out to me, Child of Man... Reach out to me, Daughter of Ocean... Touch me, that I may bond with you... Please... I beg you..."

I stretched forth my hand to the tiny, amorphous creature in my dream. For a brief moment, I had a fleeting impression of touching fur above hard-muscled flesh... A shape beneath my fingertips, much like touching a woman's waist...

And then it was gone, and before me was an ebon horse, with eyes of flame. So tiny, it could fit into the palm of my hand... Yet, I had the impression that it was something far greater than my young mind could truly comprehend.

"The moon shifts... Soon I must struggle again... Aaaah! The pain! Two thousand years of pain!"

"I'm sorry," I said, thinking I had hurt the little horse somehow.

"I am Marilith, and I will be with you, Daughter of Ocean. Listen for my voice. And I will help you as best I can... For now, all I can do is tell you this: Place your head in the upper corner..." she said, then paused, trembling. *"It begins again!"* she cried, then wailed in a voice of unearthly pain that built to a shrieking crescendo.

I awoke, startled, and saw I was still aboard the Palomean slave-ship. It was just a dream. And in realizing that, I nearly wept. I so wanted it to *not* be a dream. I so wanted to know that *someone* was trying to help me, that I was not alone...

She'd said to place my head in the upper corner. As foolish as it seemed, I was only sixteen, and facing a hopeless and bleak future. A dream was all I had. I rolled over in the cage, tucking my head into the far right corner, my shoulders against the walls of the cage. The food and water were in the right corner near the cage door, and the waste bucket in it's slot in the left corner. I had to shove with my legs against the walls of the cage to manage it, trying not to jostle the waste bucket in it's little niche...

Then suddenly, I grinned. My feet fell naturally into the opposite corner, at the top, above the waste bucket. I could lay down with my legs straight, my feet propped up by the walls of the cage. My rump fell not onto one of the rataan bars, but onto the wickerwork between. It was, incredibly enough, quite comfortable. I shuffled a bit, pulling my dress down between my legs to stifle the draft, and grinned again. I'd probably get tired of this position eventually, but just being able to stretch my legs out again and relax felt tremendously good.

I dozed for awhile, simply sitting and relaxing. I hoped to dream of the little horse again, but I did not.

The Spider - XIX.

As the day wore on, Brionnach shaded herself from the sun with the blanket I'd made for her, but otherwise simply sat silently in the little cart, enduring the bumpy ride as being far preferable to an agonizing stroll across the soft spring grasses of the wooded hills we traveled through. And, indeed, the grass was agony for her to touch, as was anything else that was alive - save, apparently, for me. I learned this when we paused near noon for her to eat and relieve herself. The pain of her bare feet touching the grass as she squatted was too much, and she fell, lying on the grass and gasping in agony. I lifted her from the ground without waiting for her command, and cradled her in my arms gently until she had recovered. When she had, I carefully removed my gloves, setting them on the grass spaced apart so that she could place her tiny indigo feet upon them and relieve herself in some small comfort. I knelt beside her, holding her small hand in my much larger, callused one, my other hand resting upon her bare shoulder that she might not fall again, and shortly she was finished. As I carried her back to the wagon, she smiled at me...

...and my heart sang.

I could not gaze upon her as we traveled, of course, being as I had to drag the cart. Yet, that brief break at noon was a moment I found I cherished greatly. She sat upon the blanket, resting and eating the meager fare we had, and I simply pulled my gloves back on and sat before her, gazing at her beauty. Every part of her fascinated me, enchanted me... The soft roundness of her indigo breasts, barely concealed by the tattered rags she had for garments... The smoothness of her indigo shoulders... The way her snow-white hair caught the spring sunlight as an errant breeze shifted it... The sparkle of her night-black eyes...

Yes, I was in love. This much was obvious, even to me. Every part of her, from her tiny little feet to her sharply pointed elven ears, fascinated me greatly. That I did not hunger or thirst or tire, or have any needs of the body at all, no longer bothered me. I did not care - it only left me more time to gaze upon her, to drink in her ethereal beauty with my eyes. That this love had been sparked by her own sorcery also was obvious, to me. Yet, that also was of no concern to me, for the emotion I felt in my heart was no dark infatuation, but something bright and pure... And a deep, abiding happiness I could not even begin to describe. There was no lust in my heart, no dark desire at all. Even the brief glimpse of a dark magenta nipple atop an indigo breast as she leaned forward did not stir my loins - the feelings I had for her were bright, and golden. Perhaps her people had cursed her with the *Lobh'dath*, turning her skin indigo and her hair white. Yet, this had not marred her beauty, to my eyes. She was, truly, the most beautiful thing in all existence, and the very focus of my life...

Truly, she was just what I had realized this morning - a soft, blue rose with sharp thorns. And despite the dark gleam in her eye from time to time, despite my own loathing of her necromantic powers, the danger of her thorns did not diminish her ethereal beauty, or the elegance of her fragrance.

"You stare," she said, and sipped at a skin of water.

"Forgive me," I replied, and averted my eyes.

"I do not mind, barbarian. You may gaze upon me if you wish - only do not let that divert you from watching the woods about us. Soon, we enter the lands of the so-called 'light elves'. The Sylvani, the Katani, and the Nomani. I am Malani - to them, a hated enemy. The indigo stain of the *Lobh'dath* marks me as one hated even among my own people. Should any find me here, they will not hesitate - they will kill me, if they can."

"Not if I kill them first," I replied, and rose to my feet, drawing my weapons. I then stood guard over her, my eyes on the forest instead of the delicate indigo skin I would have preferred to gaze upon. Her reply was a dark chuckle from behind me.

When Brionnach was ready to travel again, I sheathed my weapons and gently lifted her onto the seat of the cart. She smiled at me again, and again, my heart sang. Taking the shaft of the cart into my gloved hands, I set off in the direction she indicated - east.

The Ocean - Seven.

The storm howled above, the ship pitching violently to the sound of groaning timbers. It was still pitch-black, the hatch above us having been nailed shut earlier when the storm began. This apparently did not completely keep the water out, however - each time the ship tipped from side to side, I could feel a wave of chill water sloshing over me. We were all from Vilandia. We all knew what this much water belowdecks meant.

Finally, Manira could contain herself no longer. "The ship is sinking! We're all going to die!" she screamed.

Instantly, the air was full of screams as all the girls the Palomeans had taken as slaves began shrieking in terror - myself included.

Again and again, we could hear the waves smashing into the ship. Each time, the ship tipped farther and farther to port or starboard. We screamed louder. There wasn't much else we could do.

"Sasha! Kick out the wickerwork over the cage door!" a voice shouted. I realized after a moment that the voice had been shouting to me for many heartbeats, but I'd simply not heard it over my own screaming. I rolled onto my back and kicked outwards, fear lending strength to my efforts. In a moment, I'd kicked my feet through the wickerwork covering the cage door. The stout rattan bars still held me in, but I'd done it.

"Hold on to the bars of the door!" the voice shouted again.

I did so, terrified. The water that sloshed back and forth was now very deep - each time the ship rolled to my side, the water washed over my head and shoulders, and the rattan cage started to float.

"Hold your breath!" the voice shouted, and I did so.

A moment later, there was a tremendous, thundering roar of a colossal wave hitting the ship, and it rolled completely over. The screams of the other girls were cut off by water surging in from the smashed hatch, and I found I was completely submerged. The water was cold... Shockingly cold.

For many long moments, I was completely disoriented. Floating underwater, inside the cage... With no escape possible. My lungs burned. I needed *air!*

Suddenly, the cage bobbed to the surface, and I could feel air on my hands. I pulled my face up between the bars, and found I was floating in darkness. The storm still raged outside the capsized ship - I guessed I was inside, near the keel. My wrists and hands were in air, as was my face. The cage, being rattan, floated. If I put my knees on the bottom of the cage and turned my face up, I could breathe. But for how long?

"You must escape the cage, Sasha. Hurry!"

"Marilith?!" I yelped, finally recognizing the voice.

"Yes, Sasha. Please, listen! You must escape the cage before the chill of the water drains the warmth from you and you die!"

"But how?!"

"Bring your feet beneath you, and push!"

I did so, but nothing budged. I could hear the rattan creaking, but that was all. "I can't!"

"Push! The bindings have been soaked over and over again in salt water for over an hour! They will give! PUSH!"

I strained with all the strength I'd built working on the farm. For the longest moment, nothing happened.

Suddenly, the rattan bindings creaked, then there was a snap as they parted and the door gave way. I scrambled out of the cage, and found myself swimming in chillingly cold water.

"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!"

I did so, and shortly my hands fell upon a thick plank. It was very long, and quite thick - after a few moments, I'd managed to climb atop it. I shivered - it was *very* cold, but not as bad as it had been in the water. "Now what?" I asked, my teeth chattering.

"Reach about over your head. The shelves this lumber was stored upon are nearby. Pull yourself atop the shelf, so you can rest."

I did so, and eventually found the shelves Marilith was talking about. After a few moments of struggling, I had my self lying atop one. Or, more precisely, underneath one, since the ship was upside down.

"Your clothes are soaked, Sasha. Pull them off, before you catch a chill."

I simply nodded, my teeth chattering. Slowly, step by step, Marilith's calm voice led me through undressing, carefully wringing as much water as I could out of each garment as I held it over the edge of the shelf, then laying them out one by one on the shelf to dry as best they could in the darkness.

An hour passed before I was done, and I found that I was actually slightly warmer naked than I was wearing the wet clothes. And, to my surprise, I noticed the sounds of the storm had lessened. Eventually, the storm's sounds faded completely, and were gone. "Now what?" I asked.

"Try to rest, Sasha. You'll need all your strength, soon."

"I... I'm glad you weren't just a dream. I so wanted it to *not* be a dream. I so wanted to know that *someone* was trying to help me, and I wasn't alone. Where are you?"

"I am many thousands of leagues from you, Sasha, on the other side of the world."

"Ummm... Then how can I hear you if you're that far away?"

"You agreed to bond with me, and through our bond, we hear the voice of the other. I can also see and hear what is happening nearby you a little bit, if I concentrate..." Marilith whispered again. *"I am sorry, it is very difficult for me to speak right now. I am very tired."*

"Tired? From what?"

"My bondage is a constant exertion, Sasha... But that is a long and difficult story, best left for another time. Trying to shout loud enough for you to hear me over your own screams has tired me even more, but it was necessary. Hush, now... Try to rest..."

"Maybe you should get some rest, too? I mean, if you're that tired," I said, curling into a little ball to try to stay warm.

"I wish I could. I truly wish I could... Just one hour... Just one little hour of rest... Aaaaah... It hurts... I'm so sorry, Sasha! The land shifts, I can speak no more! Please... Please try to rest!" she said, then paused. *"Aaaaah! It begins again!"* Marilith wailed, her voice turning into a howl of pain, then fading into silence.

My heart ached for Marilith - as bad as my situation was, hers sounded far, far worse. At least I *could* rest. Yes, I was cold and miserable and in the dark. But at least I wasn't in pain.

I curled myself into a tight little ball, shivering against the cold, and tried to get some sleep.

The Spider - XVIII.

"There, Barbarian," Brionnach said, pointing with a delicately-shaped indigo hand.

I nodded. The village that lay in the wooded valley below seemed harmless enough. A village of the Sylvani, the wood-elves, she had said. It was, in truth, quite beautiful. Small, elegant wooden houses made of delicately carved and varnished wood lay scattered among the trees by a babbling stream, the edges of the roof lines marked with elaborate and baroque details and finials. Some of the buildings had little signs hanging from them, though at a distance of nearly a league, they were impossible to read. 'Merchants,' Brionnach had said, simply. I could see several adult elves moving about between the houses, and a few children playing. "We could go around," I offered.

Brionnach shook her head. "No, Barbarian. The Sylvani are masters of woodcraft - invisible in the forest, to an enemy. They would find us, and sink arrows into my heart while you stood there like a lummo, wondering where they were. It is, perhaps, only by blind luck we've avoided their patrols this last week we've traveled," Brionnach pointed to a nearby tree. "Pick me up and place me there, in the shade of that tree."

I nodded, and did as she asked. Brionnach then carefully arranged her blanket to keep any part of her from touching either the grass or the tree she was leaning against, then gestured, muttering the syllables to a spell. Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, the shadows deepened where she sat. As I watched, she literally faded from view, at first becoming translucent, then utterly invisible, simply becoming one with the shadows beneath the tree. "What..."

"I have gathered the shadows to conceal me, Barbarian," she said, and as I looked, I saw that her eyes could still be seen, twin pieces of jet that stared back at me. "Not true invisibility, of course, but so

long as I remain in the shadows and remain still, I can maintain this spell indefinitely. A trivial spell, common among my people," she said, dismissing my question with a snort. "Now... That village has a leather shop, Barbarian. Nearly all their villages do, and I've tired of suffering each time we pause to rest. I want garments of leather to protect me from the grasses and other such things. Also, my supplies of food run low. I want a few wheels of cheese and other oddments that will last us for awhile as we travel."

I nodded. "Alright, but how shall I get them? I have no money - and neither do you."

The dark eyes that gazed back at me sparkled with mirth, and Brionnach chuckled darkly. "Go down there and kill them, of course. You are my companion - and you are far more than you probably realize. I doubt that their little village has any sorcerer capable of stopping you."

I paused, taken aback. "But-"

"Don't argue with me!" she snapped, her dark eyes narrowing. "Get down there and get me what I need, and be quick about it!"

I bowed my head. "Alright. I will get you what you need," I said, and turned back to the cart. The weapons the zombies had collected a week ago still lay within the cart, and after a moment, I'd selected the best sword from the lot. I still had my own sword and axe, should they be needed. As I turned and strode towards the village, I could feel Brionnach's gaze upon me, like a physical presence. I remained silent and kept walking, down the slope and into the valley.

"Hold there, stranger," a male voice called after I had walked for perhaps five minutes. The village still lay in the distance, though now concealed by the trees of the valley. I halted, and waited. Two elven warriors dressed in green-dyed leather and wearing hooded green cloaks slipped into view from behind the trees, their elven long-bows drawn. At this distance, they could easily send a shaft completely through me, and kill me with a single shot. "And just what do you think you are doing here?" the elf who had spoken now asked, looking me over.

I looked at him in return, and opened my mouth to speak, when suddenly I heard Brionnach's voice whispering in my ear. *'Kill them. Kill them NOW!'*

I *felt* her will. It was a dark, physical force upon my mind. And, in response, a dark part of my soul, a part I had not known was there, rose up in reply...

For one long, maddening moment, I nearly drew my weapons and leaped upon the two elves in a screaming berserk fury, heedless of the danger of their arrows, heedless of the knowledge that they surely would kill me, heedless of anything but to *obey*... To *slay*...

Then I mastered myself, and with great effort, I spoke, keeping my voice as calm as I could. "I beg your pardon, but I and my companion are traveling eastwards, seeking a cure for her. She has..." I said, and shuddered as I felt Brionnach's will pause in confusion, the urge to kill easing, the dark part of my soul subsiding as her will paused. She could, somehow, *see* what I was seeing, and *hear* what I was hearing - but she could not know my own thoughts. That was, perhaps, some comfort. "She has a very serious condition, and I am trying to take her to a healer I have been told lives far to the east. I would like to enter your village, if I may, and trade for a few supplies we will need, then be on my way."

"You have the look of travel about you, that's for certain. You're filthy, stranger," the second elf said. Neither lowered their bows.

"Aye, he is. And it looks like he's been in a fight, as well," the first said, glancing down at the rent in the chainmail I wore and the bloodstained kilt about my waist, the blood having long since dried to a rust-colored stain.

"Goblins and bandits, as we crossed the mountains west of here," I lied, hoping it was believable. It was, after all, partly true.

"You have the scent of death about you, Stranger, and I trust you not one whit. What is it you would trade for?" the first asked.

"A few wheels of cheese, perhaps some tack or similar, and perhaps a few tanned and softened hides and a leather-working kit."

"And what do you offer in return?"

"This," I said, holding out the sheathed sword I'd taken from the cart.

The first elf nodded to the second, who lowered his bow. Keeping the arrow knocked and held against the bow in his left hand with an expert archer's grip, he reached out with his right to take the hilt of the broadsword I offered, and pulled it from the scabbard. After examining it for a few moments, he made a face. "A blade of the Arcadians, Elethriel. Simple steel, made with only passable skill, worth perhaps a gold coin, at most."

"An honest offer, at least," the first said, lowering his bow and reaching out to the second to take the sword from him. He examined it for a moment, and nodded. "A small bit of rust here and there, as well, though at least the edge isn't nicked. A gold, at most."

I bowed my head. "I will accept whatever you believe it is honestly worth."

The first flipped the sword expertly, gripping it by the blade and holding it out to me. I took it from him and sheathed it as he spoke again. "Tell me - why did you not bring your companion with you?"

"Her disease disfigures her greatly, and I feared you might simply shoot her out of hand. The healers in my lands say it is not contagious, merely horrifying and incurable. We seek a cure in the east, not her death."

"Not contagious, you say?" the first asked, eyeing me warily.

"No. I am her servant and companion, and have been for as long as I can remember. I've been with her every moment of my life that I can remember, and yet I have not been affected by the same curse

which disfigures her," I replied, and smiled.

The second elf nodded. "We have a healer in our village. Perhaps he might help."

The first shook his head. "Nay, Galathriel. You forget - Lythallan is off to *Thall-Aibhne* to sell a few herbs this week."

"Aye, you're right. My pardon, my friend," the second said, nodding to me. He looked me over for a long moment, then seemed to come to a decision. "And what kind of leather is it you'd be needing?"

"Soft leather - kidskin, preferably. Probably three or four hides."

"And a kit to sew it with, and some food for traveling?"

"Yes - but I'll need a full kit, not just a needle and such."

'Ask for a few empty bottles, as well,' Brionnach's silent whisper ordered. *'Bottles such as one might fill with river water, or the like. With corks.'*

"Oh - and some bottles. Empty ones that I might fill with river water. With corks."

The second elf nodded, flicking back the hood of his cloak and smiling. His hair was the color of spun gold, and his eyes flashed a merry blue as he brushed a stray lock of hair behind a sharply-pointed ear with a gloved finger. "Alright, Stranger. Give me that sword, and I'll go down and get what you need, and return. Afterwards, of course, you will leave our valley, and go around it entirely on your journey east," he said, his smile never dimming but his voice carrying the weight of an order.

"Of course," I replied, handing the sword over.

The second elf turned and strode away, while the first rested the fingers of his right hand upon the string of his bow and the nocked arrow - ready to shoot at a moment's notice. I nodded to him, and sat in the grass, waiting. He said nothing to me, and I said nothing to him. There was, in truth, nothing more that needed to be said.

The wait was interminable, but a glance at the sun between the gaps of the leafy canopy above showed it was little more than two hours or so before the second elf returned, bearing a large leather pack on his back. I rose to my feet, and he shucked the pack, handing it to me. "There you are, Stranger. All that you asked for."

"Thank you," I replied, shouldering the pack.

"We found your little cart," the second elf went on, his smile never fading, "but failed to find any sign of your companion."

"She is hidden well," I replied simply.

"So it seems."

"Her safety is important to me. I have been her servant, companion and protector for as long as I can remember."

The second elf nodded. "Alright. Regardless of how you've managed to hide her, it seems obvious to me you are hardly a party of raiders or some such. Two people and a hand-cart hardly comprise a raiding party," he said, and chuckled. "Farewell, Stranger."

"Farewell," I replied, then turned on my heel and strode away into the deepening shadows of the afternoon forest.

The Ocean - Eight.

"Wake up, Sasha," Marilith whispered.

I opened my eyes, but it was still pitch black. It was warmer, though. "Marilith? Do you feel better, now?"

"I wish I could say yes. On the soul of my clan-father, I so wish I could say that. But no, Sasha. I am still where I am - and you are still where you are. I can see it is day where you are, and the sun warms the hull of the ship. You will have to wait before you try to escape it, however. Scavenger-fish have found the corpses of the girls who drowned inside their cages, and their blood now stains the water. Soon, sharks will come."

I shook my head. I was raised in Vilandia, and certain things were well known to me, even if my only experience with the ocean I could remember was my father teaching me to swim in the ocean surf as a child. "This ship... It's now like a diving bell, holding a bubble of air for me. But that won't last - like the air in a diving bell, it eventually will sour. I can't wait for the sharks to come and go, that might be a long time. I'll run out of air."

There was a long moment of silence. *"I'm sorry... You're right. I did not think of that. If I were in your place, the air would not bother me, fresh or foul, and I could easily escape."*

I smiled in the darkness. "Maybe if I were in your place, I could easily escape, too."

"No, my friend. Your will is the will of a young girl, and your body is merely mortal. You would be torn to pieces in an instant. I very nearly was myself, the first few centuries I was imprisoned here. I..." she said, then paused again. *"It's too complicated to describe, right now. For now, look below you. Can you see the hatch? There should be enough light for you to see it."*

I looked down, through the rippling water just below me, and nodded. There was a square of blue-green light some ten cubits down and about the same across from me. "I see it." I picked up my dress, and tied it tightly about my waist. It would only hinder me trying to swim if I wore it, but I didn't want to leave it behind.

"Take a deep breath, and swim as fast as you can," Marilith said. I nodded, took a very deep breath, and dived in.

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. I could feel the pressure on my ears easing... Easing...

With a sputtering gasp, I broke the surface of the water. The ocean was calm today, but still chilly. I looked to the ship, half-blinded by the stinging salt-water in my eyes. "It's covered in barnacles! I'll never climb that!"

"Swim to your right. The bow is in the water to your right, and it's slope is much gentler than

the sides."

I did so, blinking to clear my eyes, and finally found the bow of the ship. Marilith was right, the slope was much more gentle. I tried to be careful, but the barnacles still scraped my knees and elbows as I climbed. Finally, I was atop the ship. Untying my dress from around my waist, I folded it and laid it atop the keel of the ship, then sat on it. The noonday sun shone brightly on me, and the day was warm. I looked around - the shimmering ocean stretched to the horizon, with not a speck of land in sight anywhere. I was utterly alone, and lost in the middle of the ocean. Still, I smiled. I had escaped the slave-ship. It was a small victory - again, a farmer's victory. But, it was a victory nonetheless.

After awhile, though, I sighed. "I can't stay here forever, Marilith. No food, and no water."

"I... I am sorry, Sasha. I don't have an answer. Again, I would be fine where you are. I can drink salt water, it does not bother me. After two thousand years in this prison, I think I could drink an ocean of salt if someone told me I could escape that way." Marilith sighed. "Argh. Now I'm thirsty again. Two thousand years, and not even a little drop of molten lead to drink."

I blinked. "You're serious!"

"Yes."

"I kind of had this picture in my mind... I saw you as some kind of magic horse... Or maybe a girl, like me."

"I am a female of my kind, yes, but I am not a horse. And I am young... To my people I am just a girl, though I am many, many centuries older than you. Apparently, however, being older doesn't make me wiser. I've gotten you out of the maelstrom and into the vortex."

I giggled. "Out of the frying pan and into the fire, you mean?"

"Yes, sorry," Marilith replied with a sigh.

"It's alright, really. We'll think of something."

"I wish I could ask my clan-father. He is so much wiser than I..." Marilith said, and I heard her sniffle, as though weeping. *"It is my fault, I suppose... I am tired. I have watched from afar for a long time, Sasha. I have known you were the one who could free me for a long time. I was so eager, so hopeful... Too hopeful, perhaps... And I am so very, very tired..."*

"I wish I could help, I really do," I said, sadly. "Here I am, finally warm and comfortable... Well, I'm a bit hungry and thirsty, yes, but at least I'm alive and free. I wish I could do something to help you, too."

"I wish you could, too. I have waited for you for two thousand years, Sasha... For many ages, I thought I might never be free. Yet, my clan-father whispered to me, and said I should listen to the ocean. I hear the ocean now, in the distance... She sings her endless song even now, the breeze wafting it to my ears. Two thousand years ago, the ocean whispered to me, and said someday, you might be born. If you were born, I might speak with you... And so you were, and so I did. The ocean said I should wait until you were old enough to understand... But I can wait no longer, Daughter of Ocean. The strain of my bondage has drawn my life's force thin... Very thin. Already I slip in my task, and have been slipping for a thousand years. Perhaps, in a century or two... I will falter, and die."

"Well, a century may not seem like a long time to you, but it is a very long time to me. If we can find some way for me to survive here, I'll have plenty of time to find you."

"You are still the Daughter of Ocean... And she is watching out for you. Perhaps she has a plan I am not aware of..."

"My father said the Goddess was watching out for me when he found me on the waves. Perhaps..."

"Well!" a man's voice called suddenly, startling me badly. "You're a strange one, I must say! I've seen many a shipwreck in my day, and I've seen the survivors weep, I've seen them pray, I've seen them scream for help, but I've never seen them hold a conversation with someone I couldn't hear talking back. Tell me, girl - are you mad?"

The Ocean - Nine.

I looked - and to my utter and total astonishment, there was a *man* swimming in the water nearby. He wore no shirt, and seemed to simply float effortlessly in the water, his head and shoulders just above the waves. His hair was the color of seaweed, his eyes a pale blue, and his skin had an odd gray hue to it, and seemed to shimmer in the sunlight. I covered myself with my hands. "I... Yes, I think I must be mad, I'm seeing a *man* swimming in the middle of the ocean!"

The man laughed, then reached up with both hands to grab onto the barnacles on the side of the ship. His hands were strange... I could see the wide-spread fingers were webbed, like a frog. With no seeming effort at all, he pulled himself aboard the ship, and sat next to me.

I stared openly. From the waist down, he was built much like a fish, with large, thick scales and no legs - just a long, single tail that ended up in a large, broad, horizontal fin where a normal man would have feet. From the waist up, the scales changed, becoming swiftly smaller and thinner scales, until they became the little tiny scales that covered all of his upper body. His scales obviously were very tough, however - the barnacles on the ship had not scratched him at all. Now that he was closer, I could see his ears were pointed sharply. This was no man. He grinned at me, and I could see his teeth were sharp and

gleaming. "Good day to you, girl. I am called-" he said, then made a strange -*T'KAK*- sound, like the cry of some sea creature - which, I supposed, he was. "And what's your name?"

"I-I-I-" I stammered, then finally got hold of myself. "I'm called Sasha, of the Village of Woe. I was taken prisoner by the slavers of this ship. A storm sank them, and I managed to escape."

"A *slave* ship?!" he exclaimed, and made a *moue'*. "How dreadfully disappointing. I was hoping it was a treasure ship. They sometimes have very nice things... Shiny bits of metal... Err... Coins, I think you call them. The gold ones are best. You can drill holes in them and make them into necklaces. I have... Err..." he said, then scratched his head. "I'm afraid I don't know the word in your language," he said, then made a chittering sound.

"A *betrothed*," Marilith whispered.

"A *betrothed*?" I offered.

T'Kak grinned. "Yes! You must be a very wise person," he said, then stretched himself out across the keel of the ship, lying on his stomach. "Unfortunately, I am *not* a very wise person. My *betrothed* thinks I'm quite stupid. Well, she's not really my *betrothed*, either. I just wish she was. But I can't quite get her attention. She's more interested in my brother. He's older, and he made her a necklace of pretty pearls. I tried, but I'm no good at gathering oysters and seeding them with grains of sand, as he is. I was hoping this was some kind of treasure ship, and maybe I could make something nicer than what my brother made. But if it's a slave ship it will just have slave irons and other junk that rots in the sea. Worthless, and not pretty at all," he said, and sighed.

After a moment, I lowered my hands and just sat there. It was obvious from his gaze that even though I was sitting nude before him, he had no interest in me whatsoever - and besides, the ship still bobbed a bit in the waves and the barnacles were still quite sharp, I needed my hands to help keep my balance. "Ummm... Well, I'm sure the captain might have some money hidden in his cabin. He paid for me in gold, there might be some left."

T'Kak looked up suddenly, grinning at me. "You think so?! Where might I find it?"

"Ummm... Well, usually the captain's cabin is towards the back of the ship, the ride is smoother there and it's nearer the helm if he needs to suddenly wake up and give orders. But be careful, I think there may be sharks about."

His face brightened. "Oooo! Sharks, too? Big ones, maybe?"

"Err... Well, I don't know, they find me rather tasty so I got out of the water as fast as I could."

"Well, we mer-folk find *them* very tasty, ourselves!" he said, looking into the water. "Oooo! You're right! There's a big fat one, now!" he shouted gleefully, and lifted his left hand. From his thumb, a long, sharp claw flicked out, an oily black gleam at the tip. Shoving himself forward, he slipped into the water with almost no splash at all.

I looked, but couldn't see what was happening. After a moment, I saw blood in the water, but that was all.

"Will he be alright, Marilith?" I whispered nervously.

"If you're asking about the merman, he is fine. If you're asking about the shark, I'm afraid it is doomed," Marilith replied, and laughed, a quiet tinkling sound.

I giggled, but a moment later, I shrieked in surprise. The head of the shark poked out of the water nearby me, slamming into the side of the ship - it was easily a cubit wide. A hand reached up, and T'Kak pulled himself up out of the water. He had his right fist thrust into the shark's body behind the head, and was dragging it aboard the ship hand over hand. The shark was at least five cubits long. Blood was *everywhere*, but he was grinning broadly.

"Oh, what a lovely day!" he crowed, and after dragging himself and the shark atop the ship's keel, he flexed his fingers, revealing more sharp claws. With great gusto, he began gutting the shark, tossing the entrails and other parts he didn't want back into the sea. After a moment, he held out a bloody piece of its hide to me. "Here, sit on this, instead, and use that garment to cover yourself. You surface-dwellers seem to have a problem with the sun. Only the gods that made you know why, but I've seen it before. No, no! Put the inside up, the outside's quite rough. You surface dwellers have very tender skin, you'll tear yourself up. That's right! There you go!"

I grinned, sitting in my dress atop the sharkskin. It *was* better than sitting naked before him, at any rate, though he didn't seem to care either way. T'Kak continued working on the shark, using his sharp claws to slice off chunks of flesh and lay them out atop the ship to dry. The blood ran in rivers down the side of the ship. "Aren't you worried all that blood will draw too many sharks?"

T'Kak shook his head. "I wish it would, but it won't. They'll smell my poison in the water and won't come within a league of here - they're stupid, but they aren't *that* stupid. All the prey fish will be gone from here, too, once they get a sniff of it. Quite depressing, actually. I need a hunting lance, but I don't have one. My brother has a proper hunting lance he made from a dead monodont's tooth, but I've never been that lucky to find one dead - and I certainly can't just kill one and take it, that would be quite rude. Monodonts are very pleasant little things, they'd be very upset if we started killing them for their teeth or something horrid like that." T'Vak grumbled, continuing to lay out the shark meat to dry. "Dash it all! Why does *he* have to have all the luck? He'll probably net my betrothed before I even manage to get her attention, too - the wretch!"

I tried not to giggle - despite being easily the size of any man I had known in my life, T'Kak struck me as a *very* silly young boy in many ways. "Well, you still might find some gold coins, you know. You haven't looked yet," I said as he wrenched the shark's jaws free and set them atop the ship's keel.

T'Kak blinked. "Oooo! That's right! I nearly forgot!" Lifting the shark's carcass easily, he took several huge bites with his razor sharp teeth, swiftly devouring most of what was left. With a bloody-faced grin, he tossed what little was left aside - it splashed in the ocean and sank quickly. "Let that dry in the sun, girl, and you can eat it," he said, waving a hand at the meat he'd laid out. "You surface-dwellers don't like our poisons much, I've noticed. Still, the sun on the meat for a few hours will destroy my poison and it will be alright for you to eat. Don't go away, I'll be right back!" he said, and slipped into the water again.

"Where would I go?" I called after him, and laughed.

"I don't think that's occurred to him, yet," Marilith whispered, amusement in her voice.

A long while later, T'Kak climbed back out of the water, a box under one arm. "Oh, this is a truly glorious day!" he crowed, and sat next to me.

"It's locked," I said, pointing at the padlock. "Did you get the key?"

"Mmm? Why would I do that?" he asked, grabbing the lock and twisting. With a crackling of tearing wood, he wrenched the lock off the box, hasp, staple and all, then tossed it aside into the sea where it plopped and sank instantly. "Oh, I forgot - you surface-dwellers aren't very strong, either, are you? It's amazing you manage to survive, I suppose," he said, opening the box. "Ah! Look! Gold coins! How lovely! And they all have holes in the center already!"

"Yes, they're Palomean coins. My father said they carry them on a string at their belt, the holes are to pass the string through."

"Hmmm... Plenty of junk, though," he said, and began pulling out the silver and copper coins, tossing them aside into the sea - a small fortune, to me, but he cast it into the waters without a glance. "All junk, it rots in the sea. Only gold lasts. I'm surprised you surface-dwellers use anything but gold, really."

"We're an odd folk," I replied, grinning.

"Yes, quite! It's truly amazing, I think. I learned your language from one of your sailors. He'd been shipwrecked a long time on an island not far from here. Very odd person. He kept asking me if I had any sisters I might be willing to bring by to visit him. Well, eventually I did bring my sister by, but naturally she wasn't much interested in him. All he wanted to do was try to spawn with her - but, of course, that's not possible. You're built all funny below the waist. How you manage to spawn I've no idea - probably something like dolphins, I imagine. That was... Hmmm... Oh, quite some time ago. He died. You surface-dwellers don't live very long, either."

"We try to cram as much living as we can into what little time we're given," I replied, smiling.

"I suppose you do, at that. Hmmm... Only six gold coins, and no gold chain. How depressing. The coins are quite pretty, but there's not enough. They'll hardly make a nice necklace."

"Ummm... Maybe if you present it differently? I mean, how common are necklaces of gold as a gift for your people?"

T'Kak shrugged. "Not terribly common, but I've seen several of them. That's why I thought it would be a good idea. Why, do you have a better idea?"

"Yes. Present it like a flower, not a piece of jewelry."

"A what?"

"Ummm... Well, I don't know much about what lives below the sea, so I don't know what to compare it to. But you've six coins, here - can you think of at least five nice things about her?"

T'Kak grinned. "I can think of a hundred, easily!"

"You take the coins, and hand them to her one at a time, telling her what it is about her you think is wonderful and beautiful. Then, with the last coin, you say that your love will last as long as they do. If she likes them, she can make them into a necklace, herself."

T'Kak raised a green eyebrow. "You think that would work?"

I grinned. "Yes, I do. Practice on me - hand me each of the coins, one at a time, and pretend I'm her, and you're telling me five things you think are wonderful about her. Then with the sixth coin, you tell me how your love will last as long as they do."

"A splendid idea!" he said, scooping the coins into one hand and tossing the empty box aside. He spent a moment gathering his thoughts, then looked at me and squawked in his language, holding out the first coin.

"Wait, wait, I can't understand that. Try it in my language so I know what you're saying."

"Oh, sorry. I'll try again," he said, and smiled at me. "You have large and lovely fins, and your breasts are round and full."

"Stop!" I said, and Marilith laughed silently in my ear.

"What?" T'Kak said, raising an eyebrow.

"Don't put it like that, it sounds like all you're interested in is her body! We females want to hear how you value us as a person, and what you think of us inside."

"You do?" T'Kak asked, looking surprised.

"Yes. Try again."

"Alright..." he said, and paused, thinking. "You are very smart. Much smarter than I am."

"Better, but put it nicer. Like poetry."

T'Kak clapped a webbed hand over his eyes. "Argh! Not poetry! I'm not a whale, I can't sing or rhyme to save my life!"

"You want her to like you and marry you, yes?"

"Yes!"

"Then it's poetry or celibacy - your choice," I said, crossing my arms. "And tell me specifically what each coin represents, too."

"Alright, alright - poetry it is," he said, sighing.

T'Kak sat there thinking for a long moment, then finally looked at me. "I have six coins for you, beloved, gathered by my own hand. The first is for your wisdom. You are wise like the dolphin, deep and mysterious," he said, holding a coin out to me. I held out my hand, and he placed it in my palm. "You are graceful like the sea-eel, sleek and writhing," he said, placing a second coin in my palm. "Your song is more beautiful than that of the humpback, your hair more lovely than rippling anemone, and your scales shimmer like the sea at sunset," he said, placing the next three coins in my palm. "I love you with all my heart, and my love for you will last as long as these gifts do."

I grinned. "Very nice. Grow a pair of legs and I might be interested in you, myself," I said, holding the coins back out to him.

T'Kak laughed, jingling the coins in his hand. "No, thank you! Everyone would laugh at me, I'd look terribly silly!" T'Kak glanced at the sun. "Oooo! She's going to be sunning herself at her favorite rock with my sister, right now! I'm going to go and try this out!" he yelped, then dived into the sea.

"If you have some time afterwards, I'd appreciate a little help, here! I've no water and I'm trapped here!" I shouted after him. There was no answer, however.

"Why didn't you ask him that at first?" Marilith whispered.

"I didn't *think* of it at first, I was just too surprised at seeing him. Later I realized I could ask him for help, but he was so cute and he seemed so desperate I thought I'd help him, first," I said, and sighed. "I wish I'd thought of asking him sooner, though. I'm terribly thirsty, and I don't know if I can eat the food he's put here yet."

"I don't think so. He said 'hours', and it's hardly been an hour yet."

"Lovely. Hungry *and* thirsty and I sent him away."

"Have faith, Sasha. The ocean watches over you..."

"I hope so. I really do."

The Spider - XVII.

"You disobeyed me," Brionnach said as we camped for the evening. The flickering flame of the small campfire I'd started lit her indigo face with weird highlights as she gazed at me in the darkness, her night-black eyes flashing.

"Forgive me," I replied, and turned my gaze from her. She had not spoken to me all day since I returned with the supplies I'd obtained from the elves. Instead, she had simply examined what I'd brought, nodded, and gestured silently for me to place the pack in the cart, take up the shaft and resume our journey. All that day as I slowly went around the small valley of the elves, she remained utterly silent. It nearly moved my heart to weep - but I said nothing, myself. I feared her power...

What hold did she have over me? I had felt the darkness within myself, something she had called upon that I had never known existed prior to that moment. All that day as I silently walked, pulling the cart behind me, I had considered it... And, eventually, I realized it was something that had always been there, lurking silently in my mind. Yet, I simply had not noticed it before, like one who has a blemish on their face might never notice it until they see themselves in a mirror. It was a part of me, that was certain. Yet, as I considered it, I did not sense evil from that dark part of my mind which even now lurked at the edges of my perception. No, it was not evil. It was... Alien. Different. And yet, not different at all, but simply a part of me I'd never noticed before. It was somehow unnerving.

Brionnach chuckled. "I neither understand *why* you disobeyed me, nor *how*, Barbarian. It should have been *impossible* for you to disobey."

"Perhaps," I replied, turning my gaze to the silent stars. No answers lay there, but I could not meet her gaze at the moment. "I only knew that one man is not an army. They could have killed me, and easily. And then you would have been alone. I could not leave you alone."

Brionnach laughed. "I sincerely doubt they could have killed you, Barbarian... But no matter. We have what we needed, and that is all that concerns me... For the moment."

I nodded, keeping my gaze to the stars.

"For now, Barbarian, I need you to work on making me some appropriate garments. The kit they gave us appears more than sufficient, and you appear to have plenty of leather. Get to work."

I turned to look at her in surprise, and saw she was holding out the toolkit to me - a somewhat large wooden box with a carrying handle across the top. "Me?! But-"

"But what?!" Brionnach snapped, obviously annoyed.

"But I've no idea even where to begin!"

Brionnach gaped at me, then burst out laughing. "Oh, Barbarian! You do say the most amusing things, at times. Still, do not worry. Once you have the tools in your hands, you will know how to use them. Such is your power, as my companion..." she replied, her voice trailing off as I took the kit from her. "Hmmm... Perhaps, somehow, I erred when I cast upon you. Many things you should know about yourself, you do not. If I had my research texts and perhaps several weeks to study you..." she said, then shook her head. "But no, all my books and such were confiscated by the Queen's hounds when they first took me prisoner, and publicly burned at my trial. Feh. It seems hardly worth the effort anyway, Barbarian. I'm sure you will come to understand your true nature in time." Brionnach suddenly smiled darkly. "And when you do, that may be an amusing moment."

I nodded, not knowing what to say, and opened the kit she had handed me. Inside were several tools, ranging from punch-needles to small knives, as well as ample supplies of sturdy, waxed thread and spools of leather lacings. They all seemed utterly alien to me. And yet...

And yet, as my fingers brushed across them...

The dark part that lay within my mind rose up again, and suddenly I knew what each tool, what each bit of the kit was for. I knew how to use it - perhaps not expertly, but adequately.

"We should start with boots, I believe..." I said quietly. "I will have to measure your feet, and make patterns for the soles..."

Brionnach simply smiled, turning so her feet were before me on the blanket.

I worked silently, having her stand on a piece of leather while I lightly scored the outline of her feet with the tip of a knife. Once she was seated again, I began cutting out the soles, then laid them aside. Pulling off my gloves and tucking them into my broadbelt, I took a bit of string and began to measure the dimensions of her ankles, then her calves. Brionnach smiled at my touch, but I was simply too consumed in the task at hand to pay it much notice. Without truly knowing how I knew, I began the task of cutting out the necessary pieces of leather, and stitching the boots together.

Brionnach watched quietly as I worked, slowly finishing the boots, and slipped them on with a smile. Silently, she hiked up the rags she wore as a dress, and I measured her thighs and hips to make a simple set of breeches. She chuckled softly as my hands passed over the soft indigo skin of her rump, as though a notion had occurred to her, and been dismissed in amusement. She then simply slipped the dress off, and sat before me nude, waiting for me to need her to rise for her next measurements.

The part of me that I thought of as 'myself' thrilled at the sight of her nakedness, her smooth indigo skin... Yet, the dark aspect that had arisen within me cared not, and drove me onwards. Hands and fingers callused by what was likely years of swordplay manipulated the needles and other tools swiftly, effortlessly... And soon the breeches were done.

I paused only a moment in deciding upon the tunic - though I knew not what might be best, the dark aspect that had arisen in me seemed to know what it was she wanted without her having to speak at all. I began work on a short vest, cut low in the front to reveal the curve of her magnificent indigo breasts and of short length to reveal her taut abdomen. As I watched my hands work, I began to realize I had no real control over them. And as I watched my hands measure the size of her ribcage, the fingers brushing over the softness of her breasts... I began to grow afraid.

Sleeves were next - two, covering her from wrist to the top of each shoulder, arranged so as to connect by a strap behind her shoulders. This would allow her to remove the sleeves should it grow warm, I realized. It was quite an elegant design... Yet, I had nothing to do with it any longer. No, like

some mad tailor's puppet, I worked with frightening speed and ever-growing skill, but with no volition of my own.

Finally, I was slipping the soft gloves I'd made onto her elegantly-shaped hands when she pulled her hands from mine, and finished donning the gloves herself. The moon hung high in the night sky - it was close to midnight when I finally finished. "Very nice," she commented, standing and looking herself over. The garments fit her like a second skin, which appeared to be what she wanted. She stretched, testing the fit and play of her new garments, and smiled again. "Yes... Quite nice."

"But... But how?!" I exclaimed, my voice muted by fear as I sat at her feet. "It would take ages to learn to make garments such as these."

Brionnach did a double-take at me, then burst out laughing. "Oh, Barbarian! You truly do not understand at all, do you?"

"No, I do not."

"The energy which sustains you is UnLife energy, drawn from the Plane of UnLife. Ordinarily, this energy, when instilled in a corpse, creates creatures known as Walking Dead - and this same energy gives them the power to use *any* tool one places in their hands. Tools are inanimate things, and UnLife is strongly attuned to the inanimate, the unliving. Yet, each tool has an intended use, given it by its maker - an unliving thing possessed of purpose. And this is precisely what the undead are, themselves - unliving things possessed of purpose and intent. Thus, they can use any tool easily, though perhaps not with great skill. Once a tool is placed in the hand of a corpse filled with UnLife energy, its intent and use becomes readily apparent to what intellect that corpse may possess."

My mind reeled. "I... I am undead? Like those zombies you made?!"

"Yes - but far more than that, Barbarian. There was a *reason* the High Necromancer had ordered me brought to him. I was, perhaps, the greatest necromancer the goblins had seen in ages, Barbarian, and I had developed many spells unique to myself. Among them was a new spell for creating a companion - not a simple familiar, as any other sorcerer, but a companion who was undead, and who would have greater powers than any mere familiar. Filled with and driven by the power of UnLife energy, yet

possessing far more intelligence than the nearly-mindless Walking Dead, and being far more controllable than the Hungry Ones... The vampires, the wraiths, and their like."

"But..."

Brionnach smiled darkly. "You still do not understand, do you?" she asked, then laughed. "When you tore my robes from me, I grew enraged, Barbarian. I slew you with a single spell - a blast of poison, which filled every fiber of your being and slew you in a matter of a few screaming heartbeats. But there were still more of your companions to be dealt with, and I lacked the strength to do the same to all of them. So, I cast again, incanting the spell to make your corpse my companion, so that you would rise and defend me. And so you did. As I did not wish you to rot away quite yet, as I had no desire to have to constantly repair drying bones, I cast a third spell later to tie your body to mine, that you would heal from injuries, and grow stronger as time passed." Brionnach then chuckled. "I suppose I was a bit rushed when I cast the spell to make you my companion, and the incantation was spoken, perhaps, less than perfectly. Or, perhaps, my own research into the spell itself was flawed. No matter - it is obvious that you arose with far more independence of thought than I had originally anticipated you might have, or intended for you to have," she said, and paused a moment, her eyes growing unfocused as she gazed upon me.

I shuddered at her gaze, my mind numb with the implications of what she had said. I was filled with horror - both at her, and at myself.

"Yes... Your aura is more that of a revenant than anything else, Barbarian. Yet you are not driven by revenge, or a deed as yet unfinished, as they are..." she said, then blinked, and grinned at me. "No matter, Barbarian. You are mine, and shall be until I release you, or die, myself."

"I... I am yours..." I muttered numbly.

Brionnach chuckled darkly as she gazed down at me, the night breeze stirring her bone-white hair against her indigo cheek.

"No... This cannot be!" I replied suddenly, rising to my feet. "I live! I breathe! I can feel my heart beat, I can feel the warmth when I touch my cheek!" I said, doing so, then lowering my hands and pulling my

gloves out from my broadbelt, and pulling them on. "No, woman. You lie. I am not dead. I live." Standing, I easily loomed over her tiny elfin form - but she did not flinch.

"It is a sham, Barbarian. A sham of life given to you by my sorcery, similar to the sham of life possessed by vampires and a few other Refused Undead."

"No!"

"Yes, Barbarian. Think - you speak to me now with ease, yet has it never once occurred to you to wonder how? I do not speak the language of the people of the far north, nor really any other language than my own and that of the goblins. You understood those Sylvani with ease, and they you - even though you have never learned their language," she said, and chuckled. "Such is the power I have given you as my undead companion."

"No! You lie!"

Brionnach smiled darkly. "Do I?" she said, then chuckled again. "I say you are my undead companion, bound to me by sorcery. You say you are not. If I lie, then leave, Barbarian," she said, and made a sweeping gesture to the forest about us. "Simply turn your back on me and walk away... If you can," she said, and grinned evilly.

For the longest moment, I nearly did.

For the longest moment, all I could see when I gazed upon her was a creature of horror. A necromancer, by her own admission and by the evidence of my own eyes that first night. A mistress of dark, unspeakable sorcery, rejected for this knowledge even by her own dark and evil people. She was a *thing*, a creature to be feared. For the longest moment, I nearly turned on my heel and strode away into the night-shadowed forest that surrounded us.

And yet...

And yet, as I gazed at her, I was again struck by her incredible beauty. The softness of her indigo skin. The delicate, elven point to her ears. The fullness of her lips, the rounded curve of her breasts, the smoothness of her taut belly...

And her eyes...

Dark eyes, they were, dark as night. They flashed dark fire at me, amusement at my moment of indecision, and derision. There was no love there in those eyes for me. Merely derision, and scorn.

And yet...

And yet, behind those eyes, I seemed to see something else...

An ancient hurt, perhaps... A wound, done long ago. A soul that had never healed. Perhaps it was a wound of herself, or perhaps of her people as a whole. I did not know. I only knew that I saw pain there, and a hurt that would never heal. It was not from the curse of the *Lobh'dath* which had stained her skin a deep indigo and turned her hair shock-white, though it was a part. It was something deeper, something I could not truly see, or understand. A hurt, an endless pain, and endless hate... Yet, it was a hurt that might be healed by love, if she could ever be loved. If love could ever enter her cold heart.

And as I gazed at her, I realized I loved her still.

Despite her scorn for me, despite her derision, despite the horror of what she was and what she could do, despite my unbelieving horror of what she said she had done to me, something I could not, in all truth, completely accept in my own heart despite what I knew to be true...

Despite it all, I loved her.

Did she know? It seemed she did not - and more, it seemed that if I told her, if I even tried to explain it to her at all, she would simply laugh. Yet, it was true. I loved her. I loved her, and I could not possibly explain why I did, or even try to say the words to her face. I loved her. I could not possibly leave her.

I turned to face the dying embers of the campfire, and sat silently. Brionnach simply let out a dark, chilling laugh.

The Ocean - Ten.

The sun slipped lower in the sky, heading towards late afternoon, and I sighed. Marilith had been in pain twice in the hours I'd sat here, and I wept for her because I could do nothing to make her feel better. I wept for myself, too - I'd had one chance to escape my fate, and foolishly let it slip through my fingers. Now I was stuck here, sitting atop an overturned boat in the middle of the ocean. The shark-meat was edible, but very salty. This only made my thirst worse.

Why had I done it? Why had I just let him go? Perhaps it was too much of my father's influence. He always said that one should help other people whenever possible. Certainly the strange merman hadn't been human, and he was certainly a bit scatter-brained, but he was a person despite that. I didn't regret helping him - I only regretted not remembering to ask him to help me first. Of course, as scatter-brained as he was, he might not have thought of anything that would help.

A pair of hands broke the water, claws digging into the wood of the ship's hull, and I grinned. "You came back!"

A violent splash of water followed, and the mer-folk pulled themselves up - and, to my surprise, I saw it *wasn't* T'Kak, but a female of his kind. "Oh, sorry! I thought you were someone else."

"Hee! You thinking me my brother, yes?" the mermaid grinned, baring the same sharp teeth I'd seen in T'Kak's mouth. She had the same hair and eyes he did, but her hair was longer, and over her breasts she wore a pair of seashells, connected with a string of pearls. I wondered why she would bother, seeing as how her brother wore nothing, but then it dawned on me that if she was built like a human from the waist up, it might be a bit painful to scrape one's nipples across barnacles or coral, even for the tough hide of a mer-folk.

"You're T'Kak's sister?"

"Yes, me his sister - you speak name funny, though. Him name is-" she said, and finished with a chirping - *T'KAK*- sound.

"Well, I'm glad you're here. I was hoping he would come back, I wanted to ask him if he could help me. I've no water here at all, and I'm terribly thirsty. And I'm also trapped here."

"Hee! Yah, my brother, him not very smart. Male. No male very smart, but him *very* not-smart! Hee! Then him come, say sweet words and give gold coin to my friend. She very happy, much heart-taken. So they go off, they make happy swim-dance. Now they mates. So after they come back, I ask where he learn pretty words? My brother, him *not* say pretty-words like whale-song, him say pretty words more like *seal*! *Arf-arf-arf*! Hah! So him tell me he find human-girl, she teach. I hit him in head, say why he not tell me before? Me learn some words from human long ago - humans interesting. Me want to learn more words. So he tell me where you are, and me come. Now me here. Tell me, human-girl - you want teach me human-talk so I can talk good like my brother? Me take you to island. Food, water there."

"Sure!" I replied, grinning. "Your brother told me that he introduced you to a shipwrecked sailor. He said all the sailor wanted to do was... Err... Spawn with you, but you weren't interested. I didn't realize you'd actually learned to speak our language from him."

The mermaid looked around, as though making sure we were unobserved, then looked back to me. "Yes, sailor him want to spawn. Cannot - we lay eggs in water, watch like fish, then raise hatchling on beach, like seal. Not same - sailor him tell me. Is much like dolphin, for you. Me no could spawn with him. But me play with him time or two," she said, then grinned. "Maybe more than that." At my surprised expression, she burst into giggles. "Humans fun! Is too bad you not boy human, but me still be your friend if you teach me human-talk."

"Okay," I said, smiling.

"Okay! You stay here, me look in boat. Wait," she said, and slipped into the water. A few moments later, she popped her head back above the waves, and held out my shoes to me - I'd left them on the shelf where I'd slept earlier. "Yours, yes?"

"Yes, thank you!" I replied, realizing that if she could look at a pair of shoes sitting in the ship and realize who they belonged to when she didn't even have *feet* to be able to recognize what they *were*, she probably *was* much smarter than her brother. She tossed the shoes up to me one at a time, and I slipped them on. They were soaking wet and cold, but I was warm from the sun and didn't mind.

"Me see much other things, too. Much clothes, many things maybe you like. Bad-metal knife, rope. All junk to us, maybe good for you. You want for me to get?"

"*Tell her yes...*" Marilith whispered.

"Yes, please!"

"Okay, you wait," the mermaid replied, then dived beneath the water again.

I waited, trying to be patient. It felt like an age before she surfaced again, but finally she did. I grinned. "Are we ready to go?"

"Yah! Come! Jump in water, come!" she said.

I did so - and found the water was still *very* cold. "Gah! I'm freezing!"

"Is okay! Come! Come!" she said, pulling me towards her. I saw in her other hand she had a bag of some kind held under the water. She rolled over, pulling me onto her back. "Hold tight! Use legs!" she said. I wrapped my legs around her waist, and she took my hand, pulling it over her shoulder and around her neck. "Hold tight!" she called again, and began to swim, keeping our heads above the water so I could breathe. It was a strange, undulating swim - it seemed as though her tail had similar bones as my legs, but apparently was *far* more flexible. Her 'knees', or what passed for them, could bend backwards. And she swam *very* fast. I couldn't tell exactly how fast we were going, but I guessed it was at least as fast as I could run - and she'd probably have been going faster, if I wasn't slowing her down. I sputtered occasionally when a wave splashed over my face, but she never seemed to notice. She simply blinked just as the wave hit, and kept on swimming. She seemed to have a second, clear, inner eyelid that flickered down for a moment, covering her eye, and she was able to flick her nostrils closed instantly.

"You swim *very* fast!" I said after a moment.

"Must. Is spring, water still cold. You human. Cold water kill you, in time," the mermaid replied. "Me have seen many sailors fall into water from storms. Most not swim, drown fast. Is their way, is good way. Save them much bad, slow death. Some who swim, they swim for long time. Night come, get cold, fall asleep, drown. Even in summer, when water warm, they swim, get tired, drown. Always drown. If storm over, me sometimes call to them. If they calm, me try to help. Most time no good. Land too far, they die anyway. If storm still, me do nothing. Storm bad time, they very afraid. Very afraid. Sometimes have knife. They not know me want to help. They maybe use knife, think me shark, maybe monster. They not know. Me let them die if storm still. Not want to get cut with knife. Night-time worse. Sailors cry much. Call to gods. Gods no help. Very sad. My people most times not help at all. Sailors afraid, maybe hurt with knives, always die anyway. They say, 'why help if die anyway?' I say help if can. That just me. Most not care. Some say kill instead, for mercy. If ship gone and storm still, they come under water so sailor not see, not be afraid. Cut with poison claw so they die fast, not slow. Very sad, but better than slow death. Slow death very bad. They cry much. Very bad."

"We-we'll make it to land, though, won't we?" I asked, my teeth chattering from the cold water.

"Yes, island close. One hour, maybe. Less. You be very cold, but you live. My brother, he think you weak. Me learn from sailor me tell you about. Human not weak. Human like seagull. Live near water, live from water, but cannot live *in* water. We like seal. Live in water, all the time, come out on beach to play or sit in sun, but never far from water. You not weak. Just different."

"Well, I saw your brother pull a lock right off a chest - he's very strong."

"He male, male strong. Not smart, but strong. We female. Not as strong. Much smart. Must be. Hatchlings take much smart. Many things in sea want eat egg before hatch. Many things in sea want eat hatchling before they grow poison claw. We make happy swim-dance, male he give milk - poof! He done, go hunting. We lay egg, watch egg. He come back, bring food, go hunting again. We do all else. Must be smart, not strong. Must watch egg. Must raise hatchling, keep safe until grown. Must teach hatchling dangers of sea. Much smart, must be, or hatchling die. Must choose good male, good hunter. My brother good hunter. He be good mate for my friend. Maybe they be mates forever. Maybe not. If he not good hunter and hatchling die, she no want him no more. He good male, though. Me know him. He find much food, many shiny things. Me thank you for helping him."

I grinned, despite the chill water. "Well, it just seemed he needed a little help. He was worried his brother would get her, instead."

"Other brother better hunter, but he not good at finding shiny things. Good at finding oyster, but not good at finding shiny things. He think he big and smart. He not smart, just big. You tell my brother good thing. Shiny things, much pretty words, very nice. My friend like. She happy now, he happy now. Me happy, too. Other brother not happy, though. You teach him how to say pretty words so he can find mate?"

"If I don't freeze to death before we get to the island, yes," I replied, my teeth chattering again.

"Me swim faster," she replied, and did.

The Spider - XVI.

The days and nights passed swiftly as we traveled, but I cared little. My mind was numb, reeling from the beauty of my own love for Brionnach, trembling with fear of her necromantic powers, and shattered by the horrifying truth of my own existence.

Can a man love such a horror as her, and yet still be a man? I could feel the darkness within me, the UnLife energy, she called it... It filled my limbs with strength despite the fact that I never ate, never drank, never rested... It drove me on, step after endless step through the quiet, ethereal forests. And yet, the part that I considered to be 'me' could still look at her, and love her.

She did not understand. She thought that I remained because I was her slave, her servant. My own resistance she brushed aside in her explanation as being perhaps an error in the casting of her spell, or perhaps an error in the crafting of such dark sorcery to begin with. Yet, neither was so. I remained with her because I loved her. I served her not because she commanded it, but because my heart demanded it.

In her, I could see something... Something beyond the sneer of disdain on her lip, the dark laughter in her voice. The more I gazed upon her each evening, the more I saw it - a wound, perhaps an ancient one. I wanted to comfort her, to heal her...

But, I could not. The dark force within my mind drove me onward, step after step, pulling the small cart behind me.

The lands of the wood-elves held great beauty. Deep forests abounded, ancient trees that looked as though they dated from the very dawn of time reaching enormous branches to join the canopy of leaves, above. Gentle deer and other creatures peeped at us as we traveled, but did not come near - perhaps they feared us, as one might expect them to fear any stranger... Or, perhaps, Brionnach was right, and they could sense the dark power she wielded, and fled from it. Flowers abounded - in the rare clearings where lightning or great age had felled one of these enormous trees, they carpeted the ground, burying the grasses and forest litter in a sweetly fragrant blanket of brilliant color. The tap of a woodpecker... The song of a sparrow... The chitter of a squirrel... The air of the elven forests was alive with the music of life. It was all so very, very beautiful...

And yet, in my eyes, it did not compare to the beauty of Brionnach.

I was mad, and I knew it - for how can a man be sane who loves someone who horrifies him to the pit of his soul? How can a man be sane who loves a witch such as Brionnach, by deed and her own admission a mistress of dark, unspeakable powers? How can a man be sane who loves a woman who sneers at him, laughs at him, and has stolen his soul with powers so dark they leave him trembling with fear?

Yet, I loved her. That, I could not deny. Thus, as I strode through the forests day after day, carefully avoiding any sign of inhabitation, it slowly occurred to me that I was completely mad.

Her people once lived in these lands, she explained. Once, long ago, they lived in a part of the elf-lands called Valbeana, and made their living plying the crystal rivers of that land in sleek, narrow boats. Yet, ever were their hearts and minds drawn to shadow and night, and the powers that lay within darkness. They became rulers of the Unseelie Court... The darker half of the ruling council which controlled the Lands of the Elves. Their opposite number was the Seelie court, comprised of the various races of Light Elves and their allies. There were three races of Light Elves, as she explained it. The Sylvani, or Wood Elves, the Katani, or Sword Elves, and the Nomani, the High Elves. Her people were the Malani, or Dark Elves. The elves we had encountered before were Sylvani - fair of hair and eye, they lived in villages and cities within deep and ancient forests, and comprised the majority of the Light Elf population. The Katani were similar in skin and eye, but had hair of brown, black, and occasionally reds, ranging from a deep, fire red through a shimmering copper. They were the warriors of the Light Elves, the path of the warrior so deeply ingrained in their culture that to them, armor and clothing had blended to the point where one could not distinguish one from the other - nor did their people even attempt to. The Nomani were the scholars, the thinkers... And the rulers. They were again fair of skin, but their eyes were often silver or gray, and their hair a pale, pale white. Such were the three races of Light Elves, the leaders of the Seelie court.

Perhaps, as time passed, the dark would have triumphed over the light, and ruled all... But, a great war occurred. The War of the Rift, she called it, and explained that it began and ended twelve millennia ago. The power of the Unseelie court was shattered above the earth and the Dark Elves driven underground, deeper even than the dwarves or the goblins lived, down to the Sunless Sea. There, in darkness that had not been broken by light since the dawn of time, they mastered the powers of shadow. I tried to envision it - an entire race of people with bone white skin and night-black hair, living in perpetual shadow and learning to bend the shadow to their will... And I shuddered again.

Darkness existed before light, she explained. When the Creator spoke the WORD and created the universe from the vastness of the Void, all was dark. One can take away light and have darkness remain, but one can never take away darkness and have only light remain - such is the power of shadow. Shadows were everywhere. Long ago, their people resolved to master the power of shadows, to have access to a power that was omnipresent in the universe. But, to do so, many other realms of studies were banned among their people.

"And one of those banned realms of power was Necromancy," I replied.

We had camped again, a small fire between us, and the sounds of the forest at night about us. Nearly two months had passed since we first met, though to me, it seemed much less. Brionnach amused herself by chatting with me from time to time. Though I was obviously nothing to her, merely a tool she was using to get to the Utter East, it seemed she preferred talk to the boredom of silence. "Yes, Barbarian. Though everything eventually dies, death is not everywhere. Death can only exist where there is life. Shadow, however, exists everywhere in the universe. Necromancy was thus considered a lesser study, one best left to the lesser races, particularly the Goblins and their kin. When my people first arrived upon the Sunless Sea, mastery of the shadows there was critical to our survival - no distractions in the study of Sciology could be afforded. And more, when we were driven beneath the earth by the Light Elves, our numbers were few, and disease could have killed the lot of us. Necromancy is hardly an immaculate art, Barbarian, and in that day, it was feared that an excess of animated corpses might spread disease to destroy our small numbers, so it was again forbidden. Now, an age later, this prohibition has shifted from one of necessity to one of tradition and custom. Sciology is considered our traditional craft, and the study of Necromancy that of lesser beings, such as the goblins. I thought this wrong - our people have long since grown past the handful of survivors of the War of the Rift, and our numbers are great beneath the earth. But, it remains a law among our people - thus, when I was caught, I was punished according to the ancient laws."

"I still do not understand... Your people, as you say, live in darkness and relish the shadows. It would seem to me that they all are dark of heart, and would embrace such knowledge now that their numbers are strong, rather than maintaining an ancient ban which is of no use today."

Brionnach simply sneered at me. "Though it may seem odd to *you*, Barbarian, my people *do* have laws. We do not consider ourselves to be evil, anymore than any other race considers themselves to be evil, nor is our society one of lawlessness and anarchy."

"The law was wrong, then. You were wrongly punished for a crime which is no crime among your people... Or should not be, given the reason for the law."

"Don't you think I already know that?!" she snapped. "Enough. I tire, Barbarian. I wish to sleep. Guard me."

I nodded and rose, drawing my weapons as she curled herself up in her little blanket.

I gazed out at the darkened forest. A gibbous moon hung high in the sky, the stars twinkling faintly through the canopy of leaves above. Below the trees, the shadows were deep and dark. Yet, even in darkness, the forest was beautiful. Even at night, the quiet sounds of the night-animals gently wafted to my ears by the breezes told me the forest was still alive. Here was the beauty her people had seen, all those many millennia ago. The beauty of the mouse, slipping quietly from its day-time burrow to search among the forest litter for its nightly meal. The beauty of the owl, a silent hunter who slipped through the trees on soundless wings, in search of prey. The beauty of shadows, twisted and macabre, alternately concealing and revealing hidden secrets beneath the trees as the leaves above gently shifted in the night breeze.

The dark part of my mind was quiet, and only the part of my mind I considered 'me' was awake. Yet, I could still see beauty in the forest at night, splendor in the darkness...

...and even greater beauty and splendor in the sleeping face of the indigo-skinned woman before me, who I knew beyond doubt was evil through and through.

I shook my head. It was obvious. I had gone completely mad.

The Ocean - Eleven.

The last wave carried us forward onto the eastern beach of the island, and I leapt from the mermaid's back, dashing up onto the dry sand. I was shivering badly, but the sun was still up. Hopefully, I would dry before night fell. I looked behind me, and saw the mermaid crawling up onto the beach, dragging the bag she'd made with her. "Oh! Sorry!" I said, trotting back to her and taking the bag from her hand. It wasn't too heavy, and I carried it up to the dry sand and dropped it, then sat down in the sand to rest.

T'Kak's sister crawled up to me, grinning. It was a bit startling, actually - her teeth were *very* sharp. Still, I knew she meant me no harm. She finally got next to me, and laughed. "See? Here, you strong, me weak. You walk fast, run. Me crawl," she said, rolling over and sitting next to me. "See? Me have poison claw..." she said, and flexed her thumbs, causing slim black claws to extend from the ends of her thumbs. Then she retracted her claws, and laughed again. "So what? You get up, you run away. Maybe pick up big stick, come back, hit me, I die. See? This land - you human. Here, you strong, me weak. In sea, me strong, you weak. Is balance, see?"

I nodded, smiling. "Yes, I do."

"Open bag - you thirsty, yes?"

"Yes!" I yelped, pulling open the bag. There were two bottles in it. I started to open one, but she

snatched it from my hand.

"Wait! Wait, not know what inside! Maybe good, maybe no good. Can you read?" she asked, pointing at the writing on the bottle.

It was a series of painted Palomean characters, and I shook my head. "No, that's another language. We humans have many languages, and I don't know that one. Even if I did, I still couldn't read it. Girls aren't taught to read in Vilandia unless they have the *Talent* and can do magic."

"Me smell, then," she said, and pulled the cork with a webbed hand, waving it beneath her nose. "Wooya! You not drink this when thirsty. This fire-water. Smell," she said, handing the bottle and the cork to me.

I sniffed. I didn't know what it was, but it smelled *very* strongly of alcohol. "I see," I said, stuffing the cork back in.

"Me smell other one," she said, pulling the cork of the second bottle. "Ah! Is good! Grog, sailor-man tell me. Can drink when thirsty. Water on island, too, but me not know where. Me never leave beach," she said, handing me the bottle and cork.

I grabbed the bottle eagerly, and took a swallow - then nearly retched. It was drinkable, but only just. It was some kind of mixture of bitter alcohol and water, and I didn't like it much. Still, it was better than nothing. I forced myself to drink some more, then corked the bottle and put it in my lap to try to work on later. "Thank you."

"You welcome. Me no can drink that. Me laugh, fall down! Hah! Maybe you laugh, fall down, too, me not know. But me think you not. Me think you human, and this land. You strong, here. Is balance. Much I learn from sailor friend. Him very lonely, many years. He grow old, die. But he live up there, before. See there? Little house?"

I nodded, looking up the hill behind us. There was a log cabin atop the hill, silhouetted in the setting sun. It was quite small, and looked like it hadn't been inhabited in years. "I see it."

"Him live there many years. My brother, he meet him. Sailor-man lonely, he ask my brother bring me. My brother, he male, he not smart. He always forget. Forget, forget, forget. Finally one day he remember, he tell me. I come, I meet sailor-man. Him very old human. White hair here," she said, pointing to her chin. "Errr... Not remember."

"A beard?" I offered.

"Yes! Beard. He have long beard. He here many years. Very lonely. I come, I meet him. I young, then. Err... Me forget number. Hand is five, two hand ten, yes?"

"Yes."

"Ah. Me ten two-hands years, then."

"A hundred?" I asked, amazed.

"Yes! Hundred. Hundred years old, then. Very young. Me see him, talk to him. Learn words from him, yes. But it take time. Brother, him know words, him talk to sailor-man many years. Three two-hands years. But him male, him not have time to teach. Busy, busy, hunt, hunt! Male."

"That, and he's a little scatter-brained," I said, and giggled.

The mermaid laughed. "Yes! But he speak your words very good! He teach me little, I learn rest from sailor-man. Him name Barro. Very nice. Very lonely, very nice. Me feel sorry for him. Him very old. He want friend, mate. Me no can be his mate, he human. Very sad. So, I decide be nice to him. We not talk

much after that. Him love me very much, I think. He very old, need someone to love. So we hug and kiss and..." she said, then grinned. "Well, we play. Was fun. Many times not talk much, just touch. Hold hands, too. Watch sea."

I smiled. "That sounds very nice."

"Yah, nice. One year, like that. Not talk much, just touch. Hold hands. Sometimes play, sometimes just hug," she said, and sighed. "Then he die. Up there, in house. Me climb up there - took long time. Me find him - he dead. Very sad. So, me leave him there. That... Errr... One two-hands... Err... Ten years ago."

"So you're a hundred and twenty years old?" I asked, amazed.

"Yes. Me still young, sorry."

I laughed. "I'm only sixteen, you seem *very* old, to me!"

T"Kak's sister's eyes widened. "Two hand, one hand, one?"

"Yes," I replied, grinning.

"You hatchling!" she said, and laughed.

I stuck my tongue out at her. "I am *not* a baby, I'm sixteen! Old enough to get married, where I come from!"

The mermaid laughed again. "Me sorry, me just tease. Me know humans not mer-folk, not live long time like us. Is still balance, though."

"It is? How?" I asked, wondering what she was driving at.

"You fall in water, you die. Here on island, you fine. Fruit, water... You live easy. Me have to stay here, near water. Cannot eat fruit, cannot drink water - nothing here good for me. Go up to little house? Very hard for me. Skin dry, hurt. Get thirsty. You? Is nothing, you walk. Me in water, maybe orca come. Maybe eat me. Orca mean, eat anything. Very mean. Orca and mer-folk big enemy, for we eat same thing, you see?"

"I think so," I replied, nodding.

"Ah, but you see orca? You not worry. You on land, you fine. Even if you fall in water, orca probably not eat you. Maybe so, but maybe just wonder what you are. Orca not very smart. Orca see me, aaah! Snap-snap! Must fight. Me have poison claw, but him very big. Me claw him - try. Maybe him die, maybe not. Him bite bad, me die anyway. Always. To find and kill orca, is male-thing. Good-hunting brother have monodont spear - make for very good kill on orca! Males, they do, so we females can hunt, raise hatchlings all safe."

I smiled. "Well, I understand that," I said, then paused. "You know, you've never told me your name!"

"Ah! My name-" she said, then let out a chatter of sound.

"I can't *even* pronounce that, I'm sorry."

"Hah! Sailor-man, he not could say, either. Him give me human name. Barro call me 'Pearl'. You call me 'Pearl', too, if you want."

"Alright, Pearl," I replied, grinning.

"Hah! Is good," she said, looking at the sun. "Sunset, now. Must sleep soon. Mer-folk sleep in shallows where orca no can go, but sometimes sleep on beach, too. You okay alone? Me can sleep on beach with you if you need."

"I'll be fine."

"Okay! You go to little house. Barro, him dead. He no be angry. Me know him well, he be happy for you to use house. You can bury him, too. Me no could bury him. No tool, skin dry, very hard for to do. For you, easy! You make him happy if you do that. Make me happy, too. Okay?"

"Okay," I replied, and managed a smile. I wasn't looking forward to trying to find and bury the bones of the dead sailor, but I wasn't about to tell Pearl 'no', after all. If it weren't for her, I'd still be stuck sitting on the keel of the boat, and probably looking at a very miserable death through starvation or thirst.

"Okay!" Pearl said, and rolled over, quickly dragging herself to point at the waves. She glanced back at me, and chattered something in her language, then grinned.

"Good night!" I replied, and she nodded.

"Yes! That is right word! Good night!" she said, and started crawling towards the waves.

I watched Pearl slowly crawl into the surf, then finally catch a wave. With a flick of her flippers, she disappeared into the water. The grog inside me warmed me, and the sun had dried me as I lay on the beach. It was a beautiful sunset. Pearl popped up above the water for a moment, far from shore, and waved to me. I waved back, and she dived beneath the water again. The sun neared the horizon behind me, drawing long shadows over me and lighting the sky and ocean with the lovely hues of sunset. It was,

truly, very beautiful here. After a long while, though, I sighed.

"What's the matter?" Marilith whispered.

"That sailor... Barro, Pearl said he was called. He was here *decades* and never was rescued. Thirty years, Pearl said. I could be here my entire life. I don't know where we are. The plants and stuff behind me look much like they did back home. Palome is west of Vilandia... I'd say I'm probably on one of the islands father called the Windward Isles. Ships don't come here at all, ever. They go around. Too many shallows, too many rocks, too many reefs. I'll never get off this island, I'll never be able to get home, I'll never be able to help you."

"Not so, Sasha... Listen. Can you hear it?"

I shook my head, and realized the grog was making me a little dizzy. "I just hear the ocean."

"Yes. The ocean is whispering to you... And she is whispering to me, where I am, right now. You are here for a reason. There is much for you to learn, and much for you to do. You are precisely where you are supposed to be, Sasha."

"Well, that's good to know," I said, stretching out on the sand and gazing at the crimson-hued clouds above. Perhaps I wasn't where I wanted to be, but knowing I was where I was supposed to be was a great comfort. The evening was warm, and the grog in my tummy made the whole world feel pleasant. In a moment, I was fast asleep.

The Ocean - Twelve.

Dawn the next day was a little cool, but otherwise pleasant. Marilith woke me just at sunrise, and I headed towards the cabin atop the hill. It wasn't that difficult finding the bones of the sailor - he apparently had died just outside his house. Marilith guessed that he might have fallen from the platform he'd built his house on, but it was difficult to say. Either way, there was little left of him but bleached bones. A quick search of his house (which was full of spider-webs) revealed a small shovel, and soon the task was done. I wondered why he'd even bothered to build his house on a platform, but Marilith said she could see snakes and goats on the island. It dawned on me that the easiest way to keep both out of one's house would be to put it up on a platform. It wasn't hard to get up to the house, the platform was only about as high as my chin - I just clambered up.

The inside of the house had many tools in it, as well as things obviously recovered from a shipwreck. Nails, a hammer, several knives, a saw, two hatchets, quite a bit of rope, many corked bottles, a block and tackle, and more. Inside the house, it could also be seen that much of it was built with wood recovered from a shipwreck. I emptied out what Pearl had recovered from the slave ship, adding another knife, some rope, and several other small things to the collection. At Marilith's suggestion, I laid out the rope from the slave ship out on the platform so it would dry in the sun, then selected the best of the knives which had sheaths and strapped it about my waist with an old belt we found. There was a hand-made broom inside the house, and I spent several hours afterwards going through the little place and cleaning it up. Layers of dust and dirt had built up, and spiders were everywhere. I paid particular attention to the bed - it was little more than a cot, really, but it looked as though it might be quite comfortable, once the woolen blankets had been cleaned up a bit.

By the time I was done, Marilith said she had looked around a bit nearby me, and wanted me to explore more - she suggested I carry the bottle of grog with me, and look for a source of water. We quickly discovered a fenced-off area near the house - it appeared that Barro had once kept a small herd of goats, but in ten years, they'd escaped to the rest of the island. Perhaps they'd come aboard the same ship he'd been on, or perhaps they'd been on the island before. Either way, it didn't matter - there now were quite a few goats on the island, and they were eating up everything. The grass everywhere was short, and there were no young trees anywhere in the forest that I could see. Marilith said I'd have to probably repair the pen and capture some of them for milk, then start hunting the rest or they'd eventually eat the island bare. I had to agree - the largest predator on the island apparently was me, and the goats had no fear of me at all, simply watching me dumbly as I walked by the occasional goat I found in the forest.

As it turned out, the island was about five leagues across, and had a small freshwater lake in the center. Marilith said the island was the peak of a large, dormant volcano that stretched up from the ocean floor, deep below, but I didn't know how she could tell. I could see frogs and fish in the lake, so it seemed I'd be eating fairly well. I filled the grog bottle to the top with lake-water, and diluting the grog a bit definitely helped the taste.

One strange thing was a door we found, embedded in the grasses of the slope surrounding the lake - it looked like a door recovered straight from the shipwreck that had brought Barro here. It took a great deal of effort to pull it open, as the grass had a very firm grip on it, but finally I managed it. Behind it was a small cave, apparently dug out by Barro - and inside it was many, many wheels of goat's-milk cheese he'd stored in the cool darkness of the cave to ripen. There were also several bottles of rum hidden there, apparently also recovered from Barro's wreck, though I had little interest in them. Still, the cheese was a wonderful find, and after carefully removing the cheesecloth, I spent quite some time cutting slices of the delicious find and gobbling them down before Marilith told me that I should go check the beach to see if Pearl had returned. I took the block of cheese with me, sealing the little cave-door closed very carefully, then jogged all the way to the beach. I was quite out of breath by the time I got there, it was nearly two leagues.

I didn't have to wait long before Pearl crawled out of the sea and came to sit beside me on the sand, grinning her shark-toothed grin at me. "What you find, eh?"

"Well, it looks like Barro had many years to make this island very nice, but I've a bit of work ahead of me. The goats have gone wild and are eating everything up - I'll have to pen up a few of them for milk, then start slaughtering the rest until the plants have a chance to recover. Barro also had a nice cheese-cellar made near the lake. After ten years, this cheese is *very* delicious. Would you like to try some?"

Pearl leaned over, sniffing the slice of cheese I held out to her, then jerked her head back, holding her nose. "Phuagh! No good for me."

I grinned, and took a bite. "Well, it's *very* good for me."

"You human. Is balance, see? This land - me no can eat here."

"Actually, there's a lake at the center of this island, and it's full of fish. You could probably do very well there."

"Ah, but not sea-water. Mer-folk must have sea-water. Salt, sailor-man said. No salt, we die."

"Hmmm... That probably could be fixed, if we had to," I said, then grinned. "Well, what shall we do today?"

"Other brother, him come soon. He hunt, bring you present. If you like, you teach him pretty words so he can get mate."

I laughed. "I think I'll have to teach him to understand my language, first! I can't speak your language at all!"

"That easy. Male, they not smart. But they learn words fast! Is balance. We smart, but not learn words as fast as male. They not smart, but learn words fast. They learn many things fast. We female - must be smart to guard hatchling, teach hatchling. They male - must hunt orca, must learn fast or they die, we die. All is balance. You see goat in forest, you see too many goat. Goat eat everything, you say - Barro say same, years ago. Must kill and eat goat to keep balance. Same in sea. Too many nibble-fish, they eat all coral. Coral die, many things die, all bad. Must kill and eat nibble-fish or everything die. Is balance. All is balance!" she said, gesturing expansively with her clawed, webbed hands, then grinned.

"She is right," Marilith whispered. "All the universe is based on balance. For every light, there is a shadow. For every prey, there is a predator. Destroy the balance, and what is unbalanced will falter, and die."

"I understand," I said to Pearl, smiling.

"Ah! Look! Is other brother," she said, pointing off into the waves.

I looked, and saw a green-haired merman waving from off-shore. He called to us in their chittering language, and Pearl called back. He disappeared beneath the waves, and shortly appeared again, crawling out of the surf. In one hand he held a spirally fluted, lance-like spear, easily six cubits long - and impaled upon it was a cubit-long fish, bloody and flopping. I looked him over as he slowly crawled towards me, the muscles in his shoulders rippling, his blue eyes flashing... And my eyes widened. "Oh, my..."

"What?" Pearl asked, looking at me.

"I do believe I did a bad thing with your brother and your friend. Your other brother here is *much* more handsome."

Pearl burst into laughter. "You not tell him that! His head get *very* big if you say that! Him already think he biggest, handsomest male for many-many leagues around, he no need bigger head!"

I laughed. "I won't, don't worry," I said, then paused. "Oooh! What kind of gift is it he's giving me?"

"Is fish. Not know name in your talk. Predator-fish, sharp teeth, eats smaller fish."

"No, no! I mean is it a *big* gift like the coins or a pearl necklace, or is it a little tiny gift, what?"

"Oh! Is small gift. If he give to mermaid, she just say 'thank you' and eat it. Maybe not even eat, they not very tasty. Is not big thing, is very small thing. Him just want to show he friendly."

"Good, because after eating all this cheese, I don't think I could eat another bite right now!" I said, and grinned.

Pearl laughed as her brother dragged himself up to sit next to us on the beach, to my other side. After pulling the fish off his spear, he held it out to me and chittered in his language.

"Thank you," I replied, demurely as possible, and set the bloody, flopping fish behind me where it would hopefully spasm out the last of its life quietly.

"This my brother, him name-" Pearl said, and squawked something briefly.

I shook my head. "I can't say that, either. Shall we give him a name I can say?"

"Hah! Yes, call him rock-head!" Pearl replied, and giggled.

"No, no! Ummm... Let's call him Yanar," I said, and smiled at him, feeling wistful for a moment.

"Yanar? What that mean?"

"Nothing, it's just a name," I replied quickly. "Most of our names don't mean anything, they're just words we use to tell each other apart."

"Ah," she said, and chittered a brief explanation to Yanar.

I was curious about his spear, and pointed. "What's that made out of?"

Pearl and her brother chittered for a moment, then Pearl looked to me. "Is monodont tooth. Monodont whale, males grow long tooth, point straight out of head, like this!" she said, and touched her finger to her jaw, then drew it straight away from her face. "They fight, defend herd with tooth. Is *very* strong. My brother, he very lucky, find dead monodont. Orca, monodont fight. Monodont stab orca, orca him bite monodont. Both die later. We no kill monodont. They very nice, sing pretty. Orca, him kill everything. Very mean. My brother, him say him kill fish for you with spear, no use poison claw. That way you can eat. But if you eat, his head get very big. Is small gift, do not eat. Make him work harder. Hah!"

I giggled at Pearl, then looked to Yanar. "Well, I thank you for the gift, Yanar, but I can't eat it. I'm full, I already ate before you arrived."

Yanar looked at Pearl, and they chittered at each other for a moment. Yanar then looked very sheepish, and chittered at me briefly. Pearl giggled.

"What did you tell him?" I asked, looking at her.

"Hah! Me tell him is little gift. Too little! Me tell him you not... Err... Im... Imper..."

"Impressed?" I offered.

"Yes! Me tell him you not impressed. Me tell him you want mermaid gift! Comb for hair, brush for teeth, shell-top for breasts, pearl necklace! You teach important thing! Learn words for your people. Is important!"

"Well, it's not *that* important, Pearl," I replied, but she shook her head.

"No, is *very* important. Maybe sometime we need something from your people. Maybe sometime bad thing happen, balance lost in ocean. Maybe sometime we need to ask your people for help. We use words *you* teach to ask. Maybe someday your people ask us for help. Maybe ship sink, maybe

important thing on ship. Maybe you want it back. We use words *you* teach to understand. Maybe you be old by then. Maybe you be dead by then. But someday, we use words you teach to help our people - maybe work together, help everyone."

"Her people are very long-lived, Sasha," Marilith whispered. "Pearl is thinking not of her own benefit, but of a benefit that will last a long time to come for her people. Long-lived races often make long-term plans. She was right - she truly is wiser than her brothers."

"So I see," I said, looking at Pearl with newfound respect. She might speak my language in what was, at best, a pidgin, but she was still over a century old. It was more impressive to realize that for her people, she was still considered *young*. I smiled. "Well, shall we get started with the language lessons?"

"Yes!" Pearl replied, grinning, and her brother chittered something I didn't understand yet - but probably eventually would.

The Spider - XV.

By the third month of our travels, we had entered lands that Brionnach said belonged traditionally to the Katani elves - the Sword Elves. Brionnach warned me to be on watch for them. Though not generally as woodswise as their Sylvani kin, the Katani were nonetheless quite dangerous should they manage to find us. I simply nodded. I was always watchful, of course, so, her warning meant little to me.

Time and time again, I wondered where we were truly going. Yes, I knew that we traveled to the Utter East - but that was all I knew. What was it she sought there? She said a cure for the curse she was afflicted with might exist there - but in what form? How would we know what to look for once we arrived there? I did not know - so, in curiosity, I asked.

Brionnach simply chuckled at my ignorance. "Far to the east, Barbarian, is the lands of Mysantia. In the Utter East, at the shores of the Dawn Sea, there is a temple. Within that temple is a demon that has been shackled to this plane for two thousand years, since even before the Great War of Devastation. The curse of the *Lobh'dath* cannot be removed by any sorcery known to mortal man or elf. Well, save perhaps for the sorcery of a Great Mage, but there is only one in existence, and I am *hardly* going to travel to Hyperborea to ask *them* for help. Even if I somehow could avoid the giants, dragons and fell beasts which infest that land like fleas on an old dog's back, the Witch-Women of Hyperborea would burn me to a cinder the instant they saw me - and I would have to pass them before I could even *speak* to the mage Eddas Ayar, who is an enemy of my people anyway," she said, and spat over the side of the cart before she continued. "No, Barbarian. The only solution is to try my luck at freeing the demon. The legends say that whoever frees them would have them in servitude for the rest of their lives... And an elf lives quite some time, Barbarian," she replied, and chuckled darkly.

"But..."

"Yes?"

"But what if the demon is unwilling to be your slave? What if they want to kill you, instead?"

"That is where *you* come in, Barbarian. I expect you to defend me, of course, while I deal with them. I am a necromancer - I know no spells for summoning or confining demons. It would be up to you to hold them back while I did my best to slay them."

I started to reply, when suddenly, a cry rang out from the forest before us. "Ho, Aelenil! An enemy!"

I looked. Before us, about twenty-five paces distant, were two elves in bright, shining plate armor mounted atop thick-bodied, armored steeds. One wore no helmet and bore no weapons, but the other carried a long lance and wore a visored helmet. How I had not noticed them before, I had no idea - they

seemed to have simply emerged from the trees, like magic.

"Aye, Eomas - the blue one is a Malani Necromancer."

"Katani!" Brionnach snapped, already leaping from the little cart. "Defend me!" she hissed, and began casting a spell.

"Take the wench, I'll deal with her companion," the first elf called, flicking down his visor, lowering his lance and clapping his armored heels to his mount. The second did not reply, instead beginning his own spell, glowing motes of energy trailing from his armored fingertips as he began to gesture.

The first bore down on me swiftly, his lance aimed high as I drew my weapons. I knew I would have only a heartbeat to parry the tip of his lance or leap aside, and I would have to time it perfectly.

A sudden clap of thunder split the air, startling me. A brilliant flash of lightning leapt from the second's fingertips to strike Brionnach - yet, her first spell had been a defensive one, and the brunt of the lightning sprayed about her harmlessly, like a stream of water played across an invisible sphere of protection. Though she staggered, she did not fall. My eyes flickered back to the first - he was close. Too close. I tried to parry, a desperate slash with my sword. With the ease of one long practiced at the lance, the elf simply flicked the tip beneath my guard with a slight turn of his wrist just before the moment of impact.

Surprisingly, there was no pain.

The blow of the ten-pound lance, reinforced by the skill of the rider, the speed of his charge and the simple mass of he and his mount, sent me flying. Both my weapons were knocked from my hands by the blow, and I tumbled for several moments before coming to rest against the bole of a tree with a jarring thump. Most of the chain shirt over my abdomen had been utterly torn away by the blow - as well as a good portion of my abdomen, itself. Long, bloody loops of intestines slithered about my feet as I rose, blood pouring from the wound like a river. Yet, surprisingly, there was no pain.

Perhaps Brionnach had not lied, and I truly was a dead man, with only a sham of life.

My mind numb, I cast about for my weapons, trying not to trip over my own intestines as I searched. I could not fight them barehanded.

Brionnach and the second elf traded blasts of magical energy, the results of their battle not quite certain. The first elf wheeled his mount about, then gazed at me in astonishment, his eyes wide behind his visor. "Give up, fool, you're dead!" he snapped.

"Not quite, elf," I replied, scooping my fallen axe from the ground and staggering towards him. "Fight me."

"Not likely," he replied, and clapped his heels to his mount again, riding past me swiftly, his lance wide and low. I could not possibly dodge it - it struck me above the knees, shattering both legs with tremendous force, and sending me sprawling again.

A sudden scream of pain split the air, and the second elf slipped from his mount, blood pouring from his eyes at the effects of Brionnach's final spell. His mount reared, then galloped off. The first snarled, wheeling his mount and lowering his lance to slay Brionnach from behind. I could do nothing to stop him. "Look out!" I screamed. It was all I could do.

Brionnach turned her head, and gestured almost negligently. The first elf was a skilled and capable warrior, but he was no mage. He let out a short, howling cry - and to my surprise, his horse screamed like a woman in agony. Then, as one, they fell to the earth with a dissonant crash of armor.

Silence fell in the small clearing. I still breathed. I could still feel my heart beat. I should be dead... But I was not. Brionnach's sorcery sustained me, somehow. "Brionnach, I am wounded. Can you..."

Brionnach silenced me with a withering glare. "Feh. You are *worthless*, Barbarian, she said, and kicked the corpse of the fallen elf before her. "*Here* is what I should have gotten. You have strength and

skill, but your skill is that of a barbarian warrior, with no true training in the arts of war. Perhaps my spell was wrongly done... No matter. You are worthless to me. I release you."

And at that, my heart stopped, and my breathing stilled. I collapsed, unable to even move my limbs, or to beg her not to abandon me. The dark part of my mind weakened, and began to fade.

With unblinking eyes, I watched her cast her spell again, this time taking great care. She gestured slowly, carefully, incanting words of power for many long moments.

My eyes began to dry.

Finally, she was done. The elf who had defeated me slid himself from beneath the corpse of his steed, and rose gracefully to his feet. "*How may I serve you, Mistress?*" he asked, his voice a hollow whisper from beyond the grave.

"*Much* better," Brionnach crowed, grinning.

'No...' My mind called, my voice stilled forever. '*I love you...*'

Brionnach gestured idly to the steed, and it staggered to its feet - a zombie, like the men she had raised the first night we were together. "Gather your weapons, then rope the yoke of this cart to the back of your saddle. I shall ride with you."

"Yes, *mistress*," her new servant replied, and bent to the task she had given him.

My vision dimmed, and faded. After awhile, I heard them moving off at a walk. The squeaking wheels of the cart, such a familiar sound to me now, slowly faded in the distance.

The Ocean - Thirteen.

Spring slowly turned into summer, and my work both on the island and with the mer-folk continued. It took awhile, but eventually I managed to get the pen re-built, and had six nannies and a billy-goat penned inside. The billy I selected very simply - he was the only one that didn't object to me leading him back to the pen, and was quite a docile little thing. The nannies I selected simply because they had kids, and allowed themselves to be milked into the little bucket I found. As for the rest of the goats on the island, I went around with a spear made from a pole with a knife strapped to it, and slowly whittled down their numbers, working on the billies first. I didn't want the wild ones to learn to run from me, so I first hunted the ones who seemed fearful or aggressive. Eventually, I had two wild billies and thirty wild nannies, and I noticed that the grasses were starting to grow back - it was time to stop. Of course, during that time, I ate very well.

Marilith helped as much as she could, giving advice frequently. She pointed out several herbs on the island the goats hadn't yet eaten, and told me of their medicinal uses, and how to prepare them. After finding a few jars that Barro apparently had scavenged years ago, I began working with the herbs every night, following Marilith's instructions. By mid-summer, I had a dozen jars full of various unguents and creams that I might need if I ever got hurt or sick, and Marilith was much happier for not having to worry about that. If anything happened to me, she could do nothing, as she was thousands of leagues away. It was best for me to be prepared, and be able to help myself. Marilith also showed me how to make a cream that kept the sun from burning my skin - it came in quite handy, and turned out to be fairly easy to make from an herb that was quite common on the island, since the goats didn't like eating it.

The work was hard, though, as hard as it had been on the farm back home - and at times it seemed endless. I didn't *think* I was getting fat, despite all the food, simply because I was always working so hard. Yet, my dress had not only grown threadbare, but now fit tightly across my hips and bust. It also no

longer reached my ankles, but now hung a bit higher. I thought maybe the fabric was shrinking from having been soaked in sea-water this spring, but Marilith simply laughed and said I was growing up. Unfortunately, there was nothing to replace it with. I had only managed to salvage a few blankets from Barro's belongings, most of the other cloth was ruined by either age or mildew or both. There seemed little choice - I had to wear something, and I was about to burst the seams of my dress. But, I wasn't very good at making clothing from goat-hide, and had nothing to weave goat-hair into wool. Though with Marilith's help I eventually mastered using the brains and livers of the goats to tan their hides, the results of my leather-working and tailoring left quite a bit to be desired. My goat-hide pants and blouse were too warm (though they probably would be fine if winter here turned out to be cool or cold), and my goat-hide skirt was heavy and hard to walk around in.

Finally, near the beginning of summer, Marilith reminded me that the mer-folk were the only other people on the island, and they simply didn't care what I wore. Since the only biting insects on the island were a few ants and some spiders and there weren't any poisonous snakes at all, I just decided to wear the goat-hide clothes only when I was working or walking around in the forest. On the beach, teaching the mer-folk, I wore nothing but the moccasins I'd made so I wouldn't hurt myself stepping on a sharp stone. Naturally, Marilith was right, and the mer-folk didn't even notice. Of course, they wore even less (and usually wore nothing at all).

The tiny bay on the south of the island wasn't much, but it was sheltered from the tides and the waves, and had some very large rocks right at the edge of the water. The mermaids greatly enjoyed sitting on them and sunning themselves all day while their suitors or mates brought them food. Pearl said that sunlight helped them build healthy eggs, but I suspected that it was a bit more than that. The unmated females would sit together, preening each other's hair, and casting various aspersions about the males who occasionally came up with gifts of fish and such to try to court them (usually right while they were there to hear it, which embarrassed the males greatly). The mated females would sit with their children, tending them, teaching them, and (for the little ones) cooing over them and nursing them. The mer-children were terribly adorable - but Pearl told me I should keep my distance from them, because there was a big difference between growing a poison-claw at age three, and learning when it was supposed to be used. I never saw a mer-child that looked younger than a three-month old baby, however. Pearl said that mermaids were *very* protective of their younger hatchlings, carefully guarding them under the water while their mates hunted to provide food.

At first, I simply sat with the mermaids and taught Pearl and Yanar - but soon, I found I was teaching everyone, and often was the center of attention, being preened like any other mermaid. That, I actually found quite enjoyable. All the mermaids and mermen had names, of course, but I found I couldn't pronounce any of them. I learned to understand what they were saying in their language, but apparently I wasn't built the same inside, and couldn't make the sounds they did. They made many of the sounds of their language in the back of their throats and inside the cavity behind their nose, inside their skull, somehow. Unfortunately, my nose and throat were just made to breathe through and smell things, not make sounds like that. Still, their names all had meanings, so I often just asked them what their name meant (with Pearl translating), and would begin their lessons by giving them a name in my language that

meant what their name did. Bright-eyes, Silver-tail, Happy-girl, and all the others soon learned to speak my language quite fluently.

Pearl was right, and Yanar did learn my language quickly. It took Pearl several months of talking to me before she learned to speak the way I did, however, despite having a huge head-start on Yanar. Once Yanar had mastered the language well enough, he began practicing his courting skills on me. The other mermaids found this quite amusing, at first, but after awhile, Yanar's skill at courting grew, and he would wax poetically and quite eloquently. The mermaids all sighed and cooed over him - and in short order, all the other males were extremely jealous of him. Soon, I had dozens of pretend suitors, all practicing their skills as they vied for my attentions - and, at the same time, learning my language. Each would present me with the gifts they intended to give their beloved, and the public display of these gifts sparked interest in the mermaids as they all wondered which of them each male might *actually* be wanting to give the gift to - and even greater rivalry among the males as they competed with each other to produce greater, more elaborate and more finely-made gifts to pretend to present to me.

Finally, towards the end of summer, it was again only Pearl and I. All the others had paired off and were gone. Pearl and I would simply sit, watching the waves and chatting about what life was like when I was growing up - and what life was like when *she* was growing up. Pearl, like most of the mer-folk, had lost her parents to orcas years before. Orcas really were the only thing they ever worried about, since the orcas and the mer-folk actively hunted each other. The only other things that occasionally killed mer-folk were being beached or beaten against rocks by a storm, or fighting swordfish or sawfish (which the mer-folk found quite tasty, and they found their beaks quite useful as weapons). Finally, I got around to telling her the story of my capture by the slavers, and the first time I heard Marilith.

"Marilith?" Pearl asked, pausing as she combed my hair with a seashell brush.

"Yes, she's very nice. I can hear her when she talks, and she can hear me. She's very far away, though, in some kind of cage, like I was. And she's been there for a long, long time. Someday, I'm going to find her and free her. She likes you, incidentally. She thinks you're very nice. She says now that everyone has learned how to speak my language, she can teach us all how to write it. Well, she'll have to teach *me*, first. She says we'll be working on that this fall and winter."

Pearl giggled. "This isn't an imaginary friend, is it?"

"Marilith is *not* imaginary!" I snapped, then paused. "Err... Well, I don't think she is."

"*I'm not,*" Marilith whispered, chuckling.

"She says she's not imaginary," I said, and smiled.

Pearl burst out laughing.

I frowned, and I could hear Marilith grumble. "*Tell her I can prove I exist.*"

"Marilith says she can prove she exists."

Pearl raised an eyebrow. "How?"

"*Tell her I said you have twenty-eight freckles on your back.*"

"Marilith says I have twenty-eight freckles on my back."

Pearl looked, poking my back with a claw here and there, and I could hear her muttering the numbers as she counted - mathematics wasn't her strong suit. She worked her way down from my shoulders to my rump, and finally stopped at my left buttock. "Twenty-eight. But how did you know?"

"Marilith is magic. She can see around me a little bit, if she concentrates. Also, she doesn't sleep. She watches over me while I sleep, but she can't sleep herself."

"I wish I could, in fact," Marilith said, and sighed.

"She says she wishes she could. Her cage hurts her. All the time. I hear her crying sometimes, and I try to comfort her."

"Tell her also that I watched the first night she brought you to this island. After she left you, she swam into the sea and ate what she calls a nibble-fish before going to sleep."

"Marilith says she was watching the first night you brought me here, and you went back into the water. She says you ate a nibble-fish before you went to bed."

Pearl stared at me, wide-eyed.

I grinned back. "I told you she was real."

"So, she is here now, watching?" Pearl said, looking around.

"No, she's magic. She is thousands of leagues from us, on the other side of the world. But she can see around me, if she concentrates. Well, and if she's not in pain."

"In pain?"

"Yes. I told you, her cage hurts her. I don't really understand it, and she says I'm too young to try to explain it. She says it's a constant struggle, and it hurts her. All the time. And sometimes, it hurts a lot. I want to find her someday, and free her. She helped me stay alive, and she helps me now, all the time. Kind of like a big sister, always watching over me, always giving advice, teaching me things..." I said, and sighed. "Well, almost always. When she's in pain... Well, all she can do is scream. It hurts a lot. Then after it's over, she cries a lot. And it never completely stops hurting, she's always struggling. She says if

she ever stopped struggling, she'd be torn to pieces and die."

Pearl made a sad, clucking sound, finishing with my hair and tucking the sea-shell comb into my hair to hold it in place. She scooted around on the rock to sit beside me, then looked me over. "Is she human, like you? How old is she?"

"She's not human, that much I know. She says I'm too young to really understand what she is, though. As far as how old she is, I don't know. She says that to her people, she's just a girl, like me. But she's been in that cage for two thousand years. Marilith, how old are you?"

"I... If I tell you, will you promise not to be frightened?"

"I promise I won't be frightened," I said, grinning as Pearl gazed at me curiously.

"I am two thousand, eight hundred and two years old."

I simply shook my head.

"What did she say?" Pearl asked.

"She says she's almost three thousand years old," I said, then sighed. "Unfortunately, that means she's been in that cage most of her life. Very sad."

Pearl clasped both her hands together before her face as though praying, closed her eyes, and bowed to me. "Hail and well-met, Ancient One."

I giggled. "Pearl, I'm only sixteen!"

"She meant me, Sasha. Tell her I said 'Hail and well-met, Daughter of Ocean.'"

"Ummm... Marilith says 'Hail and well-met, Daughter of Ocean.' She calls me that sometimes, too."

Pearl smiled. "If she does, I think she's right. I think you're really one of us, Sasha," she said, then paused. "You know Yanar loves you, yes?"

I blinked, surprised. "Me?! But I'm not even a mermaid!"

"He loves you for your wisdom, your kindness, and your beauty, my friend. He knows you can never spawn, you can never be mates. But like Barro loved me and I loved him, Yanar loves you. He wants to make you happy, if he can," she said, and grinned slyly at me. "He will come play with you, if you want."

"But... But doesn't he have a mate of his own already? I thought Bright-eyes was his mate!"

"She is. She understands. She loves you, too. We all do. You have given us a great and wonderful gift - to be able to speak to the humans of Vilandia is a gift we will treasure for all time. We only wish there were some way we could repay it."

I decided to take a moment to think. I reached down beside me for the basket I'd woven, containing all the little herbal medicines I'd made. Pulling out the jar of sun-cream I'd made, I began rubbing it on my arms again - water washed it off, and so did sweat. I rubbed some more on my nose and cheeks, then put the jar away. "I don't know, Pearl. Part of me thinks it would be nice for Yanar to play with me. I get all tingly thinking about him, sometimes... He's very handsome..." I said, then shook my head. "Othertimes, I know it just won't work. He's a merman, he doesn't have... Err..." I said, and blushed as Pearl giggled. "Well, he's not the same from the waist down, he's like a fish! I mean, it might be fun for him to touch me and I think I'd like that very much, but... Well, you know!" I said, and Pearl giggled again. "Besides, it doesn't really feel right for me. He already has a mate, I don't want to ever come

between her and him. What if he was trying to be nice to me and she needed him? Maybe he'd be playing with me while she needed him to hunt for her! Maybe she'd be hungry, maybe her baby would be hungry... No, I'd feel *terrible* if that happened!"

Pearl smiled. "I told him you would say that. T'Kak told me of his first meeting with you. There you were, a human, trapped on an overturned ship with no food and no water. Doomed to die. But did you ask him for help? No. You offered to help him catch Laughing-girl's attention, instead." Pearl reached out, taking my hand in hers. "You have a very large heart, Sasha of Woe. I think maybe you are not really a human. I think maybe you are one of us, but somehow there was an accident in the heavens, and you were born human instead of hatched mer-folk. I do not know - but no matter what happens, you should know that you will always have a place here, with us."

"Sasha, tell Pearl not to enter the water. An orca is nearby," Marilith whispered suddenly.

"Pearl, Marilith says not to go in the water, an orca is nearby."

"No!" Pearl shouted, letting go of my hand and looking out over the ocean.

"What's wrong?"

"Yanar is coming! He has a present for you! The orca will find him!"

"He knows it's there. He's hunting it now with his spear," Marilith whispered.

"Marilith says he's hunting it now, and he has his lance," I said, nervously looking out over the waves. Pearl started to slide off the rock, and I grabbed her arm. "Pearl?! Where are you going?!"

"My brother is out there! I must help him!"

"Well, I still have my knife, I'll come with you," I said, patting the knife I wore belted around my waist.

"No!" Pearl and Marilith both shouted, startling me. Pearl tore her arm from my grip, and splashed into the water. "Stay here! We have poison, you do not. Your knife would be *nothing* to an orca! Stay here!"

"Sasha, listen to her! Don't go into the water!"

"A-alright, I'll stay here," I said, very nervous.

Pearl nodded, turning from me and swimming away swiftly, out of the shallow water of the little cove and into the surf beyond.

I watched nervously. I knew Marilith and Pearl were right - I didn't even know what an orca *looked* like, much less how to kill one. All I knew was what the mer-folk had told me - they were big, tough, and mean. Well, mean to a mer-folk, at any rate. Apparently they and the mer-folk preyed on the same kinds of fish, and the orcas considered the mer-folk to be competition. Humans, Pearl had said, the Orcas usually ignored... But, I supposed Pearl and Marilith were right. An orca might not see me as competition, but it probably wouldn't take kindly to me trying to stab it with my little knife. I waited, hoping everything would be alright. *'Oh, Goddess... Protect my friends...'*

Suddenly, fifty paces off-shore, a *huge* black and white whale breached the water. It was enormous - I'd never seen anything like it. Clinging to it's side was Yanar, his spear buried deep into the whale's side, near it's front flipper. Yanar had one hand gripping his spear, driving it deeper into the whale, while his other hand was buried up to his forearm into the whale's flesh below it's dorsal fin. To my horror, in the whale's mouth was Pearl, slashing at it's snout with her thumbs repeatedly. The whale flicked it's head as it flew through the air, tossing Pearl aside. Blood flew from Pearl and the whale, brilliant red drops against the blue ocean, and rivers of blood poured from the whale's back and sides...

Then with a terrific splash, it dived beneath the water again.

Pearl splashed into the water a heartbeat later, and sank like a stone.

I leapt to my feet, and simply stared in horror.

I could hear Marilith shouting to me, but I simply did not care. Diving into the water, I began swimming as fast as I could, trying to find Pearl.

The whale breached again, blowing a stream of blood from the breathing hole at the top of its head. Yanar still clung to its side, working his spear back and forth, stabbing deeper and deeper into the wound. I was closer now, the waves washing over my head and making me sputter, but I could hear the shrieking cries of the agonized whale, drowning in its own blood.

Pearl was floating motionless, blood in the water around her. I swam up to her, and tried to pull her along towards the shore, my hands beneath her shoulders.

"Sasha! Put your arm around her neck with her face up, and swim on your side!" Marilith shouted.

I did so, trying to ignore the sounds of the fighting behind me. I desperately wished I could swim as fast as the mer-folk could... But I couldn't. I was just a girl.

At last, I reached the little cove. I dragged Pearl up onto the gravel, between two large rocks, and looked her over. "Oh, Goddess..." I whispered, and wept.

The whale's teeth had torn several large holes in her belly. I could see a flash of white from her pelvis, and coiled intestines below the flayed skin. She was unconscious, and bleeding badly. Blood flowed freely, and I didn't know what to do.

"Sasha, lean close and sniff. Use your nose. Do you smell feces?"

I did so, and shook my head. "No, just blood."

"Take the bottle of rice-wine from the slave-ship I told you to put in your basket. Pour it over the wounds to wash them out."

I did so, and Pearl gasped, the pain waking her up. *"Where..."* she said in her language.

"Have her lay still, Sasha. And wash your hands off with the rice-wine before you continue."

"Try not to move, Pearl," I said, my eyes full of tears.

A splashing sound near me. I glanced to my left - Yanar was crawling out of the water, his bloodied lance in his hand. *"Sister..."* he chittered in his language, his face showing tremendous sorrow.

"Brother... I am dying..."

"Yes, Sister. Why did you do it? I could have taken him alone!"

"Foolish male... I should box your ears... You should not have to ask why I would come to help my little brother..."

"I'm done - now what, Marilith?" I asked.

"What?" Yanar asked in my language, looking at me.

"Take the bloodmoss unguent I had you make, and pack it into the wounds. Particularly that deep one there, over her pelvis."

"Alright," I said, and reached for the basket again.

"Brother," Pearl said, her voice weak. *"Do not let me die a slow death. Kill me now."*

"NO!" I shouted, reaching out and knocking Yanar's spear from his hand.

"Sasha of Woe," Yanar said, shaking his head. "Pearl is dying. I cannot let her suffer, it is not our way."

"She's *not* going to die if I can help it, and if you pick up that spear to kill her I'll take it from you and cram it someplace you will find *very uncomfortable!*"

Yanar shook his head. "Sasha, I-"

"Don't *make* me hurt you, Yanar. I love you, but I will *not* let you kill Pearl."

Yanar paused, startled. After a long moment, he smiled. "Alright, Sasha."

"It... It doesn't hurt anymore..." Pearl said, looking at me.

"It's the bloodmoss," I replied, still carefully packing the unguent into her wounds. "Marilith said it's good for pain and healing. She says I made it right. I hope I did, because if I didn't make it right, she says it's poison and you'll die. Now just be still."

"Brother, do not leave the carcass, it will draw the pod," Pearl said in her language.

Yanar shook his head. *"It was a scout, Sister. The pod is perhaps four or five leagues away. They are coming anyway. I heard their kill-songs... It is a large pod. Very large. I heard at least eight hands of separate songs... Maybe more."*

"Too many, Brother. Only a few of us are as skilled at hunting them as you are, and we have few spears. We will all die, and Hair-like-sunset will be alone here on the island. How sad..."

Marilith's voice interrupted me. *"Sasha, tell Yanar to have all his people come to the island. We can protect them here."*

"How?" I muttered.

"As you like to say, we'll think of something," Marilith whispered.

"Yanar, tell all your people to come to the island. I'll protect you here," I said, even though I had no idea how I might do that.

"She is human, Brother, and this is land... Here, she is strong..." Pearl agreed.

Yanar nodded. "Alright. I will do so," he said, reaching back to the water behind him, and picking up his spear. He gazed at Pearl quietly, and for a brief moment, I thought he might try to kill her. But then, he looked at me, his face very sad. "Take care of my sister, Sasha," he said, and dragged himself into the water. With a splash, he was gone.

"Alright, Marilith, I've finished with the bloodmoss. Now what?"

"Lift her tail. It's built much like your legs. Bend her tail like she was sitting, Put your hip against her rump to hold it there, and try to hold the larger wounds closed with your hands so the bloodmoss will seal them."

I did so, and Pearl groaned in pain. The smaller wounds closed with the relaxing of the skin over her abdomen, but the larger ones I had to hold closed with my fingertips, my arms wrapped around her tail. I waited, and watched as the wounds slowly sealed under the influence of the bloodmoss. "Now what?"

"The wounds are mostly on her right side. Keep her tail bent like she was sitting, roll her over onto her left side very, very gently, and get out the rice-wine bottle. You will have to do all of this again for the wounds on her back, they are just as bad and now have bits of gravel in them, too."

"Oh, Goddess," I wept, realizing where the additional blood on the gravel was coming from. But I knew I couldn't stop. Pearl's life depended on me. As gently as I could, I rolled Pearl onto her side, and got to work.

It seemed to take forever before I was done, but Marilith told me it had only been half an hour. Finally, I had her lying on her side, her tail mostly straight. "Now what?"

"Let the sun shine on her to keep her warm, but wet down her skin from time to time so she doesn't dry out completely."

I nodded, opening the empty bottle I had brought my own water in, drinking it all down at once, and filling it with sea water so I could wet Pearl down later.

"I'm thirsty..." Pearl said weakly.

"Give her just a mouthful of sea-water, Sasha, no more for now. This evening she can have more, but those wounds need to heal more, first."

I tried cupping my hands for her and holding out the bottle for her, but she couldn't drink lying on her side, and Marilith said it wasn't good for her to move yet. I finally just took a mouthful of sea-water from the bottle, and then held up Pearl's head, pressing her lips to mine and pushing the water into her mouth. Pearl swallowed, then lay there quietly, her clear nictating membranes across her eyes. I lay beside her on the cold, wet gravel, set the bottle beside my head, and slipped my arm beneath her head to support it.

"Am I going to die?" Pearl asked, her voice soft.

I listened for Marilith's reply, and smiled. "No, but you musn't move until you're healed or your wounds will re-open. The bloodmoss has sealed the wounds, but we can't let you move from here for at least a few days, to give you a good chance to heal."

Pearl blinked, her eyes fluttering open to gaze at me. "I'm not going to die?" Pearl asked, her face showing amazement.

I grinned. "You're not going to die. But you can't move for a few days."

A splashing sound nearby - I turned my head to look. It was Yanar, crawling out of the waves again.

"I've spread the word, and others will continue to spread the word as quickly as we can. With luck, we'll have everyone on the beaches shortly," he said, crawling up to me, then stopped, staring. "She... She's *alive?!*"

"Of course she is, you silly," I replied, grinning.

"I was certain I'd come back to find her dead!"

"She gave me the kiss of life, Brother," Pearl said, smiling weakly. *"I felt it. I thirsted, she pressed her lips to mine, and I tasted the life of the sea. She is truly a Daughter of Ocean."*

Marilith chuckled in my ear. *"Yes, you are, Sasha,"* she said softly.

Yanar nodded, amazed. I simply smiled, turning back to Pearl and stroking her sea-green hair gently.

The Spider - XIV.

I lay in darkness, and silence. Time seemed to have stopped.

'Am I dead?' I wondered, then paused - of course I was. I was dead months ago. Brionnach had slain me. And now, she had abandoned me to my fate.

And yet, I loved her still.

Dimly, I felt something stir in the back of my mind at that thought.

I knew not how much time had passed, for I could not even sense the passage of time. I could not feel my heartbeat, I could not feel my breath, I could feel nothing of myself. It was as though I were floating in an endless nothingness. Brionnach had abandoned me to a hell of endless oblivion.

And yet, I loved her still.

Slowly, the stirring in my mind became stronger.

There was no sensation of cold or warmth, pleasure or pain, nothing. It was only the sensation of floating in an endless black of nothingness. Perhaps this was what she intended all along. Perhaps her endless hate, spawned by the ancient wound I had seen in her dark eyes, had caused it. Perhaps she simply had never had anyone reach out to her - and I lacked the courage to even tell her the truth, for fear she would simply laugh. Now, it was ended. Darkness was all that was left to me, and all that was left of me.

And yet, I loved her still.

And I would find her.

And I would help her.

And then, she might understand.

At that, the blackness about me seemed to shift, and I realized that the dark part of my mind had never completely ebbed. It was still there. A darkness... A force beyond life... Beyond death... UnLife, Brionnach had called it. And that was, truly, what it was. The inanimate, with a will, she had explained it to me. And yet, it was far more than that.

I did not understand what I was. I did not understand the darkness in my mind. I did not understand what was happening to me. I only understood one thing...

I loved her still.

With an effort greater than lifting a mountain, I pushed myself up from the grass. I could see - yet not with my eyes. I could hear - yet not with my ears. I did not understand any of it. I only understood that I loved her. I only knew I would find her. And help her. And then, perhaps, she might understand.

I had a direction. East. It was all I had.

Slowly, I began to crawl after her.

The Ocean - Fourteen.

Three days later, Pearl, Yanar and I sat on the eastern beach of the island with a hundred other mer-folk of all ages. Bright-eyes, Yanar's mate, sat in the grass above us, beneath the shade of some trees to keep her hatchling out of the sun. He was very small, much like a newborn, and I had placed a bucket of seawater beside her for her and all the others with tiny hatchlings to use to keep them cool and damp. Pearl was feeling much better, and all that remained of her ordeal was sixteen long, thin, pale scars, eight on her front and eight on her back. Now, however, we had another problem - one that had forced us to simply sit on the eastern beach, watching the ocean. The orcas were watching the beaches, hunting their blood-enemies.

Though some furtive attempts at food-gathering and hunting had been made by the mermen during the hours of darkness, for the most part, it wasn't enough. Everyone was quite hungry, and all were thirsty, as well. For the latter, they would have to wait until nightfall, when they could quietly slip over to the cove for a quick bath - all save Pearl, who was still far too sore to crawl that far. I kept Pearl damp myself by pouring sea-water over her from time to time, spending time gently rubbing it into her scars. If her skin became too dry before the healing was complete, her healing would only be prolonged - and perhaps the wounds might worsen. I also spent time taking buckets of ocean-water to the others who had gathered in small groups on the beach near the grass, and gave extra water to those who looked to be the worst off, and needed a drink. It would have been so much easier if everyone could just use the cove all the time, of course. But, the orcas were watching, so the cove could only be used quietly, at night, when low tide took the waters too low for the orcas to approach.

So, no one could go out into the sea quite yet. Sharp ebon fins protruded from the water, just offshore, waiting for someone to get near the surf. Every now and again, one of the orcas would rise up, their head and flippers out of the water, and swim backwards - then splash back into the sea, vanishing again.

"What are they doing?" I asked as I poured some more sea-water over Pearl's shoulders.

Pearl shook her head. "There's no word for it in your language. We call it-" she said, and chittered a word in her language that sounded very close to their word that meant 'peeking.' "The ones spying on us

are new arrivals. The other members of the pod call them, and they come. When they arrive, they take a peek to see if what the others say is really true, and there is food on the beach. And there is, for them - us. They know we cannot stay out of the water forever. We will dry out, and die. So, they wait for us to come near the water. When we do, they will charge up at us from out of the surf, and kill us on the beach like they do seals."

"What?! How? Do they have legs, too, like a frog?"

Yanar shook his head. "I don't know what a frog is, but they don't have legs. They move like this on land," he said, and laid on his belly in the sand, then made a series of undulating flops, wriggling himself forward a bit before rolling over and sitting again. A young child who was nearby giggled, but the others who saw it did not laugh. "It doesn't look very fast, but they're quite large and very strong. They can easily chase us down and kill us, and we can't even fight them on the beach. A *seal* we can fight on the beach. Not an orca."

"You both hunt seals?" I asked, curious.

Yanar nodded. "When we hunt seals, we charge them from the water, just like the orcas do, but we use our claws and poison them, we don't chase them much. Those that fight we grab by the throat and throw to the ground, then just hold them there for a few heartbeats until they die from our poison - we're much stronger than seals are, and seals don't have arms. Those that flee are killed by others waiting in the surf. Orcas do basically the same, with some charging the beach while the rest wait in the water, but they chase and bite, and they're *very* fast. Orcas can't stay on the beach for long - they have few bones and they're very heavy. Their own weight begins to suffocate them if they stay very long. We *can* stay on the beach for awhile - up to a day, if we have to. After that, we need water or we'll start dying. When we're watching seals like those orcas are watching us, the seals do the same - they get up high on the beach, near the grass, and just hope we'll go away before they get too hungry or too thirsty and have to risk the water. Now we're the hunted, and they the hunters. There's simply too many of them and too few of us with spears to try to fight them in the water, and it's impossible for us to fight them on the beach - just like it's impossible for seals to fight us on the beach."

Pearl nodded. "If we could kill their hunt-leaders, they might disperse from here. They won't leave the area, though, there's too much food in the water. They're only waiting for us because we are deadly enemies. They know they have us trapped, here."

An idea began to form in my head as I watched the orcas circle offshore. "Do you think they'd attack me if I walked to the water?"

Yanar shook his head. "No, you look nothing like us when you walk. If you were laying down..." he said, then looked at me suddenly. "You aren't thinking of baiting them with yourself, are you?! You've no idea how fast they can come out of the surf!"

"And they've no idea how fast I can run, but that's not exactly what I was thinking. It's a good idea, though. How quickly can they turn on land?"

"About as quickly as we can, but they lash their heads around quite quickly. They're *very* fast, Sasha, don't do this!"

"If I was standing at the side of one, could I jump away?"

"I don't know, Sasha. *Please* don't do this!"

"Oh, Yanar, hush!" I snapped. "I'm not about to get myself killed. Now - once they start their charge, can they stop?"

"No, they ride a wave onto the beach, just like we do when we hunt seals. Once they start, they can't stop."

"Hmmm... With the surf like it is today, about how far up the beach would their charge take them?"

"Right to where the damp sand ends," Yanar replied, pointing with a webbed finger. "Then they'd chase us probably about halfway up the beach. If any of us were halfway to the water, now, they'd attack. They know that once we saw them come out of the wave, we wouldn't have the time to turn

around and get away before they'd be upon us."

"Hmmm..." I said, a plan forming. "Yanar, give me your spear."

"Sasha, *please!* I beg you not to do this!"

Pearl shook her head. "Brother, she is *human*, and this is *land*. She is strong, here. Give her your spear."

Yanar sighed, and handed me his spear. I hefted it - it was actually surprisingly heavy, but the point seemed quite sharp. "Where's the best place to strike them?"

"Their heart is located just behind their sternum, between their flippers. It's very hard to hit, though. It's easier to stab behind the flippers, about midway up their body, and get them in the lungs. If you work the spear around, you tear up their lungs and they drown in blood. But it takes them awhile to die that way, and they'll try to kill you before they die."

I nodded, and rose to my feet, then raised my voice. "I want the fastest males to all come here to me! Hurry, now! Not the fastest swimmers, the fastest of you who can crawl on the sand!"

There was a bit of shuffling and conversation among the hundred or so mer-folk, and a half-dozen young mermen crawled over to me swiftly. None of them had spears, and all looked to be about my age. "Alright, you six listen very carefully. I've a plan, and it's very dangerous - but if we succeed, everyone will have plenty of food for quite some time."

"What do we do?" one of the boys asked.

"Make a line, here, and wait. I'm going to go down the beach a bit, and make a line in the sand. When

I say 'go', you all crawl as fast as you can for the line I made, turn around, and crawl as fast as you can back to here."

"Like a race!" one of the younger ones said. "What do we get if we win?"

"You get a kiss from me," I replied, smiling.

One of the older ones nodded. "And if we lose, we get eaten by an orca. They'll charge when they see us dashing for the water."

"And when they do, I'll be waiting for them," I said, hefting the spear as I gazed out over the water. I looked back to the boys, and could see they understood. "You don't have to if you don't want to, of course. But if you can do it and we can tease them onto the beach, I think I can kill them."

Yanar grinned, finally understanding my plan. "Hold the point to me, Sasha, and I'll envenom it for you." I did so, and Yanar extended his thumb-claws, running them along the spiraling, fluted grooves along the tip of the lance. I could see the oily black poison he left behind, and grinned.

"Me, too, please," Pearl said, holding out her hands and extending her thumb-claws.

"And me!" one of the boys added, rolling over to sit up, then holding out his hands.

"And me!" another added, doing the same. Shortly, the tip of the spear was evenly coated with oily, black poison from Yanar, Pearl, and all six boys.

"That much will finish one for certain, Sasha," Yanar said, looking the spear over. "But you still must be careful. They're *very* large, and it may take a bit before the poison has an effect."

"Alright," I said, and walked out about halfway down the beach, then looked back to them. "Yanar, you know them best. Is here about right?" I called.

"A little closer to the water. Perhaps two more of your steps," Yanar called back.

I took two steps more, then looked to Yanar again. "Here?"

"Yes, about there."

I drew a long line in the sand with the butt of the lance, then stepped ten paces to the side. "Are you boys ready?" I called.

They all shuffled themselves onto their stomachs and hands, and nodded. "We're ready!" one of them shouted.

"Remember - straight there, then turn around and straight back as fast as you can! Go!"

I watched the waves, waiting. The boys crawled swiftly, and in a few moments, were nearly at the line I'd drawn in the sand. A moment later, one of the black fins that had been circling disappeared beneath the waves. The boys reached the line in the sand, then began to turn themselves around. "Hurry! One's coming!"

With a sudden surge lent by fear, the boys swiftly crawled back, heading towards the top of the beach again. They were nearly there when I saw it - a huge, shark-like black and white whale landing ashore, and swiftly wriggling up the damp sand. The mermaids screamed in terror. I wanted to, myself. It was enormous - larger than a draft horse, easily. As it wriggled up to the line I'd made, I ran towards it, gripping the spear firmly, and aiming where I'd been told - behind the fins, midway up the body.

The beast let out a shrill shriek as I hit it on its left side, driving about half the spear into its body. It turned, trying to snap at me, tearing the spear from my hands. I jumped aside, then dashed around to its side again as it wriggled, trying to get me. Grabbing the spear again, I levered it up and down like a pump-handle, keeping my feet moving, staying on its side. The beast struggled, trying to flop away from me, and jerked the spear free. Suddenly, it began to spasm, blood bubbling from the blowhole in the top of its head as it trembled violently. The poison was beginning to affect it. I grinned.

"Sasha! Another one is coming!" Pearl shouted.

"Look out!" several others screamed.

I turned just in time to see another orca nearly as large as the first swiftly approaching from the water. It snapped at me, nearly catching my leg as I leapt aside. I ran backwards for a moment, trying to get to its side, and it turned, following, wriggling after me in swift undulations that moved its colossal body quite quickly. It didn't seem likely the lance was still envenomed - likely it had all been washed off by the first's blood. The mer-folk shouted in terror, fearful for my life.

I simply grinned. What was a terrifying and inescapable charge for a crawling merman or mermaid was a wriggling, almost comical chase for me - barely a jog. Sprinting around to its side, I twisted and lunged, spearing it with about a cubit's length of the lance. I jumped back as it twisted, jerking the spear free and dashing to stay on its side, then speared it again. And again. And again. The orca screamed shrilly in pain each time.

Bubbling blood from its blowhole, the second orca turned, trying to wriggle back into the surf. I ran forward, aiming low from behind, trying to ram the lance behind and inside its ribs, down into its heart. Stabbing deeply, with easily three cubits of the lance within its body, the whale suddenly spasmed, its tail slapping me in the hip and knocking me down. I rolled to my feet the same as I would if I'd been butted by a goat, then hopped back, narrowly avoiding being bitten. The orca flopped after me for a few heartbeats later, but it was slowing. I easily stayed out of its reach, simply dancing back as it chased me along the beach for a few paces. I'd seen it before - goats behaved much the same when stabbed in the heart, their strength quickly fading. A few moments later, it heaved itself one last time towards me, shuddered for many heartbeats, then was still. I walked around to the orca's side, and with an effort, pulled the bloody lance free.

A whooping cheer broke out among the mer-folk, and I bowed. My hip was sore from where the second orca had slapped me, but I was otherwise alright. The same fight would have killed every merman here, despite everything they could have done. Pearl was right - I was human. On land, I was strong.

I walked back to where Yanar, Pearl and the boys were sitting, and looked the boys over. "Alright, who won the race?"

The boys all blinked at me for a moment, then looked at each other. Finally, the oldest one grinned. "Actually, we were all fleeing for our lives, I never noticed who won."

"Well, I think you all did. After all, you lived," I said, and grinned. I knelt next to each of them and gave each one a kiss, which they returned eagerly. It was quite pleasant. As they crawled back over to join their families and friends, I looked back out over the ocean. "I don't see their fins anymore," I said, looking up and down the water.

"They've very good ears, like we do," Yanar said, tapping his pointed ears. "You can't see them, but they do. They almost certainly heard the pain-calls. They aren't very smart, but they aren't stupid, either. They know that something *bad* happened to those two. They'll hide a bit and see if those two come back into the water. Since they won't, the rest will eventually go away."

"For good?" I asked hopefully.

"No, just for today. But we'll know if they come back - they have to get close to the shore and close to the surface to see the beach, and their dorsal fins will poke out of the water again." Yanar shook his head. "That was a mated pair, I think. The smaller one, there, is a female. You can tell by the dorsal fin, it's smaller and angled back instead of poking straight up. We're lucky the pod leader wasn't one of those two."

"Oh? Why?"

Pearl nodded. "Because they *all* would have come. I counted at least ten fins watching us. Probably there were twenty more beneath the waves."

"Hah! Let them all come, I'm not afraid!" I said, and grinned.

Pearl laughed. "I'm surprised your friend Marilith didn't tell you not to do that - that was really *very* dangerous, Sasha."

My smile faded, and I sighed. "She can't talk to me right now, Pearl. She's having to struggle again, and she's in agony. The link is from her to me, and when she's in great pain, she can't really talk to me at all. I have to listen very carefully just to even hear her scream. Afterwards, she cries a lot, because it hurts."

"I... I'm sorry, Sasha," Pearl said, touching my hand lightly with her fingertips.

"Someday you'll rescue her, Sasha," Yanar said, looking at me.

I nodded, handing Yanar his spear. "Perhaps, but not today. My hip is beginning to hurt from where that whale hit me. I think it's going to bruise up quite a bit."

Yanar nodded silently, patting my hand, and I laid back upon the sand and gazed up at the clouds in the sky. I'd defended an entire clan of mer-folk by fighting two gigantic sea-monsters naked and armed with nothing but an overgrown tooth, and lived to tell the tale. It was the stuff of legends, really. Stories like my father used to tell at bedtime, of brave heroes and derring-do of yore. But, I knew the truth. I was just a big, gangly, sixteen and a half year old girl, trapped on an island in the middle of nowhere, my best friend was trapped thousands of leagues away in a cage I couldn't even understand, and my leg hurt.

Pearl sighed. "I wish there was some way to drive them away."

I shrugged. "What's keeping them here, now? Aside from you, I mean."

"Food," Yanar answered. "They were following migrating schools of fish when they ran across here, and the waters for several leagues around this island are shallow and have quite a bit of food," he said, then sighed. "Well, they *did*. By the time that pod gets finished here, there won't be much left for us afterwards."

Pearl nodded. "We may have to leave, ourselves, just to find enough food to survive."

"Oh, no!" I replied, sitting up. The prospect of being *utterly* alone here on the island was not a nice one. "We have to get rid of the orcas, then!"

Yanar nodded. "I agree - but how? We've maybe four spears in our whole clan. I can kill a lone scout, yes. But I can't possibly attack a full pod and live, and that pod's large enough to kill us all."

"Use the mer-folk's poison," Marilith sobbed.

I looked up, startled. "Marilith? Are you alright, now?"

"No, Sasha. I am still where I am, and it still hurts," Marilith replied, sobbing. *"But the struggle has eased, for now, if that's what you mean. I heard you talking. I am still trying to help you. Use the mer-folk's poison."*

"Okay, how?"

"Tonight, when they all go to the cove for water, have each of them empty their poisons into the water. It is an injected poison, Sasha, it will not kill anything in the water. But the smell in the water will make all the nearby fish hide, and so much of it will make the scent so strong, they will hide for a long time. The orcas will find it harder to find food, and will move on."

I turned to Yanar and Pearl, and told them Marilith's idea. Yanar nodded. "I think that would work. Just getting them to move away from this island in search of food would be enough - they'll resume following the migrating fish, and they'll be gone. Large pods like this always form to handle large food supplies, and they'll almost certainly move on to follow the migrating schools if the food here becomes harder to find. Even if some choose to stay and split off to form smaller pods, it won't be many. Probably no more than one pod of three or six. Those we can slowly kill one by one until they're all gone."

Pearl nodded, as well. "I think it will work, too. But how is your friend?"

I wiped my eyes with my hands. "She's crying, right now," I said, and sniffled. "I want to help her so badly, and I just can't do anything."

"You will, Sasha," Pearl replied, stroking my hair.

"How?! I'm stuck here on this island, maybe forever!"

"I do not know. But I do know this - you are a Daughter of Ocean. I told you three days ago I thought you were one of us, perhaps born human as a mistake. Now, I see that you truly are one of us, but it was no mistake. I live because you were born human, not mer-folk. I live because of the human knowledge and skills your friend Marilith taught you - and you live because of her help and advice. You are where you are supposed to be, I think, and you are *who* you are supposed to be. In time, the answer will come. In time, you will leave these islands, and seek your friend. In time, you will rescue her," she said, and smiled. "I think she is more than a friend, as well. I think that you and she are perhaps sisters of the soul, separated by fate. And someday, you will leave this place, and you will find her. And when you do, remember that both of you can always come back here, and live with us in peace."

I smiled. "I'll remember, Pearl."

To my surprise, however, Marilith let out a dry, acid laugh. *"Sisters! If she only knew..."*

"Knew what, Marilith?"

"Nothing, nothing. Now is not the time. Later. Another day. But not now," Marilith replied, sniffing.

I smiled anyway. "I do think of you as like an older sister, Marilith. You're always there, helping me, advising me..."

Marilith was silent for a long moment, and all I heard was her sniffles. Finally she spoke again. *"I... I thank you, Sasha. You don't know what that means to me, just now... I am alone, here, and I've been alone and in pain for so long... Even my clan-father, with all his might, can do nothing. I... I thank you."*

I smiled. "It's nothing, Sister."

The Ocean - Fifteen.

Pearl paused in her efforts to drag herself through the grass, panting. "I can't... It's too far..." she gasped.

"You *can*, and it's *not* too far," I replied, sitting next to her. "Rest for a bit, then you can start again."

"My skin is drying along my back," Pearl whined.

"Hand me your water bottle and I'll wet you down, my little mudskipper," I said, giggling.

"Mudskipper? What is a mudskipper?" Pearl asked as she handed the bottle to me and I uncorked it.

"A little creature... Ummm... Like a tadpole, really. Long tail, big googly eyes, and two little arms. It lives in the water and it runs across the mud on it's arms, from one pool of water to the next," I explained, rubbing the water into Pearl's back and rump.

"I am thinking this is not a compliment," Pearl replied sourly.

I laughed. It was a lovely fall day on the island, really, and despite how long this was taking and how serious this little experiment really was, it was still quite enjoyable. The orcas had been gone a month, now, and everyone's life had returned to normal. Still, I knew that someday, they'd be back - so, as soon as Pearl was feeling better, we'd gotten to work. It had taken two weeks to finish the apron of clamshells she wore to protect her tail - dragging herself this far across pebbles and rocks could scratch her up rather badly, and her cloaca was as sensitive as my labia (and for similar reasons, or so she said when she told me two weeks ago with her sly 'you're only sixteen' giggle). Still, I knew we had to try it. It was nearly two leagues from the eastern beach, past my house and to the lake in the center of the island, but it was the easiest path for her. It was shorter from the western beach and even shorter from the cove, but the hills that circled the lake were steeper everywhere else, with many more rocks. Barro had been an old man, and he'd chosen the spot for his cabin very carefully.

"Mmm... That feels much better," Pearl said, once I had her back damp again. Pearl looked at me. "You still wear that orca tooth necklace Yanar made for you?"

I looked down to where the curved, sharply-pointed orca-tooth hung between my breasts - it was one of the smaller front teeth from the female, but it was still a hand long and two fingers wide. "Yes, I like it. I even gave him the leather thong to pass through the hole he'd made in it, once I figured out what it was he was trying to make."

"It's not his best work, you know. He didn't even carve a picture on it. You should have held out for a better gift."

I grinned. "If he was courting me, I would, but he's not, so I accepted. I like it. Now come on - no more distractions. Let's get moving again."

"Wait - what's that?" Pearl asked, pointing.

I looked. "It's a snake," I replied, seeing the creature slithering just in front of us.

"Like a sea-snake?!" Pearl gasped, pulling herself back. "They have a very dangerous bite! It can even make *us* very sick! You it can kill!"

I laughed again. "No, no! Marilith says there aren't any biting snakes on this island at all. That one eats bugs, I think. Mostly grasshoppers. The snakes here eat birds, frogs, fish and bugs. The biggest ones are the ones that eat birds and the ones that eat fish, and they kill by squeezing the air out of you, not biting."

"Squeezing? How big are they?"

"The biggest ones are as long as my arm, and maybe that thick," I said, holding my fingers apart a bit to show her. "The goats don't like them. I think it's because a newborn kid is really very small, and they're afraid the snakes will eat them. Or maybe they tell little goat stories about poisonous snakes, I don't know. Either way, they stomp on them with their hooves which cuts them up badly. So, all the larger snakes have learned to run away from anything that walks. Totally harmless to us, though. If you try and grab them they'll bite you to make you let them go, but it's not poison or anything."

"Oh..." Pearl said, watching the snake as it slithered away into the grass. "Can you eat them?"

I nodded. "They're pretty tasty, too, after you cook them."

Pearl rolled her eyes. "Cook, cook, cook. It's amazing you humans ever manage to find the time to eat."

I grinned. "We're funny like that," I said, corking the bottle and handing it back to her. "Now come on, we still have to see if you can make it. We're nearly there, now. Maybe fifty more paces," I said, and stood.

"Really?!" Pearl asked, rising up on her hands. "I see nothing..."

"Get up on your knees, like I showed you."

"Bah, I don't *have* knees, that's my middle tail joint, and it hurts to do that!"

"That's because you don't have kneecaps. Now come on! Rise up and take a look like I showed you!"

Pearl grumbled, sliding herself backwards a bit on her shell-apron to get some slack in it, then pushing herself up onto her knees so she could see over the bushes and grasses growing around the lake. "Ah! I see it! Water!" she said, grinning as she saw the lake. It was nearly a league across, and I was certain it looked very inviting to a dry, tired mermaid.

"Yep! We're nearly there. You can make it - keep going!"

Pearl nodded, dropping back down to the ground again and resuming crawling forward, dragging her water-bottle along with her. "There better be *lots* of fish there," she grumbled.

I grinned. "Lots. And frogs, and water-snakes, and they're all *very* tasty."

"Oooo..." Pearl replied, dragging herself faster.

Awhile later, I was sitting by the lake shore, watching, Pearl's shell-apron folded and sitting beside me. Pearl had been submerged for at least half an hour. I wasn't worried, though - mer-folk could dive for well over an hour. Finally Pearl popped to the surface two dozen paces away from me, and grinned. "You're right! *Very* tasty!" she called. "And fun to catch!"

"I wouldn't know, I have to spear them from the shore! They swim faster than me, and for some reason they really don't like the idea of becoming my dinner!" I shouted back.

Pearl giggled, then dived beneath the water again. I could see her swiftly swimming towards me beneath the water. For a moment, I saw her in a different light. She was in her element, here. To the fish and frogs and snakes of this lake, she was the ultimate predator, come to pay them a rather unpleasant little visit. Suddenly, she broke the surface of the water next to me, and crawled up to sit beside me on the lake-shore, grinning like a shark. I stared at her for a moment as the water dripped from her, the supreme predator of this little lake...

Then she tossed her green hair, splashing me with water, and I squealed with laughter. I looked at her

again, and saw her as she was - Pearl, the mermaid, and my friend. "So what do you think?"

"I think it's possible, Sasha. If we could work on clearing a nice trail to crawl, we could do it. The males can carry water to wet us all down with... Hmmm... We'd all need shell-aprons, though, and maybe some kind of leather or sharkskin mitten like you said before. The pebbles smart quite a bit when your skin's dry. I'm fine, but children have thinner skin, they might get hurt. Babies could ride on their mother's backs, but the rest of us will all need aprons, at least. Quite a bit of work, gathering the shells. Perhaps a year of work, really. The frogs and snakes and fish are all very tasty, just as you said, but what I saw in there was very closely balanced. We would have to be very careful not to over-hunt, or everything would die."

"And how do you feel?"

"Very thirsty. I tried that water, but I'm still thirsty. We need sea-water, the water here is no good. I can taste the difference, a little, but I can't explain why it's different. Sea-water tastes alive, and this water tastes dead, like rain water... That's the best I can explain it. Barro said it was the salt, but... Well, I can't really tell. I can only tell this water's no good for me, and there's only so much sea-water we can carry with us."

I nodded. "Marilith says you can't taste salt well for the same reason I can't smell my own breath - it's a constant thing, you get used to it." I reached to the little leather pouch I'd tied to my belt, and pulled out a small pinch, representing quite a bit of work. "Open your mouth and stick out your tongue," I said, and Pearl did so. I sprinkled a pinch of salt across her tongue. "Okay, now try the water again."

Pearl nodded, shuffling around to the lake again, and stuck her face in the water. After two swallows, she sat back up again, licking her lips. "Very nice! I'm not thirsty anymore at all! Is that the salt you made from the sea-water?"

I nodded. "It's actually pretty easy, too. There's a flat rock on the south shore near the cove, and it's got a slight hollow in it from rainwater. Too big for me to move, but I propped it up so it was level, and then just filled it with sea-water. The sun dries it, and you fill it again and again, making sure not to fill too much because that would wash everything away. After about a day of this, you can see the salt on the rock. Just scrape it up, put it in a bag, and that's that. Marilith says you must always be careful, though. Too much salt is just as bad as too little. It's hard for humans to get too much salt, because we can taste it easy. Marilith thinks that it would be easy for you to get too much, though, because you can't taste it as

well. One pinch of salt on the tongue a day, no more. The rest you can get from the fish and things here, because you eat your food raw - their blood will have enough salt in it to get you by in a pinch," I said, and handed her the bag so she could look at it. Pearl nodded, looking at the salt inside the bag, then handed it back to me. "The real question is, how long could your people survive here?"

Pearl sat back, looking at the lake. "Hmm... Depends on the time of year. If you're right, the snakes are at the top of the balance, like we are in the sea. If we came here in spring when everything's hatching and ate most of the snakes, first... Maybe six months. We could take the place of the snakes in the balance. But not forever, the snakes have to live, too, and if we eat them all the balance would be upset. Any other time of year..." Pearl shook her head. "Probably no more than a month. After that, the balance would be upset, and everything here would die," she said, and shook her head. "This lake is very deep in the middle, but it's not like the ocean - there's nothing down deeper. No fish, nothing. Just cold water and a lot of mud. Everything lives near the edges, and right at the surface across the lake. The balance is very delicate, here."

"Well, that brings us back to my original suggestion: Hunt the land."

Pearl shrugged. "I agree - but how?"

"Well, I think we can make simple bows from some of these saplings, and just have you shoot a reed shaft. You don't have to kill with the arrows, just poke them with the tip. With your poisons, the goats wouldn't last long. If I get sick or die or something, their numbers will grow again next spring, and there'll be enough for you to easily hunt here if you had to. You could take *my* place in the balance of this island if I ever died or left here. Also, if any mean people came by like the slavers who captured me, even little bows like that would be deadly against them with your poisons. What do you think?"

Pearl thought about it for a long while, gazing out over the lake. Finally, she shook her head. "It would be very difficult. We know the balance of water, and the dangers of the sea. We do not know the balance of land, or any of its dangers. We would have to learn this. This is land, and here, we are weak."

I grinned. "Marilith and I can teach you all that. And, once you do learn, you can make tools that you can store on the land - tools that wouldn't last stored in the sea, but will last if stored on land. Medicines, hunting spears... Everything you might need. Marilith says your people could also make shell armor, like scale-mail, and store it here on land. It's made just like the apron you wore to get here, but covers more.

That might protect the males from orcas."

"Hmmm... Not from a solid bite, like that one did to me, the shells would just be crushed. But from a nip or a fin-rake... Hmmm... It would have to be the blue-clam shells, anything else would be too heavy. They swim about by clapping their shells, and their shells are very strong but light in the water..." Pearl swished her fin in the water, her face showing she was thinking of the possibilities. Finally, she nodded. "It can be done. It will take a great deal of work and a great deal of learning, but it can be done. You are human - here, you are strong, and we are weak. But you are also a Daughter of Ocean. You can give us some of your strength, teach us what we need to know. We will never be as strong here as you, for the land is your world, not ours. But, if we work hard and learn your lessons well, we would never need fear the orcas again."

I grinned. "Good. You ready to start back, now?"

Pearl rolled her eyes. "Impossible. It took me four hours to crawl here, I'm completely exhausted. I'll need to rest here overnight, at least, before I'm ready to try crawling back to the beach."

"You sure?"

Pearl flopped back onto the grass of the lake shore. "Positive. Look - I'm nearly dead with exhaustion."

I giggled - she was hardly that bad off. "Okay, I'll get the cart I made and help you into it, then I'll pull you back to the beach," I said, rising to my feet and stepping over to the nearby grove of trees where I'd stored it.

"A cart?" Pearl asked, sitting up. "What's that?"

"Well, it's not really a cart, I just call it that. It's really a kind of travois. It's just two long poles held apart by supports, a crossbar for me to push against and some netting in between. No wheels, I don't

have any way of making wheels here. But I can drag you back pretty easily, I think. I didn't show it to you before because it's not something you can use, you need legs to use it," I said, dragging the rectangular travois I'd made over to her.

Pearl looked dubiously at the travois, and appeared even more dubious as I helped her sit in it, facing away from me, her tail from the knee down hanging over the second support. I placed her folded apron in her lap, grinning at her, then stepped inside the open rectangle of the front half of the travois. Grabbing the crossbar at the front, I hefted it up, tossed the shoulder strap over my right shoulder and under my left, and started walking.

Pearl looked around as we easily walked away from the lake, up the gentle slope - her eyes were very wide. "This is *easy*!"

I giggled. "Yes, of course! It's why I made it. It's a very common tool in Vilandia, though we usually put wheels on it to make it easier. The one I had back on the farm was very easy to use, so when I realized I would have a ton of meat and hides I'd have to work with, it was one of the first things I made with Barro's tools. How do you *think* I carried all those goat carcasses around back when I was wearing my pretty dance dress? Just chucked them on my shoulder and get blood all over me?"

"If you had something that makes it this easy, why did you make me crawl almost two *leagues*?!"

Pearl yelped. "My hands are all sore and my shoulders are sore and my tummy hurts from the shells on the apron bouncing over rocks!"

I laughed. "Pearl, we had to know if an adult mer-folk *could* make it to the lake. Besides, we can't just sleep by the lake tonight. Marilith says it's likely to rain."

"A little rain wouldn't bother me," Pearl said, sulking.

"No, but it would bother me. I'd get chilled and get sick. I have to go back to my house to sleep - and do you *really* want me to leave you *all alone* when you're *this* far from the ocean?"

Pearl looked around at the forest that surrounded us. To me, it looked peaceful and inviting - but to her, a creature of the sea, it looked anything but. "No," she said, shaking her head. "I am sorry. I should be thanking you, not angry at you. You are right, we needed to know if an adult of my people *could* make it. And I probably needed the exercise, too. I've been resting and healing for a month with all the males coming by and feeding me regularly because everyone's so amazed I'm even alive in the first place, and if I don't start swimming and hunting again I'll end up bigger than an orca!" Pearl said, and I giggled as she made a face. "Well, you are right, and I am sorry."

"It's alright, Pearl."

Pearl sighed. "You *should* leave me alone at the lake, though. Sooner or later, the orcas will return, and we will have to *use* what you will be teaching us. As frightening as this forest is... Sooner or later, we're all going to have to learn its ways."

"You want me to take you back, then?"

Pearl looked around again, then shuddered. "No. The idea of being alone here, this far from the ocean... It frightens me badly. But... But I *have* to learn it, too. We *all* have to learn it. If we could sleep out of reach of the ocean, we would never fear orcas or storms while we sleep." Pearl sighed again. "I don't know what to do."

I considered it for a moment, then grinned. "You could sleep with me, in my house. That way you might learn to be able to relax and sleep out of reach of the ocean, but you wouldn't be scared because you wouldn't be alone. Then eventually you can teach everyone else how to do the same."

"You would not mind?"

"No, of course not!" I replied, laughing. "Will you need anything to sleep with?"

"Just ocean-water in case my skin gets too dry, but I have that," she said, waggling her bottle.

"Then it's all settled! You'll sleep over at my house tonight."

Pearl grinned. "Alright."

The Spider - XIII.

I found, after a bit, that I was actually grateful I had gone mad months ago - for certainly, were I not already mad, I would have become so as the horrors of my new existence slowly settled in upon me.

The flies found me first, of course. Tiny little beings... I could sense their life, somehow... They meant me no malice, of course. They only did what their instincts told them to do. Which was to sup upon the drying blood and trailing entrails that I dragged behind myself, and lay their eggs in my cold flesh. The first maggots hatched around dawn of the second day, and began to eat.

The wolves found me the third night. I was surprised it took them so long. They, too, meant me no malice, and were only responding to their instincts. They were hungry - and here, a large bit of rotting food was crawling right past them. I could not afford to be torn asunder and scattered, however. I would never reach Brionnach that way. So, I simply reached out and snapped one's neck without thinking about it. The rest then howled in fear, sensing what I truly was, and decided they'd seek an easier meal elsewhere.

The grass turned brown, and the leaves of the trees golden hues. Weeks had passed - perhaps months. I did not know. I could sense the passage of day and night, but found I simply no longer cared. I could sense the flesh decaying from me, falling from me, my limbs becoming weaker as they were reduced to mere bone, but faster for the lack of several stone of rotting flesh... But I simply did not care. My whole mind was consumed with finding my beloved, and helping her, so as to make her understand. Nothing else mattered.

Oh, it was beautiful, to be sure. The lands about me, wrapped in the golden glory of fall, were immensely beautiful. The shimmering of countless golden leaves were like the treasures of all the kings of all the ages, gathered and scattered among the branches and across the ground. The animals of the forest each went about their business, struggling to gather as much food and layer on as much fat as they could before winter's chill might set in. Sunrise to sunset, the forest was a brilliant, living tapestry of beauty. Sunset to sunrise, it was a black velvet robe, equally beautiful in the moonlight.

And among it, crawling through the crackling leaves and other forest litter, was a dry, broken skeleton of a man, which none of the forest animals dared approach. Perhaps they could sense the horror I had become numb to. Perhaps not. I cared not at all. My whole mind was consumed with finding my beloved, and helping her, so as to make her understand.

I wondered if her new servant retained some memory of his past life, and used that knowledge to go around the cities and villages of the elves. Or, perhaps, he simply fought. Brionnach was not invincible, however. A single arrow from a silent elf... A single spell... And it would be ended. They would have to be cautious, to avoid the same ambush that had befallen me. I, however, had no knowledge of these lands, or of her path. I only knew to head east... Yet, through fate or good fortune, I encountered no city or patrol. Brionnach would grow tired. She would rest at night. I did not tire, and would not rest. Even if I wanted to, I could not. The only way I could possibly catch her was to keep moving, night and day. Thus, I continued dragging myself forward ceaselessly towards my beloved, never pausing, never stopping, always heading east.

Slowly, relentlessly, the last bits of flesh gone from me, I crawled through deep, elegant forests that covered quiet valleys, gently rolling hills, and sparkling crystal streams... Always heading ever eastwards.

I wondered, when I finally found her, if she would scream. Probably not - my beloved was, in truth, a horror far worse than I.

Slowly, the days grew shorter, and the nights longer. The first snow came while the moon was high, the clouds softly concealing it, then the flakes beginning to fall. It slowed me little, and I continued crawling relentlessly after my beloved.

By the third snow, however, it was becoming quite difficult. I often spent hours just trying to move a few hundred paces. I did not tire, of course. It was simply difficult to move through the drifts of snow.

A voice... A quiet, woman's voice, ethereal and soft...

"Stop, my son," the voice called.

I ignored it. I was mad, and I knew I had been mad for months. Now I was little more than a skeleton, horrid bones crawling across a snow-draped landscape of silent beauty. No, I was mad. It meant nothing. I concentrated on slowly climbing the next hill, dragging myself between the frosted, winter-shrouded trees.

"Stop, my son," the voice called again.

Before me, a gust of wind lifted a flurry of snow from the ground. The snowflakes sparkled and danced with purpose... Forming something...

I stopped.

A ghostly, translucent figure stood before me, the edges of her white-robed body shimmering in the winter sunlight. Long white hair... Pale skin... Eyes like ivory...

My voice was gone with my flesh long before, and now, it seemed my mind had completely gone, as well. Yet, there was something familiar about her...

'I know you,' I thought silently.

The Snow-Queen nodded. Goddess of the people of the *Schnee-Vurste*, the wastelands of endless snow and ice far to the north, her face was instantly familiar to me, though I knew nothing of myself or my past life. A barbarian of those lands, Brionnach had named me. It seemed she was right - for now the goddess of those people stood before me, and I knew who she was.

"Yes, my son. And I know you, as well. Second Son of the chief of the Bear Claw Clan, your inheritance denied by birth. Jealousy, envy and greed consumed you, my son. The riches of the people of the southlands appealed to you, and you left our homeland to seek them. Yet, with nothing to your name but skill with axe and sword, you could only become a soldier... Then a mercenary... Then a thief."

'And then a corpse,' I thought silently.

"Yes, my son. But though you abandoned me, I did not abandon you. Though your greed for gold destroyed you, I did not forget you."

'Didn't you? Look at me... There is nothing left.'

"No, my son. I have never abandoned my children. Forty thousand years ago, your ancestors came to the Snowy Wastes, driven there by desperation, and the depredations of creatures greater than themselves. They called... A prayer to me to aid your people... And I awakened, and took them as my children. I gave my children three gifts, and you used them well. The chill of our lands would not harm your flesh. The brilliant light of the sun gleaming off the snow would not blind you, nor would the Month of Night that falls over the Snowy Wastes in mid-winter. Yes, you used my gifts well... From ice and snow, you built homes and castles. From stone and fire, you forged tools and weapons. From fur and flesh, you clothed and fed your bodies."

'I am mad,' I thought, shaking my head.

"Perhaps. But the Owl was right - you remain the greatest tool at my disposal, and this was the best way to accomplish your forging."

'My forging?'

"Yes, my son. Your forging was long and difficult... And even more difficult because my opponent could not know that I forged you from the flame of their own pawn. Yes, your forging was long and difficult, my son. And, like raw iron ore forged into steel, what is left is far different than what one began with. Far less, and yet, far more... The owl's strategy was wise and cunning, and I was right to trust his advice. And now, the game has begun, my son."

'The game?'

Footsteps crunching in the snow. Quiet voices. Sounds wafted to me on the chill winter's breeze, but I ignored them, enraptured by the vision of the goddess before me.

"Yes, my son. I walk with the rabbit, now, the owl at our side... The sea comes, and we rise together with the mountain to face the spider and the endless sand, and change the future of the world... But I cannot reach where I need to reach. I am winter's frost, I am a snowflake... I am morning fog. I cannot reach the Temple of the Sun. Yet, if I do not, all my children will die, and I will sleep again. The rabbit cannot reach the Temple of the Sun. Her pawn was chosen for her long before she awakened, and it is too weak to survive. The mountain may reach the temple of the sun, but her pawn may not enter. The owl may enter, but his pawn will die there alone. Divided, the spider and the sands defeat us all. United, we may prevail. It all depends on the Sea... Frost and Fire... Snow and Sea..."

'I do not understand...'

"You will, my son. For now, simply know that I give you into the hands of a servant of my ally."

And with that, the vision faded, the sparkles of magic dimming and vanishing, the whirling snowflakes settling back onto the drifts before me.

Had I breath, I would have sighed. *'I am truly mad,'* I thought.

The crunch of foot upon snow grew nearer, then stopped. "How very interesting," a woman's voice said.

I turned my head to look, then stared in confusion.

Three beings stood below me on the hill, gazing at me. One was a young girl-child, olive of skin, black of hair, and with eyes the color of oak. Yet, she was no ordinary child - the expression on her face was one of utter curiosity, like that of a child who had found a butterfly or a beetle of a kind they'd never seen before, not some horrid thing crawling through the snow. The child was dressed very warmly - a many-layered skirt, thick fur mittens and boots, and a hooded fur jacket, apparently made from deer hide.

Behind her was a tall woman in elven armor, yet she was no elf. Her skin was lighter than the child's, but her blonde hair showed she was not the child's mother. Easily taller than even I had once been, she loomed over the child like a tanned, blond-haired mountain. The expression on her face was one of horror and disgust, and she pushed the child behind her protectively - then readied the oaken staff she carried, as though to fight. Her armor was interesting... Stout leather boots and gloves, finely-wrought chain that fit her like a second skin, and a metal cuirass that came to just below her ribs... I found it quite fascinating.

The third was an elf... Or, perhaps, a half-elf. It was difficult to say. My vision was no longer that I had once had, and the woman's image flickered slightly in my eyes. Pale of skin and black of hair and eyes, the ebon-robed woman before me looked much like Brionnach had once described her people as

resembling... Yet, there was an odd shimmering as I looked at her. I had the impression of something greater... Something beyond mortality... An enormous raven, gazing at me with dark, dark eyes... And yet, as I looked again, there was nothing before me but a small elf-maid, with four raven feathers tucked beneath the silver ring which held her ponytail in place.

'Now, I have gone completely mad,' I thought.

"Eddas..." the tall woman said, her face showing total revulsion. "What is that... *Thing?*"

The elf shook her head, but the child simply grinned. "It's a man, Auntie Joy - well, what's left of one, anyway."

"Indeed, Kyrie," the elf replied, then looked at me for a long moment, her gaze becoming unfocused. "How very interesting. Much like a revenant... But not," she said, then blinked, and leaned on the short ebon fighting staff she carried. "Quite fascinating, really." She glanced over her shoulder, and grinned at the blonde one. "Oh, relax, Joy. We're in no danger."

"Are you *sure*, Old Man?"

"Quite sure, Joy," the elf replied, then pointed to me with the staff she carried. "Look - both its legs are broken and gone. You could easily take it yourself, if it attacked. But, it will not attack. It is driven by something else, like a revenant, but not by revenge or a deed unfinished, as they are. So long as we do not stand between it and its goal, we're in no danger."

"*His* goal, Grampa," the child interjected, rolling her eyes. "I know you can't see it, but trust me - it's a *he*."

"Can you tell what he's driven by, Kyrie? I can only see the first and second aural layers with this spell, and it's deeper than that."

The child stared at me for a long moment, then shook her head. "He's got the gold sparkles - it's love. But I don't understand it, Grampa. It's not love like I've ever seen before. Very dark... Very strange. He was once something greater than this in body... But less, in spirit. Now, he's almost nothing in body, but his spirit is large... And dark. Large, black blotches like I've never seen before."

"You're seeing the energy patterns of UnLife, dear. That's what sustains him. Look here, and here..." the elf said, pointing with her staff. "See?" The elf lowered her staff as the child nodded. "I can't see the emotional aspects as well as you can, my little darling, but the rest is visible to me easily."

The blonde woman sighed with apparent exasperation. "Old Man, I know you've been a teacher and scholar for nineteen centuries, but could we *please* cut the lecture short just this once? Even being *around* that thing..." she said, and shuddered.

The child giggled. "Oh, Auntie Joy! I know Grampa said that you were really a little giantess, and it's natural for you to be scared of him, but really, there's nothing to be scared of, he won't hurt us! I can see it - he's just as confused by us as we are by him."

"Joy," the elf replied, shaking her head, "you forget - Yorindar is a subtle God, and unusual things are rarely coincidences when he's involved. This being is highly unusual - and I wager we did not stumble across him by accident. One moment," she said, then turned to me. She closed her eyes for a moment, as though composing herself, then looked to me again. Then, she did something I found utterly surprising.

She began to sing.

I simply stared. *'Truly, I have gone utterly mad, now.'*

There were no words to her song, simply tones of music she sang. She gestured with her staff, as though weaving a spell, yet did not incant any words of power, as Brionnach had on the times I'd seen her do sorcery.

And, as she sang, I could feel something... A strength, flowing into me...

Then, the elf stopped, and smiled. "Now, then, my friend - tell us what brings you to this place, and drives you onwards."

I could not help it - despite how gently her request was spoken, it was, to me, an irresistible order. The darkness within my mind rose, and I was compelled to speak.

"I... I seek my beloved, Brionnach... She travels to the Utter East... To the Temple of the Sun, she said..."

The blonde woman jumped, startled, but no less startled than myself. My voice had come out as a deathly hiss, a quiet rattle of bones... But it was a voice. The child gazed on, her eyes wide, but the elf simply smiled.

"Our meeting, then, was hardly by chance. The gods have directed us to meet, I think. We travel to the same place - though for different reasons," the elf said, then gestured over me, casting a short spell.

I gazed in astonishment at myself. The shattered bones of my legs, long gone as I dragged myself league after league, were now repaired. The bones of my arms and ribs, worn down over the months, were whole. All my bones were whole, and felt strong. I was still fleshless, but it was certainly better than nothing. I rose to my feet, looking at myself, and the elf shrugged.

"That's the best I can do for you, I'm sorry. Your flesh is long gone, I'm afraid."

"It is more than I could have asked for, had I voice to ask..." I looked into the elf's eyes. There was no darkness, there. There was an alien presence, yes. A presence beyond humanity, a knowledge

beyond time... But there was no darkness, there. *"You are a necromancer?"*

The child burst into giggles, but the elf simply smiled. "No. I am Eddas Ayar."

"The Great Mage... I have heard of you... Brionnach mentioned you..."

The elf smiled again. "I am moderately well known, to some," she replied, and waved to the two behind her. "This is my companion, Joy," she said, and Joy nodded her head, eyeing me warily. "And this is my grand-daughter, Kyrie." The child curtsied as best she could in her winter overcoat. "And you are?" the elf asked, looking back to me.

I shook my head. *"I do not know, Eddas Ayar... Brionnach took my name from me, when she made me as I am..."*

"Hmmm... Well, we'll have to think of a name for you as we go along, then."

"I know!" the child chirped. "We can call him Goodman Bones!"

The tall blonde woman rolled her eyes. "Old Man, you are corrupting this child beyond all possible repair."

The child burst into giggles, and the elf laughed. The power of language Brionnach had given me still remained - it appeared that in the child's language, "Goodman" and "Goodmaid" was simply how one referred to any commoner. The child had named me "Goodman Bones", the same as she might call a man "Goodman Brown" or a woman "Goodmaid Bessie". Finally, the elf shook her head. "Well, Kyrie, it's not a proper name, but it will do until we think of a better one. I don't think our friend will mind what we call him, so long as we do not stop him in his quest. But, since we are all headed to the same place, it seems obvious we should travel together."

I knew nothing of who they really were - but, it seemed they were not hostile to me, and perhaps the one called Eddas Ayar could get me past any elves who I might run across as I traveled through their lands, and try to stop me. And, there were lands beyond that which were completely unknown to me - they might have more knowledge than I, and be able to find their way past any perils along the way. *"I agree..."*

"Good," the elf replied, gesturing negligently. Four large, circular impressions suddenly appeared in the snow, a deep crunching sound showing something heavy had just appeared. I could see it dimly, with my altered vision... A faint, horse-like outline, and very large. The elf mounted sidesaddle with a practiced ease, and the tall woman handed the child up to her. "Let us be off, my friend."

I nodded, and turned to the east again, and began walking. The tall woman followed, as did the elf and the child astride their invisible steed.

The Ocean - Sixteen.

"Those goats frighten me. They are giving me very mean looks," Pearl said, pointing to the goats in the pen as I dragged the travois up to the house.

"They can't help it, it's just the way their faces are made. That's not their mean look, that's their 'what is that?' look. I killed all the ones that gave me mean looks and ate them. I didn't want them giving me mean looks, they can head-butt very hard. Hard enough to break bones."

"Now I'm *really* scared. What if one got out and attacked me?! My bones aren't as strong as yours, I live in the sea!"

I stopped, panting. Dragging Pearl all this way was very tiring. "Well, first, those ones there can't attack you even if they wanted to, they can't get out of that fence. Second, they don't even try to bite me, because I keep them very well fed and I always wear the leather clothes I made when I'm in the pen with them so it doesn't hurt much if they do try to bite," I said, dragging the travois over to the house. "But they never do. The billy there is really very gentle - he let me take him by the horns and just walk him right into this pen. I plan on having him breed with all the nannies on the island, and maybe make all the goats very gentle that way."

"Really? They're not mean?" Pearl asked.

I grinned as I set the travois down. "No, these goats are very gentle. Don't worry about the way they're looking at us. They're only watching us because it's near lunchtime, and I always throw things I can't eat to them - they can eat almost anything." I said, taking Pearl's water bottle from her and looking her over. "Right now they're wondering if I'm going to feed what's left of you to them. I can see it in their eyes. I use this travois to drag goats I hunt back to the house. You're a pretty big catch, they know I can't eat all of you," I explained, then giggled.

Pearl blinked at me, then glowered at the goats nearby. "I am *not food*, you stupid goats!"

"Father said if you see a trait you like in an animal and you want all the animals in your herd to have that trait, you make sure that animal is the one that gets to breed the most - and if it's male, you neuter or kill all the other males so it becomes the dominant male. I figure in maybe a few more generations, I can have all the goats on the island like these in the pen. Would you like to pet them? The nannies are really very gentle, they don't mind being petted."

"No, thank you, they look very mean," Pearl said, looking at the goats distrustfully as I put her water-bottle up on the platform.

"They're really not. You're actually meaner than they are. One flick of your poison-claw and that would be that!" I said, pulling down the ladder I'd made.

Pearl looked at what I was doing, and shook her head. "I don't see how I'm supposed to get up there."

"Well, I normally don't use the ladder at all, I just climb up, but I made this ladder in case I ever hurt my ankle or arm or something. The little rope here is so I can pull it down if I was ever on the ground and couldn't stand up. You just climb up the ladder," I said, scrambling up the ladder.

Pearl rolled her eyes, then waggled her flipper at me as she sat there on the grass. "This is a *flipper*, not a *foot*! I can't climb that way!"

I laughed. "No, no! See how wide the steps are? I made it that way in case I was hurt and couldn't climb it. Father always said to plan ahead on the farm, because sometimes it could save your life. Turn around, put your back to it, grab the sides, and you can lift your rump from step to step. Once you're up near the top, I'll grab you by the shoulders and pull you up here."

Pearl grumbled, crawling over to the ladder. "I don't even see why the house is up above the ground."

"Well, I wondered about that too, when I first came here to the island. I figured out after awhile that Barro put it up here because of the goats. The ones in the pen are the gentlest ones I could find on the island. The ones running loose on the island sometimes aren't as nice."

Pearl scooted herself backwards up the ladder *very* quickly, her eyes wide. I burst into giggles, grabbing her beneath the shoulders and pulling her the rest of the way onto the porch. "Oh, Pearl! Don't worry! There's nothing here on this island that can hurt you. Well, except for maybe a couple spiders. That's another reason the house is up on this platform. But, it does make for a nice porch!" I said, sitting down on the edge of the platform and letting my moccasin-covered feet dangle in the air.

Pearl shuffled over next to me, then sat beside me, letting her flipper dangle in the air. Here on the east side of my house, the ocean could easily be seen through the trees, and it was a very lovely day. Pearl, however, didn't seem very happy. "It looks so far away..."

"What does?"

"The ocean. If I had to get to the water quickly, I'd never make it," she said, and looked down. "I don't even know how I'd get down from here."

"Same way you got up, silly," I replied, and giggled. "Besides - why would you need to get back to the ocean quickly?"

"I... I don't know," Pearl said, shaking her head. "It's just a feeling. What if one of the goats attacked?"

"We'd sit up here and laugh at them," I replied, and grinned. "Then I'd go get my spear and we'd have goat-meat for dinner."

"Well... What if something else tried to attack us?"

I rolled my eyes at her. "Pearl, an orca couldn't possibly get this far inland."

"Well... Aren't there things like that on the land? Land-orcas?"

I laughed. "Pearl, you can be so silly, sometimes! Sure there are things like that. Wolves and lions and bears... Even fell beasts like chimera and manticores - they can fly. But all predators are rare on land, and the fell beasts who are predators are even rarer still. Marilith says that far away, in the land of Hyperborea, there's many fell beasts and giants and ogres and all sorts of things that can eat you - even

dragons, she says. But most places there aren't so many, and here there are none, so we don't have to worry."

"Oh," Pearl said, and fell quiet, gazing out through the trees at the sea.

I reached out and hugged her. "Pearl, really. It's alright."

Pearl hugged back, and sighed. "I know, it's just very hard. The lake was nice, but it still was not the sea. I don't think any of my people could go there alone, and I certainly know I couldn't possibly sit here, trapped this far from the sea, if you weren't sitting beside me. I feel like something bad could happen at any moment, and I'd be gobbled up long before I could ever get away."

"It's alright, Pearl, really. I'm right here."

"I know. Your strength is the only thing that makes it possible, for me..." Pearl said, and sighed again. "Barro wanted me to come up here. Many times he asked me, but I couldn't. Too far to crawl, too far from the sea. I was afraid... And I still am. You don't know what it feels like... And I don't know if I can explain it. When I watched you fight those orcas, I was so afraid. I thought you would be killed. Then I saw how easily you were defeating them, and just trembled in awe of you. Orcas kill everything in the sea... Even the great humpback dies to orcas."

"Humpback? What's that?"

"An enormous whale... If we were sitting on the beach right at the edge of the grass and one was before us, it could splash its flukes in the water while we were petting its nose, they're so big."

"You're kidding!"

"No. They are huge - and they, too, die to orcas. And yet there you were, killing them easily. Here, I am weak, and you are strong. So strong, even the mighty orca must tremble in fear of you. Only the greatest of fell beasts from the sea could possibly survive your strength on land. The sea-serpent, perhaps. Or a kraken."

"What's a sea-serpent, and what's a kraken?"

"Well, a sea-serpent is a very large beast, it lives deep in the water. They can speak, and breathe lightning... They have three pairs of flippers along their bodies. Our legends say they are the children of a dragon, cursed by the gods to live only in the water. They hunt the creatures of the greater deep, where no mer-folk can go because of the crushing pressure of the cold, cold waters. Strange, eerie beasts live down there, leagues and leagues below the surface. Fish who are mostly jaw and teeth... Squid as big as the humpback... Frightening things. It is dark there, the only light is from lantern-fish and other hunting creatures. But sometimes, when the hunting is bad, the sea-serpent comes to the surface. It does not like your people, and hunts down your ships. It breathes lightning across the ships, and some of them are so big, they can wrap themselves around the ship and squeeze it, crushing it like an egg. Then they gobble the men in the water. They also use magic to gather the treasure from such ships, and take it to their lairs in the bottom of the sea. Some hunt the ships of men just for the treasure they may drop... I think their status among each other is determined by their age and the size of their hoard, but I don't know for certain."

I shuddered. "Do they eat mer-folk?"

"No. They talk to us, and we exchange stories and word of what is happening. They live in waters so deep, it is almost a completely separate world. They are very ancient creatures, and we treat them with great respect lest they grow annoyed with us and eat us anyway."

"Well, that's some comfort, anyway. Now, what's a kraken?"

"A very large fell beast with a long tail like ours, a sharp beak, and four arms like tentacles. They sometimes come ashore and consume entire villages of men, and they destroy any ships they run across. Beneath the waves, they fear nothing - only a sea-serpent has the power to stop them, and krakens do not live in the greater deeps, so they rarely meet. We flee krakens - they are unstoppable behemoths. Fortunately, we swim faster than they do. After a meal of titanic proportions, they usually return to their caves underwater, and sleep for a few decades or a century, depending on how much they managed to

eat."

I shook my head, amazed. "You have things like that in the sea, and you're afraid of a little *goat?!"*

"It's not the same thing!" Pearl huffed. "I am weak here on land. I *should* be afraid!"

"Yes, but not of *everything!*" I said, and plopped down onto the ground. "Come - we're going to go pet the nannies."

"But-"

I slipped my arm behind her knee, pulling her to the edge of the porch, then wrapped my other arm around her waist and pulled her down into my arms. I grunted - she weighed as much as I did - but was able to set her down gently after a moment. "Come on, Pearl. We're going to go pet the nanny-goats."

"But... But what if they head-butt me or bite me?!"

"They can't head-butt you through the pen, and if they bite you, we'll have goat-meat for dinner."

It took a bit more convincing, but eventually I managed to get Pearl to drag herself over near the pen. The nannies stood there curiously, gazing at Pearl as she timidly reached through the fence to pet them. After awhile, Pearl smiled. "They feel nice."

"Na-a-a-a!" the nanny-goat replied, blinking curiously.

"What did she say?" Pearl asked, pulling her hand back and looking at me.

I grinned, reaching down to scratch the nanny between her horns. "I don't know, I don't speak goat. Probably 'where's the food?' That's all they think about, really," I said as the nanny-goat walked off. "This pen is about half an acre and runs through a good bit of forest so they've got plenty of food, but they are always hungry anyway. I pulled up the bushes and things along the path to the lake this last week to make a clearer trail and tossed it all to them - the pile's right over there. They're still working on eating all the leaves from them, so they don't need anything today. I have a scythe I made from that sawfish beak Silver-tail gave me last summer, it does a very good job on the grasses and such around the house, and I feed that to the goats, too. Still, they're always hungry. It's just their way, I suppose."

"Oh... So they only eat plants, like the nibble-fish only eats coral?"

"Well, mainly, yes. They can eat pretty much anything, but they prefer plants. Pearl, there's honestly nothing on this island that can really hurt you except for maybe an angry billy or a few spiders. A billy-goat you can kill with a single scratch of your poison-claw, just don't let them bonk you in the head and you'll be alright. As for the spiders, your skin's not like mine. Your skin is covered with scales, I don't even know if they *could* bite you. And you're immune to most poisons in the sea, I don't think the spiders here will be able to hurt you even if they *could* bite you. There's just nothing on this island that can really hurt you, Pearl. You and I are the two biggest things on this island - as you would say, we're at the top of the balance, here."

Pearl smiled. "No, *you* are at the top of the balance. Here, I am just a frightened little hatchling in your care, until I learn the ways of the land."

I grinned, then looked up as I felt a splash of water on my nose. "Well, come on, my little hatchling, it's time for us to get inside - it's starting to rain," I said, trotting back over to the porch. Pearl giggled, and started dragging herself over to the ladder.

Hours later, the rain had come and gone, and the sun had set. As the shadows grew longer, Pearl grew more and more nervous. "I can't even see the ocean anymore," she muttered. Finally, I pulled out the little tinderbox I'd made, and went to work trying to spark a little flame so I could light a small tallow candle. Pearl watched with interest, the sparks of my knife against the flint startling her. Finally I had it, and placed the tallow candle into the wooden candle-holder Barro apparently had recovered from his shipwreck ages ago. "What is that?" Pearl said, pointing.

I giggled as I sat before her on the floor, placing the candle between us. "It's fire, Pearl."

Pearl rolled her eyes at me. "I know what fire is, Barro showed me. Cook, cook, cook, it's all you humans do sometimes. I meant what's that stick that's burning?"

"It's a candle. I made it from the fat of the goats. Marilith taught me how to make it, I'll show your people how to make them too as we go along."

"I see... Barro never showed me candles. He would sometimes light a fire on the beach from driftwood, and we would sit beside it as the evening came and..." she said, then grinned slyly.

I giggled again. "Well, I lit the candle because you looked like you were a little scared of the dark."

Pearl stuck out her tongue at me. "I was not afraid of the dark!" she said, then looked around. "It's what might be *in* the dark that scares me."

"I suppose this means telling each other scary stories before we go to bed is out?" I said, and giggled again.

"Yes," Pearl replied, sticking her tongue out at me again.

"Well, what *will* we talk about, then?"

Pearl thought about it for a moment, then grinned. "Actually, I was quite curious as to how your people spawned. Barro couldn't really explain it very well, as I did not speak his language well enough to

understand."

I blushed and stammered for a bit. "Ummm..."

"Yes?"

"Well, I don't really know a lot about it. I mean, yes, I know *how* it's done - it's like with the goats. The male mounts the female, and they... Err... Well, he puts his... Err... He puts his member... Ummm... Inside her... Ummm..." I said, and Pearl burst into giggles. "Well... Ummm... They get done and the nanny gets fat with the babies in her belly and eventually goes into labor and the kids come out and father said it was basically the same with humans and that's all I know, I've never done it before!" I yelped, completely flustered.

Pearl laughed, tossing her hair, then lay on her side on the floor, her arm under her head, smiling. "Well, that explains a lot," she said, and got a far-away look in her eyes, as though remembering.

"What do you mean?" I asked, lying down on the other side of the candle.

"We do it differently, and I could never completely understand why Barro wanted to play the way he did. He always wanted to put his member in my cloaca," she said, patting the slim slit she had in the front of her belly below her waist, about at the level where a human's groin would be. "That felt nice, but it wasn't how we do it."

"How *do* you do it, then?" I asked, propping my head up on my elbows, fascinated.

"Mmmm... Are you sure you're old enough to learn?" she asked teasingly, and I stuck out my tongue at her, making her giggle. "Well, alright. What you described is much like dolphins or whales. What we do is more like fish, but it's more complicated. Fish have to wait until the breeding season, and they can only breed once a year. We usually choose our mates in the spring like everything else, but if we *have* to, we can breed anytime we wish, because the male and the female interact to prepare each other for each

stage. And sometimes when a bad storm scatters a clan or a large pod of orcas decimates us, we *have* to."

"You prepare each other? How does that work?"

"Well, first, when we decide to become mates, we have a long swim-dance together, and we stroke each other's skin all over. That's *very* nice. Then, we find a nice, quiet beach, and we stay there for awhile. The female strokes the male, here," she said, patting her hip. "We stroke him for a while, and eventually his cloaca opens, and the inner cloaca protrudes. We suckle at it and nibble it very gently, and eventually he gives us his First Milk. After that, he goes hunting for himself, and for a week, we feed only from him. This primes our body to lay the egg, and our breasts swell with our First Milk. We can feel when we're ready, our breasts begin to hurt. At that time, the male stops hunting for himself and only hunts for us. For about a week, we eat the fish he brings and he only feeds from us, suckling at our breasts and drinking *our* First Milk. This primes his body to give his Second Milk. You can tell when he's ready, because the scales over his hips will turn red. Eventually, we can feel the egg moving, so both go into the water again, where we lay our egg. The male hovers close over it, and we stroke the male on his hips. After a bit, he gives his Second Milk into the water, which fertilizes the egg. By then, we're both fairly hungry, so he goes off to hunt for both of us while we watch the egg. Our Second Milk comes after we've laid the egg, and takes about three months. The egg hatches in the fourth month, and the hatchling is very small - about this big from head to tail," Pearl said, holding her hands about a cubit apart.

"That's *very* tiny!" I said, amazed. "Do you bring them out of the water then for their first air?"

"No - hatchlings have little gills, here," she said, touching the sides of her neck. "They slowly go away as the hatchling nurses, drinking our Second Milk. The hatchling gets bigger and bigger, until finally about the third month, he's about as long as my arm and ready to be taken onto the beach. He has to be watched very carefully and kept damp all the time until he learns to breathe air, hold his breath underwater, and his gills finally go away. When they're a year old, we give them bits of fish to eat from time to time, and slowly start weaning them - they're completely weaned by about age two. The loss of the Second Milk causes their poison-spurs to start growing, and they are ready to be used by about their third birthday. From there we teach them and raise them until they are about fifteen or sixteen, at which point they are ready to start hunting for themselves and find a mate of their own, though they're not really fully grown until about eighteen or twenty. Some stay with their parents until age eighteen or twenty, but sometimes they find a mate earlier than that. My mother said that we can live to be a thousand years old, but very few of us manage to live past two hundred, because of orcas and storms and accidents."

"Wow, that *is* different..." I said, amazed, then suddenly grinned. "You sound like you've done it before, though."

"Yes, I have," Pearl replied, smiling back. "My mate was Silver-eyes. We had three hatchlings."

"Oh? Where are they today?"

Pearl sighed. "Orcas. Same as my parents," she said, and patted her scars. "That's why I have these. The thought of my little brother out there, alone against an orca..." Pearl shook her head. "I know it was stupid, now. He has a monodont spear, and he's the best hunter of our clan. But... I just couldn't let him fight it alone. He's my brother."

I reached across to her, and we held hands for a moment, her webbed mer-folk hand in my human one. "I understand, Pearl."

"I want my brother to have the shell-armor we talked about - stored on land so it will last, worn in the sea when the orcas come. In fact, I think we could use coins from the shipwrecks, and maybe make even better armor... Armor that would stand up to the full bite of an orca, not just a nip or a fin-rake. I don't know. But I want *better* for our people, Sasha of Woe. The Travelers tell us stories, and they say-"

"Travelers?"

"Yes. Clans of mer-folk who migrate, following the schools of tuna and other migrating fish. We trade for things from them from time to time as they pass through, and exchange stories with them. Some came through last week, in fact. There are also clans of mer-magi, who live much like the Travelers do."

"Mer-magi?"

"Yes. Some of us can do sorcery, Sasha - though it is very rare, and none here in the Windward Isles possesses the *Talent*. There are clans of magi, however, and they travel from clan to clan, trading for

knowledge of sorcery. They never come here, though, for we have nothing to trade."

"Oh. Sorry, I was just curious. You were telling me about the Travelers' stories?"

"Yes. Well, the Travelers say that far, far to the east, beyond Vilandia, is another continent. The mer-folk on the western shore of that continent have better weapons, they wear armor against the orcas, and they dominate the seas. But it's only *stories*. The Travelers here in the Western Sea don't know how any of it is made. But you *do*. Your knowledge, your strength will help my clan to rule this island, and all the waters around. And, as the knowledge spreads, all the clans of the Windward Isles will one day dominate the seas, and never fear the orcas again."

"And that, Sasha, is precisely what needs to happen," Marilith whispered suddenly.

"Marilith? Are you alright? You've been very quiet," I said, looking up.

Pearl looked at me, but said nothing. I waited, and Marilith spoke again. *"I have been watching, Sasha. I have been trying not to think of my situation, losing myself in watching you, and trying to forget... It helps a bit. Laughing with you instead of crying for myself, it helps me forget the pain. Watching you instead of watching my prison, it helps me forget the misery. Listening to the ocean's whispers helps me know there is hope. And there is hope, Sasha. You are where you are supposed to be, and you are doing what you are supposed to be doing. Though I do not understand how helping the mer-folk will help you free me, the ocean whispers that it may. Thus, I wait, and I watch, and I listen, and I laugh, and so many, many times... So many times I just want to hug you and thank you for making me laugh. The laughter is best of all. It eases my pain like nothing else, Sasha."*

"You're welcome, Sister," I replied, grinning.

"What is she saying?" Pearl asked.

"She's saying I make her laugh, sometimes, and that eases the pain."

Pearl smiled. "I'm glad."

"And how are you feeling? Better?"

"A little, yes."

"Ready to try to get some sleep?"

"I think so," she said, and yawned.

I paused, fascinated. I'd always thought all their teeth were sharp and shark-like - but her back teeth were large and flat, apparently made for crushing or grinding, like a cow. She stopped yawning, and I grinned, shaking my head. "Alright, one moment." I picked up the candle, then rose, putting it on the little table by the cot I used as my bed. Folding back the blankets of wool and goat-hide, I lay down on my side, then held my arm out. "Come on, climb in."

"With you? How? There's not enough room."

"Sure there is. Just sleep on your side snuggled up to me, like two spoons. Come on!"

"What's a spoon?"

I giggled. "Come on - put your head here and I'll get us both covered."

"I don't want to be any trouble, I'll be fine here on the floor, really."

"No you won't, the ants will find you and to them you smell like a big fish and they'll be nibbling you before morning. Come on!"

"Ants?!" Pearl yelped, looking around. "What are those?!"

"Little tiny insects with a painful bite. Now come."

Pearl pulled herself over to the bed, and I helped her scramble in and snuggle up against me. "Oooo! You're *cold!*"

"I normally sleep in water, what did you expect?" Pearl said, and giggled. "Besides, I'm not cold, I feel perfectly normal. *You*, on the other hand, are *warm!*"

I giggled, arranging the blankets over us. "Well, If you get too hot, just open the blankets a bit in front of you," I said, and lifted my head a bit, then blew out the candle.

"Ack!" Pearl yelped.

"What?" I asked, snuggling up to her.

"It's *really* dark, now."

I simply giggled.

We lay there in the darkness for awhile afterwards. Pearl had a strong 'fishy' smell, but I didn't mind. When your best friends are mer-folk, you get used to that. Pearl wiggled a bit, getting comfortable, and we found after a bit that the best position was for me to put one arm under her neck and the other across her waist, with the large rolled goat-hide pillow I'd made holding up both our heads. After a long moment, Pearl sighed.

"What's the matter?" I whispered.

"Barro slept with me like this, once, on the beach. It was very nice, very warm... I never told my brothers. They would not understand. But I wanted to be Barro's mate. He was so lonely, he needed someone to love. And my mate was dead, and I was lonely, and... Well, I loved him back. We played, we hugged, we kissed... But nothing happened. He could not fill my belly with a child like a human woman, and he could not bring my First Milk like a merman could. So one night we lay on the beach, just like this, all wrapped up in blankets, and we talked. Well, he talked, and I listened, mostly," Pearl said quietly.

"About what?"

"About everything. He told me his whole life's story from beginning to end. He told me legends and tales of his people. He told me of all the lands he'd visited in his life, all the people he'd seen. He stroked my ears and whispered how beautiful they were - he had round ears, human ears, and he said my ears were like an elf. I have never seen an elf, I don't know what they look like. But he said I was as beautiful as an elf, and I could tell he meant it as a great compliment. He stroked my hips, and told me how lovely they were, like the hips of his first mate. He told me how beautiful I was, and how he loved me so and... Well, I fell asleep listening. It was so very warm, and so very nice to have him touching me, whispering to me, and telling me of his love. We woke up in the morning to the warm sun. It was a beautiful summer day. He kissed me goodbye, and went up to the cabin, here. And did not come back. I came back to the beach at our usual time day after day, but he did not come back. Finally, I crawled all the way up here, and saw he was dead. And now..." she said, and sighed again.

"Yes?"

"You told me today that you can't sleep outside the cabin. You'll get sick. Now, I wonder if I killed him that night. I wonder if I killed him with my love."

I hugged Pearl tight. "No, Pearl. He was old, it was his time. You didn't kill him. I've slept on the beach in the spring, it's very nice, here - what I said was I can't sleep in the *rain*, alright? You didn't kill him. He was just old. It was his time."

"But... But maybe I was too cold, and drained the warmth from him! That must have been it! He said I was cold, too, just like you, and-"

"No, Pearl. I'm with you now, and you're not too cold, you're warming up nicely. It was just his time, Pearl. He was old."

Pearl sighed deeply, and reached up to wipe her eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Very sure, Pearl. It wasn't your fault. It was just his time."

Pearl was quiet after that, simply sighing from time to time and wiping her eyes. It took me a moment to realize it, but it finally dawned on me that this was how mer-folk wept. I hugged her tight, and finally her sighs faded into silence.

"It's alright, Pearl. Really."

"Alright," Pearl said, and sighed again. "But if I wake up and find you dead tomorrow morning, I am going to be very upset!"

I burst into giggles, and hugged Pearl tight. "Come on, you silly. Close your eyes and get some sleep."

Pearl reached back, taking my hand in hers, and squeezed it silently. We lay there in the darkness after that, each lost in our own thoughts.

The Spider - XII.

It was a joy to walk again. After months of dragging myself along, the simple pleasure of walking was truly indescribable. It turned the snow-covered forest from an endless challenge to an endless delight.

The sun glistened on frosted trees, and to my eyes, I could see so much more than simple light on ice crystals. I could see the slow pulse of the sleeping trees, and the quiet glimmer of tiny animals who slept in small hollows within them. Though I could not take a breath, I could still sense the scent of the winter forest. Though I had no ears, I could still hear the soft sounds of a winter dove, calling in the distance. Though I had no skin, I could still sense the crisp, clear breeze as it wafted over me. It was all so beautiful...

As the drifts grew thicker in a valley, I snatched up a dead stick to use as a walking staff, and simply kept going. My weight as mere bones was far less than it had once been, and I hardly sunk into the snow much past my ankles. Unfortunately, Joy, the one the child had said was a little giantess, was far larger and heavier. I saw she was struggling, and stopped. Eddas and the child, riding on their invisible steed, paused next to her. Joy leaned against her staff, panting.

"Are you alright, Auntie Joy?" Kyrie asked.

Joy nodded. "Just tired, little one."

"Well, maybe you could ride with us?"

Joy shook her head. "I'm too big, dear. Your grampa's magic horse would be bogged down trying to carry me, and we'd go just as slow."

Eddas nodded. "You need some snowshoes, Joy, or something that will work like them."

"Give me the tools, and I can make them..." I called, my voice still little more than a dry hiss, a rattle of bones.

Joy looked at me. "Have you ever made them before?"

"Not that I remember, no..."

Joy rolled her eyes. "Then how do you know you can at all?"

Eddas chuckled. "Joy, he's dead, not stupid. Though his mind is a bit muddled at present, he's right - if I give him the tools, he *can* do it."

"How, Grampa?" Kyrie asked, her expression puzzled. "I mean... How will he know how to do it if he's never done it before?"

Eddas simply slipped from the back of the invisible steed, and pulled off a glove as she replied - her hand glittered with rings on every finger, and each had a gleam of magic about them. "It's quite simple, dear - it's one of the Laws of Magic, the Law of Commutation."

"Ooo?" Kyrie squeaked, her eyes brightening. "Can you tell me about it?"

Eddas shrugged, reaching to a ring on her thumb, and - to my utter astonishment - pulling forth a long rope cubit by cubit, looping it on the ground as she did so. "Well, I can, but you wouldn't understand the mathematics of it. You'll learn all about it when you're a bit older, and your studies in sorcery begin. In short, however, a tool is an inanimate object made to do a specific task or series of tasks - an inanimate object with a purpose, an intent. A being filled with UnLife energy is, by the Laws of Magic, also an inanimate object with a purpose, and nearly all of them were made for an intent, or arose with an intent. Both unliving, yet both possessed of intent. Thus, by the law of Commutation, they're both very similar. As such, the undead are highly attuned to any tools you might give them, and if they're humanoid, they can use them the moment they're in their hands. Perhaps not well, but they *can* use them - and practice improves their affinity to a tool, as well."

"When a tool is in my hands, I simply know how it should be used... I regret I cannot explain it any better than the Great Mage has, however... It is simply a feeling... A knowing..."

Eddas nodded, slipping her glove back on, then gestured briefly as she incanted a few syllables. I saw a sparkle of magic in the air above her head, but nothing more. Then, to my utter surprise, she tossed one end of the coiled rope into the air, where it clung. "One moment, I'll see what I have in my Sanctuary." Then, without a moment's pause, she scrambled up the rope more nimbly than a squirrel, and disappeared into thin air. I gaped for many long moments until the child noticed it, and began to giggle. Even Joy, whose loathing of me was obvious, chuckled. I closed my mouth, and simply waited.

"Auntie Joy," Kyrie said while we waited, "why don't you just... Err... Poof! I mean, grow to big size, then just walk? Wouldn't that be easier?"

Joy shook her head. "Yes, but then I could be seen for leagues, little one, and would leave enormous tracks. Your grandfather would hardly be amused with me."

"Oh, sorry."

Joy smiled, having recovered her breath.

Suddenly, Eddas poked her head out of the nothingness she'd disappeared into, her ponytail hanging down. "I've found an axe. Will that do?"

"Yes... But I will need more, I think..."

"I'll keep looking, then," she replied, and held the handle of the axe out to Joy. "Joy, hand that to our friend, please?"

Joy complied as Eddas pulled her head back into her invisible realm, though she held the axe out to me with the *greatest* of trepidation.

It took two hours, and was only possible because Eddas had some extra rope, a brazier, a bit of rawhide, and managed to find an awl. Once I had the tools, however, the task was relatively simple. Split a small sapling, bend it into a hoop with the heat of the brazier Eddas provided, drill holes in it, split the rope into strands, weave through the holes, wet the rawhide, wrap it to hold the hoop together, let it dry, work on the next one. As Eddas returned the last of the tools to her sanctuary and restored the rope to its hiding place, Joy was trying her first steps in the snowshoes.

"It's a bit awkward, Old Man."

"You'll get used to it in a bit, I think."

"Swing your feet out a bit wider... And take longer steps..." I offered.

Joy simply glowered at me. I nodded. This was, at least, an improvement over fearing me.

* * *

We camped that night, so the three of them could rest within the invisible protection of the strange sanctuary Eddas summoned. Eddas and the child entered easily, but Joy had to remove her metal cuirass, and wriggle through the invisible entrance with great effort. Once the three were finally in, they pulled the rope up behind them. It was apparent I was not invited. I did not mind - I wasn't certain I would be willing to sleep next to a walking horror, either. Of course, I no longer slept.

I could faintly smell the scent of food - it was apparent they had prepared dinner up there before they would sleep. I simply sat beneath the entrance, and waited as the stars came out. Though I could walk, now, and could easily go on without them, it seemed unwise. I might be mad, but even the vision of a madman might be true. I *had* seen *something* before they encountered me... And if true, I had seen the goddess of my people. Eddas had said that our meeting was no chance coincidence. Perhaps she was right. Either way, the best way to find out would be to travel with them.

I could hear their conversations easily as the stars came out. The child was immensely precocious, and full of endless questions. Each one she had, Joy and Eddas attempted to answer, much in the manner two grandparents might. Joy's answers always were phrased simply, relying much on simple wisdom and common sense. Eddas' answers held the depth of a teacher, and one well familiar with educating children. I found that quite curious, and for the longest time I wondered about the Great Mage and what their true story might be.

At last, the child was put to bed. There was a long moment of silence, broken only by the sounds of rustling cloth and mail. I presumed they undressed for bed. Finally, there was silence, then a quiet conversation began anew.

"I don't trust him, Old Man."

"Joy, he's dead, not deaf. It's night, as well - remember when Arella and I tried to speak in here while you and Darian sat below, that night in the forest near Greenhaven?"

A long moment of silence followed.

"Sorry."

A soft sigh. "Oh, I suppose it's alright, Joy. He's smart enough to know you don't trust him, but at this point, I don't think he really cares *what* we think of him. He's *driven*, Joy, in a way that mortals simply cannot comprehend. The gods meant for him to walk with us on this journey... Perhaps part of our task is to see to it he gets where he's going, since it doesn't seem likely he knows anything more than to head east, whereas we actually have a way to *know* where to go."

"And what happens when he gets there?"

Another long moment of silence.

"I don't know, Joy. I simply don't know."

But *I* knew. I would find my beloved. I would help her. And then, she would understand.

The Ocean - Seventeen.

"Okay, you try it," I said, leaning back and watching.

Pearl nodded, studying the sand of the beach carefully. Winter had passed, and it was nearly spring again. The weather at night was chilly, and it often rained all day. We were enjoying one of the few warm days that had been allotted to us by the gods, sitting on the eastern beach, and working on our studies. Finally, she stuck out a finger, and began to draw lines and curves in the sand. After a few moments, she stopped. "Is that right?"

"Yes," Marilith whispered.

I looked, and grinned. "That's right. That's your name - 'Pearl.'"

Pearl stared, her eyes filled with wonder. I knew how she felt. When Marilith first taught me to write my name, I was awe-struck at the whole idea that the little loops and lines I'd made *meant* something - something that others could read, and understand.

"This is wonderful!" Pearl exclaimed grinning broadly, and hugged me.

"I think so, too," I replied, grinning back as I hugged her in return.

Pearl sat back, and looked down again. "Oh! I smudged it, now it's gone," she said, almost sadly.

"So write it again," I replied, and grinned again.

Pearl blinked, then grinned broadly. "I *can*, can't I?! I can write it again!" she said, and did so, quickly writing her name in the sand with a claw. "And I could write other words, too! I could write down our stories and legends! I could write down the lessons we teach to the hatchlings! Why, I could even create symbols like these for *our* language! Then I could write all that in *our* words!"

I laughed. "Yes, you *can* do all that! But first, you need to master reading and writing in *my* language. I can't help you create the symbols for *your* language, I can't even speak it! So, you have to learn how to do my language even better than I do. And I'm still learning from Marilith, myself."

Pearl looked to me, her eyes shining. "But I *will* master it! And I *will* create marks like these for *our* sounds. You have thirty marks, and you put them together to make your sounds. We could do the same - and probably do it with less marks!"

I nodded. "Your language is actually very simple to understand, once you put meaning to the sounds. I just can't *make* the sounds, myself. Marilith says no human can. Marilith says you have... Err... Well, she calls it a second tongue, but it's not a tongue, really, it's a thing you use to make noise with, right behind your nose, above your palate, between here," I said, holding my fingers to the sides of her head. "You also have muscles I don't to pinch off your nose underwater, and your control of all the muscles and everything inside your head and throat is much better than mine. With all that, you push air around inside your head and throat, and use both tongues and your voice box to make sounds others can hear without having to inhale or exhale. I can't do that - no human can. The closest I can do is this:" I said, and closed my mouth, pinched my nose with my fingers, and made the 'tk-tk-tk' sound that in their language meant 'hush' or 'be quiet'.

"That's still pretty good!" Pearl said, grinning at me. "It's a little quiet, but it's good!"

"Thank you," I replied, grinning. "It only took me a year to figure out how to do that," I said, and

giggled. "I can almost say 'mama' in your language, too."

"*Yanar is coming*," Marilith whispered.

"Marilith says Yanar is coming," I said, looking out to the waves.

"I hope the cork we added helped," Pearl said nervously. "The last time he was very tired."

"I hope the *sealer* we put on the cork worked. If that cork gets waterlogged, it won't help much."

Shortly, Yanar rose from the surf, and began crawling towards us. He looked utterly exhausted - but he was grinning broadly.

"Was it better this time?" Pearl shouted.

"Yes, much!" Yanar yelled back, still grinning.

I looked him over. The shell-armor we'd made for him looked utterly wretched, really. With two huge ball-clam shells over his shoulders and over a hundred blue-clam shells covering the rest of his body down to nearly his elbows and below his rump, the armor was bulky and looked quite heavy - and, out of the water, it *was*, really. When dry it weighed over four stone, and wet with sea-water, it weighed five stone. But *in* the water, the cork under-layer we'd made from the bark of the cork trees on the island *should* have lightened it. It almost floated when we tested it in the shallows of the southern cove, and the cork *should* provide decent padding when struck, too. Finally, Yanar sat next to me, grinning, and gave me a hug.

"Ow!" I yelped. "It's a good thing I wore my goat-hide today, that armor pinched my arm!"

"Oh, sorry!" Yanar said, looking sheepish. "I was just so happy, I forgot how tender your skin is."

"How did it work?" Pearl asked.

"Very nicely. The first time it was just too heavy. It took too much effort to surface for air. The second time was much better - it was no heavier than carrying a bluefin to the surface. It's a little difficult to swim in it because it's so bulky, but practice will improve on that."

"Should we add sleeves and gauntlets to it?" I asked.

Yanar shook his head. "No, we'd never be able to get a grip on their spine with that. Just make the sleeves go down to here," he said, laying aside his spear and holding his hand two thirds of the way down his forearm, near his wrist. "I know you're looking at Pearl and you don't see it, but our hands are a bit different from a female's," he said, then brought all his fingers together, his hand flat, and tensed his fingers. "See how our claws curve a bit inwards? It makes our hands into almost a spear. We punch through the skin and blubber like this," he said, stabbing his hand forward viciously, "then we wiggle our hands like this while opening the thumb and extending our poison claw, then hook our fingers, inject our poison, and hang on. If they tear loose, they tear out a bit of their own back muscles and make the hole even bigger, and we jab in again. When we hit something solid, we know we've hit the spine or a rib. We just grab onto whatever we've hit and hang on again." Yanar grinned. "Our hands are made to be weapons, Sasha. It's why when we make shell-tops and combs and pretties for the mermaids, it's always such a big thing for us. It's actually quite hard to do."

"Bah. It's not that hard. You males are lazy when it comes to courting," Pearl replied with a sniff. "You all think a good mate should be won with just a smile and a bluefin or two."

"Hah!" Yanar replied. "Not anymore. After Sasha's influence, we've all got to be poets just to catch your attention. I shudder to think what the next generation will face."

"Necklaces of orca-teeth, I hope," Pearl replied grimly.

Yanar laughed and shook his head. "You're a hard one, Pearl, but I have to admit I'd like to see that, myself." Yanar turned to face me. "Help me out of this, please, I can't do the knots myself."

I nodded, tugging at the strings. "We'll work on making it a little easier for you to get in and out of. I didn't realize your hands weren't like Pearl's. Probably a bar and loop arrangement would work."

"What would that look like?"

"Like this," I said, pointing to the goat-hide blouse I wore. "See? A bar of wood on a string, and a loop here. The bar goes through the loop like a button through a buttonhole, and holds it together. Wood's not strong enough, but we've got plenty of ivory from the two orcas I killed, shouldn't be that hard to make."

Yanar chuckled. "I don't know what a button or a buttonhole is, but I'll take your word for it." In a moment, I had him loose, and he wriggled out of the armor easily. "Well, thank you - if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go rest with Bright-eyes for a bit, then go hunting for her," he said, and turned to climb up onto the grass. Nearby, just on the grass, were forty little mer-houses - really little more than cubit-high platforms to keep the ants away (Marilith had shown me an herb that could be rubbed on the legs of the huts that left them with a smell the ants would avoid). Some of them had little roofs made of goat-hide (of which I still had quite a bit), but they didn't really stop the rain or provide much shelter - they didn't need to. Their purpose was to provide shade for the little babies against the sun. Of course, the real purpose of the shelters was to get everyone used to the idea that they could be safe on the grass within the edge of the forest, yet still within sight of the sea. They would need to learn this before they ever would be able to use the little lake in an emergency, or ever really be considered masters of the island.

I looked after Yanar as he crawled away, and sighed. He was so handsome... It was too bad he already had a mate.

"Your hourglass has emptied," Marilith whispered.

"Whoops - yes it has, thank you, Sister," I replied, looking at the hourglass Barro had recovered from his own shipwreck, years ago. After turning the hourglass over again, I reached to my basket and pulled out a tightly-sealed herb-jar. The little white petals within had been an enormous pain to gather - I couldn't simply pluck the flowers, I wouldn't have any next year if I did that. So, under Marilith's guidance, I'd had to find the male and female flowers, and poke my fingers into each to pollinate them. That took days - then, once it was done, I had to carefully cut the petals off with a knife before the flowers wilted, and seal them tightly in a jar. Quite a bit of tedious work - but, necessary.

"What is that, anyway?" Pearl asked as I sealed the jar again and began chewing the petal.

"White lotus. It's all over the island, especially on the cork trees."

"Does it taste good?"

"No, it tastes like vomit," I replied, swallowing with an effort and reaching for my bottle of lake-water. My stomach growled, but I ignored it as best I could. I hadn't had breakfast, and it looked like with the work that was needed on the armor, I'd be skipping lunch again. I couldn't eat, with this herb. Only a large dinner before bed, Marilith said. Unfortunately, I'd had to eat like that for weeks, now - the armor and the houses and the spears and everything else had to be ready soon. At least I had a lot of cheese, milk, and smoked goat-meat to see me through each evening. I wasn't starving, by any means, but it was impossible to convince my stomach of that at times.

"If it tastes that bad, then why eat it?" Pearl replied, making a face.

"I don't have a lot of choice, Pearl. There's too much work to be done, it all has to be done right here, and..." I replied, then paused, looking out at the ocean. "Wait, who's that?" I asked, pointing.

From out of the waves, four mermen approached, none of them anyone I'd ever seen before. Each carried a spear with them - two were made of what looked like very long, sharpened whale-bones, while the other two were made with shorter whale-bones, one tipped with a swordfish's beak, and the other tipped with a sawfish's beak. Pearl frowned as she looked at them. "They're from the Southern Clan. They don't like humans much, I'm sorry to say. Some humans wrecked on their island about a century ago, nearly twenty of them. They killed four mermen and tried to force themselves on the mermaids

before they died to the mermaid's poison claws. Very sad."

I nodded, continuing working on Yanar's shell-armor as the mermen approached. "Could you tell them I said 'hello'? They probably don't speak my language yet."

"So, *this is the human*," the biggest one said in their language. His flipper had a large red splotch on it - a birthmark, for a merman.

I smiled and waved, then went back to work.

"Yes, *she says 'hello'*," Pearl replied, carefully putting down the section of armor she was working on.

"*She looks particularly ugly and weak*," the leader said, looking me over.

I tried not to look annoyed, and just continued working on the armor. Pearl already had warned me they didn't like me much, after all, and they had a rather good reason, in my opinion. Showing them anger in return wouldn't help them to understand I wanted to be their friends, so I just kept working.

"*She can understand you, Red-fin, she just can't speak our language*," Pearl said, watching the mermen carefully. "*But she is no mere human. She is also one of us. She is a Daughter of Ocean. Fate has placed her in the body of a human, but she is still one of us.*"

Red-fin looked to me, and sneered. "*Hardly. She's a human scum. We do not appreciate your spreading these... New Ways among our people, human. Learning to speak your language, make your tools and medicines... We see no use for this! We have lived for thousands of years here on these islands without your ways, and we will be here long after you are gone. You may have convinced the fools here of the Round-Island clan that you are one of us, but you are not*," he said, and suddenly lashed out at me with his left hand, stabbing my right arm below the edge of my goat-skin blouse with his thumb-claw.

"Ow!" I yelped, looking down. Already the blood trickled down my arm from the cut of his poison-claw.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!" Pearl screamed, aghast.

For a moment, the world spun.

"Sister? What's happened?!" Yanar shouted.

"MALES OF THE SOUTHERN CLAN HAVE MURDERED HAIR-LIKE-SUNSET WITH THEIR POISON CLAWS!" Pearl screamed.

"No, they didn't, Pearl," I replied, very dizzy.

Pearl leaned in, fastening her lips to the cut on my arm, trying to suck out the poison. I jerked my arm away, and slowly pushed myself to my feet. I was still very dizzy, but it was fading fast. "Pearl, ask them when it's my turn?"

"You should be dead!" Red-fin said, staring at me in amazement as Yanar and several other males crawled up swiftly.

"Pearl, ask them when it's my turn?"

"You're not going to die?!" Pearl said, gaping in amazement.

"No, Pearl. Though I'm going to be very sick later. Ask them when it's my turn?"

The mer-folk all stared at me in utter astonishment.

"Hair-like-sunset asks if it's now her turn?" Pearl asked, looking at Red-fin.

"Her turn for what?" Red-fin asked, confused and now facing twenty males from our clan.

"He tried to kill me. Is it my turn, yet?"

"You tried to kill her, is it her turn, now?" Pearl translated.

Red-fin's eyes went wide and he started to raise his spear, but it was no use. He was a merman on the beach - in human terms, like a man laying on his belly, propped up on his hands. I stomped my left foot on his spear, clapping it to the sand, then swung my right foot up, kicking him in the jaw as hard as I could. His head snapped back, and he collapsed into the sand. While the other three mermen shuffled, trying to bring their weapons to bear, I sat down again, and picked up the armor. "Pearl, please point out those two orca skeletons over there on the beach and tell these mermen who killed them?"

Pearl simply gaped - Red-fin was still breathing, but it was obvious to her and everyone else that I could have simply kicked him to death if I wanted. After a moment, she recovered from her surprise, then looked at the other three mermen and trembled with rage. *"Fools! Do you understand now?! Look there! Look! Do you see those two orca?! Do you know who killed them?! SHE DID! ALONE!"*

"Well, actually, I had six boys helping me lure them on the beach, but yes," I said, reaching to the thong around my neck and smiled sweetly at the Southern Clan mermen as I dangled the orca-tooth I

wore. They backed up a bit, afraid both of me and of the mermen behind me. "Pearl, please tell these mermen that if they try to leave without my permission, I will not be happy with them."

Pearl did so, and the mermen trembled. *"We-we're sorry! We did not realize your power, Daughter of Ocean!"* one chittered.

"Nor did I," Pearl added in my language, looking at me.

"I've dealt with bullies before, Pearl," I said, and picked up my water bottle. After picking up his spear and setting it to my side, I poured the water over Red-fin's face. He sputtered for a moment, then rose to his hands, groggy. "Would you mind pointing out the orca skeletons to him and telling him the same thing, Pearl?"

Pearl did so, her chittering voice dripping with venom.

"Pearl, say this to him..." I said as Red-fin backed away from me, his eyes wide. I set aside the armor, then picked up his spear. Placing it across my lap, I looked at him. "Let me explain this to you carefully, so you won't misunderstand. I could kill you, now. I'm sure that's what you expect. Pearl told me some humans did bad things to you in the past. I wasn't them. I want to help you. I want to be your friend. You have a choice - you can be my friend, or you can go away. The choice is yours. But I don't think you want to choose to be my enemy, Red-fin. The bones of my enemies lie on the beach of this island, bleaching in the sun, and the children of my clan laugh at them and bounce pebbles off their skulls." I then held his spear back out to him, and waited as Pearl translated for me.

Red-fin looked at me in utter disbelief. *"You would... You would be my friend, after what I tried to do?"*

"Of course, Son of Ocean."

"I am not worthy," he said, taking his spear back.

"Of course you are. You are a Son of Ocean," I said, and reached out my right hand.

Red-fin reached up with his left hand, gripping my hand awkwardly for a moment, then put his hand back to the sand. *"I... I am sorry. What can I do to make amends?"*

"Sit and learn with the others. Go and see that what I am teaching is not bad for you, but will *help* you. Someday, if bad people come by again, you will be able to defend yourselves even better than before. And, when the orcas come, you will kill them easily. When you have learned enough to where you can explain my plan to your clan, go home and tell them what happened here today, and what you learned afterwards. Once I have finished teaching my clan, you can come back, and learn from them. All the mer-folk of the Windward Isles can come and learn from my clan. Alright?"

"Yes, Hair-like-sunset," Red-fin replied, grinning.

"Good. Now shoo - go talk to Yanar, he can tell you about the armor we're working on. Shoo," I said, and looked around - Yanar was right behind me, and he did *not* look happy. "Everyone shoo! It's all over, everything's alright. Yanar, take Red-fin and his friends over there, and explain the armor to them."

"I'd rather claw them blind, Sasha, but I'll forgive them as you have and do as you ask," Yanar replied, then sighed. After a moment, he looked up, then chittered at Red-fin. *"This way. Come."*

After everyone had crawled off, I simply sat there, my head down.

"Sasha, that was amazing! How did you-"

"Pearl, I'm sitting within arm's reach of a dozen toddlers who would claw me without even

understanding what they're doing and you expect me to not take *some* kind of precaution? That's what those petals were for!" I said, and struggled not to retch, holding my mouth open and breathing carefully.

"*Sasha, don't hold back,*" Marilith whispered. "*You know it's better if you don't, it's over faster.*" I tried to ignore her.

"Are you alright? You don't look well..." Pearl asked, looking me over.

"I'm not, Pearl. Don't make me talk, right now... Just... Be quiet a moment..." I gasped, but it was too late. I threw myself forward onto my hands and knees, and vomited loudly and painfully. I hadn't had breakfast - I couldn't, with this herb. Only a large dinner before bed, Marilith said, and I'd had to eat like that for weeks, now. Fortunately, I had a lot of cheese, milk, and smoked goat-meat. Unfortunately, thinking about food and how hungry I was only made me vomit again.

All that came up was my water, some bile, and two of the six white lotus petals I'd eaten today. I heaved twice more, but nothing else came up. When my stomach seemed calm again, I sat back, gasping.

"*There you go,*" Marilith said, a smile in her voice.

"Better now?" Pearl asked nervously.

"A little, yes."

"I... I still don't understand, I'm sorry."

"Marilith says the white lotus protects by blocking, and helping you build an immunity to certain poisons. She says the petals are more than just herbs, they're partly magic, like a unicorn's horn. Or

bloodmoss. But you have to take it regularly for it to protect you, and if it finally works against a poison, the result is you get very nauseous - all the poison is drawn to the undigested petals in your stomach, and you end up vomiting. You can also make them into a healing oil. It's not nearly as strong as bloodmoss unguent, but it does work," I said, pushing some sand over the mess I'd made to conceal it - just looking at it made me nauseous all over again. "She's been having me take them every hour on the hour, every day I've been sitting here near the children. Once cut by mer-folk poison, I'd be immune afterwards."

"You silly! Why didn't you just tell me? I could have cut you and then that would be that!"

"What, you think I *like* throwing up? I did that three times already last winter when I was learning how to use this! Ant-bites, spider bites and one little something I *never* figured out what it was! It's *horrible!*"

Pearl burst into peals of laughter, and I could hear Marilith laughing in my ears, as well. I simply grumbled, reaching for my water bottle, and was glad that at least now I'd be able to eat lunch.

The Ocean - Eighteen.

The seasons turned, and months turned into years. It never snowed on the island, but there were a few days of winter it was bitterly cold. Summer days occasionally were uncomfortably warm and storms would pass through now and again, particularly in the fall and winter, but otherwise the weather was always pleasant. It was easy to fall into a routine - counting the goats, culling the excess, teaching the mer-folk, playing with their children...

I learned, as well. The sea was a vast and deep mystery, to me, and one I could only explore between long breaths. The salt water stung my eyes, and I never did get used to it. There were many beautiful things under the waves - and many dangerous things, as well. The mer-folk refused to let me swim without at least two of them accompanying me, one to each side of me, watching me, guarding me... But, I knew they were right to do so. Many, many things in the water were deadly to me. At Marilith's insistence, I used the white lotus several more times, and forced myself to be exposed to the more common poisons of the sea. The sea-urchin, the puffer-fish, the man-o-war, and even the dreaded sea-snake - the last of which made me so ill, I thought I would die. Even with that, however, a shark had no poisons and could kill me just as easily as a sea-snake, so I always was escorted when I swam in the sea.

And, despite learning to explore the sea a bit, I was still no mermaid. They could hold their breath for ages, and with their nictating membrane allowing clear vision, the sea was a lovely and beautiful place to them, full of wonder. I could only hold my breath for a few dozen heartbeats, at best, and as I had no nictating membrane, the underwater world they loved so much was little more than an eye-stinging blur to me.

But as much as Marilith and I taught the mer-folk, they taught me. Many were things I knew I would never use, but was interested in anyway, such as all the strange and different creatures that lived in the waters (most of which I would never see), how the Travelers survived far from land, in the deep waters, and much more. All was fascinating and wonderful, to me - a beautiful world existed out there, just beyond the limits of my all-too-human body.

The orcas came back again and again - it seemed that twice a year, orcas would migrate past the islands. Now, however, our people were more prepared for them, and the hunters had become the hunted. The water was a merman's element, and with a supple spine and his arms to propel him, he was far more nimble at darting sideways and avoiding a crushing bite than a simple fish was, or even the orcas themselves. A few from the other clans were caught that way, their shell armor giving way beneath the tremendous bite of an orca, but for the most part, the armor worked well if the merman using it twisted and dodged to avoid being firmly bitten. The teeth of the orca curved inward slightly, the sharp tips of each tooth pointing towards their gullet, but they could find no purchase on the smooth shells we had chosen. Yanar eventually learned there was a trick to it, as well - if one twisted just right as the teeth clamped down, the smooth shells we'd chosen actually allowed the merman to pop out of the mouth of the orca, like a wet seed squeezed between the fingertips. This technique allowed him to attack an orca from the front, and when it tried to bite him, he would pop out of it's mouth, twisting around to it's side, and slash its eye to ruin with his claws. This usually caused the orca such pain and disorientation that he was able to kill it much easier, and soon he became renowned as the greatest of all the orca-hunters.

The blue-shell and ball-shell clams, being so necessary to our victories against the orcas, were carefully gathered, and given their own sheltered beds, which mer-children patrolled. There, young boys learned the arts of hunting as they killed the drill-fish and other animals that preyed upon the clams. Yet, the creatures and plants of the land were equally as important. The cork trees needed to make the armor, the herbs needed to make various medicines, the goats needed for leather and other things... All were carefully tended by mer-folk, with the task of tending to the herbs and creating the medicines usually being given to mothers and daughters.

Aside from the vast meat a single orca could provide, their bones became status symbols for each clan. Mounted on stakes near the line of mer-folk dwellings at the edge of the beach, each clan silently yet proudly proclaimed how many orcas they had slain that season. Carved orca-bone and orca-ivory tools became very common, and by the time I turned twenty, the first orca-tooth necklace was given to a mermaid as a courting gift. She declined, however - of all the females in all the clans of the Windward Isles, only I wore the tooth of an orca.

I wore it still, today, as I sat on the beach with Pearl. Like it or not, I had become the 'wise woman' for all the clans of the Windward Isles, and many came to see me and ask questions of me. Pearl, who had now been by my side for four years, knew as much as I did - and often could see how what I had taught could be applied to the mer-folk's lives far better than I or Marilith could. Pearl had even discovered several medicinal uses for organs from various fish, and had found certain varieties of kelp and seaweed had medicinal properties - or, at least, they did for the mer-folk. For most, Marilith said they would simply make me sick. The orca-tooth I wore had become a symbol of rank, really, the leather thong I had given to Yanar years ago to complete the necklace now long since replaced with a braided chain of gold recovered from a shipwreck. Yet, given that Pearl really knew as much as I did and now was reaching beyond even that, I often wondered if she should be wearing the tooth, not I.

"Sasha, look," Pearl said, interrupting my reverie and pointing out towards the sea.

I looked. The noonday sun sparkled on the warm summer surf, and slowly, four dozen mer-folk crawled from the waves. Most of the adults bore a basket on their back, and the lead male bore a monodont spear in his hand. "Who is that? Travellers?" I asked, recognizing the whalebone baskets.

"I don't know," Pearl said, looking the newcomers over as they crawled towards us. "I think it might be a clan of mer-magi..."

"The traveling sorcerers you told me about?"

"Yes. I wonder why they're here, though... They trade for knowledge of sorcery, and we have none."

The visitors drew up close to us, and looked us over silently. The oldest, in the lead, wore no basket on his back, but simply bore a monodont spear in his hand. I stared at him, amazed. If he were human, you would guess by his face that he was in his thirties - and for a merman, that meant he was *very* old, possibly several centuries in age. *"It appears this is the one we were seeking,"* he said in the language of the mer-folk.

The female by his side, who looked close to his age and also did not bear a basket, nodded in agreement. *"She matches the stories. A human female with red hair like shimmering sunset on the sea. Tell me, human, are you Hair-like-sunset, the Wise One of the Windward Isles?"*

I smiled. "I'd love to say 'yes', but I'm afraid I can't speak your language at all. Pearl, could you-"

The female lifted a hand from the sand, and gestured briefly. "Is this better?" she asked in my language.

I was startled, to say the least. I'd never seen *true* magic before in my life. Now, with merely a gesture, this female could speak my language fluently - something it had taken most females of the Windward Isles a year to do. The subtlety and power of true sorcery was very unnerving. "Y-yes," I stammered.

"Very good. Now - are you Hair-like-sunset, the Wise One of the Windward Isles?"

"Yes."

"She says she is, Thunder," the female said, glancing to the male.

"How immensely disappointing," the male said, sighing. "I was hoping that the stories of her being human were merely more Traveler exaggeration. Worse, I sense nothing of the Talent in her, at all. She has a strange essence about her, true. It's as though she's being watched by something ancient... Something dark. But other than that, she's as mundane as a nibble-fish," he said, and shook his head. "She has nothing for us, I think - and even if she did, we have little to trade, for she is human."

The female chuckled. "You give up far too easily, my mate. Look at this one - see the scars on her belly? That matches the tale of the one Hair-like-sunset brought back from the dead. I see the skulls of nine orcas on sticks near those platforms the others rest upon behind her. A full pod, judging by the difference in sizes. Over there lie the bones of two more orcas, and they look like they've been there for years. Not all the Travelers' tales were exaggeration, I think. I think she is what the Travelers said she was; Hair-like-sunset, mighty hunter - and possibly a great sorceress, as well."

I blushed. "Ummm... Well, actually, I only killed those two," I said, pointing. "We left them there after we harvested the meat and ivory because the children enjoy playing with the bones. The ones behind us are all ones that were hunted this year by the males of our clan. And as far as Pearl... Well, she wasn't quite dead after the orca bit her, and I used bloodmoss unguent to heal her up."

The female smiled, rolling over to sit with her lower tail folded, and resting on one arm. "And humble, as well," she said, smiling. "This is the one, Thunder. Have the others make camp on the other side of those skeletons, and I'll speak with Hair-like-sunset. Leave the spear here."

"As you wish, my mate," the male replied, setting the monodont spear beside her. He then called out orders to the rest in a loud voice that was worthy of his name. In a few moments, they all began crawling off, while the female looked me over again.

I sighed. "I think you might be wasting your time, I'm sorry. We don't have any magic to trade with you, here."

"Oh, no?" the female replied, and pointed to the scars on Pearl's belly. "What of that? You dismiss your bloodmoss unguent as a mere trifle, but it is hardly that. In human lands, such knowledge is highly prized, and quite secret."

"It is?" I asked, amazed.

"Yes, it is. We have tried trading for it with humans before, and they demanded enormous sums of gold - so much we could not even carry it back to the surface."

I smiled. "Well, you don't have to give us anything. If you want to learn it, Pearl can teach you. I taught her how to make it, and she's actually better at making it now than I am. Anything you want to learn, just ask one of our clan - we'll teach you. You don't have to give us anything. Armor, new spears... Anything you want to know. If your males want to learn how to wear the shell-armor and kill the orcas easier, we can teach them that, too. Yanar is very good at it, now. Just ask him."

Pearl nodded, smiling. "It's true - simply ask what you wish to know, and we will teach it to you. Hair-like-sunset's name in her language is Sasha of Woe. I am called Pearl in her language. Sasha and I and everyone in our clan will be happy to teach you anything you wish to know."

The mermaid laughed. "Well, I am called Storm. My mate is called Thunder, for he was hatched during a thunderstorm and grew up to possess a voice like thunder. When I became his mate, I chose to call myself Storm, for where Thunder goes, I will soon follow." Storm gazed at us for a long moment, as though thinking about what Pearl had said, then finally shook her head. "It is not our way to simply take and give nothing in return. We have no need of your armor or weapons - our sorcery is more than a match for an orca, and even the weakest of us can defeat the strongest of them. It is your knowledge of herbs we are interested in, for herbs can often heal what magic sometimes cannot. We thought perhaps you were one of our people, a mermaid, but one who hunts orcas. We brought many things that such a person might be interested in, but I see that much of it will be useless to you. Still, the monodont spear we made may interest you - and if it does, that will be enough to seal the bargain, as far as we are concerned. We will work on making something else you may be interested in, and when our lessons in herblore are complete, we will offer it to you to complete our trade."

I smiled. "Well, I don't really have much need for a monodont spear, Storm, but-

"This is no ordinary spear, like one of your clan might carry. We have enchanted it to be of use to a mighty hunter and warrior such as yourself."

"Sasha, be careful," Marilith whispered suddenly. "The sorcery of these people is not the precise science of mathematics that it is for your people, carefully done in accordance with long research and exacting theorems and formulas. It is more like the way of the Will and the Word, as it is for my people. Humans who study magic call the type of sorcery these mer-folk use 'Wild Magic.' They do not learn sorcery, carefully studying to master their Talent as your people do. They simply do it - and as such, the results are often not as precise, and are like the workings of a youngling of my people. Be very careful, Sasha."

Storm looked at me, and grinned wryly. "Ah, the being that watches over you does more than just watch?"

I blinked. "You... You can *hear* Marilith?"

Storm laughed. "No, Sasha of Woe. I sense her with my mind, not hear her with my ears. I can tell she spoke to you, and I can tell she is cautious of me, but I cannot hear what she said. Still, I will attempt to allay her concerns. The monodont spear we have made is a very old thing, and one we are quite experienced at making. When unattuned, it is as any other monodont spear, save that the end is capped in living white-coral instead of being a hollow, and it is invulnerable - it cannot be broken, and the point will never dull. Unattuned, it is simply a large and heavy spear, the tool of a warrior and hunter. It may be attuned to a single wielder, however, and it will remain attuned to them so long as they live. Once done, it is no longer heavy in their hands, but light as sea-foam and swift as lightning. It also can never be lost - should it ever be separated from the wielder's hands, they need only wish to grip it, and it will appear in their hand."

"How do you attune it?" I asked, immensely curious.

"Sasha..." Marilith said warningly.

Storm smiled again, picking up the spear and turning it around. "The base here is not a simple hollow, like that of an ordinary monodont spear. See the rounded plug? That is the white-coral. Simply place a drop of your blood upon it, and it will turn red. From then on, the spear will be a living extension of your will, and will remain attuned to you so long as you live. Even if you have never touched a monodont spear in your life, you will handle it expertly. Once attuned, it is no longer a mere tooth, but instead becomes a living extension of your will."

"Hmmm..." I said, looking at the spear. "Marilith, what do you think?"

"Let me study it a moment longer, Sasha. It is difficult to see the astral emanations through our link, as you are no mage."

"Okay."

"What did she say?" Pearl asked, looking at the spear with interest.

"She said she wants me to let her look at it a bit longer."

Storm smiled, placing the spear between us. "Take all the time you wish, Sasha of Woe. If this trade displeases you, we can show you the other things we have brought."

"That's true," I said, nodding. "I might not need anything you have, but there might be someone else who would be interested in it."

Storm looked at me oddly. "You would trade the secrets of herblore for something you cannot use at all, just to give it away to another?"

I shrugged. "Of course. Isn't that how mer-folk are supposed to treat each other?"

Storm laughed. "Yes, but it's not how *humans* do!"

Pearl held her head high. "Sasha is one of us. She is a Daughter of Ocean. Perhaps the gods placed her in the body of a human, but she is one of us all the same. We of the Round Island clan consider her to be the same as any other mermaid."

"Well, except for the fact that I'm really still a human and everything in the sea can gobble me up, yes," I said, and sighed. "It would be nice to be a mermaid, though. The mermen sometimes come by and court me still, practicing their skills at poetry, but we all know it'll never go anywhere. I can't be their mate, I'm human. It would be nice if I really *was* a mermaid, though. Sometimes it gets lonely here, and..." I shook my head, thinking of Yanar. "Nevermind."

Pearl took my hand, and squeezed gently. "You know Yanar would still take you as his mate. Bright-eyes loves you very much, as do we all. She would be happy to share Yanar with you."

I shook my head, and squeezed her hand in return. It was a conversation Pearl and I had many times over the years, and the end was always the same. Sharing a mate was not unknown to the mer-folk. Males often died to orcas, that the females and children might live - such was the nature of mer-folk life. In some clans, the orcas had struck hard enough that the females outnumbered the males three to two - and in some decimated clans, two to one. Such arrangements were not uncommon among the mer-folk, it was simply the reality of their lives. But, to me, Yanar already had a mate, and I was not a mermaid - I was a human woman. I simply didn't feel comfortable as an outsider clinging to her mate for company and companionship, and I didn't feel comfortable with the notion that I might, because of that, somehow come between him and Bright-eyes. Pearl had told me many times I would not, and even Bright-eyes had told me the same. But, it was still how I felt. In the end, I felt like an outsider - of course, being human, I *was*. Storm watched this exchange silently, simply sitting and looking at the two of us. What she was thinking I did not know - nor, really, at that moment, did I care. My mind was full of wistful thoughts, and things that might have been, if only...

"I can find no flaw in the enchantment, Sasha," Marilith said finally. "As far as I can see, it would do precisely what she said, nothing more or less."

"So it's okay for me to accept it?" I asked, looking up.

"Yes, Sasha."

I grinned. "Great!" I said, and picked up the spear, looking it over. It was a bit over four cubits long, and just as heavy as Yanar's spear - over two-thirds of a stone. The tip was far sharper, however, almost needle-sharp. "Ummm... A drop of blood on the base?"

Storm nodded. "On the plug of white-coral, there," she said, pointing.

I grit my teeth, and gripped the point of the spear with my left hand, pushing my thumb onto it. "Ouch..." I took a moment and squeezed my thumb a bit to draw a bead of blood, then slid the spear across my lap and smeared the bead of blood onto the rounded plug of coral that filled the base of the monodont tooth. I grinned. It turned blood red instantly, and looked very much like it had been freshly pulled from the jaw of a living monodont. I hefted the spear - it was light as a feather, now. "This is great!"

"Ow!" Pearl yelped as I bumped her shoulder with the butt of the spear. Pearl rubbed her shoulder with her hand, wincing.

"Oh! I'm sorry, Pearl!" I said, putting the spear down carefully. I looked at her shoulder - she was alright, though she might bruise a bit later.

"Be careful, Sasha of Woe," Storm said, giggling. "Though it now weighs almost nothing to you, it still has all the mass of a monodont's tooth. A slight flick of your hand drives it's true mass with much greater force, because of that."

"I'm really sorry, Pearl," I said, reaching for my basket. A few moments later, I was rubbing white lotus oil into her shoulder, making the scales of her skin gleam.

"That's better, thank you," Pearl said, smiling.

Storm smiled. "And that is precisely what we wish to learn, there," she said, pointing at my basket.

"Well, we can start right now, if you want. I have all the basic unguents and oils here in my basket. We can go over what they do and how they're used today, then start working on teaching you how to make them tomorrow," I said, looking over my basket. "Ummm... Some of them won't be much use to you. Like this one - I have a cream here I use to keep the sun from burning my skin. It works great on me, though it washes off in water or sweat very easily, so I have to re-apply it. Pearl helps me do my back and... Well, it's great for me, but I don't see as how it will help you much. Mer-folk don't sunburn."

Storm nodded, then looked me over for a moment. "That brings me to a question... Why do you not just wear clothes to protect yourself against the sun, like other humans I have seen?"

I blushed. "Ummm... Well, the only clothes I had when I came here four years ago I kind of... Ummm... Out-grew. I was sixteen, then, now I'm twenty. My shoulders and bust and hips are just too wide to fit in my old dress anymore, and I don't want to just cut it up, it's special, to me. I have clothes I made from goat-skin, but it's summer, now, and goat-skin is *hot* in the summer. There's grass here, and some of it gets really long - I tried to use it to make clothes last year but the grass here makes *very* itchy clothes. I also tried weaving wool from the goat's hair, but wool is *very* itchy and *very* hot. Besides, nobody here wears anything except shell-tops and things, so I kind of got used to just wearing moccasins to protect my feet and nothing more when it's warm."

"Ah," Storm replied, nodding. "But you could still wear shell-tops, like hers and mine. And, perhaps, even more garments like that. They would not be too warm."

"Well, yes, but... Then everyone would think I was being courted by one of the males and they were giving me things and I'm *not*. Besides, I can't wear a shell between my legs, my skins' a lot softer than yours and my body doesn't work like that, it would hurt when I sat down. And we tried a shell-skirt, it was heavy and very uncomfortable. The only thing left I could make clothes out of on this island is cork, and I'm *not* going to wear tree-bark!" I said, and blushed again as I heard Marilith's laughter in my ears.

"Hmmm..." Storm said, looking at me. "How do you keep sand out of your cloaca, then? It doesn't look like it seals properly, like ours."

Marilith laughed even harder, and I blushed even deeper. "Ummm... It's not a cloaca, it's a vagina, and I keep sand out of it by sitting with my knees up, like this, or sitting on my heels. I also have goat-hide blankets I bring out to the beach when I want to stretch out and relax, and I sit or lie on them."

Pearl nodded. "She also has a little goat-hide belt arrangement she wears over it when it's bleeding."

"Pearl!" I gasped.

Storm raised an eyebrow. "Bleeding?"

Pearl nodded. "She bleeds like a speared bluefin every full moon."

"*Pearl!*"

"Really?" Storm asked, raising an eyebrow.

Pearl nodded again. "That took us the longest to get used to, really. At first we thought she was wounded. That's when she made the pledgets, so it wouldn't startle us."

I had never been so embarrassed in all my life. "Yes, I had undergarments when I came to the island and I cut them up to make washable cloths I could re-use and can we *please talk about something else?!*" I yelped, blushing furiously.

Storm shrugged. "Well, I can see why you wouldn't want to wear clothes if you have that problem."

"Well, I know it sounds odd to you but it's *normal* for humans! I wish I was a mermaid and didn't have that problem but I'm *not* so I *do*!"

"You *are* a mermaid to us, Sasha," Pearl said, and grinned. "Sasha is one of us, Storm. She is a Daughter of Ocean. Clothes are for humans." Pearl waved her hand at my legs. "Ignore all those oddities below her waist and just think of her as a red-haired mermaid. That's what we do," she said, and giggled.

I blushed furiously, utterly mortified, but Storm simply smiled. "I see," she replied. "Well, shall we begin the lessons?"

"*Please*," I said, enormously relieved we were talking about something other than me, and reached for my basket again.

Morning came, and the three of them climbed down from their invisible hiding place. Eddas handed me a large woolen blanket, a sharp knife and a needle and thread, telling me to take the time to make a robe for myself - it would conceal me better, should we encounter anyone. I nodded and complied. The task was a trivial one, and soon I wore a simple robe and hood. The scraps I made into gloves and boots to further conceal myself, and handed the tools back to Eddas.

Joy looked me over, and laughed. "You've forgotten to make eye-holes!"

Kyrie burst into giggles, but I simply shrugged. *"I can still see..."*

"How?"

Eddas, who had just finished climbing down from her sanctuary again, gestured briefly, and the rope that dangled in the air fell to the ground again. "He didn't have eyes to begin with, Joy. It's simply part of his nature. His vision is focused on his eye-sockets, as one might expect, but he doesn't need eyes to see."

Joy made a face, then shook her head. "Well, I wish I could do that. The sun on the snow is already quite dazzling this morning."

"Use the ring of adaptation I gave you, Joy. You've already learned how to use it to adapt for the cold - it's the same to adapt to the bright snow."

Joy paused a moment, her face showing brief concentration, then she blinked, and smiled. "Ah! It worked." Suddenly, she frowned. "Wait, Old Man - what of Kyrie?"

"Hmmm... You're right. The sky is quite clear, today, and the sun very bright. We'll have to do something for her, as well," Eddas replied, again slipping the rope back into its hiding place. Gathering a few twigs from nearby bushes and gripping them into a small bundle in one hand, Eddas snapped her gloved fingers - instantly, the twigs were alight. She let them burn for a moment, then extinguished them

with a gesture.

"What good will that do, Old Man?"

"Give them a moment to cool, and I'll show you."

I watched in curiosity. Once the twigs had cooled, Eddas used their charred ends to darken the skin about the child's eyes, and atop her cheeks. "How do I look?"

"You look fine, dear," Eddas replied, and Joy nodded.

Kyrie looked to me. "What do you think, Goodman Bones? How do I look?"

I shrugged. *"You look like a raccoon..."*

The child squealed in outrage, and both Eddas and Joy burst out laughing. "You, my friend, have never raised children," Eddas laughed.

"No... And it seems unlikely I ever will, now..."

Their smiles dimmed, and Eddas nodded.

"Let us be off..."

"Aye, my friend. Let us be off," Eddas replied, summoning her invisible steed with a gesture.

The day went quietly after that, simply trudging through the snow between winter-shrouded trees. Twice, the child reached to her coat, slipping out a slim leather thong, from which dangled a small amulet of some kind. It gleamed of magic to my eye, but I knew not what it was. Each time, she gripped it in her little mittened hands, and appeared to be concentrating. The second time she did this, she pointed eastwards, slightly south of the direction we'd been heading.

"That way," she said simply.

I nodded, and resumed walking, the rest following. It seemed now I knew how they knew which way to go - the child guided them, through magic of some kind. Guided by sorcery and guarded by a Great Mage, it seemed we could not fail. My heart lifted.

'I shall be with you soon, my love... Soon...' I thought, my gaze ever eastwards.

The Ocean - Nineteen.

The months passed, and summer slowly turned into fall. I worked with Storm daily, but only with her. I

thought perhaps that she might have the other females come over so that they might learn, as well, but Storm said that she would instruct the females of her clan in herblore later. The others of her clan simply sat and waited, camped on the beach, and hunting from time to time. Their males carried no weapons when they crawled into the surf to hunt, but they never came back empty-handed. Their camp was actually somewhat odd, by human standards. From several of their baskets, they produced tents made of sharkskin that unfolded into somewhat large domes, and they slept inside them. At night, their males stayed awake in rotating watches, guarding the edges of their camp. Sometimes odd, flickering lights were seen at night by the mer-folk of my clan, coming from the close circle of tents of the mer-magi. The mer-folk of my clan feared them a little, however, and did not ask what the lights might mean. Marilith did not trust them at all. *"Their magic is the Wild Magic, Sasha. Be careful of them,"* she said. Yet, it was obvious Storm meant me no harm, nor did any of their people. I wasn't sure quite what to think.

Despite Thunder's apparent position as the clan-leader, Storm, it seemed, was the true leader of their clan. When Thunder spoke, the others obeyed - but he never asked anything of Storm, ever. When she spoke about him, she was always deferential and respectful, and when he was near, she always looked at him with warmth and love. Yet, when she spoke, he obeyed. It was a strange relationship I did not truly understand. Marilith said that the females were the true wielders of power in their clan, and the males were little more than sorcerous warriors. I supposed she was right.

Storm learned at a tremendous rate - I did not know whether it was simply because she had a brilliant mind, or if she was using sorcery to augment the speed at which she learned. Marilith thought it was a little of both. Either way, Storm only needed to be shown something once, and she learned it the first time. Each recipe and every use for every oil, tea and unguent I knew how to make, she learned after the first time I showed it to her. It was, at times, almost eerie.

Finally, as fall approached, I had taught Storm all I could. Pearl took over, and began to explain what she had learned from me, and what she had discovered of the art on her own. I would visit them from time to time as they sat on the beach, but otherwise I spent my days working on the island. Winter was coming again, and there was still work to be done. The goat-herds needed to be culled, fall herbs needed to be gathered, the winter cheeses needed to be poured and pressed... There was a lot to do.

It was weeks before I found time to visit Storm and Pearl again, but finally I managed to get caught up on my work. It was near noon on a warm fall day. Most of the females and children were at the southern cove, the mermaids sunning themselves while the children played in the water. The males were off hunting, of course, and as I approached the spot Pearl and Storm sat on the beach for their lessons, I could see that we were alone. I could hear them talking, and started to call to them, but paused suddenly as I heard their conversation.

"I do not understand why your clan trusts her," Storm said in the language of the mer-folk, shaking her head.

"Who? Hair-like-sunset?" Pearl asked, looking at Storm.

"No. The creature who watches over her. She is dark, my friend. A dark presence which hovers over her aura, always watching, always listening... It is quite frightening."

I stepped behind a tree, hiding, my mind awirl with confusion.

"The proof of the spear is in it's use, Storm. She has shown on many occasions she is not merely Hair-like-sunset's guardian, but our friend. The skills I teach you now I learned from Hair-like-sunset, who learned them from her. In this way, I also learned to read and write. She is not an enemy to be feared, but a friend to be cherished. Hair-like-sunset hopes to one day rescue her from the strange, magical cage she is held within. From what Hair-like-sunset says, she is near the ocean, but not under the waves. She is trapped on land, somewhere, which means only a human could free her. She helps Hair-like-sunset, in the hopes that someday, Hair-like-sunset will escape this island, and perhaps free her. They are sisters of the soul, Storm."

"Yes, yes, you've told me the tale, and I agree the proof of the spear is in it's use. But I cannot deny my feelings. Hair-like-sunset sees her in a gentle light, like an older sister swimming just behind her shoulder, whispering advice to her. But I see a dark and ancient being of great power, whose presence looms over her ominously... A giant manta ray of immense proportions, casting its shadow over her in the waters of her life. Certainly the manta has no barb, no fang, and is no danger. And yet, its presence cannot be denied."

Pearl shrugged. "Perhaps she is the looming manta - yet as you said yourself, the manta is no danger. I do not see your concern, Storm."

"She advises now, she is friendly now - Hair-like-sunset still wishes to free her. But what if Hair-like-sunset wishes to lead her own life? Will she still be a sister then, helping and advising, or will she simply turn and go her own way, leaving her alone? We swim with the giant manta, and it allows our company - and to some extent, it seems to enjoy it, at times. But its ways are not ours,

and its motives are its own. When it tires of us, it simply leaves, and we are alone in the waters... As she may be, someday."

Pearl laughed. *"You are quite a suspicious person, Storm. I suppose the life of a nomad forces one to be cautious - but truly, Marilith is a good friend, do not worry. Now, shall we continue where we left off yesterday?"*

Storm nodded. *"Yes, please."*

I crept away quietly, glad for my goat-skin moccasins. The constant sussuration of the surf had hidden my approach from their ears, and now hid my departure. Awhile later, I reached my house. After climbing up on the porch, I sat, my legs dangling off the edge, thinking. Finally, I looked up. "Did you hear what she said, Marilith?"

"Yes, I did," Marilith replied quietly.

"Why didn't you say anything, then?"

"Because I did not know what to say, Sasha. I sometimes fear that I will say the wrong thing, and perhaps you..." Marilith paused. *"I am sorry... I am sometimes afraid to say anything at all about myself."*

"Why?"

"I fear if I tell you too much about myself, you will not understand, and perhaps..." she said, then paused again. *"No. You are too young. This is a discussion best left for another day."*

I rolled my eyes. "Marilith, you've been saying that since I was sixteen. I'm *twenty*, now. How old do

I have to be before you decide I'm mature enough to understand? Thirty? Fifty? Eighty? Dead?"

Marilith was silent for a long while. I heard her sigh once, but that was all. Finally, she spoke again. *"Perhaps a story of my people will explain it best. Shall I tell it to you?"*

"Sure."

"Once upon a time there was a little girl, who lived in a magical land far away. Like many young ones of her kind, she had not yet decided what she would become when she grew up. There was still much time before she had to make her choice, and she was still quite young. But, all had to make a choice, and that choice was critical to her people's survival."

"You see, this land was plagued by evil sorcerers from another dimension. They summoned the people through magical rifts, and used the power of their will to force them to serve. There was no rhyme or reason to it - anyone of any age might at any moment be summoned through a rift, to return badly wounded, or perhaps even dead. Only the strong could resist - but even they were sometimes forced to obey - and, sometimes, they too returned dead. Her people reproduced quite slowly, and the death of even one was a serious loss. But hundreds had died already, and the carnage showed no signs of stopping."

"One day, while the little girl was playing, a rift opened, and drew her through. To her surprise, she saw that from her perspective, the evil wizards were little more than ants. Their lives were short, their bodies weak, but their numbers strong. She struggled against the ant who had summoned her, but it was no use - his will was far greater than hers. Despite the weakness of his body, his will and soul was a match for a child of her people. 'Go kill this ant who is my enemy,' he ordered. So the little girl went, found the other ant, and stomped it dead. The ant who had summoned her grew tired, and he released her - she was back home again."

"The little girl decided that all the evil wizards were little more than ants - they were nothing to be feared. So, when she came of age, she asked her clan-father if she might join a sect which hunted all the ants, wizard and non-wizard alike, attacking them in their dreams when they were most vulnerable. The sect hoped that one day, they might exterminate the ants - and dreams were the only way they could strike back. It was considered very dangerous, and her clan-father warned her many times to think carefully before she chose. But the little girl was adamant - she would do this anyway. So, she made her choice, and her body changed to suit her choice. From

there, she slipped into the plane of dreams, and got to work."

"It was not as easy as she thought, however. The ants could be tormented in their sleep, but could not truly be killed, save by the greatest of skill, and the most precise touch. The dream dimension is a fluid and ever-changing reality, and required great practice to master. And she still had the lessons of her own people to learn, magic to master, knowledge to absorb. But, she worked hard, and occasionally had successes against the weaker ants, killing them as they slept."

"One day, the little girl ran across a stranger in the dream dimension. It looked like a golden owl, and he was very wise. The owl explained that not all the ants were bad, and he showed her an ant that was very good. He was part of a circle of ants that were all brave and good. The owl said that this ant was special to him, and asked that the little girl and all those of her sect not attack him. He said that if she agreed, then he would see to it that nearly all the bad ants were destroyed, and the threat to her people would be lessened. The owl was a greater being, more powerful than even her clan-father - he was, in fact, a god."

"A god?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes. Well, the little girl agreed, and passed the message to her sect, her clan-father, and all her people. It was a joyous thing, and everyone was very happy. And soon, what the owl said came to pass. The owl could slip into the dream dimension from his own dimension, and he whispered to one of the ants in their dream. That ant was a great leader, and he led all his fellow ants to where the bad ants were, and there was a great war. In short order, all the ants were dead, save for a small handful. It was a joyous day! There still were a few bad ants remaining in other parts of the world, and every once in awhile they would draw one of her people through a rift, but this was very rare, and the ants who summoned them were often weak, and easily killed. The great and powerful ants were gone... All save one," Marilith said, and sighed.

"The world the ants lived on was very old, and it slowly changed over the eons. Continents moved, the moon above it shifted, and it even shifted in its great circle about the sun, bringing long ages of pleasant warmth, and long ages of ice and cold. But one of the gods who watched over the ants was a god of deserts. The gods warred with each other, you see, and the ants were the pawns they used in their war. In truth, all the universe was part of a vast war between the gods, each struggling for supremacy, and even the little girl and all her people were merely pawns in a greater game."

"The god of deserts knew that a warm time had come, and now would wane. The deserts would shrink, and so would their power. In time, perhaps a mere fifty millennia or so, the deserts would be gone, and the god of deserts would sleep - perhaps forever. No matter how carefully they worked to build their followers among the ants, time and the very nature of the world would eventually spell their doom. So, this god whispered in the dreams of one ant who lived in the deserts - a very powerful ant, and very bad. That ant made a special place. Within that place, a being could be contained, and its power harnessed. The continents could be slowed, the moon held, the world's balance carefully maintained so that the age of ice would never come, and the deserts would continue to grow. It was a mighty task - one only the little girl's clan-father could truly do with any ease. But the bad ant was hardly strong enough to summon the little girl's clan-father and live to tell the tale, for the ant was old, and tired. So, instead, he summoned a lesser being, hoping to get one who would be strong enough to at least hold everything steady for a few thousand years, when perhaps a better solution might be devised. And the being he got was the little girl."

"Wait..." I said, realization dawning.

"What?"

"The land shifts... The moon shifts... All things you've said before. This is your story, not a story of your people."

"It is a story of my people. I am one of my people, and this is my story," she said, and chuckled.

"And we're the ants - humans."

"And elves, and dwarves, and mer-folk, and dryads, and... Well, everyone on this world. All mortals are ants to an immortal. Only the dragons are our equals."

I nodded. I decided I would hear it all. "Alright. So what happened?"

"The wizard imprisoned me in the cage he'd built, and set the mechanism into motion - the strain of doing so was too great for his old heart, however, and he died afterwards. The machine's operation is very complex, and I cannot possibly explain it to you, for you are no mage."

"Try anyway," I replied dryly.

"Well... The four great forces he wished to control are tied to my body, much like four great stallions would be tied to the limbs of a criminal sentenced to be drawn and quartered. Each strains to go their own direction - but I cannot let them, or I will literally be torn apart. I struggle to hold them still, I struggle to keep them from moving... But, over two thousand years, they have moved slightly anyway. A greater being of my people would be strong enough to hold them with ease - but, a greater one of my people would also have escaped these bonds long ago. I am a lesser being of my people. I cannot hold them forever. In a century, perhaps two, I will finally slip, and will be torn apart."

"What will happen then? Earthquakes?"

"No. The mechanism will be destroyed, and possibly a good portion of the land around here. Perhaps the nearby areas will feel an earthquake, and perhaps even a tidal wave... But I am very remote here, none will be harmed. No one will notice anything. I will simply be dead, and the forces loosed to move as they will. Perhaps fifty thousand years from now, the age of ice will come again - and, of course, a warm age will follow, the restoration of a cycle that has been halted for two thousand years. But no one on this world will notice. The change is so gradual, even the elves have not realized it - their written histories only stretch back forty-eight thousand years, and much of their early records are simply legends, myths, poems and songs, written down. The change is simply too gradual for mortals to notice. Only the dragons will notice - and they probably will not care. But meanwhile, I am strapped to this cage, this prison... This magical rack, which slowly pulls me apart. It is all I can do to simply hold myself together, now."

"So you're a summoned creature... A creature who once preyed on the dreams of men."

"Yes, Sasha. My people were dying, I-"

"You're a nightmare. A demon. A demon from hell."

"Well... Yes. Hell is really not what you think it is, however, nor are we really what you think we are. You see-"

"I loved you as a sister! A sister I never had!" I shouted, and sobbed.

"Sasha, I love you as a sister, too!"

"No! It's like Storm said - you're a greater being than I am, and as soon as you don't need me anymore, you'll just leave me! You don't care about me at all - how *could* you care?! I'm just an *ant* to you! You want me to free you, but the moment I do, you'll simply leave me! If I don't find a way off this island, you'll leave me then, too! I'm nothing to you, nothing!"

"No, Sasha! I do love you as a sister! On the soul of my clan-father, I love you as a sister! You made me laugh, which eased my pain! You cared about me, when no other mortal on this world ever would! I have waited and hoped and prayed for you for two thousand years, Sasha! Please, Sasha, believe me!"

I wanted to run away from her and cry by myself - but where could I run to? She was always with me. And, really, I was always with her. It should have been obvious, but for four years, I simply hadn't thought about it. She was almost three thousand years old - I should have realized years ago that my pitiful human existence was just a brief flicker of a candle compared to her. I was, in truth, nothing to her. To free her, I would have to leave my home of four years, and all the friends I had here... And as soon as she was free, she would no longer need me, and I would be alone. I simply sat there and sobbed. Marilith sobbed, as well. Shortly, however, her sobs turned into screams of pain. Her trials were beginning again.

"I will prove it to you, Sasha! You are a sister of my soul! Somehow, I will prove it to you!" she screamed, then her voice broke down into wordless shrieks of agony, and faded.

I didn't know what to think. My best friend, someone who I'd thought of for four years as my invisible sister, quietly guiding me and helping me... Was a demon from hell. She had lied to me - or, perhaps more accurately, she simply hadn't told me the truth. Now that she had, I felt deeply betrayed. Yet, when I heard her screaming in pain, all I could think was that *I* had betrayed *her*, and made her suffering all the worse.

Legends and tales of heroes that I had heard as a child told of their enemies summoning demons to battle them. And, of course, the heroes would kill the demons. From what Marilith had said, there was probably a grain of truth to those old legends. Perhaps the demons truly *did* reproduce slowly. Given that Marilith was almost three thousand years old and she was still considered *young* to her people, equal in age to myself when we first met, perhaps they reproduced *very* slowly, indeed. Perhaps Marilith really *was* my friend and sister of the soul, and perhaps Hell *wasn't* quite what I understood it to be. Perhaps...

I sighed. I simply didn't know. I only knew that Storm's assessment had probably been very accurate. She was a giant manta, casting her shadow over the waters of my life. And despite the warm sun shining down on me as I sat on the little porch of my house, that shadow seemed very deep and dark, indeed.

The Spider - X.

"*There...*" I said, pointing between the snow-draped trees to the small valley below.

Eddas made a face. "Trolls."

I simply shrugged. I had never seen such beings before, and did not care what they were called. Twisted, misshapen things, they would easily be taller than Joy, were not each of them hunch-backed. Their limbs were of uneven lengths, not only between each limb but between each other, and all of them limped along with individual gaits, some on two legs, some using their knuckles as a third or fourth leg. All were swift, and moved silently, however. Raw, rotting furs were their garments, and crude clubs their weapons. How they survived I did not know - nor did I care. "*Can we go around them...?*"

Eddas shook her head. "Possibly, but they'd find us anyway. That's a raiding party, and it looks like they're circling, looking for tracks. They'd eventually find our tracks, follow them, and ambush us. The elves hate them - and with good reason. They can eat anything... Wood, grass, bone, meat... Anything. But they prefer to eat things that will scream and beg for mercy while they're eating them. They're also filthy, and ridden with ticks and fleas and disease which harm them not at all, but can make any other being near them quite ill. They're Unseelie, and quite dangerous. Ah - they've found a deer."

There was a brief flurry of activity as the trolls huloo'ed to each other, and swiftly loped to a central point. They were *incredibly* fast. A bloody flurry of clubs followed for several moments, then they howled their victory over the stag they'd killed. In a moment, they began to tear it to pieces with their misshapen, twisted hands, and eat it raw.

"They eat *anything*, Grampa?" Kyrie asked.

Eddas nodded. "Yes, Kyrie. Back in my day, there was a scholar who wanted to find out just exactly what trolls ate. Master Kradok of the Algrassian Circle, if I remember correctly. Well, after much wrangling and the hiring of a few crack hunters, he managed to get one to study. He locked it into a stone cell with a steel door that had a barred window he could observe through. The cell was filled with all sorts of food - dried meats, fish, grains, fruits, and so on. There were several ordinary items, as well, just to see if the troll might be interested in them. According to his diary of the experiment, for the first ten days, the troll ate first the meat, then the fish. After that was gone, it turned to eating the fruit, which had gone somewhat rotten by then. After that was gone, on the fifteenth day, it began eating the grains. After that was gone, on the thirtieth day, it began eating the other items in the room. If I remember correctly, it ate a boot first, then all the other leather items it could find. Then it ate all the cloth items it could find. Then, it ate all the wooden handles of all the tools in the room. Afterwards, it began eating the wooden table. Once that was gone, it ate the chair. This continued until finally, six months after the experiment had begun, there was nothing left but the stone cell itself. After two weeks without food, it laid down, and appeared to die. Tragically, that is where the scholar's diary of the experiment ended."

"Tragically?" Joy asked, an eyebrow raised.

"Yes, Joy. They never found the scholar, or the troll afterwards. The King's Justiciar investigated, of course, and came to the conclusion that the scholar opened the cell to dispose of the corpse, or perhaps to dissect it and learn more about their physiology..." Eddas said, then shrugged. "And the troll leaped upon him and ate him. It apparently takes a bit more than a couple weeks without food to starve a troll to death."

"Ewww!" Kyrie squeaked.

Joy simply rolled her eyes. "Somehow, the moment you began that story, Old Man, I knew that was how it was going to end," she said, then shook her head. "Now - what are we to do about them?"

Eddas slipped from the back of her invisible steed and gripped her ebon staff firmly, gazing upon the trolls. "Hmmm... I'll take the ones over there, and you go after the ones over there. They'll scatter, so be ready for that."

"Right," Joy replied, and after stepping out of her snowshoes, she began walking forward into the small valley, her staff at the ready. There was a sparkle of magic about her - then, to my utter astonishment, she suddenly grew to enormous size. Easily sixteen cubits tall, her feet crushed small trees as she strode down into the valley. Eddas Ayar trotted behind Joy, so tiny in comparison now she looked like a little black-robed mouse following along.

What followed could hardly be called a battle. Joy, now the size of a giantess, simply began crushing the trolls with her feet. It was much like a normal-sized woman might stomp a rat, save that the blows were more a deliberate, crushing step rather than a swift, bone-jarring stomp. Eddas Ayar, meanwhile, cast great strokes of flame, immolating the trolls instantly. Those that fled did not get far. One tried to dart among taller trees where Joy might not be able to step on them - she simply smashed them with the tip of her staff, which had also grown to enormous size. Four others scattered, attempting to flee in all directions. Eddas simply brought them down with explosions of fire. In a few moments, it was over. Joy returned to Kyrie's side, resuming her usual size in the twinkling of an eye. Eddas spent a while afterwards, searching about in the snow and spraying long blasts of fire over the corpses.

"Why does she do that...?" I wondered aloud.

"Trolls regenerate from almost any injury," Joy replied as she wiped the bloodied soles of her boots off in the snow, her eyes still on the valley below. "We giants hate them - they can be quite a nuisance."

"I see..."

Eddas finally returned, walking up from the valley to stand beside us. She smiled at Joy. "Very neatly done, dear."

Joy smiled, slipping her snowshoes back on. "Thank you, Old Man."

"Let's head around this, towards that rise, there. We needn't subject Kyrie to what's left of the trolls, I think. Afterwards, we'll have her orient us again, and move on." Joy nodded, and Eddas looked to the child. "Will that be alright, Kyrie?"

Kyrie made a face, looking at the bloodied snow in the valley below. "Yes."

So that we did, going around the little valley to spare the child the view of what remained of the trolls, then continuing on to the east.

I found the whole incident quite fascinating. The Great Mage and her companion traveled with an aura of civilization about them that was almost palpable. More, the way they related to each other was immensely fascinating. I slowed my step, until the others were abreast of me. *"Forgive me, but I find I am quite curious..."*

Joy raised an eyebrow, but Eddas Ayar simply looked down at me from her invisible steed, the child clinging to her waist as she rode behind her. "Curiosity is a good sign, my friend. It means that your

instantiation pareticia is fading."

"My... My what...?"

Eddas chuckled. "Nevermind, my friend. Let us simply say that I know more about you and your kind than you do at the moment, and leave it at that. Eventually, you will understand. For now, what was it you were curious about?"

I shook my head. The Great Mage spoke in riddles I did not understand, but the question was simple enough. "You..."

"Me?" Eddas replied, raising a perfectly arched eyebrow.

"Yes... She calls you 'Old Man', and the child calls you 'Grandfather', yet it is obvious to me you are neither... You walk and speak with the air of one coming from a vast and grand civilization, yet I know nothing about it... I am curious about you... And her... And the child..." I said, and shrugged. "Everything..."

Joy rolled her eyes at me and Kyrie burst into giggles, but Eddas simply nodded. "I am Eddas Ayar, my friend, and I am what I am. Beneath this garment of flesh, I am a man of Hyperborea - a civilization long gone, now. I was born almost 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 my youth I displayed a strong talent, and was accepted as an apprentice by the Dyclonic Circle when I was twelve, entering the Black Tower to begin my training. As a master, I cast the Spell of Hidden Life, and upon my death, my soul entered my animuary. While I slept, war came to my people, and my civilization was destroyed, lost to the dust of the ages. Sixteen centuries later, a half-elf female entered my tomb, and I possessed her body. This body was nearly dead when I took it, however, a blow to the head having caused its owner's spirit to have fled just at the moment I took it. By the strength of my will alone, I forced this body to live where its previous owner's will could not. Unfortunately, I fainted thereafter from the wound, and the part of the sorcery which would have allowed me to reshape the body into my own transpired without effect, lacking my will to guide it. As it turned out, however, this was all in accordance with a plan of Yorindar, a god of the humans of the Southlands. To that end, this body received its final forging in the heart of a mana-storm, and is permanently as you see it today. Thus, I am Eddas Ayar, a Hyperborean battle-mage - and, in this body, the Raven of Yorindar," Eddas explained, then nodded to the child.

"Kyrie is my granddaughter, after a fashion. I raised the women of my race from the dust of my civilization, but due to a conflict of the gods, the men of my race were lost. Yet, the women survived, because I had the power to instill within each new life, sparking a pregnancy through sorcery. I taught them all that I know, including this secret, and today the Witch-Women of Hyperborea are known and respected for a thousand leagues around by all good peoples - the giants, elves, the dwarves, and the humans of the Southlands. Kyrie's grandmother received my touch, and her daughter had a daughter herself, years later - Kyrie. Thus, Kyrie calls me 'grampa' because I am her grandfather, through sorcery," Eddas explained, then nodded to Joy.

"As for Joy, she is a giantess - though a very small one. The height you see her now is her natural, full growth. I have given her enchantments which allow her to assume the full-size of a giant, as well as a few other things which are not important to this explanation. Joy has been my companion and friend for over a century and a half, and she calls me 'Old Man' because that is what she chooses to call me."

Joy shook her head. "I call you 'Old Man' because that's what you *are*, Old Man. As I've told you before, what you have between your legs is not what makes you a man, and never was," she replied, then grinned.

Eddas smiled back, holding out her gloved hand, and she and Joy clasped hands for a long moment in silence as we walked.

"Oooo... Golden Sparkles!" Kyrie squealed, laughing. "Like little butterflies, flit-flit-flit!"

"I see nothing..."

Eddas squeezed Joy's hand for a moment longer, then let go and looked to me. "Kyrie's life was sparked with sorcery, my friend, and she is very attuned to the astral. She can see emotion as easily as an ordinary mortal can see the sky and the stars. And more, of course. You apparently do not understand much of yourself yet, but that's to be expected. My own examination of your aura shows you are still very young, and have not yet grasped your true nature and powers. In short, however, though your mind interprets what you see as light and dark much as you saw when you were alive, as you may have realized wearing your hood, it is not simple light you are seeing. Your vision goes beyond the simple

sensation of light, and allows you to see the outer aura, the first aural layer. You probably have seen the sparkles of magic, and several other things you did not see when you were alive. My spell allows me to see the first and second aural layers, though I cannot see the second nearly as clearly as Kyrie does unless I spend hours or days in study - sometimes longer. Kyrie, however, can see the third Aural Layer. She can see the very soul, itself. Thus, I knew you were harmless when we first met, even before I assensed your aura with my spell, simply because Kyrie did not see you as a threat. She may be only a child, but her vision is uncannily penetrating and keen, and it is never wrong - she can see malign intent as easily as you or I can see a cloud, or a tree. To her, it is obvious. Since she saw none in you, I knew you were not hostile."

The child nodded. "Oh, yes! I know you can't see it, Goodman Bones, but grampa is right, I can! The trolls were *very* mean and *very* bad! Deep red auras, all shot through with purple swirls, red blotches... *Very* bad! Now you, you're completely different. You've a lovely teal aura, very pretty, really. There's some icky black blotches, yes, but Grampa says that's what keeps you alive, so I guess it does. There's also gold sparkles... You love someone, and very much. But it's very strange... The gold sparkles don't go up and float away, like what I saw in Grampa and Auntie Joy. Instead, they go 'round and 'round and 'round, in and out through the black blotches, they never fade! And they're dark, too... Very strange..."

Eddas smiled, looking over her shoulder as she patted the little hands wrapped around her waist. "It's simply his nature, dear. I'll explain it sometime when you're a bit older, and your studies of sorcery have begun. Right now, the mathematics of it is so complex and the explanation so dull, I'm afraid you would just fall asleep and slip right off the steed - ker-*PLOP!* Into the snow."

Kyrie burst into giggles again, and to my surprise, Joy smiled at me. "Well, if Kyrie says you're alright, then I suppose you're alright," she said.

Eddas sniffed. "My opinion as a Master battle-mage being relatively worthless, I suppose."

"Naturally, Old Man. You'd sit down and have a cup of *bayallar* with a *dragon* and not even bat an eye! What *you* consider harmless is *hardly* what *I* consider harmless."

"Bah! I would not," Eddas replied, her nose in the air. "All the dragons *I* know utterly loathe *byallar*."

Joy did a double-take, then burst out laughing, as did Kyrie. Eddas simply grinned. I wanted to laugh - it was amusing - but strangely, I had no laughter within me. I simply waited for a moment as we walked along, until finally their laughter had faded. *"Thank you, Great Mage... I understand a bit more, now..."*

"And you'll understand even more, in time. Don't worry - it will come to you."

The Ocean - Twenty.

Storm finished stirring the unguent, then held it out to Pearl. "What do you think? Is this right?"

I leaned back, watching. Four months had passed since Storm's clan had arrived, and the days of fall had often been rainy. The sun was warm today, however, a gentle breeze coming off the ocean and wafting over us as we sat on the beach. It was another beautiful day on the island - it was only too bad I was still too depressed over Marilith to truly enjoy it.

Pearl sniffed the ivory unguent jar carefully, and nodded. "It smells right, to me. Sasha, what does Marilith think?"

"It is done properly, and that unguent of green-coral will indeed cure scale-flake in a mer-folk. You, of course, would simply get a severe rash if you tried it," Marilith whispered. Marilith had been

extremely subdued since our crying fight two months ago - and I had little to say to her, in return. What was there to say? I needed to trust her, I *wanted* to trust her... But, I wasn't sure if I could. She, in turn, seemed to want to prove herself to me - but she couldn't, she was merely a voice in my ear. There was nothing she could do, really. She couldn't even hug me to show me how she felt.

"Marilith says she made it right," I replied, and managed a smile.

"Then that's it," Pearl said, smiling. "You've learned how to make everything Sasha and I know how to make."

Storm sealed the little unguent jar, and smiled at us. "Then our bargain is nearly complete," she said, and looked over her shoulder to where the rest of her clan was camped, on the other side of the orca skeletons. "*Thunder! Bring the bag, please!*" she called in her language.

"Yes, *my mate*," Thunder called back.

"Bag?" I asked, looking at Storm. "What's in the bag?"

Storm smiled. "You'll find out."

Eventually, Thunder crawled over, and handed a small bag to Storm. Storm emptied it before me on the sand, and a gleam of silver plopped out of it. I stared - it looked very much like a belt, made of little overlapping plates of metal, much like scales. "What is that?"

"Something we've been working on for two months, Sasha of Woe. A special gift to complete our bargain. You said once that you wished you were truly one of us, a mermaid. This belt will allow you to do that - if you exert your will, it will transform you into one of us."

"Really?" I gasped, grinning broadly.

"*Sasha, be careful! At least give me a moment to study it!*" Marilith called in my ear.

Storm smiled. "Yes, really. You will be as close to one of us as our sorcery can possibly make you. Of course, we know that you are still who you are - the dangers of the sea are many, like those of the land, and we would not see you kill yourself with a foolish mistake one of us would never make, simply because we know things you do not. And we know that to your clan, you are a great warrior, and perhaps your skills will be called on again, sometime. So, the scales it gives you will be like steel, to protect you from the dangers of the sea. And, should you need to transform back into a human again - though I can't imagine why you would want or need to - the belt will allow that. There is one warning, however;" she said, looking at me. "Once closed about your waist, it can never be opened again. We did this so that you might never lose it, but I would not have you think that it was a trap of some kind." Storm smiled again. "But, have your friend examine it, Sasha of Woe. She is an Ancient One, and her vision is far greater than any of ours. Let her tell you what it will do, that you may better decide if this is an appropriate gift to conclude our trade."

"*Please, Sasha,*" Marilith added.

"Alright," I replied.

Storm and Pearl gazed at me, waiting, and I waited for Marilith to speak. I was very impatient, however. Just the thought of being able to actually *become* a mermaid, to *join* with my clan and explore the sea, and perhaps more... It was terribly exciting. I thought of Yanar... Bright-eyes had said many times, now, that she would share him with me. The thought of him stroking me, cuddling me, and making a baby with me was thrilling - and as a mermaid, I wouldn't be an outsider, a stranger taking him away from his proper mate. I would be a *mermaid*, sharing a good and strong male with another mermaid as a friend. Such were their ways, due to the simple reality of their males dying to orcas. Yanar would be happy, Bright-eyes would be happy, and *I* would be happy. Everyone would be happy, really. But then, as I thought about it, I realized that there would be one person who would not be happy with such an arrangement.

Marilith.

Her cage, her prison... Whatever it was, it was not under the sea. It was near the sea, and she could hear the sea faintly, but it was not under the sea. It would take a human to find it, and it might be years before a ship passed close enough to this island for me to possibly be spotted and rescued - assuming they didn't wreck on the shoals and reefs getting that close. Only as a human could I get to her. If I chose to become a mermaid and stay here on the island, living with Yanar and having his children, it might be decades before I undertook the quest of rescuing her. She might not wish to wait decades in pain while I lived decades in happiness and pleasure.

"The enchantment is poorly made, Sasha," Marilith replied at last.

"Somehow, I knew you were going to say that," I replied sourly.

"Sasha, you do not understand. As I told you, their sorcery is not an exact science, as it is for your people. It is closer to the will and the word of my people, and their understanding of something limits their ability to manipulate it. Their own bodies they know quite well. Your body, they do not. They have studied you, that much is obvious. But they do not understand you. They see you as being much like a dolphin, Sasha. A mammal of the sea, but living on land, instead. But Sasha, you are not a dolphin, you are a human being. Yes, the belt will transform you into a mermaid. From what I can see, that part of it will work fairly well. And they've gone far beyond that, as well. Your skin will even be stronger than theirs, much like steel, and the adaptation enchantment upon it would render you in many ways a greater being than they - you could, if you willed it, adapt to even the crushing pressure of the greater deep, or the burning flame of a natural fire."

"That hardly sounds poorly made, Marilith," I replied dryly.

"Sasha, the enchantment is not perfect. Yes, you will become a mermaid. Or as close to one as they can make you, since their understanding of your body is inaccurate. I cannot tell you whether or not you would be able to truly live the life of a mermaid, and have children. Likely not. Certainly, this misunderstanding has advantages... I doubt your skin would dry in the sun as theirs does, for example, and it is likely that once you do transform into a mermaid, you would live as long as they do, and possess their strength. But, it has limitations, Sasha - the greatest of which is I cannot guarantee you would ever be able to transform back into a human. Even if you could, I cannot guarantee that you would be fully human thereafter. And, lastly, I think the transformation would be quite painful. They see the workings of your body as being like a dolphin, Sasha. And you are not a dolphin."

"So you're going to tell me not to try it," I replied sourly.

"No. I am going to ask you to try it anyway."

I blinked in surprise. "What?"

"I said I would prove to you that I love you as a sister. And I will. Sister, if you use that belt, you will accomplish your dream, and become a mermaid. You can live with Yanar as his mate. Perhaps you will even be able to spawn with him, and raise his children. I do not know. I only know that you will be happy. I love you, sister. You eased my pain. Perhaps another will find me and rescue me. Perhaps I will slip and die. I do not know. But I have realized that if I truly loved you, I would not put my happiness, my life above your own. And no, I will not leave you, either. You bring me happiness and laughter, Sasha, and this eases the agony of my prison. I will stay with you and talk to you as long as I can, sister. I love you. Take up the belt, and live in happiness with the mer-folk of the Round-Island clan."

My eyes misted as I finally understood. Marilith *did* care for me. She *did* love me as a sister. And as such, she was willing to sacrifice everything for me - her happiness, and perhaps even her life.

"What did she say?" Pearl asked, immensely curious.

"She..." I sniffled, and wiped my eyes with a hand. "She said that the belt is imperfect. She said it will probably change me into a mermaid, or at least as close as you can come with your understanding of my body, but afterwards I might not be able to change back. But she said I should take up the belt anyway, and use it to join with you and live in happiness."

Storm looked at me. "So what will you do, Sasha of Woe?"

I looked up, tears rolling down my cheeks. "Marilith, what direction are you in from me?"

"Roughly west, Sasha - though, in truth, that's not very precise. The world is round, Sasha, like a ball, and I am almost exactly on the other side of it from you. Why do you ask?"

"Because I am not going to wait decades to be rescued from here. I am going to use the belt, change into a mermaid, and come find you. And when I do, I am going to hug you tight, and never let you go," I said, and picked up the belt.

"Sasha, you would never be able to reach me! I am inland, you couldn't possibly crawl to me as a mermaid, it's too far. Stay here with the Round Island mer-folk, and be happy."

"Marilith, if I had to crawl a thousand leagues across sharp glass, I would still come for you," I replied, closing the belt around my waist. It slipped down, coming to rest just over the top of my pelvis, about where the tiny scales of a mermaid's torso transitioned to the larger scales of her tail. It clung to me, adhering to my skin, but thereafter did nothing else. "Storm, how do I make it work?"

Storm smiled. "Use your will, Sasha of Woe. Will it to be so."

"Ummm... I don't know how to do that."

Storm smiled again. "You are a mundane, it is difficult to explain it to you... It's as though you are making a wish, with all your heart. But it's not a wish, it's a demand... An order. *Will* yourself to change."

I concentrated, looking down at my bare legs. "Change," I said, trying to wish it so.

The pain was immense, sudden, and surprising - I shrieked in pain. I could *feel* the skin along my legs splitting, merging... I could feel the metal scales of the belt slithering down to cover my legs as they

transformed into a mermaid's tail, blending into my skin. I could *feel* my vulva and anus being pulled forward from between my legs... From my waist up, the scales blended, becoming smaller, more transparent... My eyes burned, and there was a tremendous pain inside my head, inside my chest... Everywhere, it *hurt*. I fell back, gasping, my eyes closed.

Finally, the pain faded. I opened my eyes - they felt funny, and everything was blurred. I blinked, and the nictating membrane over my eyes flicked back, and I could see clearly again. Pearl was leaning over me, as was Storm. "Are you alright?" Pearl asked, her face a mask of concern.

I smiled, gasping for breath. "Y-yes, I think so."

Pearl looked at me. "Your hair's still red, your ears are still round, and your teeth are still human," she said. I ran my tongue around in my mouth, and realized she was right. "What of the rest of you?"

"My skin feels funny," I replied, looking myself over. My skin was now covered with tiny, transparent scales, like a mermaid - but was still pink, not gray like theirs. All the hair on my body was gone, except for that which mermaids had - eyebrows, eyelashes, and head-hair. From the waist down, I had a mermaid's scales, though they gleamed like steel. I looked at my hands, and saw that they were little different, save that the tips of my thumbs now had little openings on them, and felt very odd. I flexed my thumbs, and saw slim black claws extrude. They retracted easily, just by my relaxing my hand.

"Well, you didn't get proper finger-webbing or the rest of our claws, but the poison claws are good, you'll need those to hunt," Pearl said, smiling. "*Can you speak our language, now? Did you get that?*"

"I don't know, my head does feel funny..." I said, and tried. I found I was easily able to flick my nostrils open and shut, and I could feel that something had changed inside my head and in the back of my throat. "*I think...*" I chittered, then grinned at Pearl. "*It appears I can.*"

"Wonderful! How about the rest of you?" Storm asked.

I nodded, then reached down with my fingers, parting my outer cloaca - and discovered that beneath, I still had what was apparently a vagina and anus, though the former was now much smaller than it once was, and seemed tightly closed.

"That's not supposed to look like that," Pearl said, and scowled at Storm. "She can't mate with something like that, it's like a dolphin!"

Storm turned her head, blushing. "I'm sorry. We tried our best."

I nodded, realizing it was true. Even if I changed my mind now, I could never have Yanar's children. But I was not about to change my mind. "It's alright," I said, and laughed. "If I can swim and hold my breath like you do, I'll be happy." I turned myself over, struggling to turn around and face the sea - and quickly found it was quite difficult, since my legs now moved as one. I looked back and grinned, wagging my flipper, and realizing that it was really both feet, blended together and the toes stretched out long and wide to make the flipper itself. I could even curl it, which no mermaid could do - and, apparently, I still had heel-bones in there, as I had a slight ridge before my flipper that mermaids didn't have. I might even be able to stand and hop on it, but that was hardly what I wanted to do. After a moment more of looking myself over, I laughed. "Help me to the water, you two, I want to learn to swim like you do."

"You're not angry with us?" Storm asked, obviously still embarrassed.

"No. Now come on! Help me out, here! After I learn to swim, I want Yanar to teach me how to use a monodont spear underwater! I've a feeling it's a long way to where Marilith is, and I'll need to hunt along the way."

As Pearl and Storm helped me learn how to crawl the way the mer-folk did (it wasn't as easy as it looked), Marilith spoke. *"Sasha, please. It's too far to swim, and too far to crawl across land, you couldn't possibly make it. Stay here, and be happy."*

"Sister, hush. I'm coming for you, no matter what."

"You mean it... You're really serious!"

I grinned, the ocean surf getting closer as Pearl, Storm and I crawled along. "Yes, I am."

Marilith was silent for a long while, and I was nearly to the surf before she spoke again. *"Thank you, sister. I love you,"* she replied, sobbing.

I took a breath just before a wave splashed over my head and shoulders, flicking my nostrils closed easily and blinking my nictating membranes in place. I chittered quietly in the language of the mer-folk, which did not require me to exhale or inhale. *"You are welcome, sister. I love you, too."*

The Ocean - Twenty-One.

The mer-magi left the next day, and for months afterwards, I again had much to do. Learning to use my new body wasn't easy - it wasn't fully that of a mer-folk, unfortunately, but it was the best the mer-magi could do. I didn't even try to transform back into a human - it seemed to me I'd have to get used to living as a mermaid anyway, if I was going to be able to make it to Marilith. Crawling back to my home to free the goats from the pen had been quite tiring - I now understood the trouble Pearl had crawling around inland far better. Yet, the scales on my belly and tail were harder than steel, and even the sharpest rocks did not scratch them - it was, really, much easier for me than it was for Pearl. Still, the goats had to be freed, so they wouldn't starve inside their pen. The nannies sniffed and poked at me, immensely curious and confused, and the gentle little billy I'd penned looked quite forlorn, as though he

realized that the days of easy food and gentle ear-scratching were now at an end.

I still had knees and kneecaps, somewhere beneath the metal scales of my tail. I found it was much easier for me to rise up on my knees and look around than it was for a mer-folk - no harder than it had been before, really, though my legs seemed connected together by tough ligaments between the knees and ankles, and could not be parted for balance. I could also still sit on my heels, something no mermaid could do, as it was simply too uncomfortable for them. Unfortunately, this meant my knees didn't bend backwards, as their second tail joint did, and learning to swim in this new body took quite a bit of effort. One benefit of my new body was that I could do something no mermaid or merman could possibly do - I could roll over onto my rump, place my flipper on the ground, shuffle myself on top of it, then stand, using it like a foot. It took an enormous amount of practice, and I found it was far easier if I used the monodont spear the mer-magi had made for me to balance with. But, the sight of me as a standing mermaid dramatically impressed everyone.

It was actually easier for me to get used to my new body than it was for the mer-folk of the Round Island clan, in the end. I was, to them, an endless source of fascination and wonder. And, as word spread, mer-folk from all the clans of the Windward Isles occasionally came by to visit, and see the changes for themselves.

I discovered that I could hunt the goats still, though it would take quite a bit of practice before I was really good at it. The magic monodont spear was, in my hands, very light, and could be thrown - and when it left my hand it flew with tremendous force, for in truth it weighed over two-thirds of a stone. Actually *hitting* something while on my knees, however, was terribly difficult. It took me two days to hit one goat, and I finally gave up on the idea, and simply learned to hunt as the males did, in the water. I did crawl over to the lake and try hunting the fish and frogs there - the water tasted fine to me, and it appeared I could drink sea water or fresh, as I wished. I no longer sweated, however - the enchantment of the belt allowed me to simply adapt to hot or cold, as I chose. If I forgot to use that power, however, my skin would sweat from beneath the scales and get very uncomfortable to remind me.

I also discovered that Storm had been right about one thing - the belt could not be removed. In truth, it wasn't even visible anymore. I guessed it had become part of the scales at my waist. I still needed a belt, however - I had no pockets, and since I now needed my hands to move around on land, it became obvious I needed some kind of pockets to carry things. I couldn't make one out of goat-hide that would last, but Yanar gave me a present of a shell-belt that seemed to work. It wasn't terribly sturdy, but it would do for carrying small things.

Eventually, it occurred to me that if I was going to swim to Marilith, it wasn't just a day's swim away - I needed some place to put my lance, and I needed to learn to sleep in open water. Marilith assured me

that I could simply drop the lance, and even if it fell to the bottom of the sea I could still summon it to my hand just by willing it to be there. That, however, seemed an entirely unsatisfactory solution, so I practiced sleeping in the water with the lance tucked beneath my belt of shells. That worked, but imperfectly. Eventually I learned to sleep face-up in the water with the lance laid atop me along my body, between my breasts, the point alongside my head. This had the benefit of changing my center of balance in the water, and it was easier to float with my face out of the water as I slept. Eventually, I learned to sleep as the mer-folk did in open seas - holding my breath and napping, waking briefly to take another breath, then napping again. It seemed to come naturally to my new body, and for that, I was quite grateful.

So many worries assailed me. How would I find Marilith? How would I free her? How would we get home, later? I did not know - the ocean seemed an immensely vast place, and frightened me. But, I refused to give up. Somehow, I would succeed.

Spring came again, and the orcas returned. This time, however, when the males crawled off into the surf to hunt them, I followed. A brief encounter with a shark last winter had shown me that the scales that covered my body were, in truth, as hard as steel. I could be bruised beneath them, but the shark's teeth could find no purchase, and some even broke on the thicker scales of my tail. It only took us an hour to close in on the pod that was lurking offshore. The mer-men split off into teams, heading towards the orcas with their spears ready, while Yanar and I swam towards the pod leader. The orca turned to Yanar and I, and charged for me in a swift rush. I turned, flicking my tail towards it, then bent my knees - the orca clamped down hard across what once was my thighs and calves. It was a painfully crushing bite, but did not cut through my scales. The orca, not knowing any better, chomped down again and again, trying to bite through - but by that time, Yanar was at it's side, and stabbed with his hand to get a grip on the orca's flesh.

The water filled with blood, and the orca released me, turning to try to bite Yanar - as soon as it did, I flicked my tail and launched myself forward, stabbing it's other side with my spear. The orca struggled, twisting this way and that, trying to get at each of us, but it was no use. I simply folded my tail and let him bite at my knees again every time it bit at me, and Yanar simply held on, stabbing deeper with his spear. I could not be hurt, and it could not reach Yanar. I found that though I could not grab onto the orca the way Yanar did, my spear was tremendously piercing, easily ripping through flesh and bone. A sudden idea occurred to me, and I stabbed behind it's eye, and a bit up. The enchanted lance easily penetrated it's hide, blubber, muscle and bone, stabbing into the orca's brain. The orca spasmed violently, dying - and I turned to the others to try and help them. In short order, I found that the mass of my lance, augmented by my new strength, simply could not be resisted by the orca's flesh - twice more I stabbed for their brains, and twice more they died in violent spasms. A few heartbeats later, it was over - we had defeated an entire pod, and done so quite easily. The meat from this kill would feed our clan for weeks, and the mer-men chattered in joy as Yanar hugged me tight.

Three days later, I sat at the southern cove, the mermaids preening my hair. My tail was still sore from the crushing bite of the orca, bruised beneath the metal scales, and I had decided I needed a bit of rest. The skulls of the pod we killed were back at our village, and drew awed comments by visitors when it was explained what the odd holes in three of them were from. I swished my tail idly in the water beneath the rock, and smiled, enjoying the day.

"How long will you be with us, Sasha?" Pearl asked.

"I think I'll leave tomorrow morning, Pearl. I think I'll be healed up enough to start, then. Marilith says she can keep me pointed in the right direction, but there's a lot of land I'll have to either swim around or cross, somehow. It's spring, now, and I'll need to travel as much as I can while the weather is good through spring and summer. The sooner I get started, the better."

The mermaids all moaned their disappointment, and Bright-eyes sighed. "We will miss you, Sasha," Bright-eyes said, wiping away a tear. "Yanar has a present for you today. I hope you will accept it."

"Oh? What is it?"

"Something he made - I won't spoil it," she said, and managed a smile.

"Here he comes, now," Pearl said, pointing.

I looked, and saw Yanar swimming towards us up the cove. I smiled. He still looked very handsome. Finally he reached the water below the rock, and simply rolled over, sitting in the shallow water.

"Hair-like-sunset, I have a special gift for you today - a gift from the past, and a gift for the future. I hope you will accept it," he said, very formally and in his language.

"What is it, Yanar?" I replied, smiling down at him.

"Hair-like-sunset, I know that someday soon, you will leave to seek your sister of the soul. Yet, I find I love you deeply - as do we all. We do not wish you to go. We know you must. I made this gift for you years ago, but an orca attacked and nearly killed my sister. In the excitement of that day, I forgot to give it to you. But you did not forget us - you saved my sister's life, and thereafter taught us many, many things that we now use. Thanks to you, we dominate the seas. Thanks to you, the orcas fear us, instead of we fearing them. In a century or so, our numbers will grow, and things will change. But one thing will never change for us, Hair-like-sunset - and that is our love and gratitude for you, and the lessons you and your sister of the soul have taught us. Thus, I offer you this gift, made with my own hands," he said, and held out a shell-top, exquisitely made. *"Return to us, Hair-like-sunset. Someday, when you have freed your sister, come back to us. Live with us, and be my mate. And bring your sister, that our people may hold her close, and tell her how much we love her, as well."*

"But Yanar, I could never have your children. My... Well, that part of me remains mostly human. Well, I'm not even really sure of that, either. I don't have menses anymore, I don't know if I can reproduce at all, even with a human," I said, and shook my head. "I'm sorry, Yanar. I could never be your mate, because I could never have your children."

Bright-eyes reached out and hugged me, tears streaming from her eyes. "My second child is your child, Sasha. If it were not for you and the armor you made, Yanar would have died years ago, and my son would never have been hatched. You gave that to me. You gave me my mate's life. Please don't say no. Promise to return to us. Let me share Yanar with you, and raise our children together. Promise to bring your sister, that we may tell her how much she is loved, as well."

Marilith sniffled in my ear. *"I... I think I'm going to cry,"* she whispered.

"Me, too," I said, my eyes misting, and looked to Yanar. Reaching out my hand, I took the shell-top from him, and held it in my lap for a moment. "Yanar, I will be leaving tomorrow morning. The weather is good, now, and it is the best time," I said, and slipped down into the water beside him. "But I will be back, Yanar. Someday, I will return," I said, and wrapped my arms around him, kissing him passionately. Yanar hugged me tight, kissing me back, and after a moment, I let him go. Slowly, and with great care, I slipped on the shell-top, then reached behind my back to fasten the ivory clasp.

Yanar grinned broadly as the mermaids cheered. I climbed back up to the rock, sitting next to Pearl, then reached up to my neck. Pulling off the orca-tooth necklace, I looked to Pearl. "Pearl, bow your head."

Pearl did so, and I slipped the necklace on her. She looked up to me, tears rolling down her cheeks, but said nothing.

"Pearl, from now on, *you* are the Wise One of the Round Isle clan. You know as much as I do about everything I know - and, really, more. Lead our people well, Pearl."

"I... I will try, Sasha," Pearl replied, letting out the weeping sigh of the mer-folk - which, apparently, was how I now wept as well, since I was weeping as we hugged.

I spent the rest of the day hugging each of them - and, as word spread, my entire clan came by to hug me, and tell me they would miss me. Each one, merman, mermaid and merchild all wanted to tell me I was loved, and would be missed. I wept openly, hugging each of them, and told them I would miss them, as well. In my ears, I could hear Marilith weeping, as well. This was *home*, now. And, in my heart, I knew it would always be home for me. My father recovered me from the sea, taught me what I needed to know as a human. My people here on Round Island taught me what I needed to know as a mer-folk. My soul-sister Marilith had taught me what I needed to know to make the transformation from girl to woman. Now, we would see if all that I had learned would allow me to rescue my sister, and then return home again.

We were camped again, the gleaming stars in the heavens above like glittering diamonds strewn across a black velvet mantle by the hand of a careless god. The moon shone down bright and full, a silent orb gazing down from the heavens at the snow-draped world of night, below. Bare winter trees reached clawing branches upwards, stirring slightly in an icy winter's breeze... It was all so incredibly beautiful.

I no longer slept, and no longer dreamed. Yet, each day and each night seemed much like an endless dream, to me. Silent winter landscapes, echoing with quiet beauty. The sun on the snow during the day... The moon in the trees at night...

And, I was still completely mad.

Oh, my thoughts had cleared a bit over the weeks of travel, of course. The Great Mage had been right. But the more my thoughts cleared, the more I came to realize the insanity of my situation. I was dead - yet I moved and spoke, and strode towards my beloved, certain of purpose, my intent crystal-clear.

I would find her.

I would help her.

And then, she would understand.

Yes, I was mad. But it was not the madness of detachment, a loss of comprehension of reality. It was, instead, the comprehension of the simple madness of my reality. Strength and power flowed through my limbs, and allowed me to carry on despite never eating, never sleeping... Purpose filled my being, a singular goal, despite the impossibility of that purpose. The beauty and splendor of the elven lands lay about me, revealed to my vision despite the fact I no longer had eyes. The soft, elegant sounds of the winter forest at night wafted to me, despite the fact I no longer had ears to hear it with. Madness... I was an impossibility. I was a horror... A horror driven by love.

Why did I love Brionnach? I did not know. Yet, the thought of her drove me onwards, ever onwards... Towards the Utter East.

I still knew little of my past life, other than what Brionnach had said of it. Yet, I now had feelings... Impressions... The snow about me seemed familiar, as the winter's chill... Somehow, they felt of *home*.

Vague impressions of endless snow, endless ice... Forests locked in nearly endless winter, with only a brief season of warmth and green for them to renew themselves in... Castles made of snow and ice... A race of pale-skinned, white-haired people who lived in the endless wastelands of snow and ice... Magic was there, as well. Fire from stone, through the power of sorcery. Iron from rock, forged into weapons of steel... Deep and powerful sorcery, yet only flickering memories to me now, lost as quickly as the snowflake that falls upon a warm palm. A brief moment of beauty to the eye... Then nothingness.

A swirl of snow formed in the breeze, and a sparkle of magic glimmered to my left. I turned my head as I sat in the snow, and gazed into the darkness of the night-bound forest.

A ghostly, translucent figure stood before me again, the edges of her white-robed body shimmering in the moonlight. Long white hair... Pale skin... Eyes like ivory...

Greetings, My Son.

I simply nodded. That the Snow Queen was a goddess mattered little to me. That she was the goddess of the race whom I once was a member mattered even less. Nothing about her mattered to me at all, really. Only Brionnach mattered.

You have grown, and approach wakefulness. This is good, she said, her voice a quiet tinkling of bells in my mind.

"Is it...?" I asked, my voice still little more than a dry rasp, a rattle of bones. "Is all this merely a dream, then, that I shall awaken from?"

No, my son. But you shall awaken nonetheless. When you do, you will be far beyond my reach. So I must tell you this now, that when the time comes, you will remember, and understand.

"I am listening..." I replied. There was little else I could do, really.

When the time comes, you will be presented with a choice - a deed you can do to help your beloved. An act that will be demanded of you.

A pang deep in my chest, where once I had a heart. A hope flared into existence. "Yes?"

Do nothing, my son. If you truly wish to help your beloved, when the time comes and the choice must be made, do nothing.

"I... I do not understand..."

You will, when the time comes. Listen to the Raven, my son. Listen to the Sea. Listen to the Mountain. Listen to the Rabbit. But do not listen to the Spider. When the time comes, you will know. And when the decision must be made... Do nothing.

I simply nodded. There was nothing I could say.

In a moment, the vision had gone, the flurry of snowflakes falling lightly to the ground, the last sparkles of magic gone dark. And yet, the memory remained.

I was truly mad.

The Ocean - Twenty-Two.

I left early in the morning, heading westwards from the island. It took quite a bit of time before I learned to swim in precisely the right direction, however. There were no landmarks on the sea, nothing to guide myself by. Marilith simply would tell me to swim a little more to my left or right when I strayed off-course, and that was all. By the end of the first hour, I had swum away from Round Island, and could no longer see it behind me when I looked. By the end of the first day, I was in deeper waters, the familiar shoals, reefs and rocks giving way to endless blue depths.

Hunting in deeper waters turned out to be a bit more of a challenge. Schools of fish were fewer, and farther in between. My ears were not as sharp underwater as that of a mer-folk, and I could not simply listen for the distant kill-songs of dolphins or orcas, then follow them to prey. Though the water made my hearing sharper and I could hear softer sounds farther away, it was not enough. Marilith had to use her own vision, gazing far ahead of me, to find prey for me to hunt.

Eating in open sea was also a bit of a challenge. I remembered as a child in Vilandia seeing sea-otters - they rolled onto their backs and floated. I tried that, however, and found it was far more difficult than it appeared. Finally, I developed a sort of backwards-swim that allowed me to eat comfortably, and yet still keep heading towards Marilith. I also learned that if I dripped a bit of poison into the water as I ate the fish I caught, the sharks would leave me alone. Mainly I would eat the meat and skin of fish that I caught, tossing the rest. Certain organs I had to eat, however, and certain fish were very important - Marilith had studied my new body over the last few months, and said I would grow malnourished if I was

not careful with what I ate. It was quite a bit of a trial to get used to eating raw fish and fish organs, but eventually I managed it.

Marilith had been very honest about the distance. Even assuming everything went well, it would take me at least a year, possibly two to swim to her at the speed a mermaid swam. I had no idea the world was that big - but Marilith said it was. I went west, as she said it would be shorter to swim around the northern coast of Palome than it would be to go the other direction and swim around the continent she was on, Antonica. The northern reaches of Antonica were sheeted with ice, and food was hard to find, there - aside from the question of how I might get air when trapped beneath sheets of ice over the ocean. The southern reaches of Antonica were more easily passed, but the trip would be far longer. That left heading west, going around Palome and continuing on to the eastern shores of the continent of Antonica. I swam underwater most of the time - it simply was faster - and only surfaced for air once every half an hour or so.

Weeks passed - and, slowly, months. My days became an endless dream, swimming endlessly. My nights were filled with dreams of swimming, endlessly swimming through the water. Marilith advised me and talked to me often, keeping me going, keeping my spirits up, encouraging me onwards... But in my mind, my life had become an endless dream of swimming and hunting, endlessly heading westwards.

Perhaps that was why the storm caught me by surprise.

Marilith had been in pain for hours, and could not speak to me. I knew I was near Palome, now, but that was all I knew. I simply thought that once I sighted land, I would just turn right, and head north until I could swim around it. My mind had become so numb, so used to simply swimming endlessly west, that I simply did not notice the storm's approach until it was too late.

I knew from the mer-folk that a storm was best ridden out deep below the waters. But, I was simply too frightened to remember it at the time. The ocean rolled, and I dived through the waves, tossed by currents that were much stronger than I. By the time I realized I should be trying to swim downwards, beneath the currents of the waves, I was too exhausted to do so. I took a breath and held it, then simply floated in the water, tossed by the waves of the raging storm. Marilith was still in agony - if she knew I was in danger, she could not say. Finally, a last wave lifted me into the air, and brought me crashing down into the water - from there, everything turned dark.

The Spider - VIII.

"Look, Grampa!" the child called, pointing.

Eddas Ayar looked from the back of her invisible steed, her face grim. Behind her, Joy the Giantess stood, watching. I, too, gazed ahead, but did not understand their dour expressions.

Ahead of us, the warm sun of a spring morning hung low, gleaming off the shimmering waters and the bright shores of what could only be an ocean. Waters stretched to the horizon, with no land in sight - yet, there was no smell of ocean, no breath of salt in the air. We were at least two leagues away, upon a snow-draped hill, spring flowers and errant blades of grass poking through the melting white mantle here and there. And yet looking down, it was as though the land simply came to an end, and gave way suddenly to water.

Comprehension finally dawned. *"There is no way around it that I can see..."*

Eddas Ayar shook her head. "No, my friend. That is the Inland Sea. It's two thousand leagues north to south, and nearly a thousand leagues east to west. On the other side are the desert sands of Mysantia... But there's supposed to be a city here."

"Supposed to be...?"

"Yes. When I realized this was where Kyrie was leading us, I had no doubt that we could find passage. Now that we are here, however, it seems I was wrong. *Hup!*" she called, the last to the invisible steed. In a moment, she had ridden halfway down the hill, Joy the Giantess following at a trot, the child giggling with glee as the invisible hooves of the steed tossed bits of snow about. I followed as swiftly as I could.

Awhile later, we stood on the shores of the Inland Sea. Eddas Ayar had dismounted, and was now searching the ground carefully. I could not tell what it was she was looking for. The ground looked rather ordinary, to my sight. A lake-shore, and nothing more - save that the shore stretched to the horizon in both directions.

"Anything, Old Man?" Joy asked, looking on.

"Nothing. Either the city of *Thall-Tasaal* has been utterly annihilated, or..."

"Or?" Joy asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Or I'm lost," Eddas replied. Joy and the child burst into giggles, and Eddas made a *moue'*. "It's not all *that* funny. *You* try navigating in your head when the last time you'd been through here was something near eighteen or nineteen centuries before!"

The child simply giggled harder, but Joy smiled. "Sorry, Old Man."

"*What shall we do, Eddas Ayar...? It seems a bit far to swim...*"

"One moment," Eddas replied, and drew a circle about herself in the damp sand of the shore, muttering a quiet incantation. A moment later, she raised her staff, gazed out over the waters, and began to rapidly incant a spell, gesturing with precision.

Again, I could see the sparkle of magic... And in a few moments, the waters responded.

A wave approached the shore - a *large* wave. It loomed monstrously over the waters, a behemoth that swiftly rushed to the shore.

"We must flee...!" I called, wondering if we could out-run the colossal tidal wave at all.

Eddas simply rolled her eyes. "Hardly."

"But... It will be upon us in a moment...!"

Little Kyrie wagged a finger at me reproachfully. "Hush, Goodman Bones. Grampa has to concentrate."

Chided by the child, I held my peace, and simply watched. In a matter of moments, the wave loomed over us, a colossal wall of water and rushing sound...

...then, it simply stopped, and held there, the waters within it churning, spray dripping from it's crest. A voice came from it's center, hollow, and bubbling. *"Who calls?"*

"I call, Eddas Ayar," the Great Mage replied.

"Water-Friend and Wielder of Power, I serve thee willingly. What is thy bidding?"

"First, a question - where from here is the city of *Thall-Tasaal*?"

"The ripples of the waves and the echoes of distant song tell me the city of elven sailors lies one hundred leagues to the south of here, Eddas Ayar."

"Bah, too far. Alright, are there any sunken ships nearby you can dredge up for us? Something not too far gone, and preferably without any bones aboard."

"Yes, Eddas Ayar... Several. These waters bear the evidence of ten thousand years of sailors plying their trade upon their surface... Elf, human, and others. Below a hundred fathoms, the chill of these waters preserves the carcasses of many proud vessels... And their crews."

"Something sleek and deep-water, then - an elven *muirgath* would be best, if you can find one, but anything capable of crossing these waters would do if you can't."

"As you wish, Eddas Ayar," the titanic wave replied, then subsided. In a moment, the waters were as quiet as before.

Suddenly, the grime-encrusted prow of an ancient vessel broke the surface of the waters, and slid smoothly ashore. Ages of pale mud and silt clung to its wet form and dripped onto the damp sand of the shore. The wave rose again, its shadow long over the beach. *"What else, Friend of Water?"*

"Nothing, my friend. You have my deepest and enduring thanks. Go in peace."

"Farewell, Eddas Ayar. It was an honor to serve you," the wave bubbled in reply, then sank again into the waters a final time, and did not return.

The child apparently could see my amazed, gaping expression beneath my hood, for she looked at me and burst into giggles.

"*What... What was that...?*" I asked as Eddas Ayar strode over to the ancient ship.

The Great Mage waved an ebon-gloved hand dismissively. "A water-elemental." She rapped the hull smartly with her staff, and it echoed hollowly. "Ah, good, he emptied it of water when he brought it forth. I forgot to ask. This is an elven *muirgath*. It's a fishing ship, but narrow and long to be very fast. Normally it's handled by a crew of three, but one can handle it in a pinch. When storms threaten, they race ahead of the storm, towards shore. I've no idea how to sail it, of course, but I'm sure Goodman Bones can handle it. Once he lays his hands upon it, the knowledge will come to him."

"*That creature... It called you... A friend of water...?*"

Eddas nodded to me, walking about the muck-encrusted vessel and looking it over. "Yes. About nineteen centuries ago, when I was traveling the elemental planes, I learned they had a problem. I became an elemental-friend by saving the elemental planes from a sphere of annihilation that threatened to return those timeless lands to the chaos of Unity. It was actually quite difficult, at the time. You see..." Eddas paused, then shook her head. "Well, nevermind. It's a long story, and not very important. I did them a favor, and since then I've been considered a Friend of the Elements. It's really nothing more than that."

Joy rolled her eyes. "Old Man, you really have *no* idea how you sound, at times."

"That's why he has *you*, Auntie Joy!" Kyrie chirped, then giggled again.

Eddas looked at the child, and grinned. "Quite probably, Kyrie," she replied, then winked, making both Joy and the child laugh. Eddas then turned to the ship, and raised her staff. Gesturing carefully, she began to incant a long, intricate spell.

I watched, amazed. Sparkles of magic danced over the ship, and slowly, the muck and grime of unknown ages slipped from it, plopping to the beach. Ancient, warped and waterlogged wood straightened and dried, flecks of rust slowly became nails, and a grotesquerie of slime at the bow slowly revealed itself to be a proud wooden figurehead of an elven woman in a sheer robe. Slowly, shattered bits of wood flickered back into place, becoming a mast - and moments later, a sail appeared. Splotches of green slowly transformed into bright brass stays and lanyards. Ropes appeared from nothingness. Flecks of color appeared, slowly becoming ornate and delicate paintwork. A name began to appear on the prow of the vessel, written in delicate gilt letters - *Brinneal*.

Eddas paused, then leaned heavily on her staff, gasping for breath.

Joy swiftly strode up, lifting Eddas into her arms. "Old Man?"

"Sorry, Joy..." she gasped. "Even... Even with the Deep Magic, that was a bit of work," she replied, then fainted, her staff falling to the sand from nerveless fingers.

I reached to the ship, running my fingers across the renewed wood. I could *feel* the intent of it's makers... The dark part of my mind echoed with the intent of thousands of small parts, all come together to make the proud, sleek elven vessel before me. "*The Great Mage was right... I can sail her... I can feel it.*"

Joy nodded, saying nothing, simply cradling Eddas in her arms.

I looked to Joy, who held the unconscious mage like a babe in her arms. "*Will the Great Mage be alright...?*"

"I think so," Joy replied.

"It was the magic, Goodman Bones. Too much, too fast," the child said, gazing at us.

"I see..."

"Well, we've little time to discuss it, I think. If we sit here jabbering about it, I'm sure Eddas will be quite annoyed with all of us when he wakes up," Joy said, gently laying Eddas down in the sand, then looked to me. "Climb aboard, Goodman Bones, and make that ship ready to sail. Come, Kyrie," Joy called, stepping over to the invisible steed and lifting the child from its back.

I hopped up, grabbing the ship's rail and pulling myself aboard. Running my fingers over the vessel, I could *feel* what needed to be done. I reached for the nearest line, and began to work. Joy placed the child over the rail and aboard the ship easily, then tossed her own staff and the great mage's staff aboard.

"I am ready, here... We need to push the ship into the water..." I called, looking down at Joy from the ship's rail.

Joy nodded, and there was a sparkle of magic - suddenly, she was the size of a giantess again, and loomed over the ship at sixteen cubits of height. Kneeling and reaching down gently, she lifted Eddas into a hand, then laid her atop the deck. She then reached to the prow of the vessel, bending down and pushing, shoving it into the water. Rising to her feet, she continued pushing the ship out into the water, until she was standing waist-deep. She then stood beside the ship, placed her massive hands on the ship's rail, and after another sparkle of magic, she was normal-sized again, and pulled herself aboard the ship.

Eddas awoke about the time I had the ship pointed roughly east, and was trimming the sails to catch a southerly breeze. Joy sat beside her, Eddas' head in her lap, gently stroking her dark hair. The child sat nearby, watching.

"He's coming 'round now, Auntie Joy," the child announced about the time I took hold of the tiller, keeping the ship pointed east.

Eddas' eyes fluttered open, and Joy frowned down at her. "Old Man, *don't* do that again. You

frightened me."

Eddas smiled weakly. "Sorry, Joy. Thousands and thousands of little things to be repaired through sorcery... Years of work, for any other mage. I know the Deep Magic, but as I've told you before, even the Deep Magic is not infinite."

Kyrie giggled. "She's not *really* angry, Grampa! I can see it - she's really very happy you're alright."

"I know," Eddas replied, and grinned.

"Bah! I am, too, angry!" Joy snapped, giving Eddas a fierce glare. "Old Man, that was a very foolish thing! We could easily have taken several days, if that was necessary, and-" Joy began, finally being silenced by Eddas rising up on one arm, pulling her face down, and kissing her lovingly.

The child giggled again. "Golden butterflies! Flit-flit-flit!"

"Alright, perhaps not entirely angry..." Joy replied, and Eddas kissed her again.

Joy smiled. "Mmmm... Still a bit more annoyance, Old Man. One more should do it."

Kyrie burst into a stream of giggles as Eddas reached up and kissed Joy again. I wanted to laugh, myself - yet, again, I found I had no laughter in me. Instead, my gaze was focused eastwards, across the rippling waves of the Inland Sea.

'Soon, my beloved... Soon,' I thought, my gaze ever eastwards.

The Ocean - Twenty-Three.

I felt the sun on my skin, and opened my eyes. I was on a beach, the surf calling nearby, and three fishing boats just offshore. I looked myself over. I had lost the little shell-belt I wore and the shell-top Yanar had given me, as well as my lance. Of the three, only the last was recoverable. I was also exhausted, and felt like I'd been thoroughly beaten with a stick. I rolled over, intending to turn around and pull myself into the surf, then paused.

There was a *man* sitting next to me, his legs crossed, quietly gazing at me.

He was an old man, a Palomean, his head completely bald. He wore a simple garment, little more than knee-length, loose pants and a wraparound, robe-like jacket, all made of a gray, canvas-like material. Vivid memories of the old sailor on the slaver ship popped into my mind, and I backed away from him fearfully. The old man did not move, however. He simply sat there, watching me with his almond eyes. His wrinkled face was completely calm.

The old man had a strange metal pot with two sections sitting beside him. He reached out, lifting the pot from his side, then set it before himself. Flicking the handle of the pot to un-latch it, he separated it into two smaller pots as I watched. Carefully removing the lids, he set one before himself, then pushed the other one towards me slowly and gently. I could smell the aroma of boiled rice, and my stomach growled hungrily. Yet, I was still cautious of the old man. He, however, simply reached into a pocket and produced two slender sticks, then began eating the rice with them. After three mouthfuls, he looked to me, then to the pot before me, then back to my face. He gestured invitingly with his utensils, and resumed eating.

"Well, I suppose that counts as an invitation," I said, pulling myself cautiously closer. The old man made no reply - it didn't seem likely he understood me, anyway. I reached out carefully to the rice, but still he made no move towards me - he simply continued eating. I picked up a small handful, and popped it into my mouth. It was delicious.

Grinning, I pushed myself up to my knees, then sat on my heels. Reaching out and picking up the pot, I began gobbling the rice eagerly with my fingers. When I was done, I put the pot down in front of the old man, then sat back.

"I thank you for breakfast, but I can't stay, I'm sorry," I said, then smiled as I gestured to the surf behind me. "I have to continue on."

The old man shook his head, and babbled something in his language. He pointed behind me, and I looked - three fishing boats lay offshore, but that was all I saw. I looked back to him. "I'm sorry, I don't understand."

"He says they are waiting for you, Sasha," Marilith whispered.

"Marilith? Are you alright, now?"

"No, I am still where I am," she said, and chuckled dryly. *"The old man says those fishing boats are waiting for you. They have spread their nets into the water, and intend to capture you. He says a live mermaid would be worth quite a bit of money, to them. He says you are safe here, on the beach, because of him. They dare not approach him."*

The old man babbled again for a moment, then pointed up the hill behind him. I looked, and saw there was a small house of some kind, its architecture strange and alien to my eye.

"He is offering to carry you back up there, where you will be safe. He does not know how long this will last, however. Word will eventually spread of your presence, and the local lord will come to take you away."

"Well, he doesn't have to carry me if the belt can transform me back to human. Shall I try it?"

"I think that would be a good idea, but I don't know if it will work. I honestly do not know if it even can transform you back into a human."

"Well, there's only one way to find out," I said, and gritted my teeth. Placing my hand over my scales just at my waist where they transitioned from the Tiny scales of my 'skin' to the large metal scales of my tail, I closed my eyes and concentrated. "Change!" I ordered.

The pain was just as bad as I remembered, but at least this time I was prepared for it. A few moments of sharp, intense pain later, it stopped, and I opened my eyes, looking down at myself.

"Hmm... Well, I have legs again, at least," I said, and held out my hand, willing my lance to my grip so I could use it to stand. It was dripping wet with cold sea-water - I had lost it very early on, and apparently it simply had lain on the sea-floor until I summoned it to my grip. I had to use both hands, but eventually I managed to stand. As I did so, my gaze fell upon my hands, and I realized my thumbs looked odd. Looking closer, I realized I still had small slits in the tips of each thumb for my poison claws. "Hmmm... That's not right, either."

"Very odd... You didn't get back any body hair, either, Sasha. Your body's still bald, like a mermaid or a dolphin. And to my eyes, your aura doesn't look exactly the same as it did before, either. It still looks much like the aura you had as a mermaid. It appears that all the transformation did was give you legs and retract all your scales. Otherwise, you're still the same as you were."

I nodded, looking down at my bald sex and feeling my bare armpits for a moment. "Well, everything looks and feels like it's in the right place. And if I *am* still pretty much the same as I was and my menses don't come, I'll be very happy," I said, and Marilith giggled in my ear. The belt of metal scales was again in place around my waist, across the top of my pelvis. I looked to the old man, who was staring at me.

He smiled, and bowed as he sat there. I grinned, and bowed back. "Thank you. And for my next trick..." I said, and giggled.

The old man picked up the two pots, stacking them together and pushing the handle up to make them connect. Picking them up by the handle, he rose to his feet - rather smoothly, I thought, for someone his age. He babbled something briefly, gesturing to the house at the top of the hill nearby.

"He is inviting you to follow."

I nodded, staggering along behind him. After being a mermaid and moving around only by crawling or swimming for over half a year, walking was extremely difficult to get used to again, at first. I leaned heavily on my lance, gripping it near the tip in both hands and using it to keep my balance. The old man walked slowly - obviously for my benefit, as he was watching me.

"It amazes me that you are not embarrassed to be naked before him," Marilith observed, chuckling.

"Well, I suppose after living with the mer-folk for four years, I'm a bit less self-conscious," I replied.

"A bit?" Marilith said, and laughed. I giggled, and the old man smiled at me.

By the time we were halfway there, I had the knack of walking again, and simply used my lance as a walking-stick. We reached the top of the beach, and I saw there was a series of flat, round stones placed on the grass, each one about a pace apart. It made a path, of sorts, that led up to the house. We walked up and onto the porch, but I did not see a door. He reached up to a wall that looked like it was made of paper squares spread over a wooden frame, and slid it aside, revealing itself as a door. "How very odd..."

The old man babbled something briefly, gesturing about the house and at the door we stood next to.

"He says that you are invited to stay in his house, and he can provide clothes for you, if your people wear clothes. He does not refer to you as human, incidentally, but as a spirit of the sea. It is his guess that the local lord will probably be by here sometime in the afternoon, once the fishermen's tales reach him. He says if you will remain in your current form, he can pass you off as a foreigner taken as a cocotte and bought by him, and dismiss the fisherman's stories of a mermaid washing up on his beach as being the vivid imaginations of ignorant peasants. He says his wife has been dead several years, now, so the idea of him purchasing a trained cocotte to tend to him in his old age would be believable."

I nodded, smiling. "That will work, I suppose. I can't just run down the beach, after all, the boats will simply follow, and I'll probably run across someone who's not as nice as you. If I had my knife I'd just cut my way through their nets, but I lost it in the storm along with my shell-belt."

The old man nodded, walking across the floor of his house. It was interesting - the floor was covered in woven rectangular mats, all precisely the same size, fitted together like a puzzle. Reaching into a cabinet, he pulled out a small rectangular stool, the top curved and padded. He set it on the floor, then patted it, looking to me and speaking briefly.

"He is inviting you to sit," Marilith explained.

I nodded and sat on the stool, laying my lance beside me - the stool turned out to be quite comfortable. The old man then went to another cabinet, and withdrew a long blue robe, and a folded, very broad red sash. He held them before himself, and spoke again.

"He is asking if these garments are acceptable to you."

I nodded, smiling, and the old man brought the robe up to me, gesturing for me to rise. I did, and he gently slipped my arms into the sleeves, then wrapped it around me. He then took the red sash, wrapping it about my waist several times and carefully tying it into place behind my back. The robe felt like silk - a fabulously expensive fabric in Vilandia, and only worn by the nobility. "This is very nice. He's a very nice person," I said, sitting again.

"I think so, too," Marilith replied.

The old man sat before me, sitting on his heels, then looked up to me, speaking at length. I listened for Marilith's voice as she translated his words for me.

"He is introducing himself to you. He says his name is Buntaro. In his language this loosely translates as 'man of letters', though I should tell you that much like your own name, it has no actual meaning in his life, it's simply a name. That he has a name, however, is telling, I believe he is of the upper classes. Most peasants in Palome are named simply for their profession, like 'third daughter of the rice-seller' or 'fisherman of so-and-so village'. He is telling you that he is greatly honored by your visit, and regrets deeply that he cannot speak your language to make your visit more comfortable. He still thinks of you as a spirit of the sea, and is telling you how he and his wife always enjoyed the sea, respected the creatures that lived within it, and so on. I think he is trying to make a good impression on you."

I giggled. "He did that when he fed me, I was *hungry!*" I replied, grinning at the old man.

"He is now asking you if you are still hungry, or have any other personal needs that should be attended to."

I shook my head. "Even if I did need something, how would I tell him? He can't hear you."

"Pantomime, perhaps?" Marilith offered.

I tried it. Clasping my hands flat together, I tipped my head, and laid my hands aside my head. "I'm tired. The currents in the storm wore me out. Sleepy. Understand?"

The old man nodded, rising to his feet. Going to another cabinet, he pulled out a carefully folded pad,

unfolding it and laying it on the floor atop the mats. He then set a small pillow beside it, and pulled out a blanket, setting it beside the pillow. He gestured to it, bowing and babbling at me briefly, then smiled.

"He is inviting you to nap."

I smiled back, picking up my lance and using it to get to my feet again. After laying it beside the small bed, I lay down on the mattress. The old man knelt beside me and carefully covered me with the blanket, then rose, bowing.

"He bids you rest well, and says he will be quiet as a mouse while you sleep."

"He's very nice!" I replied, grinning.

"Well, that's somewhat understandable. From his perspective, he's here all alone, has been for apparently several years, and a beautiful mermaid just washed ashore outside his house. He probably feels blessed by the gods!" Marilith replied, and cackled heartily.

I giggled, and the old man smiled at me, then rose to his feet. Stepping back to the paper-door, he slid it open, stepped outside, bowed to me again, then slid it closed again.

I stretched for a moment, then relaxed on the bed. "This is very nice," I whispered, trying not to make the old man think I was calling him back inside the house again. "But I'm worried, Marilith... Am I still where I'm supposed to be, or should I try to leave here as soon as possible?"

"The ocean whispers to me, Sasha... You are where you are supposed to be. Storm gave you what she was supposed to give you, and the storm this morning placed you where you were supposed to be placed. Your life is and always will be your own to lead - but you have always chosen to go where you were supposed to go. There is a reason you are here, with him. Perhaps you are to learn something, or do something... I do not know. But no matter what the reason is, there is a reason. It appears I will have to wait awhile longer," she replied, and sighed deeply.

"I *will* find you, Sister. I promise," I whispered.

"*Thank you, Sister,*" Marilith whispered back.

The Ocean - Twenty-Four.

I awoke to the sounds of an argument, apparently outside the house. I didn't understand what was being said, the speakers were speaking in Palomean. "Marilith?" I whispered. "Is that the lord that Buntaro said would come by?"

"No. The feudal lord of this area sent one of his retainers by while you slept, and Buntaro gave them the story he had told you. The retainer took a peek at you while you slept, and as your feet were poking out from beneath the blanket at that time, he decided the old man was telling the truth, and left. Currently Buntaro is arguing with three of the local fishermen. They are not amused, because they have been reprimanded by their lord for spreading foolish rumors."

"Ummm... I assume this wasn't just a talking-to?"

"No. The village was fined one koku of rice, enough to feed a typical man for a year."

"Ouch," I replied, and pushed myself to my feet. Walking over to the door, I slid it open and looked.

Three men were arguing with Buntaro, who simply replied in a calm, clear voice. One was older, but the other two were young, and looked large and angry. Buntaro didn't glance my way, instead keeping his eyes on the men standing on his porch. All were dressed similarly to Buntaro - baggy shorts, and a short-sleeved, robe-like jacket that came down to the hips. Finally, the leader pointed to me, and rattled off something briefly and angrily.

"He is saying that you should be surrendered to the villagers in payment, and if Buntaro is not willing to do that, they will simply take you. It is his assessment that if you are simply a foreign woman taken as a cocotte, they can re-sell you to regain what they have lost."

Buntaro shook his head slowly, and the leader simply snorted, barking a short command. At that moment, the nearest one started to reach for me.

What happened next was very fast. Buntaro lashed out a hand with the speed of a striking snake, grabbing the hand of the young man and twisting it. In a moment, he had him on his knees, groaning in pain as he held the young man at arm's length, his fingers painfully bent back. Buntaro looked to the leader, and spoke calmly.

"Hah! He is saying 'I believe you should reconsider your decision.'"

The second young man apparently didn't see the humor in that, and he stepped forward, his fist cocked back for a punch. Buntaro released the first, and easily swept the fist of the second aside as it came flying in to his face. Catching him by the wrist, he pulled his arm forward, then twisted - in a moment, he held the second groaning in pain and on his knees, his wrist bent back painfully, just as easily as he had held the first.

Unfortunately, his back was to the first young man, and the first was drawing a knife.

I didn't think about it - I simply reached out and grabbed the young man by the back of the neck, squeezing as I extended my poison claw. He yelped with the sudden pain, leaping back from me and clutching at his neck with his free hand. A heartbeat later, he collapsed, spasming violently, the knife held tight in his fist as all of his muscles contracted. Buntaro let the second young man go, and stared at the death-throes of the first. In a few heartbeats, the young man's whole body locked rigidly, then relaxed - the same as any large fish I might claw. The leader stepped back from me, his eyes wide.

Buntaro knelt to the first young man, touching the front of his neck. After a moment, he sighed, and looked up to the leader.

"He is telling the village master that his son is dead."

"That was his *son*?" I said, not sure how to feel about that. I didn't want to see the young man murder Buntaro, but I didn't see any other way of stopping him. As the mer-folk say, once weapons are raised, the time for talking is over.

"Yes. Apparently both are his sons. Buntaro is now telling the village master that his dead son was an idiot, and drew a weapon over an issue that was not worth killing or dying for. Regardless of who or what they may think you are, it's obvious that you are not willing to simply be taken away even if Buntaro allowed this to happen, and unfortunately for them, you are more than capable of enforcing your will. He says the villagers acted foolishly - what's one koku of rice to a village with over a thousand koku stored?"

I nodded, watching as the village master wept over his son. My heart ached for him, and tears came to my eyes. Yet, I couldn't see what choice I'd had. "I'm sorry," I said, my cheeks damp with tears, "but he gave me no choice."

"You did the right thing, Sasha," Marilith replied quietly.

The village master looked to me, and gazed at my tears for a long moment. Finally, he nodded. With a brief command to his second son, the village master and the second son picked up the corpse of the first, the knife falling out of his limp hand to clatter on the porch. Silently, they carried him away. Buntaro watched as they walked off, his face firm. I simply wept.

Finally, they had disappeared beyond the trees near the house, and Buntaro looked at me. With a gentle hand, he reached up, and wiped away my tears, speaking softly.

"He says he is not angry with you, and asks you not to weep for the dead man. He says the dead man was an idiot, and you probably would have killed him anyway when he tried to net you from his boat. He says he saw a drop of blood on the man's neck, and asks what weapon it was you used?"

I wiped my eyes for a moment, then raised my hands and tensed my thumbs, making my poison claws protrude.

"Ah," Buntaro said, nodding as I lowered my hands and retracted my claws, then spoke at length.

"He says that while he thinks your death-touch is admirable, he thinks you need to learn less lethal methods. The dead man could have been disarmed, if you had only known how. He asks if you wish to learn?"

I nodded, wiping my eyes. "Yes, please."

Buntaro smiled, and spoke again.

"He says he would be honored to teach you," Marilith whispered, translating his words.

The Spider - VII.

The gentle rocking of the ship's motion was, to me, of no importance. My mind and gaze were ever eastwards, and I only released the tiller when it became necessary to trim the sail again from time to time. The Great Mage seemed not to notice the ship's motion, either, nor did the child. Joy, however, spent the majority of the next two days clinging to the rail of the ship, quite ill.

"I don't see *how* you two can stand it!" she moaned, having finished another long round of dry heaves.

"An invisible steed rocks back and forth quite a bit, Joy - they aren't built precisely like a normal horse. I ride sidesaddle simply because it's more convenient with a robe, and Kyrie rode behind me, where it's a bit worse. We're simply used to it."

The child nodded vigorously. "Oh, yes, Auntie Joy! It was much like this all the time I rode! Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth..."

"Kyrie!" Joy yelped, looking decidedly green about the gills.

"Sorry, Auntie Joy," Kyrie replied sheepishly.

Eddas sang a soft, soothing song to comfort Joy, and a sparkle of magic flowed from her. I looked up from them, returning my gaze to the east.

The Inland Sea seemed lifeless, yet, I could sense that this was not so. Beneath our feet lay fathoms undreamed of, and much small life flickered at the edges of my perception. Plants that floated beneath the water, drinking in the light of the sun... Fish that fed on those plants... And larger fish that fed on them. As much as the forests had been alive, even in the grip of winter, the Inland Sea was alive, beneath a shimmering, trackless surface.

Somehow this relationship of plant to predator to prey seemed familiar... But not in the sense of having seen it in my past life, but something beyond that... Something I could not completely comprehend. Fleeting images of shadow danced in my mind, yet were gone before I could truly grasp what they were. It was all so familiar... And yet, quite alien, at the same time.

A dream, a vivid flash... A brief vision of shadows...

Then it was gone, fading from my mind before I could completely grasp it. Only the shimmering waters of the inland sea lay before me.

They could not sleep inside the magical sanctuary of the Great Mage. The ship would move out from beneath it, Eddas said. It was with great difficulty she retrieved blankets from it, opening her sanctuary, then using some spell of flight to return to the ship afterwards, as we did indeed sail out from beneath. She had been quite winded afterwards - flying took the same effort as walking or running, she said, and at the speed the wind was giving our ship now, we were moving at what was quite a fast run. I offered to slow the ship at the time, but she declined. "Speed is of the essence, Goodman Bones," was her reply.

The spring winds were fair and fresh, and the *Brinneal* was an elven *muirgath*, a long, slim fishing vessel made to escape bad weather by racing swiftly before it. I wondered what had made it sink before... Perhaps a sudden squall had caught its owners unaware at night, while they slept. Such could not happen with us. I sailed the *Brinneal* night and day, my gaze ever eastwards, and I did not sleep.

For five days and five nights, we sailed the Inland Sea. Each day, Eddas conjured food and drink for Joy and the child. Each night, they slept huddled together on the deck, wrapped tightly in many blankets. I spoke little to them, for indeed I had little to say to them. In my heart, I could feel a sense of urgency... Indeed, speed was of the essence, though I did not know why. I only knew that I must hurry.

Dawn of the sixth day revealed shore on the horizon - and more, a port-city of some kind. The shores themselves were lined with strange trees of a like I'd never seen before... Leafy branches only at the top, held aloft by a long, slender trunk of many sections. The buildings of the city were brown, as though made of earth or mud, but quite large. Many were ornately decorated, and some were domed.

"Eddas, what city is that?" Joy asked, echoing my thoughts.

Eddas shook her head. "I don't know, Joy. It's been quite some time since I've been through here - I think that city was founded sometime between my last visit and now. Judging by it's lines, it's a Mysantian city, but that's all I can say of it." Eddas looked to me. "Steer there, for that empty pier, and we'll make port, Goodman Bones."

I nodded silently. I had already lowered the sail to keep us from simply racing into the pier and crashing, we now drifted slowly towards it. Yet, a deep sense of urgency was in my heart, and I still knew not why. I only knew that the closer and closer we drew to the piers, the more and more urgent the feeling became. Finally, Joy reached out to the pier, grabbing the nearest of a pair of bollards to stop us and pull us close. Her strength was enormous - but I found I cared little. The urgency in my heart had grown to a frenzy. I released the tiller, dashed to the rail, and leapt from the ship to the pier.

"Goodman Bones! Where are you going?!" Joy shouted after me - but I gave her no answer. At the end of the pier, I dropped to my hands and knees in the sand of the beach, and simply knelt there. The sense of urgency faded, and I slowly began to feel renewed strength in my limbs.

"Better, my friend?" Eddas asked, walking up behind me. Joy and the child followed, gazing at me in curiosity.

"Yes..."

"What was the matter?" Joy asked, looking at me.

Kyrie gazed at me, then nodded in understanding. "He was getting hungry, Auntie Joy."

"Hungry for what?"

Eddas shrugged. "His kind is attuned to the earth, Joy. It was what he was in contact with when he arose - he draws strength from it. He's not a simple zombie, after all."

Joy looked at me, then shuddered. "I had nearly forgotten... Seeing him covered as he is from head to toe, I had nearly forgotten..."

The earth beneath my woolen-gloved hands was comforting, and restoring. Yet, it felt odd, in a way I could not explain. To my eyes, it was just dirt - beach sand, the earth of a shore of a vast inland sea, with a dock and port-city nearby. Yet, it did not feel right. It felt... Stained. I searched my feelings, wondering what might be wrong, and the dark part of my mind rose in answer. I lifted my head, looking around. *"Something is wrong, here, Eddas Ayar... I can feel it... The earth here has drunk the blood of hundreds... Perhaps a thousand or more... Men, women and children... The wind is at our backs, and we do not smell it from here, but there is much death nearby... Much death... Listen... There is no sounds of a city... No voices calling each other... No workers at the docks... Listen... Do you hear it...? That faint buzzing... The distant grackles... It is the sound of hundreds of carrion birds, feasting... And millions upon millions of blowflies..."*

"I hear nothing," Joy said, shaking her head.

"Me, neither," Kyrie said, looking around. "It does seem very quiet here, though..."

"I hear it," Eddas said, tapping her pointed, elven ear with a gloved finger. "My ears are a bit sharper than yours. Joy, stay here and guard Kyrie. Goodman Bones, come with me," Eddas said, pulling the hood of her ebon robe up to shade her face, then held a gloved hand out to me. I took her hand to rise, and as I did so, I again had the same brief, fleeting impression I'd had before... It was the impression of something greater, something beyond mortality. An enormous raven, gazing at me with dark, dark eyes...

And yet, as I looked again, there was nothing before me but a small elf-maid, the four raven feathers in her ponytail now hidden beneath the dark hood of her robe.

Eddas turned, walking towards the town, and I followed quietly, thinking.

The Ocean - Twenty-Five.

Once I had been moved into the 'guest room' of Buntaro's house and given some clothes to wear, the first thing that Buntaro had to do, unfortunately, was to teach me to understand his language. Learning the basics of his language took the rest of fall and on into winter. From time to time, young men dressed in ornate armor would arrive, and speak with Buntaro briefly. They usually came with a retinue of servants, and made camp on the beach before his home. Each one that came, Buntaro trained in a certain maneuver or skill for several weeks, they paid him, and they departed. It seemed that this was how Buntaro made his living - though it wasn't until the middle of winter that I had mastered his language well enough to ask him about himself.

Buntaro explained that he was once a general, in the service of a great lord of the land. He had served for many years, and grown old in the service of his lord. He was allowed to retire by the lord's son when

he inherited, and since then he had spent his days in a quiet house along the beach with his wife of many years. They had hoped to have children of their own, but unfortunately, that didn't happen. She had died ten years before I arrived on his beach, and Buntaro trained the occasional noble who came by to hone their skills, or learn a new technique. Though he dressed like a peasant, he was, in truth, a noble of his land, and quite famous. He asked my own story in return, of course, but my mastery of his language wasn't quite good enough to really explain it.

I finally just decided to tell him I was a mermaid in search of my sister, who was trapped in a faraway cage in a distant land. It was close enough to the truth, at any rate. From what Marilith could tell after months of carefully examining me, the enchantment on the belt *was* imperfect. I was, still, basically a mermaid - though now one with legs and without scales. In studying the belt, however, she learned that the flaw which prevented me from becoming fully human had another advantage - I could command the belt to simply merge with my human skin (whereupon it vanished), and I could also command the belt to cover me in shimmering scales of steel when I was in my human form, as strong as the scales on my tail were in the form of a mermaid. Marilith said there might be a day when both abilities would come in useful, and practice eventually allowed me to do it with ease (though any transformation with the belt still hurt quite a bit).

As it turned out, I used the armor the belt could provide quite a bit, for as soon as I had a basic grasp of the language, Buntaro began working with me every day, teaching me what Marilith said were the rudiments of unarmed combat. As both my language skills and my combat skills improved, he began teaching me more sophisticated things. I wasn't entirely unfamiliar with the notion of fighting - the mermen had taught me how to hunt and how to kill orcas, after all. Still, this was something new, and I looked forward to each day, wondering what else I might learn. Buntaro did not question where my metal scales came from, simply assuming I was a magical sea-spirit, and it was part of my powers. Instead, once I had explained that having scales over my palms and the soles of my feet made it hard for me to grip things and painful to walk, he took me to the village (the villagers gave both of us a wide berth in the street). While we were there, he had the village leatherworker make me a set of sturdy forearm-length gloves and calf-high boots. After some experimentation, I discovered that I could slip them on and form my scales beneath them, and simply leave my palm, soles and the undersides of my fingers and toes bare. That was actually quite serviceable and comfortable, as well as providing fairly good protection.

By the time summer rolled around again, Buntaro had begun teaching me the 'proper' way to fight with staves and spears. He reasoned that since I obviously had a magical lance, it seemed appropriate I at least know how to use it if I was ever facing someone who was truly skilled. We didn't practice with my lance, however - it simply was too dangerous. He'd had me stab a tree with a trunk as thick as my thigh with it, and I nearly thrust the tip of the lance halfway through it. So, instead, we practiced with wooden staves, and padded spears. Many a night found me collapsing exhausted into my little bed in his house, bruised from head to foot. But, by the end of summer, I started to improve, and the bruises became less and less frequent.

Fall came again, and Buntaro finally began teaching me the true secret to what I once thought was the sailor's magic - pressure points on the human body, and joint-locking techniques. There were certain

spots one could attack that, with even mild pressure, caused great pain. Joint-locks took advantage of the fact that the human body was only made to bend in certain ways. It all came surprisingly naturally to me, having spent literally years with the mer-men, who used their knowledge of the anatomy of prey-fish and of the orcas against them - two poison claws only went so far, and it took time for one's poison to build back up again. I also learned to simply take my hair and put it up in a ponytail high on the back of my head every morning when I woke up - I wasn't willing to cut my hair, and anywhere else it was too easy for Buntaro to grab it when he was teaching me grappling maneuvers.

Finally, one fall day, we sat on his porch, watching the sea and sipping some hot tea he'd made. It was a lovely day, and the sight of it reminded me of many lovely days I'd spent on Round Island, with my clan. I sighed with the memories, watching the waves slowly roll onto the beach.

"You learn quickly and well, Sasha," Buntaro said in his language, gazing out at the sea.

"I credit my teacher," I replied in the language of the Palomeans, smiling as I smoothed the silk robe I wore.

"Hardly. Your mind is like a sponge, absorbing all, losing nothing. A natural talent of your people, perhaps?"

"Of the males, yes. We females are simply smarter. Thus, I credit my teacher."

"You are too kind," Buntaro said, smiling, then sighed. "Would that you had come to me years before. I would have spent the rest of my years teaching you everything I know, as my master once taught me. Then, my art would be carried on after my death. Now, however..." he said, and shook his head. "You must move on in your quest, I believe. It has been a year, and from what you say, your sister has waited ages for you already."

I smiled, listening to Marilith's voice. "My sister tells me that she would hardly take me from a great teacher such as yourself - particularly considering that your art is as beautiful as the arts her own teachers taught her. She watches and listens even now, and she says you remind her very much of her own teacher, in many ways."

Marilith chuckled in my ear. *"Save that my teacher was a nightstallion, of course,"* she whispered, and I grinned.

Buntaro shook his head. "No. I cannot keep you any longer, Sasha. If I did, I fear that I might..." he said, then shook his head. "No. I dare not."

"Dare not what?" I asked, looking at him.

Buntaro said nothing, gazing out at the sea.

"Tell me, please?"

Buntaro sighed. "I am old, Sasha. I have been alone for over a decade, now. My story to my lord was that I had bought you to care for me in my dotage. He and I knew the truth, however. If I ever bought a cocotte, it would be simply due to loneliness. He knows that I would hardly sit and become feeble, enduring the humiliation of being cared for by a slave for lack of any living person who cared enough to do the same out of love. Now, I sit, and I gaze out over the sea and I realize that my sight is fading. The horizon is no longer sharp and clear, the clouds now somewhat faded to my eyes. It is time for me to go."

"Go where?" I asked, but Buntaro simply chuckled.

"He means commit suicide, Sasha," Marilith whispered. *"He does not wish to grow enfeebled and helpless. He would rather die, first."* I started to object, but Marilith interrupted me. *"Sasha, don't! Arguing with him about this won't change his mind. It is simply his way - the way of the people of Palome. He feels he is alone in the world - and, in truth, he is. He does not wish to grow old and feeble alone."*

"But I don't want him to die!" I said in my language.

"What?" Buntaro asked, but I shook my head.

"Then here is what you must do," Marilith whispered, and I nodded, listening. After a long moment, I looked to Buntaro.

"My teacher... You have taught me well. I owe you much. I now wish to repay that debt. I beg your permission to remain here, and learn your art. I beg your permission to remain here, and win your heart."

Buntaro laughed emptily. "You little fool. Don't you realize that those two desires aren't compatible?"

"Then choose which one you wish, Buntaro, and the price shall be paid."

Buntaro paused, gazing at me. Finally, he shook his head, smiling. "Wicked, *wicked* woman! I do believe that your people are not too much different from mine. You know I cannot choose both, and you know I desire both. Ever since that day I saw you lying on the beach after the storm, I desired you as a wife. Ever since that moment I saw you kill the village-master's son, I wished to teach you all that I knew. One path leads to happiness, the other to immortality, through you carrying on my art."

I bowed my head, saying nothing.

Buntaro looked me over in silence for a long moment. Finally, he chuckled, shaking his bald head. "I am old, Sasha. I have had happiness with my late wife. The memories of her are enough to sustain me. I choose to teach you, instead."

"Thank you," I said quietly, though somehow... Somehow, a small part of me was disappointed.

The Spider - VI.

An hour later, we were in the central square of the town. I finished lacing on the boots I'd found, then rose to my feet. I looked to Eddas, who was working nearby. *"Is this better, now...?"*

Eddas looked up from the corpse she knelt beside, and nodded. "Yes, quite. You do look a bit more presentable with leather boots and gloves, my friend, and the woolen ones you made had grown quite threadbare. Anyone who saw you might catch a glimpse of bone beneath, and be alarmed."

Her voice was a bit muffled, of course. This was because of the black cloth she had tied behind her head, covering her mouth and nose. How she tolerated the stench I had no idea. Perhaps she had enchanted that little bolt of cloth when she took it from the empty fabric shop. Or, perhaps, she simply was made of sterner stuff than I imagined.

And the stench was powerful, to say the least. Here in the city square alone, hundreds of corpses lay scattered about - men, women, and children. All were days dead, all murdered. The air was thick with blowflies, and the stench of death immense... Had I breath, I'd have gagged. We'd found easily a thousand corpses searching the town, brown of skin, black of hair, and dressed in odd, loose-fitting garments of many colors - all slain by lance or sword. Scattered among the dirt of the streets and alleys were the curved marks of a horse's hooves... Back and forth, again and again they crossed the town center. Bare, bloodied footprints added to the tale, but the story they told was unclear to me. Were I not already mad, I'd have fled the scene in horror.

Eddas incanted briefly, and I watched as the rotting, maggot-ridden corpse she was working on filled with UnLife. I could sense it, eagerly filling the empty husk where once a mortal soul had resided... Feeling the residue of a lifetime's memories that lay within... Eddas asked a few brief questions, and received hissed replies in a voice as unearthly as my own. With a gesture, she dismissed the UnLife she had summoned, and the corpse relaxed again. The vultures stood nearby, watching and idly feasting. Vicious and aggressive creatures in large groups, they were still innately cowardly. Eddas only had to kill a few of them with claps of thunder and lightning before they learned that a greater being than themselves was present, and gave us a wide berth.

"What have you learned from the corpses, Great Mage...?"

"Not much, my friend. Whoever did this was likely a necromancer of great skill. They attacked at night, few saw anything truly useful. The attacker took out the gate guards first, then used them to secure the exits from the city while they killed a few of the locals to secure the beaches. Once that was done, they sent in some kind of armored knight - from the description, a Katani riding a skeletal horse. From there, it was a night-long killing spree. By dawn, what few survivors that remained hidden were slowly found and killed by that knight, one at a time. One victim saw a glimpse of a woman in revealing leather garments... Blue skin, white hair. My guess at this point is a convicted Malani necromancer did this - though why, I have no idea."

My heart sang. *"She was here... My beloved... She was here..."*

"The one you said made you? Brionnach?"

"Yes... She has skin of indigo, hair of snow... It was the curse of the Lob'Dath, she said... Punishment for studying the Forbidden Arts... I... I think..."

"Yes?"

"I think she went around... She rode with her new servant, a servant she made from a Katani warrior... He has a horse... They went around the Inland Sea, not across, I think... They were

months ahead of me... Now we are perhaps only a few days behind..."

"A few days, yes. The dead are notoriously loose with time so it's difficult to tell speaking to the corpses, but definitely less than a week, judging by the decay. Quite skilled - and extremely dangerous. But the 'why' of it still escapes me, however."

"She was probably low on supplies again... She wanted me to do the same to a village of elves... She commanded it... I resisted her, and instead traded with them peacefully... She was not amused..."

Eddas nodded, studying me for a moment. She then rose to her feet, and gestured to the corpses with her staff. "Still, no single skeletal warrior could do this, he'd be hacked to pieces eventually, by sheer numbers if nothing else. And after months of travel, he'd certainly be rotted to a mere skeleton."

"She said... She said she had developed many spells unique to herself... One was that which she used on me... A spell to make a companion... A being greater than a familiar, yet... More controllable than the Hungry Ones, she said... But the spell on me was wrongly done, she said... And, in truth, perhaps it was... I served her not because she commanded it, but because I love her... I still do... She had a second spell, that gave me a sham of life... I did not rot... But then I failed against the elf, and she released me, and took him, instead..."

"Bah. That's hardly unique to her, necromancers in my day experimented with that idea. We called it a Minion. That line of research was abandoned, though. It simply was too risky."

"Risky...?"

"Yes, my friend. The dead serve the living not because we command them, but because they choose to. An ordinary Walking Dead has little choice - their minds are feeble, barely as smart as a chicken or a snake. They eagerly choose to serve, they know no better. The higher undead usually choose not to serve the living, and spells to compel them to service are extremely taxing, due to the very nature of UnLife energy - it's equal in difficulty to summoning a greater demon, and just as fraught with peril. A partial solution was the Spell of the Undead Minion - but it is equally risky. If the situation is not perfectly arranged at the time of the creation..." she explained, then shrugged.

"If Brionnach thinks her elven Minion serves her because she's forced him to, then either she's a fool or her understanding of Ethical Calculus and the higher Laws of Magic is poor, at best. A Minion is like any other undead - they serve not because they are forced to, but because they choose to. To make a minion, one must warp the very nature of the portal through which the UnLife energy enters this plane, and fills the corpse - otherwise, you simply end up with a zombie. A Philo-Ethical Sublimation Filter must be constructed, to allow a higher-state of UnLife energy to fill the corpse that will possess the correct mind-set to choose to serve, rather than kill their creator. Yet, the very nature of this filter means that it runs contrary to the Law of Symmetry - UnLife is, for the purposes of the mathematics involved in the filter, in direct opposition to Life energy. The Law of Tativity plays a part, as well. The direct result is too unique to the caster's desire for it to even be possible without it being affected by situational ethical parameters - you would *have* to include inversion palliations or the universe would resist the spell to an infinite degree. Thus, the only possible structure for the filter that is even usable by a mortal results in a corpse that arises with the magical opposite of the mentality and emotion that filled it at the moment of its death. A willing servant who submits to this becomes a ravaging wight intent upon your death, while a forceful enemy intent upon your death becomes a willing servant. Yes, quite risky - and the fact that it's only truly usable on one's most murderous enemies is only a part of the risk. I'd say it's *hardly* likely she developed this sorcery on her own. Most likely, she's been working with the goblins. They're quite skilled at necromancy. She probably cobbled these spells together from two or three formulas they've developed for their own uses."

I shook my head - much of what the Great Mage had said had, naturally, gone completely over my head. Yet, parts of her explanation left me even more confused than I had been before. *"I... I do not understand... She said... She said I meant to rape her when she slew me... By your explanation, this means I love her because at the moment she slew me, that was what filled my mind... I thought... I thought that was a lie, because I could not even see myself doing that... I love her, I would never want to hurt her... Yet... By your explanation, her words were true. Does this mean that I am an evil man...?"*

"No, you are what you are. You'll understand, in time," Eddas replied, then gestured back down the street. "Come - we'll gather Kyrie and Joy, and proceed around the town. I don't think we need to expose Kyrie to this." I nodded, stepping over a corpse and following, and Eddas continued speaking. "Brionnach may be powerful, but she lacks true understanding of the higher mathematics of magic. And more, by releasing you, she shows me she is truly a fool. You love her - and the strength of that love meant you could not let go, and you became one of the Refused. Astrally, you read very much like a Revenant. If she tries the same with her elven minion, the results won't be as benign."

We passed from the town square down into a side street, walking towards the docks. I followed Eddas silently, thinking, and searching my feelings. Finally, I spoke. *"My love is not pure... It was spawned from lust and dark-mindedness... Yet it fills me still, and feels as pure as ever... I love her with all my heart... Even seeing what she has done, here... I still love her... I do not understand*

this... And I do not understand how I survived after she released me... I do not understand how I remained... There is so much I do not understand..."

"Well, as to the latter, you survived because you aren't one of the Walking Dead. They are simple, nearly mindless creatures, and the will of their creator sustains them and maintains them on this plane. Thus, the moment their creator dies or chooses to release them, they are gone. You, however, are a far higher creature. No will of mortal man or woman could *possibly* maintain you here, only a *god* has that kind of willpower. Thus, you draw strength from what you arose from. In your case, your corpse was in contact with the earth - you draw strength from the earth, much like many Refused do. By the same token, she could not simply release you and have you gone unless you *chose* it to be so. But, you did not," she said, and pulled her mask down as we approached the docks.

"As to the rest, you'll understand in time. Now, hold still a moment while I use a little cantrip to brush the dirt and stench from our clothes. Kyrie might forgive us, but I'd never hear the end of it from Joy," Eddas said, and chuckled.

I nodded. I wanted to laugh - I truly did. But I could not. It was not that the dead in the town weighed upon my mind, or even that the knowledge I'd gained of myself weighed upon my mind. It was simply that I had no laughter within me.

I wondered if I ever would.

My ear caught the sound of approaching hoof-beats, and I paused in sweeping the porch, my eyes gazing down the beach. "Master, someone comes."

"I hear them, my child," Buntaro replied, sipping at his tea. "My eyes have faded these last few years, but my ears are still good."

"It is twenty men, in armor and on horseback. I see no clan banners... Wait - one is wearing a cherry-blossom symbol across his chest."

"That would probably be my lord's son, he who allowed me to retire gracefully. I appreciated his kindness, of course, though I think it was more to rid himself of what he saw as a doddering old man and a constant reminder of his father's words than it was a gesture of true gentility," Buntaro replied, and chuckled.

I nodded, setting aside the broom and waiting. The riders approached the house swiftly, turning from the beach to ride up the hill, then paused before the house. I bowed - it was expected in Palomean culture - but Buntaro simply remained sitting. Their leader was a man in his late thirties, perhaps his early forties. He ignored me, not bothering to return my bow, and looked to Buntaro. "Old man, I have need of you," he said simply.

"Oh?" Buntaro replied, sipping at his tea. "That's quite interesting, Lord Midoro. Is it perhaps that I was right, and the Kagemoto clan has forged the alliances they sought twenty years ago, and now attacks you from the southwest?"

"Yes," Lord Midoro snapped, then paused shifting in his saddle as he composed himself again. "I am sorry. I was wrong."

"A great admission, and one showing that you have attained true wisdom, my lord. The first step to true wisdom is admitting that we are not always right. Unfortunately, you have come to this wisdom far too late. I cannot help you command your armies, my lord. The years have not been kind to me, and I am blind as a stone. You will have to ask my student to help you, instead."

Lord Midoro nodded. "Bring them out, that I may ask them."

Buntaro chuckled. "Unless you have gone blind as well, my lord, you should be looking at her."

Midoro raised an eyebrow, looking at me. "What? This foreign cocotte you bought nine years ago?"

"Quite."

Midoro scowled. "I would have thought that you would be more civil about this, and not taunt me with my mistake."

"I would never taunt you, my lord. We may have disagreed, but I still respect you highly. This is Sasha, a woman of Woe. I have taught her as my successor. I have even taught her to ride - if she agrees to serve and you brought an extra horse, you may take her away with you today."

"You taught her to ride?"

"Of course, my lord. What did you think I wanted with that lame mare I asked you for four years ago? I certainly didn't need it myself," Buntaro replied, and chuckled.

"You won't mind if I test her, of course?"

"I won't mind, my lord, but I don't recommend it. She has her own life, and a destiny that calls her - she stays with me because she chooses to, not because I force her to. A test will hardly endear her to any offer you may make, I think."

Lord Midoro nodded. "That is a risk I'm willing to take," he replied, and nodded to the man mounted next to him, to his right. "Akiro, fetch me her head."

"Yes, my lord," the retainer replied, and slipped from his horse, drawing his *tachi* in a single, smooth motion. The sword was a very long, slightly curved single-edged sword with a two-handed hilt, the blade two cubits in length and having a thrusting tip. Usable on foot or on horse, it was a sweeping, deadly weapon in the hands of one with skill - and from his stance as he approached me, the retainer looked quite skilled.

"Try not to kill him, Sasha," Buntaro said, and sipped at his tea.

"Yes, master," I replied, and willed the metal scales of my belt to cover my body beneath my robe as I stepped forward off the porch. The retainer stepped towards me, sword readied for a killing blow. As he swung, I closed my hand, summoning my lance to my grip at a thought. I blocked fire-to-stone, smashing his blade with my invulnerable lance. With a ringing *-CRACK-* of snapping steel, the last two thirds of his blade went spinning to the side. The retainer jumped back, startled, his hands numbed by the force of the blow. Unfortunately for him, he could not simply give up. His lord had *ordered* him to kill me. He fumbled for a moment, dropping his broken sword and reaching for a dagger with his numbed fingers. I snapped the butt of the lance forward into his shin, crushing the armor plate that protected it. With a howl of pain, the retainer fell to the ground, his shin-bones smashed by the mass of the lance.

"She's quite good with an obviously enchanted weapon," Lord Midoro replied dryly. "How good is she without it?"

Buntaro shook his head. "You are certainly not endearing yourself to her, my lord, but you are welcome to find out."

Lord Midoro nodded, then looked to the retainer mounted to his right. "Tashiro, bring me her head."

"Yes, my lord," the second retainer replied, slipping down from his horse and drawing his sword. He

was more lightly armored than the first, and though he had the banded hauberuk that was common in Palome, he wore little more than chainmail sleeves and leggings on his limbs.

"Toss aside your lance, Sasha, then do what you must," Buntaro said, and sipped at his tea again.

I nodded and dropped my lance, then stood, ready. The second retainer let out a terrifying yell, and charged in, his sword raised. I stepped in suddenly, and as his sword came flashing down my hands were already moving, my right hand rising to meet his hands and deflect his stroke to my side. As his sword passed harmlessly by me, I twisted, smashing my left elbow into the pressure point on his forearm a bit over a hand above his wrist. His right hand relaxed from the pressure-point strike, my right hand slid over his hands, and as he started to leap back to get to a proper cutting distance again, I twisted the sword from his grip and tossed it aside. The retainer did not hesitate, leaping forward, the fingers of his hands outstretched to grapple. I stepped aside, sweeping his attack past me and grasping the outstretched fingers of his right hand. In a moment, he was on his knees, gasping as I held him there in a finger-lock.

"With respect, my lord," the retainer groaned, "I submit this wench is precisely what Lord Buntaro said she was - a wench of woe!"

I frowned, but Lord Midoro nodded. "So it seems. With respect, Wench of Woe, I politely ask that you release my retainer. One crippled man is all I can spare this morning."

"As you wish, Lord Midoro," I replied, and let the retainer go. He gasped in pain, flexing his fingers, and I willed my lance to my grip. Bowing to Midoro, I turned, and stepped back onto the porch. After setting my lance aside, I picked up the broom and returned to sweeping. My heart was pounding, but I refused to let them see how nervous I was. The first retainer, whose leg I'd broken, had managed to cut loose the dented armor from his leg. It was already beginning to swell. The second used the empty sword-scabbard of the first to splint the leg, then helped him back onto his horse. Once done, the second picked up his swords and mounted his own horse.

"It seems I was wrong again, Buntaro," Midoro said dryly, once the second retainer had mounted again.

"So it seems, my lord," Buntaro replied, sipping at his tea.

Midoro looked at me. "Wench of Woe, as the successor to Lord Buntaro, I politely request your assistance against the Kagemoto clan."

I shook my head. "With respect, Lord Midoro, I have no wish to serve you. You offer me nothing that I want."

"I offer you rank and privilege, Wench of Woe. You would be no mere cocotte, but a member of the warrior-caste, with lands of your own. And if that is not enough, your weight in silver."

I shook my head again. "I have no need of rank or privilege, nor money. I only wish to see my master is cared for with kindness and love until he passes on, then I will resume my journey."

Buntaro chuckled. "I tried to warn you, my lord. Your tests did not endear you to her. She is, at heart, a gentle soul."

Midoro shifted in his saddle, thinking. "Alright. Since your only concern is Buntaro, I will provide a dozen maidens to care for him. Sweet, gentle and loving, they will tend to his every need until he passes."

I paused in my sweeping, and looked at Midoro. He looked quite serious - and I did not doubt he could provide. Yet, I could hardly see twelve girls tending to Buntaro without becoming a pack of cackling hens, using his personal fortune to buy themselves all sorts of pretty things while he was ignored. In fact, I remembered what *I* was like when I was a girl back in Vilandia, and I wasn't entirely certain *I* would have been up to the task at that age. "They do not need to be maidens. My master is blind, and even the most dazzling beauty in the land would mean nothing to him. Bring twelve who are willing and competent regardless of age, and I will examine them. I will select one from them who is suitable, if any are suitable at all. If one is suitable to me and acceptable to my master, then I will serve you until my master passes. If not, I will not."

"I will do so, Wench of Woe. Expect me to return within three days," he replied, then turned his horse and began to ride down the hill. His retainers followed him.

"Bah. I will not be fawned over by some child," Buntaro growled.

"Never fear, master, I will select the oldest one he brings."

"The oldest?"

"Yes - old and wrinkly, and preferably quite crotchety," I replied, and grinned. "Someone needs to keep you on your toes while I'm gone."

Buntaro grinned, then burst out laughing. I sat next to him, and carefully refilled his teacup as he chuckled, gazing blindly out at the sea.

The Ocean - Twenty-Seven.

Marilith chuckled in my ear. *"I'm afraid, Sasha, that there is an enormous difference between being given command, and commanding."*

I suppressed a sigh, looking over General Morita. He was a stout older man in his fifties, broad and stocky, his legs bowed from years of being in the saddle. He wore a long, scowling moustache that ran past the corners of his lips to the bottom of his jaw, and matched the hard expression on the rest of his face. His armor wasn't the fine, ornate and unmarked armor worn by Lord Midoro, but bore the scratches and dings of many a fight. He was experienced, he was skilled, he had the full respect of all the troops beneath him, and he had utterly rejected my plan. The atmosphere in the large pavilion tent we had set up near his army was quite heated, despite the chill morning breeze that rolled down from the nearby mountains. On the low table before us was a detailed map and a simple diagram - the map detailing my plan, and the diagram detailing his. We sat just on opposite sides of the table, kneeling on the pads the servants had provided, but in truth, we were leagues apart.

"Your plan is that of a schoolmaster, who assumes the loyalty of his troops will never waver. You fail to take into account that the press of battle may make some hesitate, some run, and some even switch sides. Such is the nature of war here in our lands, Wench of Woe," Morita said, using the name that had again become mine.

I shook my head, tossing my ponytail. "Whereas yours, Lord Morita, will do little more than get a few thousand killed, and hold off the enemy for another few weeks. My master said that a defensive war cannot be won - only by going on the offense can one insure victory."

Morita ground his teeth for a moment, obviously chafing badly under the notion of not only being commanded by a foreigner, but by a woman at that. "I agree, Wench of Woe. However, your plan will not work. The defenses of Hibeki Castle are too strong to break, the lands well fortified, and the troops quite prepared. We must wait until they have begun to move, then attack them here, on the plain outside Hibeki Valley," he said pointing to his diagram with a stubby finger. "We can drive them back into the valley, and they will be forced to regroup on their own lands, and try again another day."

"Until they gain reinforcements in a few weeks as the troops of the other clans join them, at which point they will overwhelm us and wipe us out. The spring rains have passed, and their allies' armies are on the move."

Morita ground his teeth, fuming. "If you were not Lord Midoro's favored one I..." he said, and struggled to control himself.

"You would probably kill me," I finished. "And you chafe under the yoke of a foreigner. And a

woman," I said, looking at him.

The veins in Morita's temple throbbed, and his face was livid.

"On the other hand, if I were a man and a Palomean, I would be highly insulted that you refused my commands and would simply kill you, General, then do my best to lead what few of your troops might remain loyal thereafter, and probably lose. Either way, one of us dies, probably both, and eventually, the war is lost."

Morita exploded. "The war was lost twenty years ago, when our lord rejected Lord Buntaro's advice! The best any of us can hope for is at least an honorable death!"

"That's not good enough for me, General," I said, and picked up the map on which I'd drawn my battle plans. "You say that my plans are those of a schoolmaster - by that, I take it you mean someone who may be very experienced in the theories of war, but little experienced in its practice. And with that, I must agree. Regardless of whether or not my plan will work, it is the plan of someone who is inexperienced." I held the map out before me, then slowly, deliberately, tore it in half.

Morita gaped at me as I tossed the pieces aside. I picked up the general's diagrams, and held them before me. "Your plan is admittedly that of a man who does not think he can win, and is hoping to simply hold back the enemy as best he can, and pray something else happens that might change our luck. And we both know that's a fool's hope," I said, and tore them in half the same way, tossing the pieces aside. "We both have the same goal - we want our lord to win. You and I are not enemies, general, we are allies. Let's stop fighting each other, and instead put our heads together, and come up with a new plan that will allow us to win."

"I... I expected you to reject my plans, but I hardly expected you to reject your own," Morita said after a moment.

"And you hardly expected to be commanded by a woman, either, but it's as my father said - life is full of surprises," I said, and smiled. "Now... We see the beast before us, and it is preparing to charge. How might we trick it into turning, that we might sink our lance into its side?"

Morita sat back, trying to gather himself. "They would have to see a target they could not resist, or something they could not refuse to defend. They would have to be distracted."

"The Ichi river defines their valley... Gah, I tore up my only map, one moment," I said, and Morita chuckled as I retrieved the pieces, then laid them on the table before us. "Alright. Back here is the bridge which connects them to their southern allies. What if this bridge caught fire? And perhaps the fields near it?"

"They would assume something went wrong, of course - but how to do it? I thought of that myself before, but I can't see any way to get to it. It would take weeks to travel through the mountain passes to get there, and their patrols would almost certainly spot anything we sent that way. And sending a team of men swimming up the river is impossible. It's watched at several points along its length, they would be spotted. The bridge itself is also well guarded, and right now it's swollen with spring runoff from the mountains - the water is like ice."

"Hmmm... How deep and how wide is the river?"

Morita shrugged. "Fairly wide, and fairly deep. No less than three fathoms deep and fifty paces wide anywhere along here - it can't be forged in the valley, the only place it can be forged is here in the plains, downstream. That's why the bridge is critical for them. The very difficulty of crossing the river makes it not merely their main water supply but also an important part of their defenses inside the valley, and they dredge it every few years to make sure it *stays* deep." Morita shook his head. "We can't go up the river to fire the bridge, it's simply not possible. As I said - it's part of their defenses, and guarded at regular intervals along its length. Men swimming in the water would be spotted somewhere along it, and killed. Even if by some miracle their guards all somehow missed any team we sent to do it, it would take at least a day to swim there, and that river is fed by a dozen mountain streams, here, here, and here," he said, pointing at the map. "It's spring, and with all the runoff from the snow thaw, the waters are like ice, this time of year. No man could possibly make it."

I smiled. "Ignore that, for the moment. Just as a mental exercise to get our brains to thinking again, let's pretend it is possible for one person to get there. What would they need?"

Morita nodded, stroking his moustache. "Well... Just as a mental exercise, mind you... Oh, I suppose flint, steel, and probably two bottles of rice-wine. Well, no, that wouldn't burn hot enough. Hmmm... Lamp oil... No, a bottle of lamp-oil would float, and just make it easier for them to be seen..."

"A bottle of rice wine mixed with oil? Or perhaps oil weighted down with lead or some coins in the bottles so the bottles will just sink in the water?"

"The latter, I think. If they used one bottle to douse the timbers of the bridge, it could be set alight. Another bottle could be used to fire the fields. Of course, the bridge guards would spot them and kill them before any real damage was done."

"Let's pretend they don't. Let's pretend they're able to kill the bridge guards, and set the bridge and fields afire. Then what?"

"Well, of course, the Kagemoto would assume they were under attack from the south, possibly by a force that had managed to sneak by their patrols. Probably they'd send a good quarter of their troops to see."

"And if they found nothing but a burning bridge and no enemy? Would they then just ignore it, fight the fire, what?"

"Hmmm... Well, they *couldn't* simply ignore it, of course. The winds in that valley are fairly crisp this time of year, and almost certainly would eventually spread the fire. They'd *have* to start working on digging fire-breaks, and so on. The bridge would *have* to be extinguished, they need it too badly. And probably some sort of temporary bridge quickly built, while the bridge is being repaired... Hmmm... Too much work for just their peasants alone. They'd *have* to use their soldiers, they'd have no choice. Easily half their army could be tied up trying to control the blaze, if it started around midnight. It would be dawn before they'd probably have things under control again. And, of course, they'd be ripe for a surprise attack," Morita said, then shrugged. "But, of course, it's impossible..." Morita paused, thinking. "Hmmm... This mental exercise of yours was a good idea. I wonder if we *could* set up some kind of diversion like that..."

"Actually, general, I can set up *precisely* that diversion. And, I think I can time it to happen right

around midnight, tonight. The question is, can you have our forces ready to take advantage of it in the morning?"

Morita shook his head. "How? With assassins? Heh. Despite what you may have heard of them, Wench of Woe, they're still men. Don't believe that 'superhuman' drivel they spread around about themselves, I've killed them myself, they bleed and die just as easily as any other man. The river is simply too cold. To make it, they would have to be in icy water for hours, breathing through a tube, and trying to sneak along the banks, staying underwater as they passed guards... No, they'd be caught and killed. It's just not possible."

"No, not with assassins. I'll do it myself," I said, rising and turning to one of the servants. "My robe, please."

"Yes, my lady," the servant replied, stepping to the rear of the pavilion.

Morita shook his head. "It's not possible - you'll simply die."

I smiled, laying my robe over my arm once the servant brought it. Only Buntaro knew I was magical - everyone else simply thought I was a cocotte, trained as Buntaro's successor in the Art of War. I didn't disillusion them of that. "I can do it, general. Meet me by the river where it passes near our camp, and bring the weighted oil bottles, flint and steel, all in a bag. Oh - and make the steel a file, please, it'll be easier to strike a stream of sparks."

"But-"

"General, I *can* do it. Send a few scouts into the hills, and tell them to watch for distant fires along where the bridge is around midnight. If I succeed, they can report back to you, and you can position our army to launch an attack come dawn. If I succeed, we gain everything, at the risk of only me and a handful of scouts. If I fail, you can still proceed with your plan anyway, and you've lost nothing but a few scouts and a little cocotte who over-spoke herself."

Morita gazed at me for a long moment, thinking, then shook his head. "No, you don't strike me as an idiot. Inexperienced in war, perhaps, but not an idiot. And I doubt Lord Buntaro would have trained you if you were. If you say you can do it, then you can - even if *I* don't understand how, you still might succeed. Buntaro's skills border on sorcery, I've been told... Perhaps he's taught you a secret I don't know, and you're sworn to not share as you're a master of his art. No matter. If Buntaro were here and told me you could do it, I'd believe him. It stands to reason I should believe *you* when you tell me the same," Morita said, and nodded firmly. "I'll position our army today, and simply wait for the smoke in the morning. If you fail and are caught, you'll be killed - but if the gods are kind, they won't catch you, and we'll win," he said, and grinned. "And if we *do* win, I will personally kow-tow before my entire army, kiss your feet, and swear never to doubt you again."

"General Morita, if this plan works and we do win, I *insist* you continue to doubt me and argue with me. I'd never have come up with it if you hadn't," I said, then grinned. "But you can still kiss my feet, if you wish."

Morita burst into laughter, then rose to his feet, bowing to me. "I'll go make the necessary preparations. How soon will you be ready?"

I smiled, bowing in return. "Perhaps half an hour. Just bring the oil, flint and steel in a bag at the river, and I'll do the rest."

"You don't have to start here, we could ride up closer to their territory before you have to begin swimming."

"I'll need time to meditate and focus my *chi* now, and time to adjust to the coolness of the water," I lied smoothly, and smiled again.

Morita nodded. "I suppose you would. Alright, I'll meet you by the river," he said, bowed again, then left the tent.

I shoed out the servant, then sat and pulled off my boots and gloves. I looked down to myself, and willed the scales to go away. A moment of sharp pain later, I was naked again. Of course, I was nearly always naked, they just didn't know the scales I wore weren't some kind of magical, skin-tight armor - it

was actually a part of my skin. The six large scales that ran over my groin were actually a part of me, and despite how inconvenient they were at times, they were necessary to maintain the ruse. It was fortunate I was able to cover my nipples in scales and also shape and merge the scales over my mons and the cleft of my labia to actually be seamless, like armor, or the ruse would be obvious to everyone. Still, the cleft of my scale-covered buttocks and the sway of my scale-covered breasts often drew attention in camp, and whispered comments that I pointedly ignored.

After a reasonable length of time, I rose and slipped on my robe, then walked outside. The soldiers eyed me in curiosity as I walked to the river, but said nothing. The word of what I'd done to Midoro's two retainers had spread, of course, and none wished to challenge me.

I reached the river, and saw Morita waiting for me. He held out the sack, and I took it. It was fairly heavy, and a quick glance inside revealed it contained what I asked - two large bottles of lamp-oil, apparently weighted, a flint, and a steel file. I nodded wordlessly, slipping off my robe and letting it drop to the ground. Morita stared - as did all the soldiers near, really, but I ignored it. Without hesitation, I walked straight into the water. Morita was right - it was ice-cold mountain run-off. But a moment's concentration later and my belt compensated for it, the water feeling comfortable to me. I dived beneath the water, down to the bottom of the river, and willed myself to change.

The pain was again very intense - but a heartbeat later, I was again in my mermaid form. The pressure on my ears eased, as three fathoms was nothing for a mermaid. I began swimming up-river, grinning broadly. *"How do I look?"* I chittered in the language of the mer-folk.

"The same as you did in the ocean," Marilith replied. *"Your forms seem to be very stable and repeatable. The enchantment is a finely-made one, it's simply flawed because the creators did not understand your biology, and did not understand the precise theories of magic your people do to bypass this problem."*

"That's not what I meant, but it's good to know," I replied, grinning underwater.

"You should probably surface and wave, or something. Most humans can't swim underwater for this long, the soldiers along the banks are beginning to get nervous."

I nodded, rising to the surface, and poked my head and shoulders out of the water. The soldiers along the bank pointed and cheered.

"How's the water, my lady of Woe?" Morita yelled.

"Bracing!" I shouted back, and after taking another breath, I dropped below the surface again. I kept my tail down until I was near the bottom of the river - no need to reveal my secret to an entire army.

I surfaced every now and again, just to let them know I was still alive, and soon I noticed that General Morita had the army moving. After seeing me stay underwater for *quite* a long time and seeing me swim the river as fast as a man could run, it seemed he was convinced that I really *could* make it. I then got down to the serious business of swimming - I had a rather long way to go, and I had to be there on time.

The Spider - V.

Kyrie concentrated, holding her little medallion in her hands, then looked up. "That way," the child said, pointing, and I nodded. Drawing the tulwar Eddas had obtained from a dead guardsman of the city, I resumed hacking a path for us through the jungle. The others followed, resuming their conversation.

The jungles to the west of the Inland Sea stretched only for a hundred leagues, or so the Great Mage said. Beyond was arid scrubland, and beyond that, desert sands. Spring here was an interesting

experience - chill at night and in the morning, the temperature swiftly rose towards noon until the child had to remove most of her outer garments against the heat - after the first day, Eddas had simply cast a spell over the child. A spell of adaptation, she said it was, and it seemed to work - the child thereafter was comfortable in a light dress regardless of the chill of morning or the heat of afternoon. The Great Mage and her companion, Joy, seemed to already have the same magical protection against the extremes of temperature. I, of course, simply did not care.

The strange forests about us were filled with endless varieties of life - countless multicolored birds, snakes, lizards, and endless insects of all descriptions. Many times Joy would warn the child not to approach an insect or snake simply because it looked interesting. After all, they might be poisonous. I knew the child was in no danger, however. With a giantess and a Great Mage watching over her, she had little to fear from anything.

The Great Mage had been right - I was, truly, connected to the earth, somehow. My prolonged absence from it as we had crossed the Inland Sea only made me more aware of this connection. I could feel the earth beneath my feet, feel myself drawing strength and sustenance from it. I did not understand it. Yet, I found I did not care. A greater thought pressed on my mind.

I knew we were near my beloved. She traveled openly on what passed for roads, here - paralleling trails of dirt through the jungle, the marks of ages of wagon and cart-wheels. She was, I guessed, flushed with her victory over the nameless port-city, and her knight's skeletal steed carried the two of them swiftly down the roads, through the jungle, and towards the desert beyond. Though she traveled more swiftly, we followed the direction the child indicated, a more direct path. And, we were all going to the same place, it seemed. Soon, I would be with her. Soon...

"Why did you have that water-elemental take the boat back to the bottom of the sea, Grampa?"

"Well, my little darling, unfortunately, all the people of that town were quite dead - murdered, in fact. We had no further need of that ship, but I could hardly leave it there. Eventually, whoever rules these lands would find out about these killings and the mysterious empty elven ship, put two and two together and come up with five - they would assume the elves across the Inland Sea were responsible, and they weren't," Eddas replied, then smiled. "Besides, my little darling, that ship wasn't mine to begin with. By Hyperborean law, custom and tradition, it belonged to the sailors who sailed her, and went down with her. The respectful thing to do was to return that ship to it's rightful owners - so I did. For the same reason, I had another elemental bury those poor people in the town. We Hyperboreans had a great deal of respect for the dead in my day, and the revived Hyperborean race of your mothers has an even greater respect than we did, as their entire race was quite literally fathered by a liche, and born of the wombs of liches. You'll learn more about this as you grow up."

"And they were all dead, Grampa?"

Eddas nodded to the child seated behind her on the invisible steed. "Yes, unfortunately. It appears the necromancer who created our friend, Goodman Bones, came through and killed them all just because she needed supplies. Perhaps she didn't wish to bother with trying to trade. Or, given that she's traveling with a skeleton horse and an undead companion, she might have thought they'd simply kill her out of hand, and decided it was too dangerous to try... But, the former seems more likely. Dark elves aren't a very nice people, I'm afraid, and a convicted necromancer is usually one who's been associating with goblins, and they aren't very nice either. I would imagine our Mistress Brionnach is *quite* an unfriendly person."

The child scratched her head in confusion. "How can someone so mean and terrible make someone so nice like Goodman Bones?"

Eddas smiled. "The explanation's a bit complicated dear, but suffice it to say that she's quite skilled at sorcery, but lacks the degree of training I've given your mother and the others of the Second Generation. She literally did not know what she had done when she made him."

"Oh..." Kyrie said, thinking. "What did they look like? The people of the town, I mean?"

"Well, they looked like pretty much every Mysantian I've ever seen, Kyrie. Much like you and the other Hyperboreans back home, they were dark of skin, black hair, dark eyes. But, of course, they're Mysantians, not Hyperboreans. Their hair was straight, where the hair of Hyperboreans is curly. Also, they're a bit lighter than us, their noses are a bit shorter, and they aren't quite as tall. It was particularly noticeable in their men. When I first came through Mystantia nearly two thousand years ago, I stood easily a head taller than any man of their nation. Only a few came close to my height - strong and powerful warriors, and a few others."

"Oh, okay," Kyrie said, hugging Eddas. "Maybe we'll meet some live ones and I can see what they look like for myself."

Joy nodded. "Very interesting... Do you suppose the Mysterians might be related to Hyperboreans, Old Man?"

Eddas shrugged. "It's hard to say, really. I first met them almost two thousand years ago, and back then they shared almost nothing with our people. Their language was different, their culture was different... Everything. Of course, I was probably the only member of my race to ever have gone that far east - they'd never even heard of Hyperboreans, themselves. It can't be denied they had a love of haggling, though, so I suppose it's possible," Eddas replied, then stroked her chin for a moment, thinking.

"Well, Joy, simple mathematics shows that all humans are related. At some point in the past, there must have been one male and one female human. I suppose that ages before our people developed a written history, it's quite possible that our two people were one. Perhaps they were a smaller tribe that went eastwards from the Occidanic Forest, and over time their hair became straighter, their noses became a bit shorter and their lips a bit thinner. No matter - they are their own people, today, and have their own culture. I saw quite a few elven goods in the town... Fabrics, tools, and the like. It's likely the people of that town and others along the Inland Sea were quite used to dealing with the elves from the other side of the Inland Sea - if so, it's possible my appearance might not be *too* startling to the Mysterians of today," she said, then paused again.

"You know, it dawns on me that the elves and the people of the Southlands are much alike - very fair of skin and hair, with the hair tending to be straight. If these people *are* descended from a wandering tribe of Hyperboreans from prehistory, it's entirely possible they picked up some elvish blood as they passed eastwards, beyond the Inland Sea. That would explain why their hair is straighter, their skin a bit lighter, and all that. Conversely, it's entirely possible that *our* people came from *them* - we might have been one of *their* wandering tribes who came westwards, and they later grew lighter as they mingled with the occasional elven traveler from across the inland sea." Eddas grinned broadly. "My! How very fascinating! Thank you very much, Joy! And thank you, too, Kyrie!"

Kyrie blinked. "For what, Grampa?"

Joy chuckled. "Dear, you and I have just handed your grampa a puzzle it will take him at least a century of research to unravel - he's really quite the stuffy old scholar at heart."

"I am *not* stuffy," Eddas snorted, her nose in the air, but this only caused Kyrie to burst into giggles.

The Ocean - Twenty-Eight.

It was easy to slip by the river patrols during the day - I could simply look through the water and see them. At night, however, I had to be more careful. I could stay submerged for over an hour, but I didn't want to push it. I might *need* that breath. So, I would quietly surface in the middle of the river about every half an hour, just my face out of the water, take a breath, and slip below the waters again. Fortunately, Marilith could see far better at night than I could, and her link still allowed her to concentrate and see the area nearby me.

"I am starving," I grumbled in the language of the mer-folk, shortly after nightfall.

"There appears to be several crayfish just ahead. Up a bit, and to your right. It's night, they appear to be in torpor," Marilith whispered.

"Ah! Lovely," I replied, seeing them in the moonlight that filtered down from above. They were easy to catch, and their tails pried off with a twist. Rather a rude way to wake them up, but I was *quite* hungry. After a dozen, I felt better, and moved on again.

It was painstaking work, and quite tiring to boot. While I could swim faster than any human possibly could, I still had a limited time to get where I needed to go. Swimming or running, it still was a long way, and the current was against me. I wondered if I would make it...

"How am I doing?"

"You're nearly there. Stay down, if you can, there's a patrol near you on the road that runs along the river."

I did so, gliding silently along the bottom of the river.

An age passed, or what felt like one, then Marilith spoke again. *"Stop. You're under the bridge."*

I stopped, looking up, and could see a huge blackness against the stars above me, with flickering light to the sides on each bank of the river - torches, where the guards stood.

"I see two guards on each side of the bridge. They appear to be armed with bows, and wearing banded armor."

I nodded, rising to the surface and setting the bag on the bank near the water. Summoning my lance to my grip at a thought, I silently slipped from beneath the bridge. After swimming a few yards off, I used my tail to raise me out of the water, aiming carefully with my lance.

There was an enormous difference between an inexperienced mermaid trying to hit an island goat while on her knees, and an experienced mermaid trying to hit a man while doing a tail-stand in the water, her element - particularly when that mermaid had a few years of training from a master at using her lance to begin with.

The monodont lance flew straight and true, impaling the first guard through the chest. He let out a short scream, his bow dropping from his fingers as he collapsed. I slipped beneath the water again, summoning the lance to my grip at a thought.

"He's dead. The others are moving along the bridge, looking for you. They saw the direction your lance hit from, but didn't see you. Go to the other side, their backs will be to you."

I nodded. I could hear the confused shouting above me as I slipped beneath the bridge again, near the bottom of the river. Rising up to the surface again, I raised my lance, aimed carefully, and threw. The next one tumbled from the bridge, splashing into the water and sinking as I quickly dived to avoid their arrows.

"A monster!" one of the guards screamed.

"They apparently saw your tail," Marilith observed with a chuckle.

"Let me know when I can surface again," I replied, summoning my lance to my grip again.

"One of them is fleeing, the other is facing away from you. Now!"

I rose, spearing the third while his back was to me. The fourth had a long way to run to the castle - I decided to let him go, and get to work.

After recovering the bag and changing back into a human, I began trotting along the bridge, emptying the contents of the first bottle across its wooden planks. Pulling out the flint and tinder, I started trying to spark the oil alight.

"Sasha, use one of the torches beside you, it will be easier."

"Oh! I didn't think of that," I said, tossing the flint and file aside and trotting over to the nearest torch-holder at the side of the bridge. "Sorry, I'm very nervous."

"And use your belt to adapt to the flames," Marilith replied.

"Why?"

"Humor me. You're naked and alone in enemy territory splashing lamp-oil everywhere, knowing my luck, you'll burn yourself."

I grinned and did as she asked, the warmth of the torch-flame on my skin fading to nothing. Nodding, I held the torch against the oil. Instantly it caught, the flames quickly racing along the bridge. I looked around and saw the fields, then started trotting towards them with the second bottle.

"Sasha, use your scales, particularly on the bottom of your feet. There's bamboo nearby."

"So?"

"Bamboo shoots are like little wooden daggers, Sasha."

"Ouch. Let's not find out the hard way if that's true," I said, and willed my scales to cover me again. Scales on the bottom of my feet were very uncomfortable to walk on, but I imagined it was better than stepping on a bamboo shoot. The fields nearby were mostly grains, and I poured out the oil bottle carefully, trying to spread it evenly around.

"Sasha, hurry up, the last guard found help, and they're coming."

"With luck, the burning bridge will hold them a moment... Got it," I said, tossing the empty bottle aside and dropping the torch into the oil. It caught with a *whoof* of flame, and I turned and dashed for the river.

A dozen guards stood on the other side, shouting to each other - it wasn't long before they noticed me, and started drawing arrows. I turned and ran along the river, arrows zipping nearby. I couldn't just run straight at them and dive in, unfortunately - they had seen me. "I do *not* want to find out whether or not my scales can stop a direct hit from one of those backed bows the Palomeans like," I muttered. "Buntaro said those things were *powerful*. Gah, the light from the fire destroyed my night vision, I'm nearly blind. Where's the- OW!" I yelped as something stabbed me in the back.

"It appears your scales can stop them, Sasha," Marilith replied, her voice showing great relief.

"Yes, but it *hurts*! A lot! Where's the river?!"

"Keep going, you're well outside their light, and their night-vision won't be any better than yours, what with the fire. A little more to your left. A little more... Straight ahead."

Arrows flew around me, but Marilith was right, the archer's night vision was lost from the light of the torches and the swiftly burning bridge, and now that I was well outside the range of the light, they couldn't see well enough to hit me. I could see the glimmer of moonlight on the water - I ran and dived in, willing myself to change back into a mermaid. I didn't know how deep an arrow could penetrate into water - probably not very deep. Still, it didn't seem worth the risk, so I stayed near the bottom, swimming swiftly downstream. Unfortunately, I was still mostly blind. Summoning my lance to my grip, I held it before me, letting the butt drag the bottom of the river to allow me to feel it and know my depth.

It was an age before I could see the river again, the moonlight from above filtering down through the water. I held my lance alongside my body, and just kept swimming. I'd done all I could - the rest was up to General Morita and his army.

I ran a hand over my back, but could only feel the tiny, transparent scales that covered my upper body

in my mermaid form. *"My back is really sore... How bad is it?"* I asked in the language of the mer-folk.

"You have a bruise just below your ribs and above your kidneys, right next to your spine. I think you'll be alright, but it looks like you'll be sore for a few days. One moment, I'm going to look behind you at the bridge..."

"Alright," I replied, and waited. I could see a slowly growing light behind me, but my back hurt too much to really realize what it meant.

"Sasha, the bridge and fields are fully alight! You did it, Sasha!" Marilith crowed. *"The blaze is huge! Before they can get enough soldiers across the river to try to work on it, it will be totally out of control!"*

"No, we did it, sister," I replied, and grinned. *"We make a great team. And we'll be even better someday, when we can work hand-in-hand."*

"I'm looking forward to it," Marilith replied, a smile in her voice.

Three days passed, and the jungle finally gave way to thinner, scattered hills, then finally to arid scrublands. Strange plants covered with spines dotted the landscape, and the going was much faster. My heart sang with anticipation of seeing my beloved again, and it was only the somber mood of the Great Mage which tempered it somewhat. I had offered the tulwar back to Eddas, as its edge was ruined by hacking through jungle undergrowth for days, but she simply repaired it with a spell and handed it back to me. "You may need it, Goodman Bones. Not all the Mysantians I ran across nineteen centuries or so were friendly, after all." I nodded, strapping the weapon about my waist and continuing on at the fore of our little group.

During a pause to rest at noon for Joy and the child, sitting beneath one of the few shade-trees in this arid scrubland, Joy spoke up. "Eddas, we've only traveled perhaps thirty leagues, and we're already beyond the jungle? I thought you said that the jungles stretched a hundred leagues from the Inland Sea?"

Eddas nodded, looking around at the arid lands that surrounded us. "They did, two millenia ago. The desert appears to have crept in a bit since then."

"What could cause that?"

Eddas shook her head. "I don't know, I'm sorry."

Joy chuckled. "Not even a theory to impress us with, Old Man?"

Eddas glowered at Joy. "I don't just make up theories off the top of my head to impress people, you know!"

"I'm sorry, Old Man - I meant that as a joke," Joy replied, reaching out to take Eddas' hand for a moment.

"I'm sorry, too, Joy," Eddas replied with a sigh, squeezing Joy's hand for a moment. "There are still many things of our world that I don't understand. Much of the science and knowledge of my day remains lost, and of what little I've found, some of it can't be verified. I don't *know* why the desert has expanded, nor have I managed to recover any theories from my day that might explain it. I can't verify my people's work against that of the dwarves - their knowledge of this simply isn't developed enough, nor do they care much about the heavens to begin with. Nor can I verify their work against that of the elves - the elves believe that the changes they occasionally notice in the planet and the cosmos are directly from the influence of the gods, and their science, such as it is, is merely the prediction of eclipses and other large events in the heavens, which they have accurate to a few hours or so. In my day, the Hyperboreans had concluded that the world was much like a vast machine, set in motion by the Creator long ago. Though the gods could manipulate certain events if they chose, causing a volcano here or a storm there or an earthquake somewhere else... Well, for the most part, the Divine Compact limits them. But, I can't find confirmation of that. For example, do you remember a few years ago when I took you to the Bright Sea?"

Joy rolled her eyes. "Yes. I thought it might be fun, but you spent days standing on the beach, just casting spells to take measurements of the sea."

"Well, I was doing that because I was trying to measure the distance across the Bright Sea to Vilandia to within half an finger. And I discovered that it hadn't shrunk - or, at least, it hadn't shrunk enough for me to notice."

"Was it supposed to?"

"If the theories of my day were correct, yes. The distance between Hyperborea and Vilandia should have shrunk about a hand, because this part of the continent is moving westward. That's what caused the Iron Mountains to form, and the Sunless Sea beneath them, and the Inland Sea - or so the theory goes. Much like pushing a cloth across a table and watching the middle buckle, our part of the continent is slowly being pushed westwards by titanic forces beneath the earth, acting slowly over the course of aeons. These forces pushed up the Iron Mountains, snuffed the volcanoes that formed the Sunless Sea, and the movement of our part of the continent created the Inland Sea. The verification of this theory is, of course, measuring the movement. But, we didn't *know* Vilandia existed in my day. It was theorized that another land existed out there, possibly several others. We'd gotten verification that there was land from certain spells we'd developed, and we were certain how far away it was and what direction it was in. But before we got around to sending ships to explore the sea, the kings of Hyperborea began warring over who might be Emperor. That kept us distracted for centuries, all the way up until the end. Well, today I know that the land those early researchers had detected through sorcery was Vilandia. But, repeating their experiments shows our continent, Antonica, isn't any closer to Vilandia - and we should be, by about a hand. Thus, the only conclusion is the theories of plate tectonics from my day were wrong, and the elves are right. But they *can't* be!"

Joy smiled wryly. "Have you considered that they might be?"

"Yes, several times. If I hadn't mastered the Deep Magic, I'd believe my people were wrong. But, I *have* mastered the Deep Magic, Joy. I *know* the elves' theories of how the world works can't be right. The gods simply *can't* be directly manipulating every facet of the world, they don't have the energy. Gods are gods, and are finite. Immensely greater than us, yes - but still finite, and limited by the Divine Compact. Only the Creator is infinite. And before you ask, no, the Creator isn't directly manipulating the world, either. You see, the mathematical structure of the Divine Compact is such that..." she said, then paused. "Well, I won't bore you with the details, but trust me, they're not," Eddas said, then shook her head. "No matter - the simple fact is that the Hyperborean theories of plate tectonics must be true, but I can't confirm them. And, our theories regarding the moon I can't confirm, either. It's as though for two thousand years, everything has stayed the same. Or very nearly so, at any rate."

Joy nodded. "Aaaah. So *that's* why you were so frustrated measuring the moon's cycle last year. I wondered what you were on about."

"Yes. I told you I wanted to learn about these things ten years ago, and I've been studying them off and on since then, comparing measurements I make with those that I've managed to recover from the ruins. Things should have changed from the time I came though here last, of course - but not the way they have. Two thousand years ago or thereabouts should have marked the beginning of a cooling period on our world, leading to an ice age in fifty thousand years or so. The jungles *should* have stayed the same, or grown. The desert *should* have stayed the same, or shrunk. But it hasn't - the opposite has. Two thousand years ago, the desert was growing. And, it still is. For some damnably inexplicable reason, our world has stayed precisely the same for two thousand years."

"Perhaps the Great War of Devastation had something to do with it?" Joy offered.

Eddas sighed, rising to her feet. "No, Joy. If anything, the clouds of dust from the blasts should have hastened the process by dimming the sun, like clouds in the sky cool the lands beneath. But, sadly, it must be admitted that Hyperborea is quite a small land compared to the rest of the world, and the war that reduced my people and civilization to the pages of long-forgotten history books was literally nothing to the world as a whole." Eddas gestured, summoning her invisible steed again. "Let's be off, we've rested long enough."

I watched, thinking, as Eddas mounted and Joy lifted the child up behind her. I was mad, and I knew it - yet, even the dreams of a madman might be of some use to the Great Mage. *"The sands grow because the gods wish it, I think... Or, at least, some do..."*

"What makes you say that, Goodman Bones?" Eddas asked, looking down at me.

"I am mad... And I had a dream of madness... before meeting you, as I crawled broken and alone through the wilderness... I had a dream of seeing the goddess of my people... Yet, perhaps that dream has meaning for you that it does not for me... She said the owl, the rabbit, the ocean and the mountain... All walk beside her to combat the sand and the spider... To save her people... To change the future of the world... I think... I think that somehow this will happen at a place she called the Temple of the Sun..."

"Which is precisely where we are headed, as you know," Eddas replied, nodding. "You are not mad, my friend, you are simply confused. This will pass. Nor was that a dream of madness - it was a vision. But in time, you will understand that, as well."

The child looked up to Eddas as she sat behind her atop the invisible steed, clinging to Eddas with her chubby little arms. "Do you understand it, Grampa?"

"A good question, Old Man," Joy said, looking to Eddas. "Do you?"

Eddas nodded. "I believe so, though we appear to be missing one member for our little group to match Goodman Bones' vision. We will have to wait and see," she replied. "Now come - we've quite a ways to travel, and it only gets more difficult from here on out."

I nodded, and after the child had again oriented us, I took the lead again, leading our little group ever eastwards.

The Ocean - Twenty-Nine.

"What a glorious woman you are!" General Morita crowed, bowing to me from his saddle.

"Thank you, General," I replied with a smile, bowing in return as I sat astride my own horse. The attack on the Kagemoto at dawn following my firing of their bridge and fields had gone very well. I'd spent three days resting and healing in my tent while that part of the fighting was going on - Morita had asked me if I wanted to view the head of the enemy clan-leader, but I had politely declined. Now, we were on the offensive, slowly working on annihilating the clans which had allied against Lord Midoro. Over the course of the last three months, I'd learned through hard experience that though my scales couldn't be easily penetrated, the flesh beneath could be badly bruised - a sword-cut to the leg left me limping for days, and an arrow-strike to my left breast nearly caused me to faint from the pain. I'd never known how much control Buntaro had used in his strikes when he was training me until I was actually struck by people trying to kill me. Still, there wasn't much I could do, other than be careful. The gleam of my scales had become more than simply an easy way to identify me for our soldiers - I had literally become a kind of banner the soldiers rallied around and struggled to defend, just as much as they defended General Morita. Time and again I would move to areas in a battle where our men needed to fight harder, and my simple presence fighting at their side gave them the additional will to fight and win.

Morita and I had worked together closely these last three months, as well. My 'schoolmaster' plans would be examined by him for flaws - and, slowly, I improved my tactics, as he improved his. Together, we were probably the finest pair of generals that had ever been seen in Palome. Unfortunately, our enemies were well aware of it.

Time and again, the enemy would trust towards wherever I was positioned, trying to kill or capture me

- preferably the latter. Time and again, this meant they would be defeated, wasting their men in futile attempts to attack our center while our flanking troops were able to surround them and crush them. And that was precisely what had happened today, in this battle. The battle had begun just before noon, and now appeared to be over little more than three hours later. The enemy was routed, and Morita was showering me with praise once again.

"Ah! It's truly a tragedy I'm already married," Morita said, grinning. "I like my wife, however, so I'd hardly ask her to commit suicide. Probably I'd simply send her off to a nunnery so I could be free to marry you. What do you think?"

I smiled again. "General, as much as you and I argue, I'm afraid we'd be at each other's throats in three days if we lacked an enemy before us we could work on instead."

Morita burst out laughing. "So true! Still, I suppose I should keep my wife. After all, she can cook quite well. Can you?"

"My sole failing," I replied, bowing my head briefly. "I can't even boil rice properly."

A rider approached from the battle front, swiftly galloping beside us and drawing his steed to a sliding halt. "My lord, my lady - the enemy is fully routed!"

"So I see," I replied, looking over the battle.

"Make our new camp on that hill there, commander," Morita said, pointing. "Execute the enemy wounded as usual, we've little time to bother them if we're to make it to the lowlands by next week."

"Yes, my lord!" the commander said, then turned and rode off.

I suppressed a sigh. That was another of the realities of war here in Palome - they rarely took prisoners. When they did, it was only important prisoners, and only because they wanted to torture them to death in shameful, humiliating ways to destroy the morale of their enemy.

"Well, you glorious, wonderful woman-with-but-one-failing, I do believe I've a treat in store for you this evening. That priest we picked up this morning among the stragglers from Nagachi village has turned out to be quite an excellent cook, and the men all lavish praise upon him. He's offered to cook for us, tonight. Would you like to join me?"

"I'd be delighted, General," I replied, and grinned.

An hour later, I was alone in my own pavilion, tying the knot in the sash of my robe. "How do I look?" I whispered.

"Very nice," Marilith whispered back. *"Blue is definitely your color. But why would you worry about it?"*

"Sister, it's *only* the first time in my life any man's ever asked me to dine with him."

"Hah! Morita is just being friendly, Sasha. He respects you greatly, but it would never go beyond that."

"I know, but as they say here in Palome, *'It's the principle of the thing,'*" I replied, and giggled.

I breezed out of my tent feeling quite happy, and already could smell the delicious aroma of the food from Morita's pavilion. I nodded to the guards outside his tent as they bowed to me, and walked in. Morita, who had taken the time to change out of his armor and into a more comfortable robe, smiled and bowed. "Please, my lady, have a seat here," he said, patting the pillow next to him. The old priest was carefully serving the general, and smiled as I sat beside Morita.

"Mmmm! That smells heavenly!"

"I hope you enjoy it, my lady of Woe," the old priest replied with a smile, laying a plate before me.

"*Sasha, that's puffer-fish,*" Marilith whispered.

As Morita picked up his utensils, I picked up a sliver of the fish from the fish, rice and vegetable dish before me, and popped it into my mouth. "Mmmm! Puffer-fish! I haven't had this in *ages!*"

Morita paused, a scoop of rice and fish nearly in his mouth. "Puffer fish?!"

"Yes! I used to eat it quite a bit back home," I replied, picking up another pinch of meat and popping it into my mouth. I had never mastered the use of the odd little sticks they used as utensils here in Palome, and as Buntaro had thought me a magical creature of the sea, he'd never insisted I learn.

Suddenly, and to my utter surprise, the little old priest turned and dashed out of the tent with a burst of spryness he'd not displayed before.

"That *bastard!*" Morita screamed after the priest, leaping to his feet. "*Guards! Catch him! I want him alive!*"

"What in the world...?" I wondered aloud.

Morita turned to me, his face urgent. "My lady! Stick your finger down the back of your throat so you can vomit that back up! Hurry!"

"Why on earth would I do that?"

"My lady, puffer fish is deadly poison!"

"Of course it is, General, but I'm immune to puffer fish poison. I thought you were, too, otherwise why would you serve it?"

"My lady, He told me this was *carp*! Puffer-fish has to be specially filleted, and..." he said urgently, then paused. "Wait... You're immune to puffer fish poison?"

I nodded. "Of course."

Morita simply stared.

"I wasn't trying to tell you it would be good, Sasha, I was trying to warn you it was poison," Marilith whispered, giggling. *"Unfortunately, you haven't thought of puffer fish as poison in years. Or fortunately, depending on how you look at it,"* she added, and laughed.

Three guards came into the tent, dragging the priest between two of them. His feet were bound at the ankles, and his hands were tied behind him. "My lord," the third guard said, holding out a small dagger, "we stopped him before he stabbed himself with this."

"Probably poisoned, too!" Morita snapped.

"Let me see it, please," I asked, holding out my hand. The guard handed me the knife, and I looked it

over. The blade had an oily sheen to it.

"Sea-snake and spider-venom," Marilith said after a moment, still giggling in my ear. "You're immune to those, too. Now you see why I was so thorough when you were seventeen, much as you hated me making you throw up over and over again. Of course, it doesn't matter much now, I suppose. As a mermaid, your resistance to poison is incredibly high, anyway."

I looked at the assassin. His wrinkled face showed no fear at all. His disguise had been perfect, simply because it was little more than a priest's robe and skill at acting - he really *was* old. Everyone had been fooled, even Morita. Certainly I couldn't be killed this way - but Morita could, and I wasn't certain I could win the campaign without him. I would have to do something to put a stop to this, before Morita was killed in another botched assassination attempt. Of course, it seemed likely that this attempt had been specifically *aimed* at the general, and I had foiled it through luck. Either way, this had to be stopped now.

"Guards, call Ichiba the torturer! I *will* find out who sent this scum!" Morita snapped.

"Wait! I have a better idea," I said, and rose to my feet. Walking around the table, I stood before the fake priest. Holding the knife before me, I licked off the oil from both sides of the blade, then swallowed. "Mmm... Sea-snake. Quite tasty," I said, then tossed the knife aside. "Take this message back to your clan-leader, assassin: I am the Wench of Woe, and I am my enemies' doom. Don't try to kill me or my friend, General Morita. You won't succeed, and all you'll manage to do is annoy me. And if you annoy me, when I'm through destroying the enemies of Lord Midoro, I'll turn around and do the same to you. If you and the rest of the assassin clans want to survive, then stay the hell out of my way. Do we understand each other?" I asked.

"Yes, Wench of Woe," the assassin replied calmly. How he could be so cool in the situation he was in, I did not know. I envied him. I was only calm because it was only *now* - *right this moment* - that I could see in his eyes that I was looking at someone who would kill me *not* in the heat of battle or to survive, but *simply because he'd been paid to do so*. The deadly calm of his gaze was truly chilling.

I looked to the guards. "Take him out of our camp and cut him loose, he can't take my message to his clan if we kill him."

The guards bowed, dragging the assassin away, and I returned to the table. Sitting down before my plate, I resumed eating again, hoping I wasn't trembling with nervousness.

Morita sat beside me, looking at me. "Are you certain you'll be alright, my lady?"

"Quite certain, General. Oh - and the puffer fish is quite delicious," I replied, and managed a smile.

Morita grinned wryly. "I'll take your word for it. How's the tea?"

I picked up my cup and sniffed it.

"The tea is fine," Marilith whispered. "Apparently all that was poisoned was the food. Puffer-fish kills over the course of several hours when eaten, that would have been plenty of time for the assassin to make his escape."

I sipped at the tea, and smiled. "The tea is fine, General. Have some."

"Since it seems that's all that's edible, I believe I will," Morita replied, and poured himself a cup. He sipped at the tea in silence for a long moment, watching me eat, then finally shook his head. "What a fool I am," he muttered.

"Mmm? How so?"

"I thought to perhaps bring you in here tonight, and at least show you the basics of using utensils, like you were some mere barbarian woman Lord Buntaro had found and trained and yet somehow failed to teach table manners to. What I fool I was. You're no mere woman - you're more like a guardian spirit,

watching over us all. With you at our lead, we cannot fail."

I smiled. "Perhaps, General, but our enemies are a bit more pragmatic. This poisoning attempt wasn't aimed at me, it was aimed at *you*. They know that if they could strip me of you, I would have a much harder time defeating them. Don't underestimate yourself, General. You are just as necessary to Lord Midoro's victory over his enemies as I am. More so, really. Most of the troops we command are under your personal banner," I said, then made a face. "Bleah. I think I'll have some more tea. Despite what I told that assassin, sea-snake and spider venom does *not* taste good."

Morita did a double-take, then burst out laughing as I sipped at my tea. "Oh, what a truly *glorious* woman you are! I'd give my *stones* to have you as my wife!"

"I'm afraid, General, if you did that, I wouldn't have much use for you as a husband after," I said, and joined him in laughter.

The Ocean - Thirty.

The spoils of war were great, indeed. Bars of silver, ingots of gold - all poured into the treasury of Lord Midoro. By fall, the last of his enemies had either been utterly crushed, or had worked out ruinous peace treaties. I was, literally, a household word, and feared throughout the land. Yet, I remained who I was at heart, and the day when General Morita presented me with one of the spoils of war as a gift, a silver ladies' hand-mirror, I realized I had remained who I was in body, as well.

I sat now in my pavilion. Messengers came and went from Lord Midoro's castle somewhat regularly, and we were catching up on the latest developments, waiting to see if the last peace treaties had been signed or if we would war again. Sitting there, in my scales, gloves and boots, I gazed at my own reflection, stroking my hairline with a gloved finger. "Not a single gray hair... And the color has not faded..."

"It's as I told you when you were twenty-one, Sasha," Marilith whispered. "You are, in truth, no longer human. For all intents and purposes, you are a red-headed mermaid who can grow legs when she needs. And mer-folk live a very, very long time."

"But not fully mer-folk, either. My ears are still round, my groin is still that of a woman, not a mermaid..."

"The enchantment was, unfortunately, imperfect. Or fortunately, depending upon how you look at it. Many humans would give anything to have your fate."

"Perhaps... I suppose I should be happy, but... For some reason... This frightens me."

"It comforts me, Sasha. It lets me know that there is still time, and you still may someday arrive in time to save me."

I sighed, putting down the mirror. "I've wasted years here. Nearly ten years. I should have been searching for you."

"It was hardly wasted, Sasha. You grew into a woman on Round Island. And here, you have grown into a warrior - perhaps the most feared warrior in the land of Palome. The ocean whispers to me, and tells me all this was necessary. It was a time of growing, and a time of learning. And now, the ocean whispers, and says that this time of growing and learning has ended."

"Ended?"

Marilith started to reply, but I held up a hand, hearing footsteps approaching outside my tent. "My lady," General Morita called, "there is a message for you."

I set the mirror aside, walking over to the tent flap and pulling it open. "What is it, my friend?"

Morita held out the scroll to me. "Lord Buntaro has died."

I sighed, my eyes misting as I opened the scroll and looked over the carefully written calligraphy of the message.

"He passed peacefully in his sleep two weeks ago, while we were subduing the Hebika clan. Lord Midoro says he understands your agreement with him is effectively at an end. He offers you anything you wish, my lady, if you will continue on in his service. The last of his enemies has made peace with him, but he would truly treasure a leader such as yourself in his service."

"No. My master is gone, and my debt here is paid. I must continue on, my friend. My sister is waiting for me," I said, and looked to the guard beside me. "Fetch me my horse."

"Yes, my lady," the guard replied, and trotted off.

Morita nodded. "She has waited ten years, my lady... Are you certain she is even still alive?"

I sighed. I'd told him enough of my journey during the last nine months for him to understand I sought my sister in a distant land, but not any more than that. The truth was something I had preferred to keep to

myself, as the truth would have shown Buntaro to be a liar. Now, he was gone - it didn't matter. "She has waited far longer than that, my friend. She has waited for me for two thousand years."

Morita gaped as the guard brought my horse up. We hadn't known if we'd be fighting on or heading home, so my horse was already saddled. I needed nothing from here, so there was nothing to pack. All I needed was water, and my horse already had a canteen strapped to the saddle. I swung into the saddle, summoned my lance to my grip, then looked down at Morita. "Goodbye, my friend. I will miss you."

General Morita bowed deeply. "Farewell, Wench of Woe. I will miss you, too."

I turned and rode away, the fire-red ponytail of my hair streaming behind me, and my cheeks damp with tears.

The Spider - III.

The arid scrublands swiftly gave way to desert dunes, reaching endlessly to the horizon like a sea of sand. Little life was present here, save for the occasional lizard peeking at us from the shade of a sand dune, or the occasional snake slithering across the sands. Small vortices of dust and sand spawned during the day, whirling and dancing across the desert dunes, only to dissipate after traveling a league or two. "It's merely the heat," Eddas Ayar explained. "Sometimes an air elemental can slip through to our world from them, but it's very rare." As I did not need to eat or drink and the Great Mage summoned food and drink for his companions inside the magical shelter they rested in each night, we were able to simply follow where the child indicated, straight across the dunes, and not worry about finding water in one of the oases Eddas Ayar said were to be found here and there.

As the days passed, slowly trudging across the endless, burning sands, a sense of growing awareness filled me. Like the feeling one gets when searching for a forgotten word or phrase, the feeling of a word just at the tip of one's tongue, the feeling of knowledge being just beyond one's grasp... In a similar manner, I could feel an awareness of myself was close at hand, just beyond the grasp of my mind.

I drew strength from the earth, this much I knew. Yet, I did not draw strength from the life of the earth, but from the simple contact with the earth itself. Here, in the deep deserts where there was little life at all, I drew as much strength from the earth as I had in the jungles near the Inland Sea, or the murdered town that sat at it's shores. Only the days of separation from the earth, as I had experienced in crossing the inland sea, had drawn the strength from my body. It was not life that I drew strength from, nor was it death. It was the earth itself. The great mage said this was because my body was in contact with the earth when I awakened... Yet, comprehension of that was still beyond me.

My body was dead, and yet I moved and thought and spoke as though alive. I was neither dead nor alive... I was something else apart from those two states. A third state of existence... UnLife, the Great Mage had called it. But what was that, truly? I did not know. And yet... Somehow, I sensed that true understanding lay only just beyond the grasp of my mind.

A dream, a vivid flash... A brief vision of shadows... Amorphous shapes that fed upon each other... No sun, no sky, merely existence in a weightless void, like that of a fish in water. Drifting... Feeding... And being fed upon...

And then it was gone, and only the burning sands remained, shimmering in the heat of the sun.

I paused, gazing upwards, trying to recapture the sensation in my mind...

And my gaze lit upon something in the sky.

Eddas rode next to me, the child clinging to her as she sat behind, and Joy to their side. They stared at me as I stared upwards, and finally, Eddas spoke. "Goodman Bones? What is it?"

"Something comes, Eddas Ayar... There, in the sky..."

Eddas looked up, blinking against the sunlight, then nodded. "Joy, take Kyrie, please," she said, and slipped down from the invisible steed.

Joy reached up to the child's waist, easily lifting her from the invisible steed and setting her upon the ground. "What is it, Old Man?"

"Well, if we were near the sea, I'd say probably a roc. But we're not, so it's probably a dragon."

"What's a roc?" Joy asked, gazing upwards.

"An enormous bird distantly related to the phoenix, and about the size of a dragon. They hunt whales in the sea much like an eagle hunts fish in a lake. The Mysantians two thousand years ago told me that there are deep jungles and vast plains to the south of the deserts, and rocs occasionally hunt oiliphants there, but I digress. There's not enough food in a desert to support a roc. It has to be a dragon... Ah, yes. It's close enough to where I can see the tail, now. Definitely a dragon."

"And it's looking for us, I presume," Joy replied dryly.

"You know yourself, Joy, that coincidence is rarely coincidence when the gods are involved. It *has* to be looking for us. There's not enough food here to support a dragon, either, though they can conjure food if they need to."

"What do we do, Old Man?"

"We wait. If it decides to fight, protect Kyrie. Otherwise, leave it to me."

Joy nodded silently, taking the child to one side and standing before her, her staff at the ready. I knew not what else to do, so I drew the sword I bore at my hip. I doubted it would be of any use against the beast, but it was all I had.

Slowly the creature approached, growing larger and larger as it did so - truly, it was a dragon, and enormous in size. Its sable scales shimmered in the sunlight, and as it drew itself up for a landing before us, its titanic wings buffeted us with wind-borne sand. Joy and Kyrie coughed, but Eddas had already raised the little bolt of cloth she obtained in the town, and once the sand had settled, she drew it back down around her neck again, and flicked the sand from her garments with a gesture.

"You do not flee..." the dragon rumbled, eyeing the Great Mage.

"Should I?" Eddas replied dryly.

The dragon did not reply, but instead looked over our small group. Its eyes lit upon me, and its scaly eyebrows narrowed. *"Feh. Put away your little sword, dead man, lest I destroy you for your insolence."*

"I will not be stopped..." I replied.

The dragon hawked a moment, as though clearing its throat, then spat at me. I leapt aside, barely dodging the steaming goo it spat, but it splattered across the blade of my sword. In moments, the metal of the blade began to hiss and smoke, and then melt like ice held to flame. *"And I will not be denied,"* the dragon replied.

I dropped the swiftly melting sword, and looked up to the beast with a great deal more respect than I had a moment before.

The dragon turned its gaze back to the Great Mage, and peered down at her. *"And who are you, little elf who stands before me unafraid?"*

"I am Eddas Ayar," the Great Mage replied simply.

"Ah, that explains it. I have heard of you. My brother Karg spoke of you once."

"Then you, of course, must be Gritela the Noxious. I should have recognized you from the gleam of your scales and your resplendent beauty, which is legendary among all dragons."

The dragoness smiled. *"You speak sweetly, and kindly."*

"I speak truthfully, for your brother has spoken many times of you, and the struggles your paramours must endure to even catch your eye. Yet, you are no ordinary dragoness, who fluffs her treasure horde with the gifts your paramours bring to win your heart. Your brother has told me your hoard is of astounding size and true grandeur, each coin and trinket gathered with your own claw. Fearsome in beauty, and fearsome in battle - such is Gritela the Noxious, the Lady of Morrag Peak."

The dragoness smiled again - though her sharp-toothed grin was hardly a friendly one. *"Ah! Eddas Ayar, you speak so sweetly. It is truly a tragedy that I must kill you."*

Joy stood firm before Kyrie, but I could see her knees trembling. The dragoness was larger even than a giant, and even Joy at her full size would be little more than child-sized to the beast. Eddas, however, did not flinch a bit. "Oh? And why would you have to kill me, lovely Gritela?"

The dragoness scowled, her reply a rumble of anger. *"The Sheikh of Majapur has my hatchling, Eddas Ayar. Eight years ago, Sheikh's Grand Vizier used sorcery to sneak into my cave, and steal*

my hatchling. Now I am forced to obey, lest he kill my child. The Sheikh has ordered me to find and kill the mage that murdered those who lived in the city of Naldad, by the Inland Sea. Your tracks lead directly back there, thus you must die."

"Well, two things, gracious lady: First, I did not kill the people in that town. They were murdered by a dark elf necromancer by the name of Brionnach, who left the town by way of the roads, and thus left no tracks. Second, if you will but stay your mighty claw, I will be more than happy to recover your child for you."

The dragoness raised a scaly eyebrow, gazing at Eddas Ayar. *"You would do this for me?"*

"Of course. Your brother is a friend of mine, I could do no less for his radiantly beautiful sister."

"It was mortal trickery that cost me possession of my child, Eddas Ayar. How do I know this is not more trickery to simply slip away from me and never return?" the dragoness asked, her eyes narrowing.

"Because I am Eddas Ayar," the Great Mage replied, "and in this body, I am the Raven of Yorindar."

"The tool of a god," the dragoness rumbled.

"Exactly," the Great Mage replied - and for a brief moment, I again saw an enormous raven standing in the Great Mage's place. A brief flicker, a fleeting impression - then the vision was gone, like a shimmering desert mirage, and all I saw was again a half-elf maiden.

Joy and the child seemed to shiver for a moment, but the dragoness simply regarded the Great Mage in silence. Finally, she nodded. *"Alright, Eddas Ayar. I agree. What must I do to help you?"*

"Simply come with me to Majapur, and together, we will recover your child. I've a hidden sanctuary I can summon for my mate and my grandchild, and they can remain here in safe and cool shelter while they wait for us to return."

The dragoness nodded again. *"So be it. Summon your sanctuary, Eddas Ayar, and make whatever preparations you need to keep your mate and child safe. When you are ready, I will fly you and the dead man on my back to Majapur."*

Eddas smiled as she again produced the magic rope needed to climb up into her invisible sanctuary, as I'd seen her do many times, now. "Oh, it will hardly be necessary to bring Goodman Bones along, lovely Gritela. As you've stripped him of his only weapon and I have no other to give him, he would be quite helpless even if I *did* think a warrior would be of some use to us, which I do not. No, Goodman Bones can simply remain here while you and I recover your child," she said, and with a brief incantation, she cast the rope into the air, where one end of it clung. "Go on up, Joy, and take Kyrie with you. I'll be up in a minute. Pull the rope up after you when I'm gone so I know you'll be safe. I'll summon enough food and drink to last a few days. If I don't return before it runs out, I won't be returning."

Joy looked to Eddas, her face a mask. "Eddas, I-"

"Joy, just *do it*," Eddas snapped, her composure slipping for a brief instant. Then she sighed, and looked up to Joy. "Please, I've hardly the time or desire to argue about it right now. If I do not return, simply use the magic ring I gave you. The Spell of Returning I enchanted it with can take you and Kyrie straight home."

Joy reached out to Eddas, bending down to kiss her gently. "I wasn't going to argue, Old Man - not this time. I was just going to tell you I want you to be careful."

Eddas smiled, and they hugged for a long moment. "I will, Joy. I will." Afterwards, Joy and Kyrie climbed up into the sanctuary, and Eddas followed.

The dragoness and I did not have long to wait, and she endured the brief delay with the calm patience of an immortal. As for me, my mind was on the east, and my beloved. Though I tried to feel concerned for what might happen, I found I simply did not care. There was no other desire within me other than to

find my beloved. Even should the Great Mage die, Joy and the child return home, and I be abandoned in this desert, I cared not. My only thought was to find my beloved, and to help her. And then, she would understand.

Finally, Eddas Ayar climbed down from the sanctuary, and the rope was withdrawn within. Eddas turned to the dragoness, and smiled. "Now - where precisely is your child being held, and what magic are they using to keep you from getting at them?"

"My child is prisoner in a small keep within the palace grounds, Eddas Ayar. They bring daily rations of cattle to feed him, as they have each day for five years, but an enchantment of repulsion cast by the Grand Vizier keeps me from approaching within the reach of my sorcery to the keep, and a spell of warding keeps me from using sorcery to summon my child to my claw. I can view him only from afar, and my heart breaks each time I see him and hear his little cries."

"Hmm... How old is he?"

"He will be ten this summer, Eddas Ayar. I laid his egg after an off-season mating twenty years ago."

"Hmmm... About the size of a calf, himself. I wonder if the sultan realizes that in about a decade, he'll have something the size of a small oiliphant to feed?" Eddas replied, stroking her chin, then finally nodded. "Well, we'll discuss it more on the way there. May I mount your back, lovely Gritela?"

"Please do," the dragoness replied, lifting her wings a bit. A few moments later, Eddas Ayar had settled herself at the base of the dragon's long neck, her legs draped over the second shoulder-joint where the wings connected. The dragoness then gathered her legs beneath her, arching her back. With a mighty leap, she propelled herself into the air, her enormous wings buffeting me with flying sand as she took off into the sky.

I gazed after them in silence. I wanted to feel concerned for the Great Mage, and hope that they would succeed. Yet, I found that I could not. All my thoughts were consumed with Brionnach. All I could think was that every moment I waited here was another moment longer before I would find her. The dark part of my mind stirred, and for the longest moment, it was all I could do to keep from simply striding off

eastwards, across the burning sands.

Yet, I knew that my best hope of reaching Brionnach lay with the Great Mage and her companions. Untold dangers may lie along the path, and I was ill-equipped to deal with any of them. More, the child was able to navigate directly to where I knew Brionnach was heading, whereas all I knew to do was head east.

With an effort, I forced myself to sit on the sand, and wait. Whether I wanted it or not, my love would have to wait. I could only hope that I could retain control of myself, and wait long enough.

The blazing sun slowly sank in the sky, and eventually the heat of a hot desert day gave way to the chill of a starlit desert evening. The difference in temperature affected me little, and my gaze clung to the eastern horizon. Where was she, now? Was her elven minion still with her, or has she abandoned him, even as she did me, and taken another? Did she hunger, or thirst? Did she have blankets to keep her warm at night? I did not know. I only knew that I would find her, and help her. And then, she would understand.

"He is driven, Joy," the Great Mage had once said, "in a way that mortals simply cannot comprehend." Yet, I found that even *I* did not comprehend it. The Great Mage had told me that eventually, I would come to understand myself. And, as I sat there, gazing at the stars on the eastern horizon, I began to wonder...

"He wanted you to have this," Kiku said, holding out a small box to me.

I nodded, taking the box from her as we sat on the beach near Buntaro's house - now her house, as Buntaro had consented to marry her before he died. Quite nice of my master, I thought, but not surprising, for him. I opened the box, and saw it was a slim chain bracelet, attached to which was a tiny glass bottle with an incredibly small little cork. "What is it?"

"He said it was magic. It's sometimes used by the assassins, they hide things in it. Large things. It won't break, and the chain will never tarnish - it can't be lost if you make it tight about your wrist or ankle. He said to tell you that, he said you'd want to know that. He said you told him you'd lost your box when you came to him, whatever that meant. He said this is his gift to you to replace it. It's lucky you came back."

I held the little chain with two fingers and looked at the dangling little bottle hesitantly. After a few moments, Marilith whispered in my ear. *"It is a very straightforward set of enchantments, Sasha. A sizing enchantment to hold it to you, another enchantment that transfers what you wish to carry into or out of the bottle, and a final enchantment to render the whole invulnerable. It's very safe, don't worry, it was made by the scientific sorcery of humans, not the Wild Magic of the mer-magi. Just touch the item you want to insert into the bottle to the little cork, and will it to happen. When you want it out, just touch the cork, and will it to happen. I can't tell it's precise measurements, but I'm guessing it can hold about a hogshead of liquid."*

"Well, it will come in handy, Kiku - but it wasn't by luck I came back. There really wasn't anywhere else I could go. After having fought all the clans around here for the better part of a year, it didn't seem likely I would be able to just ride through their territory alone," I said, and chuckled as I pulled off my gloves. I held them to the little bottle, and exerted my will as I'd learned to do with my belt. They vanished from my grip, miniature versions of them appearing inside the bottle - there was plenty of room. I did the same with my boots, pulling them off and then the black silk cloth I used to hold up my ponytail, then slipped them inside the bottle the same way. Once they were in, I slipped the chain over my wrist, and willed it to fit snugly. My hair draped down over my shoulders again and down to the middle of my back, for the first time in years.

"You have scales on the back of your hands and the top of your feet?" Kiku asked, her eyes widening.

I grinned, and willed my transformation into a mermaid.

Kiku goggled at me. "He... He told me... He told me you were really a spirit of the sea... I didn't believe him!"

"He never lied, Kiku. I did, however. I told him I'd pick the oldest, wrinkliest woman there was. I didn't - I picked the gentlest and sweetest. And, as it turned out, you were also the youngest," I said, still grinning.

Kiku patted her swollen belly. "Well... He did eventually find that part out on the wedding night, though I really *did* try to do as you asked and pretend to have an old woman's voice, I really did!" she said, and giggled. "He was very happy, though, and he laughed for days and days, thinking how you'd tricked your old blind master, but done it so nicely."

"When are you due?"

Kiku smiled. "Next spring. If it's a boy, I want to name it after him. If it's a girl, though... I want to name it after you. I never would have found out how sweet and wonderful he was if it wasn't for you. I only regret we didn't have more time together."

I smiled. "I know. That's my only regret, too," I replied, and turned, starting to crawl into the surf.

"Wait! I can't name a girl after you if I don't know your real name!"

I paused just at the edge of the water, summoning my lance to my grip. "I am Sasha, the Wench of Woe," I called.

"I'll remember, Sasha!" Kiku called, standing and waving.

I looked forward again, and crawled out into the water, the waves washing over my arms and breasts. Finally, a large wave washed over my head, and with a flick of my tail, I caught the wave and was gone, back into the sea.

The Spider - II.

Two days later, Eddas Ayar had returned. She had returned with little fanfare - a brief shimmer of magic caught my eye, and suddenly she was standing beside me. Joy had been thrilled beyond measure, as was the child, and it was only after a long delay for many hugs and kisses between the three of them that our journey resumed. Now, Eddas Ayar again rode her invisible steed, the child seated behind her, and Joy striding at her side.

"So what happened, Old Man?" Joy asked, still beaming.

Eddas shrugged. "There's not much to tell, really. Most of the time for the trip was taken up in flying there. Majapur is quite a distance from here, and I've never been there before in this body, so I couldn't simply use a Spell of Returning to go there. Still, Gritela is quite an old dragon, even older than Karg. I knew that once I had dispelled the repulsion enchantment that kept her away from her child, her own sorcery would be more than sufficient to collect him safely - his name is Bofkak, incidentally, and he's quite a nice little dragon. You'd love him, Kyrie. He's got the dark indigo scales and little stubby horns of a ten-year-old, a funny little squeaky voice, and his eyes are very large and terribly cute, much like a kitten. Well, a kitten with scales and fangs and wings that's about the size of a calf and can eat an entire cow in a day, I mean," Eddas said, and Kyrie giggled as she continued. "I watched over him and kept him company while Gritela dealt with the Vizier and the Sheikh. But, much of my time on the trip there

was spent trying to convince Gritela that destroying the city afterwards was not a wise idea - an individual human may be weak compared to a dragon, but an army is more than a match for one."

"I see," Joy replied, nodding. "And did she listen?"

Eddas wagged her gloved hand so-so. "Well... To an extent. I'm afraid the Sheikh of Majapur will have to find a new Grand Vizier, since Gritela decided to eat the current one to teach him a lesson. And I'm afraid they may still be putting out some of the fires in the palace even now. But, for the most part, the city surrounding the palace is relatively undamaged."

"Relatively undamaged?" Joy asked, raising an eyebrow.

Eddas nodded. "Gritela was quite annoyed, as you can well imagine," Eddas replied, and Joy and Kyrie burst into giggles. Eddas smiled at their laughter, and continued speaking. "She explained the reason for her annoyance in no uncertain terms to the Sheikh, as well. Well, she explained it once she had torn down a good portion of the palace and grabbed him in her claw, that is. Judging by the mountain of cattle-bones outside the little keep they had her hatchling in, I would guess that feeding a dragon's child when you don't have the bottomless resources of a dragon's will and a dragon's sorcery to call upon was a bit of a strain for the Sheikh's treasury, as well. Having to rebuild his palace will likely leave him nearly a pauper-king, particularly considering Gritela decided that what remained of the treasury within the palace was now hers by right of penalty, as well as all the other gold and silver objects that she could find within the palace. Cups, goblets, plates, quite a bit of jewelry... Well, all of it she gathered into a pile, then opened a portal to send it all back to her cave on Morrag Peak." Eddas shook her head. "I think that after this experience, it's quite unlikely the Sheikh will want anything to do with dragons ever again in the future, so it seems likely Gritela and her hatchling will be safe from reprisals."

Kyrie grinned. "Bofkak sounds terribly cute, Grampa! Can we go visit him, someday?"

"Well, I've never been there in this body, so we'd have to travel there much as we are now. Also, we'd have to get permission from Gritela, of course, and dragons really don't enjoy visitors much. They prefer being left alone. Still, Gritela is quite grateful to me, as you can well imagine, so I don't see as that would be a problem. Morrag Peak is on the eastern shore of the Inland Sea, within the lands of the elves. After this adventure is over, perhaps we'll discuss it with your mothers and see if they think it's alright."

"Visit a *dragon*?" Joy said, and shook her head. "Old man, you are *totally* corrupting this child."

"Piffle," Eddas replied with a snort, and Kyrie giggled again.

I listened to the tale, but found I had little interest in it. The fate of the dragon-child and its mother meant nothing to me. Instead, I found I was still driven by my love for Brionnach, and possessed solely by the desire to find her. Had I breath, I'd have sighed. I wanted to care, I wanted to be interested. But, I did not, and was not. *"A question, Eddas Ayar, if it is not too much..."*

Eddas shrugged, looking at me with her dark eyes. "Ask."

"You said that eventually, I would come to understand myself... Will I like what I understand?"

"That is difficult to say, my friend. Do you like what you understand of yourself now?"

"No... I am a living horror... A thing from beyond the grave..."

"As am I, to some people's eyes," Eddas replied, gazing at me. "The goblins fear me as a loathsome thing. They have ancient prophecies that predicted my return to the lands of the living, and they see me as a creature of darkness, twisted by a god of light to serve his purposes. The Malani fear me as a liche, a thing of the crypt, beyond their control. Both views are, in some respects, correct. This body is inhabited by the soul of a man who suffocated to death in his tomb two thousand years ago. I *am* a liche - and yet, I am more than that, just as you are a revenant, and yet are more than that."

"No... You are good... You are alive... I can sense the pulse of life within you... I am dead... Undead... Something else fills me... UnLife, Brionnach called it..."

"True, but UnLife is not evil. A *being* of UnLife can be evil or good, but the energy that drives them is neither good nor evil, anymore than Life-force is good or evil, it simply exists. Yet, UnLife is not Life-force as we know it - nor, really is it the state of being inanimate. It is a third state of existence, much as a mushroom is not a plant, nor is it an animal, but a third form of life. It's somewhat difficult to explain without delving into the mathematics of it..." Eddas replied, stroking her chin with an ebon-gloved hand. "The best way I can explain it to you at the moment is that UnLife is, really, very much like a mushroom. It is neither plant nor animal, and despite having similarities to both, it is a third form of existence. The energy which drives you and maintains your existence comes from the Plane of UnLife. It is not life-energy, nor really is it the opposite of life-energy. It is UnLife, something aside from either concept."

I shook my head. *"I do not understand... And yet..."*

"Yes?"

"I want to understand... I want to know who I am... What I am... And why..."

The Great Mage smiled. "That is a very good development, Goodman Bones."

"Perhaps... But wanting to understand is not the same thing as understanding... Can you help me? Can you explain it to me, that I might understand?"

"Hmm... Perhaps it's best explained by analogy."

"Analogy?"

"Yes. Imagine a forest, beside a lake. The forest is full of deer, and the lake is full of fish. The deer cannot live in the lake - they will drown and die. Yet, at the same time, the fish cannot live in the forest - they will drown in air, and die. Yet, the lake and the cycle of life within it mirrors the forest and the cycle of life within it. Plants eaten by herbivores, herbivores eaten by carnivores, and all eventually dying and returning to the plants, to begin the cycle again. These cycles exist both in the lake, and in the forest that

surrounds it. Yet, no deer is found in the lake, and no fish is found in the forest - they are separate worlds, with their own inhabitants and rules of existence. Do you understand so far?"

"Somewhat, yes..."

"Good. Well, the lake and the forest are as it is with the Plane of UnLife and our own plane. Our plane, the Material Plane, is one of the many Planes of Life. In our plane, the two basic divisions of existence are the living and the inanimate. The inanimate is that which does not possess life. There are exceptions, of course, such as Golems and other magically animated things, but they aren't important to this explanation."

I nodded, listening silently as we continued across the shimmering sands. Joy and the child listened, as well, their eyes on the Great Mage as she continued speaking.

"Now, the Plane of UnLife, however, is an entire plane of existence which parallels all the Planes of Life, yet contains within it no living thing, and no inanimate thing. There, UnLife is found, instead. Yet, like the frog comes from the water to live upon the land, sometimes UnLife can come to live upon our plane. They are not alive - by the Laws of Magic which apply to our plane of existence, they are unliving things possessed of will or intent."

"And evil...?" I asked, thinking of my own dark existence, and the heart of the one who had created me.

Eddas shrugged. "Some are evil, yes. They exist only to feed, to survive, and reproduce. They are the Hungry Ones - the vampires, the wraiths, the barrow-wights. Others come with a purpose, a higher intent. They are the Revenaunts. Some are evil, but others are not. The key is the doorway that the UnLife uses to enter our plane - the corpse, itself. A corpse is a thing that was once alive, but now is not. From the standpoint of magic theory, that transition from living to unliving is quite important. A strong will... A powerful purpose can, at the moment of death, open a door to allow UnLife energy to fill the corpse, and continue that purpose. Such is a revenaunt - which is what you are. And yet, as I've said, you are far more than that, even as Joy is far more than simply a midget giantess, Kyrie is far more than a ten-year-old little girl, and I am far more than a liche."

Joy nodded. "My people have a saying, Goodman Bones. *'Everything and everyone is always far more than they appear.'* I never really understood it as a child. Now, having lived as Eddas' companion for many years, I do." The child simply nodded at Joy's words, and said nothing, watching me.

We walked in silence after that, and I considered the Great Mage's words carefully. Finally, I shook my head. *"I... I am afraid I still do not understand..."*

Eddas gazed at me for a long moment, her eyes unfocused. Finally, she blinked, then smiled. "Don't worry, my friend. You will. And soon, I think."

"Yes, Eddas Ayar..." I said, then returned my gaze to the east.

The Ocean - Thirty-Two.

Swimming around the northern shores of Palome took the better part of three months. The winter storms were fierce, at times, but I was older and wiser, now - I did not allow myself to become numbed by the endless routine of swimming. Instead, when the storms began, I went well below the waves, safe from the currents, and continued on. Finally, I was past Palome, and Marilith pointed me roughly west-southwest, quietly advising me to turn left or right until I was pointed in the right direction, then keeping me heading that way as I continued on.

Months passed. The seasons turned again, and again. The moon's dance in the heavens repeated again and again and still I swam on, hoping to reach her. Day and night I kept swimming, heading towards Marilith. There was nothing else in my life.

It was hard not to become numb to the endless routines of hunting, sleeping, swimming endlessly... But, I had learned from Buntaro that of all the weapons I might possess, the best of all was my mind. That, in truth, was why he did not want to ever become doddering and helpless - it meant that he would lose the one weapon he had always possessed against all the foes he had ever faced; his own mind.

I had little to occupy my mind, however. I could speak in three languages, but there was none to talk to save Marilith, and she was often in pain as the weeks slowly turned into months. I could read in two languages, now, but there was nothing to read. The only thing remaining in my life that interested me and I knew little about was my link to Marilith - or, more precisely, her link to me. It seemed one-way... Or was it?

I remembered the dream, that first time she'd called to me. I remembered reaching out and touching her, and feeling what seemed like a woman's hip, covered in a pelt of fur...

She was screaming, now, and had been since dawn. It was now noon, and she still was screaming. If I concentrated, I could hear her very faintly. It was the longest she had ever been in agony, in all the years I had listened to her. And all I could do was weep.

I rose to the surface to make sure of my bearings. The sea was utterly calm, today, its surface barely rippling, at times almost like that of the quiet lake back on Round Island. The sun shone brightly in the sky, with not a cloud in sight. It was the kind of day sailors dreaded nearly as much as they dreaded fierce storms - it was an utterly calm day, with no winds. It was a beautiful day. A terrifyingly beautiful day.

And very faintly, I could still hear Marilith screaming.

"I am coming for you, Sister," I said aloud, tears streaming down my face.

Marilith simply screamed in agony, the sound still faint.

"I am coming for you, Sister!" I shouted, swimming faster.

Marilith continued screaming. It was the longest she had ever been in agony. I had known her over half my life, now. I had heard her screams since I was fourteen years old. I had wept an ocean of tears, listening to her pain. But this was different. This was too long... Far too long.

"I am coming for you!" I passed my lance to my left hand, reaching out my right hand below the water, swimming faster.

Marilith continued screaming, her howls of agony transcending anything I'd ever heard before. It had gone on too long. Too long. It occurred to me that this might be the end, for her. She might die, and I would be alone.

"I am coming for you! Hear me, Marilith, I am coming for you! Feel my hand reaching for you! I am coming for you!" I screamed, hoping she would hear.

Marilith continued screaming. My heart was breaking. I stretched my fingertips forward in the water, swimming as fast as I could, knowing that there was still endless leagues between us.

"I AM COMING FOR YOU!"

And for the briefest moment...

For the briefest moment, I felt something on my fingertips...

There was an intense flash of pain, so bright, so brilliant, it was as though the world exploded. For a single heartbeat, every part of me felt like it was being ripped to pieces, and scattered across the infinite Void...

Then it was gone, leaving me gasping and breathless.

I floated in the water for many heartbeats after that, stunned.

I felt myself all over - I was unhurt.

But the pain had been real.

Slowly, I resumed swimming again, trying to pick up my speed, listening for Marilith's voice. Her screams had stopped, and now I could slowly begin to hear her weeping again. She always wept when the pain eased. Sometimes for hours.

She said nothing for the longest time, simply crying wordlessly. I kept swimming, listening for her voice. I wanted to swim beneath the water and swim faster towards her, but I couldn't. I was weeping. A mer-folk can't swim underwater and cry at the same time. We have to breathe to weep.

"Something touched me," Marilith sobbed, once she found her voice again.

"It was me," I replied, weeping.

"Something wet touched my face. I felt it. I hurt so bad, Sasha, I knew it was the end. I couldn't

hold myself together any longer. It hurt. I was going to die. I knew it. I thought I could last longer but I couldn't, Sasha! I was dying, I knew it and then something touched me... And the pain eased."

"It was me," I said again, tears rolling down my face as I swam.

"You saved me. I couldn't hold it, Sasha. I was going to die. You saved me."

"I love you, Sister," I replied, weeping. "And I am coming for you."

Marilith sobbed. *"I love you, Sister!"*

The Ocean - Thirty-Three.

I crawled out of the surf, onto the sunlit beach. Seagulls called as they soared above, their eyes on me, curious. At the top of the beach, the sand gave way to tough grasses, thorny bushes, and palm trees. Antonica lay before me, at last.

I willed the change to human, then lay my lance beside me and knelt on the beach for a moment. The

ocean behind me whispered, the endless sussuration of water on sand. I bowed my head, sending a silent prayer of thanks to the Goddess, then reached up and spread my hair out across my shoulders so it might dry more quickly. I touched the little bottle that dangled from my bracelet, willing my gloves, boots and silk hair-cloth to be returned to me, and they popped out of the bottle, dropping down onto the sand. Once my hair was dry I put it in a ponytail again, then donned my boots and gloves, willed my scales into place, and tried to rise to my feet. It took several moments, using my lance to help myself up. Months of endless swimming had again momentarily robbed me of the ability to stand and walk.

Finally, I had it. I was standing, and my knees seemed steady. "Which direction is it, Sister?" I asked, looking up.

"Roughly north-northwest of you... Follow the beach north, I think you should see it from the shore."

"See what? What am I looking for?"

"I... I can't really describe it, I'm sorry. This whole place is enchanted. Closer than a league, and all I can see is the walls of my prison. I can see around you, and if I concentrate I can see other areas in the world, but I can't see where I am. I only know I am high in the air, near the ocean... Some kind of tower, I think..." Marilith said, her voice pausing. *"Sasha, someone is trying to get in here."*

"What?! Who?!"

"I do not know. I can sense sorcery nearby me... Sasha, I'm frightened! This machine is a thousand times more complex than you imagine! A careless hand could kill me, easily!"

"I'm coming, Marilith!" I shouted, then staggered along the beach, leaning heavily on my staff.

"Sasha, I'm so frightened! I can hear them... I can hear their voice... They speak in the language

of a dark elf to someone near them! I can sense their presence... A spellcaster... A dark elf, and something else... A being of UnLife... Sasha, a powerful necromancer is trying to get to me!"

I *forced* my legs to comply, *willing* myself to run. I stumbled several times, and nearly collapsed twice, but I would not stop. I ran. "I'm coming!"

It was an age before my legs remembered the ways of the land, and I could run properly. But, finally, they did. Yet, looking around, I still saw nothing. "Which way?!"

"I don't know! You're close to me, now, within a league! I can see around you, but I cannot see around myself to tell you the way!"

Then, I rounded a turn in the beach, past a barrier slope, and saw it. A spire of basalt, reaching up from the earth, just at the edge of the shore. It was hundreds of paces across at the base, narrowing as it went up, and rose to the sky like a spear - an impossible climb. The waves of the ocean lapped at edge of a volcanic cliff the spire rose from. Atop the spire was a tower of gleaming ivory. How I would get there I did not know. But I had to try.

The edges of the cliff blended into smoother hills inland. I turned, dashing through the thorn bushes and between the palm trees, trying to work my way around to the back side of the spire, hoping perhaps to find some way to climb it...

The thorn-bushes scraped harmlessly against my scales, and finally gave way to shorter scrubs and grasses. I dashed uphill, heading for the spire's base. In the distance ahead, I could see four figures, standing near something at the base of the spire that looked much like a stone door. One was tiny, like a child, and dressed like a little girl. One was tall, very tall... A blonde woman in chain, armed with a staff. The third wore gray robes from head to toe, and seemed very thin. The last was a woman dressed in black hooded robes. As I approached, she flicked back her hood, looking the door over. She had pale skin, black hair, sharply pointed ears.

"Sasha! The one in gray is undead, a skeleton of some kind! The one in black is a dark elf!"

"Get away from my sister, you bitch!" I screamed, charging.

The one in gray simply turned, then gazed on quietly, their hood eerily lacking eye-holes for them to see through. The blonde stepped before the child, then stood, her staff at the ready. The elf in black gazed at me as I charged her, not even bothering to ready the ebon staff she had in her hand. The ocean breeze fluttered the four black feathers tucked beneath the silver band that held her ponytail. I aimed my lance for her heart, running at full speed...

Then, just as I came up to her, she lifted an ebon-gloved hand, gesturing, and suddenly I was held in the air, floating just a cubit above the ground.

I screamed in rage, raising my lance to throw it, and she gestured again. My lance bounced off an invisible barrier that surrounded me. I willed my lance to my hand again and thrust with all my might, but could not break through - my lance skidded harmlessly off the impenetrable barrier.

The child, a little girl of olive skin and black hair, looked to the elf, and giggled. She spoke briefly, and the elf nodded. In a moment, all three were chattering back and forth while I was held there, helpless. I screamed in rage and frustration. To come so far, to get *so close*...

The elf gestured at me, and the little girl grinned again. "Thank you, grampa!" she said, then looked at me. "Grampa says this spell lets you understand me, now!"

"It should, at any rate," the elf replied, smiling. "If it doesn't, I can try something else. She's quite an odd one - she's got quite a bit of Wild Magic about her."

"And dangerous, too," the blonde woman said, glowering at me. Even though I was obviously helpless, she did not lower her staff.

The child giggled again. "Oh, Auntie Joy! She's really not a bad person at all! I can see it, she's a lovely yellow-green aura, almost olive green! Well, it's all shot through yellow-green blotches right now because she's really very confused and quite a few red blotches because she's still very angry, but really she's a very nice person."

"Hmmm..." The elf said, studying me. "And you really think she's a mermaid?"

"Oh, yes, grampa! Look there, and there! She was born human, and became a mermaid! Well, almost. She's kind of part-way between the two. It's very odd..."

The one in gray spoke, his voice a dry hiss. *"It seems to me we're all quite odd, child."*

The child giggled again. "That's true, Goodman Bones!"

Marilith wailed in misery. *"Nooooo! I was a fool! I should have told you to approach cautiously, perhaps sneak up on them! That's a Great Mage, Sasha! A wielder of power equal to the one who made this place! Now you'll die, and it's all my fault!"*

"I'm not quite dead yet, Sister," I replied, lowering my lance and simply hanging there in the air. It dawned on me that as easily as the elf had captured me, if they wanted me dead, I'd already be dead.

"Who is she talking to, Old Man?" the tall blonde asked.

"That presence which hovers its perception over her, Joy. I believe she's talking to the demon trapped inside this tower," the elf replied.

"I am, and her name is Marilith," I said, looking at the elf. "And I am Sasha, the Wench of Woe."

The elf smiled. "Perhaps it's time we sat down and had a little chat, Sasha. I'll release you if you promise not to attack again."

"I do," I replied, nodding.

I felt myself settle gently to the ground, and the elf sat on the grass, facing me, her legs crossed beneath her robe. The child bounced over and dropped herself into the elf's lap, giggling, and they hugged for a moment.

"I don't trust her, Old Man," the tall blonde said, scowling at me.

"Joy, the fact that you don't trust someone who's tried to kill me does not surprise me in the least. Now have a seat and let's relax a bit. The door's jammed, anyway, so we're not getting in this way. It will take me some time to find another way in."

I sat in the grass, laying my lance aside. The tall woman called Joy slowly sat next to the elf, keeping a wary eye on me. The one in gray stood quietly, gazing at me from behind his eyeless hood.

The elf smiled at me, and patted the child on the head. "Well, Sasha, I believe introductions are in order. This little gremlin is Kyrie, my grand-daughter," she said, tickling the child and making her giggle. "To my left is Joy, my companion. To my right... Well, I'm afraid we don't know his name, he lost it along the way, but Kyrie named him Goodman Bones, so we've stuck with that. As for me, I am Eddas Ayar."

Marilith gasped. *"I know him! He's the one the owl-god asked me not to touch, ages ago! But... But how?! That was a man, a human man, and this a half-elf woman... Yet I can see it, it is him!"*

"My... My sister says she knows you," I said, amazed.

Eddas smiled again. "I am well known, to some."

"The demon Eddas said you speak to?" Joy asked, and I nodded. Joy snorted, looking to the elf. "Old Man, why does it *not* surprise me to learn a demon knows your name?"

The elf-maid shrugged. "Well, I've always tried to treat them with honor and respect, of course - all those who were of the Dyclonic Circle did so. It's not like they *ask* to be summoned, you know. It's not surprising they'd eventually learn who I am. Besides, some of them can be quite pleasant. Well, once you get over their appearance and the fact that they want to kill you, of course."

Joy rolled her eyes. "Of course."

I shook my head - it was all so confusing. "I'm afraid I don't understand... My sister says you were once a human man, but now you're a half-elf woman... The little girl, Kyrie... She calls you grandfather and you call her granddaughter, but she is obviously no relation. Joy calls you 'Old Man', but I see neither a man nor age on your face. I simply do not understand."

Eddas nodded, and began to speak, her tone of voice as though she was reciting an explanation she had recited many, many times before. "I am Eddas Ayar, my friend, and I am what I am. Beneath this garment of flesh, I am a man of Hyperborea - a human civilization gone to dust some eighteen centuries ago, now. I was born almost two thousand years 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 my youth I displayed a strong talent, and was accepted as an apprentice by the Dyclonic Circle when I was twelve, entering the Black Tower to begin my training. As a master, I cast the Spell of Hidden Life, and upon my death, my soul entered my animuary. While I slept, war came to my people, and my civilization was destroyed, lost to the dust of the ages. Sixteen centuries later, a half-elf female entered my tomb, and I possessed her body. This body was nearly dead when I took it, however, a blow to the head having caused its owner's spirit to have fled just at the moment I took it. By the strength of my will alone, I forced this body to live where its previous owner's will could not. Unfortunately, I fainted thereafter from the wound, and the part of the sorcery which would have allowed me to reshape the body into my own transpired without effect, lacking my will to guide it. As it turned out, however, this was all in accordance with a plan of Yorindar, a god of the humans of the Southlands. To that end, this body received its final forging in the heart of a mana-storm, and is permanently as you see it today. Thus, I am Eddas Ayar, a Hyperborean battle-mage - and, in this body, the Raven of Yorindar," Eddas explained, then patted the little girl on the head, making her giggle.

"Kyrie is my granddaughter, through sorcery. I raised the women of my race from the dust of my civilization, but due to a conflict of the gods, the men of my race were lost. Yet, the women survived, because I had the power to instill within each new life, sparking a pregnancy through sorcery. I taught them all that I know, including this secret, and today the Witch-Women of Hyperborea are known and respected for a thousand leagues around by all good peoples - the giants, elves, the dwarves, and the humans of the Southlands. Kyrie's grandmother received my touch, and her daughter had a daughter herself, years later - Kyrie. Thus, Kyrie calls me 'grampa' because I am her grandfather, through sorcery," Eddas explained, then nodded to Joy.

"As for Joy, she is a giantess - though a very small one. The height you see her now is her natural, full growth. I have given her enchantments which allow her to assume the full-size of a giant, as well as a few other things which are not important right now."

Joy nodded. "And I call him 'Old Man' because I have been his friend and companion for over a century and a half and that's what he *is*. He's nearly two thousand years old, and he *hardly* hesitates to remind us of that at any given moment by trotting off to chat with dragons or ghosts or any number of equally frightening things," Joy said, then grinned wryly at Eddas as Kyrie giggled.

Eddas chuckled, then pointed to the one in gray. "As for Goodman Bones, I'm afraid there's not much I can tell you about him. He was created by a convicted Malani necromancer, Brionnach, and he loves her. His love has driven him to find her - and this tower, known as the Temple of the Sun, was her destination. She was tried and convicted by her race for the crime of necromancy, and sentenced to be dipped in the *Lobh'dath*. Her hair is now white and her skin indigo from the effect of the *Lobh'dath*, instead of having pale skin and black hair like mine. Our friend has been slowly awakening to his true nature as we journeyed, but he's chosen to keep his discoveries to himself. Which, really, is probably for the best, as his nature is somewhat frightening and I'd rather not have anyone distressed by it. Suffice it to say that beneath those robes is a good-hearted being, driven by a love no mortal will ever truly comprehend," Eddas said, then sighed. "Unfortunately for all of us, the reason Brionnach came here was she wished to free the demon in the tower, and enslave it so it might cure the curse of the *Lobh'dath*. And, even more unfortunately, she's beaten us here by a good hour, and jammed the door in the process of entering. The little magic key Kyrie has won't open it."

"*Sasha! Help me, I don't want to be enslaved, I want to be free and live with you!*" Marilith wailed.

I leapt to my feet, snatching up my lance. "We have to stop her! We can't let her enslave my sister!"

The gray-robed man shook his head and spoke, his voice again a dry hiss. "*How can you be the sister of a demon?*"

"For that matter," Joy added, "how can you be a mermaid? Or a human-mermaid, or whatever it is Kyrie said you were?"

I shook my head, looking up to the spire. "None of that matters, now! We have to hurry!"

Eddas smiled. "I beg to differ. We have plenty of time. The tower is keyed to four forces - the moon and the tides, the sun, the stars and planets, and the shifting of the continents. The chamber where your sister is in cannot possibly be entered until those forces are in alignment. That much is obvious just from a brief examination of the aura of this place - that's the conditions that had to exist to seal the center when it was created, that's the only conditions that will allow it to be entered again."

Joy chuckled. "Obvious to *you*, Old Man."

"Well, yes. Nevertheless, there's nothing she can do to enter the heart of this tower until then - and that won't happen until midnight, and it's not even noon yet. That's what we were talking about when you first came charging out of the trees at us. That kind of alignment only happens every few centuries or so, so even if Brionnach had beaten us here by a month or even a year, it still wouldn't matter - she can't get into the heart of this place until it opens on it's own. We've been traveling to get here since last summer, and I've known the precise day and hour we had to be here since about the middle of last winter, before we met Goodman Bones. If I thought there was *any* chance that Brionnach might free the demon of the tower before then, I would *hardly* allow Joy and Kyrie to be here. I'd take them straight home, then Goodman Bones and I would deal with the problem as best we could."

"You wouldn't let them be here? Why not?" I asked, looking down at Eddas.

"A good question, Old Man," Joy replied, glowering at Eddas.

Goodman Bones shook his head beneath his gray hood. *"Because the earth is under great tension... And that tension would be released."*

Eddas nodded. "Precisely. Most likely this tower would be blasted to vapor, and leave a crater I estimate would be about a league or two across."

I gasped, but Joy simply glowered more deeply at Eddas. "Old Man, what have I told you before about getting yourself killed in some stupid male Hyperborean display of honor?!"

Eddas rolled her eyes. "Joy, I have no intention of getting myself killed, please don't worry. The forces involved here are *not* swift ones, I would have plenty of time to escape before they built up and detonated this tower. Whoever built it, they were quite good, and thought of nearly everything. They *hardly* wanted an error when they were first binding the demon here to get them blasted to vapor."

Marilith sniffled. *"So even a Great Mage says I cannot be freed?"*

"So she cannot be freed?" I asked.

Eddas shook her head. "Not in the sense of simply prying her loose, no. This tower is a vast construct... Truly a work of art, in my opinion. We can't just pry her loose from it, the forces gathered here have to be slowly released - and done so in a manner that doesn't tear her apart, either, or the same thing will happen anyway. I *sincerely* doubt Brionnach has the skill to free your sister anyway - but even if she does, perhaps through finding some ancient text I am unaware of, we still have plenty of time. She cannot enter the chamber your sister is in until midnight. Even *I* couldn't, and I'm probably the most skilled mage you could find to ask to do it," she said, then smiled. "So, as we do have a bit of time, why don't you sit down, and tell us your story? I'll need to be at my full strength before I attempt this tower again, I'm afraid, so like it or not, you'll have to wait anyway. Your story will pass the time while I rest, and I'm sure everyone is quite curious."

"Mostly me!" Kyrie yelled, grinning.

Eddas leaded down, kissing the child on her head. "Yes, Kyrie. You in particular I'm sure are *very* curious as to our new friend's story."

I sighed, sitting down again. It seemed there was little choice. "I suppose it all started one day shortly after I turned sixteen..."

The Ocean - Thirty-Four.

"...and then Marilith said someone was in the tower. A necromancer, she thought, possibly a dark elf, with an undead companion. So, I saw you, thought you were she, and... Well, the rest, I suppose you know," I finished, three hours later.

Joy shook her head. "I don't understand how a demon could be that nice to you."

"She is my *sister*!" I replied hotly.

Eddas shook her head. "Joy, demons are immortals, like dragons and a few others, they just live on a

different dimension. They live in Hell, and Hell existed long before the Arc of Time was formed and the gods started casting souls into it like some sort of cosmic rubbish bin. Even our *words* for Hell and the Afterlife aren't really very accurate. The Afterlife is where most souls go as part of the tally the gods keep under the Divine Compact, unless specifically consigned to Hell. Hell is where they specifically consign souls who failed them - and they have to, it's another part of their tally. Our world is a third part of this relationship, and living souls here and the actions of mortals and immortals here represent another part of the tally - our choice as to which god to follow and whether to obey them or not is a part of our Free Will, which determines where we'll end up. And ours is only *one* universe, Joy. What is Hell for us in our universe here is *not* Hell for all the possible universes within the multiverse. It's all a cosmic game, Joy, and the concepts of Hell and the Afterlife that we all have inherent in our languages and culture isn't precisely how our universe actually works. So yes, demons can be good or evil or anywhere in between, just like a dragon or kraken or any other immortal here in our world. Well, perhaps not a kraken, they're universally evil, but you get the point. Even the word 'demon' isn't really very descriptive of what they are. They don't have anything to do with religion or the gods or even the Divine Compact, they existed at the same time the gods were born, just as the dragons did in our world. Only the Creator existed before them, because the Creator existed before everything."

"All true," Marilith whispered, "though Eddas Ayar left quite a bit out of that explanation. I think he was trying to keep it simple."

I shook my head. "That was simple?" I whispered.

"Believe it or not, yes," Marilith replied.

"I see..." Joy said, then shook her head. "I'm sure my mother would be quite disappointed with me to learn how easily you've weaned me of many of the beliefs of my people, Old Man."

Eddas smiled. "Well, *I'm* sure she's quite happy with you, Joy. She's almost certainly in the Afterlife herself, and has already learned much of what I've already told you simply by living there a few centuries. If you like, I can sing her a path here from the Afterlife, and you can ask her how she feels about you yourself."

"Oooo! Can you, grampa?!" Kyrie asked. "I'd love to meet Auntie Joy's momma!"

Eddas nodded. "Certainly. I know her deed-song, we could wait until she sun's set and-"

"NO!" Joy snapped, then composed herself again. "Thank you, but no. I know it wouldn't bother you, Kyrie, but seeing my mother as a ghost would be a bit much for me. If Eddas says she's probably happy with me, I'll take his word for it."

Little Kyrie burst into giggles, and I gaped, astonished. "You talk of other planes like they were just cities down the road, and summoning spirits from the Afterlife as though it were as easy as singing a song!" I said, amazed.

Goodman Bones nodded. *"The Great Mage does that a lot. Joy the Little Giantess finds it quite disconcerting. I suppose I should, too, but I've learned that once you've died, the universe loses much of it's ability to astonish you."*

Eddas laughed. "One of my old masters said much the same," she said, then patted the child. "Hop up, Kyrie, I've rested enough, it's time for me to get to work again."

"Yes, Grampa," Kyrie replied, and did so.

Eddas rose to her feet, facing the door, then began slowly gesturing, mumbling a quiet incantation.

"What's she doing?"

"He," Joy corrected.

"Sorry. What's *he* doing?"

Kyrie grinned. "Grampa's trying to find a way to fix the lock. Grampa says Brionnach cheated. She did something the wizard who made this place never expected."

"What was that?" I asked, looking down at the little girl.

Eddas stopped, sighing as she lowered her staff. "She used a simple lockpicking cantrip to open it. I'm guessing this tower is about two thousand years old, and probably made by a Great Mage of the Mysantians. They didn't *have* many sorcerers back then in Mysantia, and certainly didn't have sorcerers who were thieves. Why *steal* gold when your skills are so rare you can simply *charge* gold to anyone who wants you to cast a simple spell every now and again, and have the awe and respect of the masses instead of being hunted as a thief? Such it is in societies where wizards are few and far between. The dark elves, however, have quite a few spellcasters in their population, always have, are quite familiar with sorcery, and thief-wizards among their people are fairly common. *Baile'mor'Dorcha* fairly reeks with anti-thievery and anti-eavesdropping spells cast on every home over and over again for thousands of years, it's really *quite* pathetic." Eddas then stood there, stroking her chin as she examined the door.

"Can you get it, Old Man?" Joy asked.

"I don't think so, Joy. The 'lock' spell on this door is damaged. Everything here is made much like a magical equivalent of mundane machinery. In mundane terms, the lock's been jammed. The enchantment still exists, but I'll have to repair it before it can work again. In essence, I'll have to re-enchant it. Even with the Deep Magic, that would take me a good two, three days, probably."

"We don't *have* that long!" I yelped.

"I'm quite aware of that," Eddas replied dryly.

"Perhaps I could pry the door open?" Joy offered.

"How? It slides up, Joy, and there's no space to fit your fingers. I already tried moving it with telekinesis earlier, and even my will can't budge it. You could lift it at your full size, but there's no way for you to grip the door to lift it."

I looked at the door - it was plain and unadorned, a simple slab of stone set into the side of the basalt spire. "Perhaps I could jam my lance beneath it, and you could wedge it open enough that way for her to grasp it? It's invulnerable."

Eddas glanced at the lance in my hand, then shook her head. "No, her fingers are as thick as your forearm at full size."

I looked up. "Could you use magic to fly us to the top?"

"I could, but there's no way in from there - I already looked before you arrived. Incidentally, I've seen the room your sister is in, the sunlight shines upon her in there through the glass dome."

"You have?! What does she look like?!"

Eddas chuckled. "Like a demon locked in a tesseract."

I ground my teeth, growling wordlessly.

"Do not offend Eddas Ayar, sister. He is more powerful than you know," Marilith whispered.

"Old Man, I think you could give her a little better description than that," Joy said firmly. "She *has* waited half her life, you know."

"I could, but she wouldn't understand it," Eddas replied, still studying the door. "And even if I lifted her up there to show her, she wouldn't understand what she was looking at. She might not even see it the same way I do. In fact, she probably won't, the whole area's quite perspective-relative, due to it's reliance on hyperdimensional interstices to hold the demon to begin with. I see it one way because I'm a mage, and highly educated in hyperdimensional mathematics. If she looked, she'd see it in a way that her mind could interpret based on her knowledge and experience - just as if you looked, you'd see it yet another way that your mind could interpret, based on your knowledge and experience, and Kyrie would see it yet another way. It's quite perspective-relative, as I said."

"Well, *try* to describe it, Old Man."

"Hmmm... Well, alright. When I look in there, I see a hyperdimensional quadrahedron made of a diamond transposed through a fourth dimension-"

"Aha!" Joy said, interrupting. "You mean pulled through time! Time is the fourth dimension! I've been listening to your lectures, Old Man."

"Actually, no. Time is a fourth dimension, it's not the fourth dimension. I'm talking about a fourth *spatial* dimension, not a fourth *existential* dimension. The movement in the first three dimensions are described as up and down, left and right, forward and back. Movement in the fourth spatial dimension is described as ana and kata. This gets a bit involved, as you start considering hyperdimensional mathematics anytime you start talking about extra-dimensional space. You see-"

Joy rolled her eyes. "Nevermind, Old Man. Just go back to telling us what you saw."

Eddas shrugged. "Alright. Well, the diamond tesseract is attached to four gemstones used as force aggregation centers - ruby, emerald, sapphire and topaz, each about as tall as you are, Joy. Inside the diamond, I see a shapeless form, twisting through four dimensions, trying to resist being pulled apart. There's also several dozen smaller gemstones set into the main crucible, which I suppose were used to initially balance the forces involved. But, that's only what *I* see. She might see a physical being in chains attached to a huge machine as though being drawn and quartered, or she might see nothing but an empty room and glowing orbs of energy interacting." Eddas turned to me, and smiled. "Don't look so confused,

you're wearing a tesseract yourself," she said, pointing an ebon-gloved finger to the little bottle that dangled from the chain on my wrist. She then held out her hand. "May I see your lance, please?"

I blinked, my mind still spinning from Eddas' explanation. "Ummm... Alright," I said, handing it to her.

Eddas examined my lance closely for a long moment, her gaze unfocused, then blinked and looked to the child. "Kyrie, may I see your key, please?"

"Sure, grampa!" she replied, pulling a small leather thong off her neck and holding it out. A tiny gold key dangled from the end.

Eddas took the key, removing it from the thong, then handed the thong back to Kyrie. Slipping the loop of the key over the needle-sharp tip of my lance, she nodded. "Crude, but possible. One of these three items will give - the key, the lance, or the door. Let's hope it's the latter." Eddas then turned to the door, slipped the key in a small hole in its center, then poked the tip of my lance into the key as a lever.

"You're going to just *force* it open?"

"No, I've hardly the strength for that. Joy is. Joy?"

Joy nodded, stepping back. In the twinkling of an eye, she was suddenly *huge*. Easily sixteen cubits tall, she loomed over us like a mountain. I gaped, utterly amazed.

Kyrie giggled. "Step back, silly mermaid! Auntie Joy needs some room!" she said, taking my hand and leading me aside from the door.

Joy carefully knelt, one hand on the ground, then reached for the door with her other hand. Eddas held my lance in place in the key as Joy fumbled. "I can't quite grip it," she said after a moment. "It's too close

to the wall."

"Pry it out a bit from the top," Eddas offered.

Joy nodded, wedging her fingers along the butt of the lance. "I've got it. Which way do I turn it?"

"Rightwards," Eddas replied, gesturing. "But *slowly*!"

Joy nodded, and slowly applied her strength. "It's not budging."

"Increase your force slowly."

Joy nodded, doing so. I could see the muscles beneath the chain armor over her forearms bulging. I looked at my lance, and gaped.

"It's *not* supposed to bend like that!"

Eddas shook her head. "Of course it is, that's how invulnerability enchantments work. The atoms of the object are bound together with magical force - you can cut or bend an invulnerable object, but the atoms never part, and when the force is removed, they return to the positions they were in. It's why you can block a sword with an invulnerable staff, and the sword doesn't just slide down and bite into your hand. She's as strong as an oilphant at this size, I'd be utterly astonished if it *didn't* bend."

"What's an atom?"

"The smallest constituent part of matter known to magical theory. I've been working on a new theory, however. It's possible that there are smaller components, which actually comprise atoms which comprise matter. You see-"

"Old Man! Could we skip the lecture for once, I'm trying to concentrate, here!" Joy grunted, clapping her other hand atop her first, and straining with all her might.

"Keep going, Auntie Joy! I can see something happening!" Kyrie said, looking at the door. I could see nothing - but apparently the child's sorcerous birth gave her vision I did not possess.

My lance was bent like a bow, and I gaped openly. "My lance will break!"

"Let's hope the enchantment wasn't *that* poorly done," Eddas replied.

Suddenly there was a loud grinding sound.

"Joy, ease up! Don't let go suddenly, but ease up!" Eddas called.

Joy nodded, slowly letting off her strength, my lance slowly returning to normal. The door rose up slightly, then stopped.

"Well, that was somewhat encouraging," Eddas remarked, grinning.

Joy rubbed her gigantic fingers through her gloves, glancing at the door. "How? Even Kyrie couldn't fit through that gap!"

"No, but you can now fit your fingers beneath it," Eddas replied, handing my lance back to me and the key back to Kyrie.

Joy nodded. "Give me a moment and I'll try it."

We waited, the child tying the key back onto the little thong and putting it over her neck. I tried to flex my lance experimentally, and found it was the same solid and inflexible monodont tooth it had always been - it didn't bend at all in my hands. I was truly awed.

Finally, Joy waved a hand, and Eddas stepped aside. Kneeling before the door, Joy slipped both hands beneath it, gripped it firmly, and strained.

After several long heartbeats of gasping effort, Joy stopped, panting. "I can feel something's holding it up, Old Man. I'm having to struggle against that *and* its weight."

"Take your time, Joy, there's no rush," Eddas replied.

"How heavy could it be for someone her size?" I wondered aloud.

Eddas passed a hand beneath the door, which was now almost a cubit opened at the bottom. "Hmm... About a cubit thick, at least eight cubits tall and three wide... Oh, nearly seven tons. Figure the spell that's holding it up is exerting at least that much force. She's fighting against friction and the spell, so she's probably lifting an effective weight of around fourteen or fifteen tons."

"Tons?!" I replied, gaping.

"If you're wondering if it's heavy, yes, it's heavy!" Joy snapped, waving her hand to shoo Eddas aside, then gripping the door again. Joy grunted and strained for several long heartbeats, finally managing to pull

the door halfway open before she stopped, gasping again. "That's it, Old Man. It's wedged tight, I can't move it any more."

"That will do, Joy. Rest at full size for a moment, and I'll make sure you're alright to shrink down again."

"Alright to shrink down again?" I asked, still amazed. Joy sat back and crossed her legs, panting.

"Yes, of course," Eddas replied, walking around Joy and looking at her closely, feeling her back through her chain armor. "Strained muscles at this size are one thing, strained muscles at human size are another. Reducing damaged flesh back to it's original size usually compounds the injury - sometimes fatally. Does it hurt here, Joy?"

"A bit, yes."

Eddas gestured with her staff, running her gloved fingers over Joy's spine as high as she could reach. "Better?"

"Yes, much, thank you."

"Arms and shoulders?"

"They're fine, just tired, Old Man. My fingers hurt a bit from where the lance was pressing."

Eddas nodded, running her gloved hands over Joy's outstretched fingers and continuing to gesture with her staff.

I shook my head. "It's amazing you can lift that much."

Eddas shrugged, patting Joy's fingers as she finished. "Not really, at this size she weighs about five tons, herself."

"Four and a half and not a stone more!" Joy snapped.

"Of course, dear," Eddas replied, smiling. "Probably less. I told you all that walking we did to get here would help you get rid of those elf-pastries."

"You're *not* going to bring *that* up again, are you?!"

Eddas blinked, then dropped her staff, clasping her gloved hands together. "No, no! My dear, your figure is svelte and sleek, the very perfection of beauty! Wonderful to behold at either size, you are the envy of every giantess for a thousand leagues! I consider myself blessed by the gods to even behold such grace, such perfection, such voluptuous splendor! Even Dyarzi in her prime never held a candle to your sleek, well-muscled form! Truly, you are the envy of all, a living goddess!"

I shook my head. "Okay, *now* I believe it - that's a man," I said.

Eddas glowered at me, which made Joy burst into laughter, and Kyrie double over giggling. In the twinkling of an eye, Joy had returned to her usual size. She rose to her feet, and gave Eddas a kiss. "Alright, Old Man. I'll forgive you, this time," she said, and they hugged for a moment.

"Thank you," Eddas replied, then picked up her staff again. "Now - it's likely to be quite dangerous. Goodman Bones, I'm glad you had the patience to wait, it doesn't seem likely Brionnach will recognize you at first, and she'll likely attack."

"It is an effort not to simply dash in to find her and profess my love, but I know if I try, she will simply destroy me out of hand. As I said before, I can sense her at this distance, Great Mage. She sits before the doorway to the top of the tower, studying it, trying to determine how to open it. She is not aware we are here, but if she knew, she would indeed try to kill us."

"Nor is she probably aware it will open in a few hours by itself, anyway. And how are your feelings towards her?"

"I still love her, and I still wish to help her, Eddas Ayar. Despite the horror that she is, despite the horror that she made me into, I still love her. I cannot explain it any better than that. I do not know what I will do when I see her. I only know that this is the focus of my life at the moment. It is why I am here. I must find her. I must help her. And then, she will understand. I only ask that you do not attack her, Great Mage. If you do and she commands me to defend her, I will be unable to do anything but obey."

Eddas nodded. "I understand," she replied, then looked to Joy. "Joy, stay here with Kyrie, and guard her."

"Old Man..." Joy growled warningly.

"Joy, I told you yesterday, I am *not* going to bring Kyrie near a necromancer who's powerful enough and evil enough to murder an entire village just because she couldn't be bothered to trade for food, nor am I going to leave her outside alone!"

Joy nodded, her shoulders dropping. "I'm sorry, Old Man. I just want to make *sure* you'll be alright. I've learned to trust Goodman Bones, but... Well, he's little use against her. I... I just want to know you'll be alright."

"Joy, I'm not going to lie to you. I can't use most of the battle-spells I know in there, I'd damage the tower. And if I damage it in the wrong spot, I might possibly destroy it. Goodman Bones can't help me much, either. The gods have a reason for him to be here, but it isn't to fight. It's as I told you yesterday,

Joy - we've been waiting for the gods to provide another warrior. It's obvious to me that she is here," Eddas said, and gestured to me.

I stared, stunned by the implications of what Eddas Ayar had said. Suddenly, it all made sense to me. My entire life had been but a prelude to this day. Everything that had happened to me had been so that I would have the skills I would need, and the ability to get here. Eddas Ayar had called himself the Raven of Yorindar - the servant of a God. But, by extension, I was the Daughter of Ocean, the servant of the Goddess of the Ocean. My sister was *meant* to be freed. Perhaps the strange necromancer inside the tower was from a god who opposed this. Her life, too, had been but a prelude for this moment, and she, too, had precisely the skills needed to bring her here. Inside the tower, Eddas Ayar could not use their full power - a warrior was needed. And that warrior was me. I truly *could* free my sister, with the help of Eddas Ayar. And I *would* free her.

I gripped my lance, and nodded. "I am ready."

The Ocean - Thirty-Five.

"No, you've both missed it again," Eddas said, and sighed invisibly somewhere nearby us.

"Eddas Ayar is right, Sasha. That was up, not ana," Marilith whispered.

"Argh!" I yelped, frustrated. The stairwell inside the spire was only two paces wide, but it went upwards endlessly - literally endlessly. If I looked down, all I could see was spiraling stairs going down to infinity. If I looked up, all I could see was spiraling stairs going upwards to infinity. The stone walls of the spire and the bottom of the stair had disappeared very early on - all that was left was infinite stairs, and infinite darkness beyond them. Eddas Ayar, Goodman Bones and I all went up the stairs, trying to reach the top. And every three revolutions, Eddas would disappear, and we would not.

Eddas appeared again, walking towards us, literally seeming to un-fold out of nothingness. "Both of you need to step *ana*, not *up*, and not *kata*."

The undead by my side nodded. "Yes, *Great Mage*," he hissed.

"I can't do this! How can I step in a direction I can't even *understand*?!"

"By relaxing your mind and following me," Eddas replied, shaking her head. "You're still trying to relate this to up, down, left, right, front and back. It's none of those directions. It's *ana*. This whole spiral staircase is a tesseract with a half-twist, looped back upon itself. Don't think about it, *feel* it. Use your *mind* and *will* yourself to go in that direction."

"But I don't see a direction to *go*!" I yelped. "Look, to me, this stair only goes up and down! We've been climbing up for hours and hours, now! After the first three turns, the bottom and the walls and everything else just... Vanished! I can't understand it at all!"

"Hmmm... Alright. Let's start with the basics, so you can understand it a bit better," Eddas said, and looked over the side, towards the center of the stairwell. She held out her staff in one gloved hand, holding it horizontally, then let go.

"Ummm... Why did you do that?"

"Wait," Eddas replied.

A moment later, her staff fell from above, passing us as it fell down again.

I gaped. "What the...?"

A few moments later, it passed us again, this time going faster. Then again, going faster still. It began to emit a loud *-whoop-* sound as it passed us, which grew louder, and louder still. Again, and again, and again, until it was flying by us at phenomenal speeds, tumbling in the air as it fell past us over and over again in an endless *whoop-whoop-whoop-whoop-whoop-whoop-whoop-whoop-whoop!*

"It... It's going back to the top, and falling again! Like a circle!"

"Don't touch it, you'll lose a hand," Eddas warned.

"I see that... So, this stair is connected top to bottom?"

"Exactly. And every third circle, it turns and goes *ana*, not up. If you walk up, you're back at the bottom again," she replied, then held out her hand. Instantly, her staff appeared in her grip.

"But how...?" I asked, pointing at her staff.

"The effect is similar to that of your lance, Sasha, but significantly more refined."

"Oh. I'm sorry, but... Next to you, I feel like a child."

"Hardly, Sasha. From what you told me, you learned knowledge of pressure points and the martial arts in Palome, and that I've *never* experienced. I'd *love* to sit down with you for a few decades and learn that. Also, you probably have quite a bit of knowledge of Herblore, another skill I've never really gotten around to mastering. I'd like to spend a decade or two learning that, as well."

"Well, it won't take *that* long."

"Of course it will, I'm not a mermaid - and, in turn, I'm sure the Witch-Women of Hyperborea would love to exchange herbal knowledge with you, and perhaps both sides would learn. But for now, back to what we're talking about," she said, and pointed at the stairs. "As I've shown you, the stairwell loops back on itself. But, when you look over the edge, you don't see the back of your own head three loops down or three loops up. That's because the light here is falling *kata*. I'm simply following the light in the opposite direction, *ana*, right at the third turn."

I shook my head. "I understand what you're saying, now. It's a turn of some kind, in a direction I can't really see. But I just can't *walk* in that direction."

"Well, I suppose it's easier for Goodman Bones to visualize it, since he's not limited to human perceptions of reality anymore. And it's probably easier for me, since I can visualize hyperdimensional relationships in my mind. Comes from having the *Talent*, and centuries of work at sorcery, I suppose. It doesn't hurt that I've had a few years walking other planes of reality, as well - you'd be disgusted to learn how annoyingly common walking *ana* and *kata* is on the elemental planes, for instance. Particularly the Elemental Plane of Fire. The City of Brass is *immensely* annoying to navigate. It's a wonder anyone gets their morning meals, really."

I could hear Marilith giggling, but I just shook my head. "I'll take your word for it."

"I suppose you'll have to - you're a mundane. I might be able to teach you to understand it in a few years, but you'd probably never be able to take a step *ana* here, simply because you can't walk *ana* in our world normally at all no matter *how* well you understand it. It's not just the physical act of walking, it's an act of will to *make* yourself walk that way - or, of course, you can be pushed or pulled that way... Hmmm..." she said, stroking her chin. "Let's try it this way," she said, and tucked her staff under her arm, turned to face upwards on the stair, then held out her gloved hands. "Each of you take my hand, and

follow. Don't think. Close your eyes if you have to, but *don't* think about what you're doing or where you're going. Just relax your minds, and just let me pull you along, alright?"

Goodman Bones nodded, taking her hand. *"Yes, Great Mage."*

"Alright," I replied, taking her other hand and closing my eyes.

We walked up the stairs for awhile after that. I stumbled several times walking with my eyes closed, but managed to keep my balance. Then, suddenly, I felt Eddas Ayar's gloved hand tug me in a different direction. Not up, down, or sideways or any other direction I'd ever walked before in my life. I stumbled and fell, hitting the hard marble steps painfully. "Ow!" I yelped, opening my eyes...

...and gazed about in astonishment.

The endless darkness that had surrounded the stairs was gone, and I could see we were standing on an immensely broad stair, over fifty paces across, spiraling into the sky. The bottom of the stairs was visible - we were above the lava cliffs, apparently somewhere inside the spire, hundreds of cubits up. The sun hung low on the horizon, reddening the scattered clouds and turning the sea to shimmering gold. Far, far above us was a shimmering sphere, at the end of the spiral stair. "Oh, my..."

"Do you understand, now? The stair had more than three dimensions. The bottom was connected so that we kept on walking back to it, over and over again. To get to the rest of the stairs, we had to step in a fourth direction, crossing it's fourth dimension. Like taking a step up to enter the next level of the stair, except we took a step *ana*."

"Yes..." Goodman Bones replied, looking up at the stair. *"It was not up or down, or any of the physical directions... It was another direction, just as UnLife is not death or life or even anti-life... It is Not-Life, another existence entirely."*

Eddas looked at him for a long moment, then nodded. "Yes, much as a mushroom is neither animal nor

vegetable, but another thing entirely."

"Yes... *I understand so much better, now...*"

"Well, I don't! I can *see* it, now! I couldn't, before!"

"Of course, you're *on* this part of the tesseract, now, and your mind interprets it as being a contiguous whole."

"And now, I don't see the narrow stairs below us at all," I replied, shaking my head as I looked down the immensely broad stairs behind us.

"That's because they aren't down - nor are they up, or left or right or forward or back. They're *kata* to us, a direction which in our world only exists inside a tesseract. And incidentally, those stairs and these stairs weren't different sizes - it was the same stair."

"I'd ask you to point at them, but I'm afraid you would," I replied, my mind spinning. "Let's just continue on. Will you need to pull us along to the top?"

Eddas looked up for a long moment, studying the stair. "No, I don't think so. You should be prepared, however. She's up there, and eventually she'll notice us once we get close enough."

"We can't just sneak up on her?"

"No, *Sasha of Woe*," Goodman Bones replied. "*Her minion is like I, and can sense your life as you approach.*"

Eddas nodded. "Stealth is utterly useless against the undead, that's why I haven't been asking everyone to be quiet before now. Let's put a few protective spells over you two, now, since we're close enough to where we'll need them soon."

I waited as Eddas gestured separately over Goodman Bones and I, but saw nothing. "Ummm... I don't see anything? Is this good?"

"Yes. Why, what did you expect to see?" Eddas replied, turning and beginning to walk up the steps.

"I don't know... Glowing armor? Something?"

Eddas simply chuckled. "Visible effects simply tell one's opponent what spell to use to bypass them. Each of you is currently protected by a shield equal to my own - about equal to a fine suit of articulated plate. That should protect you from her minion long enough for you to destroy him, Sasha, and should keep Goodman Bones from harm."

"The spell is there, Sasha of Woe. I can see it - a glimmering shield closely covering every part of your body, and mine, and hers... And the Great Mage has more... Rings and arcs of power that dance about her, shielding her body..."

I was taken aback slightly - Goodman Bones' voice was no longer a dry, unearthly hiss, but had grown stronger, becoming a low mutter. "I see..."

"Good. Now, most of my efforts will be focused on keeping her spells from striking you, myself, and Goodman Bones. Your task is to destroy her minion. Do *not* attack her, and to *not* let her minion attack me. Understand?"

I nodded, gripping my lance in both hands. "Yes, I do. I'm ready."

"Good. Follow me, and be ready for anything," she replied, and began walking up the stairs.

It was, by my count, twenty-seven turns of the broad stair from top to bottom, and we were only on the third turn from the bottom. Twenty-four turns waited us. They stairs were very broad and a single turn was probably easily a hundred paces - almost two and a half leagues of stair remained. I guessed we'd spend at least a good hour walking to the top, but we would get there in plenty of time. The sun was just setting...

...and then, as we walked, the sun swiftly set, and the stars began to come out.

"Alright, I know you're going to laugh at me, but..."

"Yes?" Eddas said, still walking.

"I just watched the sun set like a stone dropping in the ocean, and now the stars are out."

"It's a trick of your perception. You're walking inside a tesseract. What you see around is outside isn't really what's there. You're seeing what was there, several hours ago while we were fiddling with the bottom three turns, dilated through a fourth dimension of time."

"So it's not real?"

"Not in the sense that it's happening outside, no. You're a mermaid - you've looked from both below the water to things on the beach, and from the beach to things on the water. Is what you see through the water always perfectly clear, like looking at things beside you?"

"Well, no. When you look from water to air or air to water, it's always distorted. The water ripples, and things are bent... You see the fish in the water or the rock on the beach, but they're not really where you're seeing them, they're in a different position."

"Exactly. You're standing inside a tesseract, looking outside at the world. And what you're seeing isn't precisely what's there."

I watched as we continued on, and the sky darkened. Swiftly at first, then more slowly, the stars came out. "It seems to be slowing a little as we go up..."

"Yes, as we near the locus of the tesseract, we'll start to see the outside world more and more as it is."

I shook my head. "I've *completely* lost track of time in here. Will we make it in time?"

"Yes, easily. We've still well over an hour to midnight."

I looked at the stars in the sky outside, which I could see were slowly yet visibly moving. "How can you tell?"

"How can you tell where to stab with your lance when you're looking at a fish below the water while you're on the shore?" Eddas asked in return.

"Well, you just *can*. Once you understand the distortion, you can compensate for it in your mind..." I said, then blushed. "I see."

We walked in silence after that, round and round the stair, heading upwards. More tricks of my perception became apparent to me - Goodman Bones started to walk more and more heavily, and the

slim frame beneath his robes started to fill out. I decided not to ask - I'd already made myself look like an ignorant child, here, there was no need to bother Eddas with endless questions. She did not seem to change, nor did I, but I supposed that probably had an explanation, too. We were halfway there, and already the full moon was rising to it's zenith. It looked three hours to midnight, judging by the sky outside, but it was impossible to say.

"And to think... Poor Marilith has had to look outside the world thorough this for ages..." I muttered, shaking my head.

"Worse - she's trapped within a tesseract of her own. A tesseract within a tesseract."

I blinked. "Is that even possible?"

Eddas nodded. "Look at your wrist."

I didn't understand for a moment, then I realized she'd already told me the little bottle I was wearing on my wrist was a tesseract. "Oh. Sorry. I feel *very* stupid right now."

"Nothing to be sorry about, this is just something out of your experience. I've little experience with the sea. If I went into the water and reached out to pet a sea-snake, would you say I was stupid?"

"Well, no, just ignorant. You're *hardly* stupid."

"There you are."

We walked in silence for four more turns, when suddenly Marilith spoke. "*The moon shifts! Aaaaah!*" she wailed, and in a few moments, she began to scream.

But I could hear her screams not just as the quiet howl of pain I had heard half my life, but as a reverberating echo from everywhere around us.

"She's in pain! She says the moon shifts, and she must hold it!"

"I imagine that would hurt, yes," Eddas replied, still walking up the stairs. "The strength of her struggles is magnified by the enchantments of this place to provide the power necessary to maintain the balance it was created to maintain. I've been studying the moon and planets and the stars these last few years, and I've been wondering why my measurements were off ever so slightly from what they should have been from my day. The moon's orbit should have slowed an eyblink or two in these last two thousand years, the distance across the Bright Sea to Vilandia should be a hand or so shorter... But it isn't. She's the answer. For two thousand years, she's been trying to hold everything as it was when this tower was built."

"But *why*?" I anguished, my heart aching to hear Marilith's screams so loudly.

"This is the Temple of the Sun, Sasha, and it was built to allow the desert to grow. The ancient mage who made this place wanted his people's lands to stay as they are, and perhaps grow - and, in truth, he was probably directed how to do it in a dream by his god, much as many of our key pawns are directed. We've had to deal with one serious obstacle in the desert, so it's likely that was their god's attempt to stop us - and the powers of all the gods over the world are not infinite, so this tower itself is probably their last attempt. Why Brionnach is here, I have no idea. Perhaps the desert god of the Mysantians has allied with the Spider God of the Malani, so as to have the best chance of defeating us. Maybe something will happen to the Sunless Sea if the tower fails - though it shouldn't, the Sunless Sea is hundreds of millions of years old, an ice-age or two shouldn't affect it at all. Or maybe Brionnach is exercising her Free Will, and ignoring her god - we *do* have that option, from the lowliest farmer to the greatest dragon. It's an important part of what forms the Arc of Time in the first place. Or perhaps the Spider Goddess has something entirely different in mind that I can't even imagine..." she said, then shrugged. "I really don't *know* why Brionnach is here, to be truthful. No matter, Brionnach can't free your sister without destroying herself, she can't possibly have the skill. Instead, she'll have to replace your sister before she can enslave her."

"Who would she replace her with?"

"Her minion," Goodman Bones said, his voice a dark and hollow echo from beyond the grave. "Or, failing that, me."

I looked at him, and gasped, pausing. His robes, which once hung loosely, now fit tightly to the well-muscled body beneath. The thews of his arms rippled like pythons beneath the fabric, and his shoulders were broad and full. The boots he once wore, laced tightly around his bones, now were tattered and shredded - he kicked them off, revealing a man's bare feet, and a brief flash of hard-muscled calf. He reached to his tearing, splitting gloves, ripping them from himself and tossing them aside, revealing large, powerful hands, and thick forearms.

"You have awakened," Eddas said simply, looking at him.

"Yes, Great Mage. Our proximity to my beloved has brought me to awareness. Now, I understand. We meet our destiny soon. I do not know if we will survive. As such, I wish to tell you something now, while I still can."

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

Eddas smiled. "You are welcome, my friend."

The Ocean - Thirty-Six.

The last turn of the spiral stairs finally presented itself to us. Ahead, in the distance, we could see the stairs ended in a round platform, with four raised, curving arms. Floating there, held above the supporting arms by some invisible force, was a shimmering crystal sphere forty cubits wide. It rotated slowly, locked to the rhythm of titanic forces I could not understand.

Before the sphere stood an elf-maiden. Her skin was deep blue, her hair snow white. She was dressed in garments of leather which left bare her taut belly, and the cleavage of her indigo breasts. Perhaps this was meant to distract a male opponent, to give them pause long enough for her to kill them. Perhaps it was simply meant to be comfortable in warm climates. I did not know - but, as Eddas Ayar had instructed, I kept my gaze focused on her companion.

Her companion by her side wore articulated plate armor of a design I'd never seen before. Ornate and elaborate, the shoulders flared up in an aureate finial of detail that was more stylish than actually functional. He wore a full helmet, as well, the visor down - I could see nothing of his face. On his left arm, he wore a shield, and in his right fist, he bore a longsword. He did not attack, but simply stood by the blue elf-maid in silence, waiting.

And in the background, Marilith screamed in agony.

Eddas walked up the stair until we were within twenty paces of the elf-maid, then stopped. Goodman Bones and I stood behind her, waiting. I held my lance at the ready, my eyes on the elf-maid's companion.

"Greetings, Brionnach," Eddas called, raising her voice to be heard over Marilith's screams.

"Greetings, half-elf. I am surprised the council would send a mongrel half-breed to hunt me down."

"Hardly, Brionnach. I was not sent by the Council of Death, nor even by the *Faelias Freiceadan*. I am Eddas Ayar, and I am here for my own reasons."

Brionnach tensed. "The enemy of my people!"

"Hardly, Brionnach. I-"

But Brionnach would parlay no further. "*Kill them!*" she screamed, and began to gesture for a spell. I saw Eddas begin to gesture, but I couldn't wait to see what happened - Brionnach's minion charged, and I dashed forward to stop him from attacking Eddas. Lunging, I slipped my lance past his shield, the point stabbing into his chest, through the steel of his armor.

The minion slapped at my lance with his shield, knocking it from my grip and twisting it deep within his body - blood poured from the wound, but he didn't seem to notice. He didn't even cry out in pain. He slashed at me with his sword and I leapt back nimbly, willing my lance back to my grip. The end of my lance was coated in his blood, and blood gushed from the hole in this breastplate - but he did not stop. I stared, amazed.

Raining a flurry of blows upon me, he drove me back. I parried over and over again, then finally leapt back, flicking the tip of my lance out and engaging his blade, then rotating it. With a flick of the wrist, I disarmed him, sending his sword skittering across the stone stairs. I stabbed again, knocking his shield aside, and punching through his cuirass, into his heart. He staggered, and I leapt back. Blood sprayed from the wound, his heart cleanly pierced, and he gazed down at it. "Fall down, damn you!" I yelled.

He simply laughed, then launched himself forward, slamming into me with his shield and shoulder, and sending me tumbling down the stairs.

I slammed into the outside edge of the stairs, finally coming to rest. The pain from hitting the stone steps dozens of times as I'd rolled down them was immense, but Buntaro's training had saved me - I'd managed to roll with the fall, and not break any bones. I looked around groggily. Eddas stood there at

the top of the stair, her staff held in both hands before her, concentrating. Brionnach cast spell after spell, which seemed to wash ineffectually over some invisible sphere that protected Eddas. The sounds of rushing feet approached. I looked - the minion was charging me, having recovered his sword. I flailed about behind me, trying to push myself up, but there was nothing - just a tremendous fall behind me. It was only my perceptions of this place, perhaps, but it was all I knew. I rolled to the side just as he cut, his sword sending sparks from the stone. Rolling to my feet, I willed my lance to my grip, then parried desperately. He could not be killed - mortal wounds meant nothing to him.

But perhaps if he could not be killed like any mortal man, he might still be *broken* like any mortal man.

I parried again, then snapped the butt of my lance into his shin, crushing the armor plate over it, then leaping back as he slashed at me. He stumbled, his leg giving way, and fell to the stairs with a crash of armor. I snapped the butt out again, smashing his wrist, shattering it, and sending his sword flying. He lashed out at me with his shield, trying to knock me down, but I simply leapt back, reversed my lance, then began smashing him with the butt over and over again.

He tried to block with his shield - I shattered it on the first blow, the second scattering the pieces, and the third crushing the forearm beneath. Blood ran in rivers as he struggled to swiftly crawl towards me and grapple me. I simply kept out of his reach, much like I had an orca so long ago, and smashed him again and again. There was little style and no finesse to it. Master Buntaro would have been ashamed of me. Or perhaps he wouldn't - he once said that if an opponent is trying to kill you and he fails, then the style you used to defeat him must have been the correct one. I continued pounding the minion until every bone in his limbs was shattered and broken, the armor over his limbs dented and crushed.

Finally, it was done. It might have lacked finesse, but it apparently was the correct style. The minion glared at me hatefully from behind his visor, but he was helpless. Or nearly so - he still flailed his shattered limbs, trying to reach me, trying to kill me. I growled, reversing my lance and lowering the point at him. Focusing all my strength with the *chi*-shout Master Buntaro had taught me so long ago, I charged, smashing the point of my lance into his chest, sliding him backwards in the slick pool of his own blood head-first all the way to the center edge of the spiral stairs, slamming him into the low wall with enough force to dent his helmet and snap his neck. Still, even with his head impossibly twisted down to one shoulder and flopping loosely, his neck obviously broken, *still* he flailed at me, trying to get me. With an effort, I levered him up atop the edge. He hissed with fury and anger, and I glared at him.

"Die, already!" I growled, pulling my lance free, then kicked him off the edge.

He did not scream or wail as he fell, and for a moment, I wondered if I had erred. Did this larger stair also loop back upon itself? I looked over the edge, watching. A long moment later, that question was answered with a distant crash as he smashed into the ground at the base of the stair. What was left of him twitched slightly in a spreading pool of blood, but did not move otherwise. "So much for you," I muttered, then turned, staggering up the stairs. The battle between Eddas and Brionnach still raged - Eddas still stood there holding back her spells, while Goodman Bones simply watched.

Brionnach paused, gasping with the effort of trying to overcome Eddas' defenses. She looked, seeing me. I was bloodied and limping from my tumble down the stairs, spattered in blood from defeating her minion, but I was still coming. "So, that's it, eh? You cannot hurt me for some reason... But your warrior can? Bah!" she said, and gestured at me.

"No!" Eddas shouted.

Pain hit me like a hammer, everywhere at once. I could feel it - poison filling every fiber of my being, injected by her spell. I screamed with pain, falling to my knees, my lance clattering to the stair from my weakened grip.

"So much for that one!" Brionnach crowed. "Now what will you do, Eddas Ayar?"

I shuddered, reaching for my lance again and placing the butt against the stair. "That hurt!" I growled, using my lance to push myself to my feet.

Brionnach gaped at me. "Hurt?! You should be dead!"

I glared at her, holding my lance at the ready. Despite my current form, I was still what the mer-magi's belt had rendered me, years ago - I was a mermaid, and incredibly resistant to poison. "Just be glad I'm not going to ask for my turn to pay you back for that, bitch! I am the *Wench of Woe*, and my enemies fear me!"

"For obvious reasons," Eddas remarked dryly, then looked to Brionnach. "Are we quite through with this, Brionnach, or is a longer demonstration necessary to convince you to stop fighting?"

Brionnach nodded, his shoulders slumping with exhaustion. "Alright. I can see I am out-matched. If you're going to kill me, Eddas Ayar, make it quick."

"Hardly. Though you consider me the enemy of your people, I am not," Eddas replied. I limped up as Eddas spoke, and eventually was standing by her side. "I could really care less about your people - and your queen knows this, as I have instructed her most carefully on this subject. She's well aware that so long as you leave me and my interests alone, I'm quite content to leave you and your interests alone. That, really, is at the heart of your people's problem. There are only two emotions anyone feels towards your people, today - either indifference, or hate. Even among yourselves, indifference, mistrust and hate are very common. Yet, there is one who feels differently towards you. And now, I think it's time you spoke with him."

"What? Who?"

"*That would be I,*" Goodman Bones replied in a cold, hollow voice, and pulled off his hood.

I gaped - he was *astonishingly* handsome. Pale skin, long white hair, a strong, proud jaw... But his eyes were chilling, the color of ice, and his expression utterly cold... Inhuman.

"You!" Brionnach gasped.

"Yes, my beloved. I loved you from the moment you created me. Your misbegotten spell summoned me, a being of love, from a dimension you apparently do not fully understand. I do - but the truth of it, I think, is for another time. You abandoned me, and left me to rot. You did not understand what you had summoned. I crawled for months after you, driven by my love for you. I have followed you every step of the way, driven by one purpose. I wished to find you. Now, I have. And now, I wish to help you, that you might understand."

"If you wish to help me, Barbarian, then *kill them now!*"

He trembled, as though struggling.

I was still bruised and bloodied, and I ached all over. Still, I held my lance at the ready. I did not know if he would attack, but he looked quite powerful. I wondered if I even had the strength remaining to stop him.

Finally, he shook his head. *"No, beloved. Accept that I love you, and my love for you does not mean I am a beast to be commanded to attack. Accept that I love you, and the reason I did not leave you before was not because of your will, but because of my love."*

Brionnach stared, as though stunned. "But it's *impossible!*"

Eddas snorted. "Hardly. Your understanding of Ethical Calculus and the higher Laws of Magic is poor, at best, Brionnach. You turned an enemy into your deepest dream, your most heartfelt desire. Now, you have to live with that. Such are the Laws of Magic," Eddas commented, then looked up. "The time is now - the chamber opens," she said, then reached out and took my hand firmly. "Come, Sasha, there's not much time. Goodman Bones, don't let Brionnach follow."

I staggered after Eddas as she walked swiftly to the crystal sphere, then reached out to touch it with a gloved hand. The world flashed white, and we were gone.

The Spider - I.

I gazed upon my beloved, my heart filled with love for her, despite what I now understood of both her, and of myself.

I could feel it, now that my mind was finally clear. The dark plane of UnLife, stretching as eternally vast as our own universe did. A plane of endless dark, endless cold - but not the darkness of Death, or even the cold of frost... It was the cold darkness of UnLife. Creatures lived there... If that was, in truth, the right word. Amorphous beings of darkness, they struggled with one another not for supremacy, but for simple survival. The dark fed the lower ones, much as plants reached their leaves to drink in the sun. The higher ones preyed on them, much as deer graze on the helpless plants about them. And still higher ones preyed on them, in turn, much as wolves preyed on the deer. But yet, the comparison was not so simple. They were all alive... Conscious... And aware. And they all struggled to survive.

And, at times, the whim of fate or a trick of sorcery let them slip from that plane of UnLife, and enter this one.

Their struggles to survive were not physical conflicts, as similar struggles are on this plane, but were conflicts of emotion, and the strength of passions. The most successful, of course, were the violent passions - hate, fury, and an insatiable hunger that went beyond the comprehension of any mortal mind on this plane... Yet, there were other emotions that also succeeded, and survived. Joy, Rapture, Epiphany...

And even Love.

I was not who I once thought I was. I was not some brutish barbarian from the frozen arctic wastelands to the far north, arisen from death through necromantic sorcery. I was, in truth, an alien being... A creature from beyond this plane, beyond the mundane realities of light and life, shadow and

death. I was a being of UnLife, summoned by Brionnach's spell, bound to the corpse of the barbarian warrior she had slain.

But the spell was wrongly done. I was not so easily dismissed, for she did not understand what had kept me here to begin with. And because of Brionnach's ineptitude, the Great Mage was right - I was, indeed, far more than I seemed.

Ocean and Mountain... Spider and Sand... The Rabbit and the Owl... Now, I truly understood the words of the goddess who had spoken to me. I was, like Eddas, Joy and Kyrie, and even Brionnach who now trembled before me with exhaustion, a tool of the gods. A pawn in some greater game they played against each other, with victory determining the fate of the world... And much more.

The soul of the brutish barbarian who had once inhabited this body was long gone. In its place was myself - a creature of UnLife. Yet, part of the barbarian remained. His fleeting memories... His personality, devoid of the greed and jealousy for his sibling which drove him to take up a path that led to his eventual destruction, was a part of me. His hopes, his dreams, his highest thoughts were a vessel for what now inhabited his flesh. Truly, the barbarian had been forged like raw iron ore into the steel of a sword by his goddess - much of what one had at the beginning was gone, replaced by other components to make something entirely new.

Brionnach stood silently, her shoulders slumped as she gasped with exhaustion. Slowly, she stopped panting, and lifted her head to gaze at me. Once she had finally caught her breath, she snorted, then turned for the crystal sphere, intending to enter it. I caught her upper arm in the grip of my right hand, and held her easily - I could tell from the renewed strength in my limbs that I could easily crush her bones, had I the will to do so. But, of course, I did not.

"Release me, barbarian!" Brionnach snapped. "I must stop them!"

"No, beloved. You must not. You and I have a far different destiny than to simply enslave a demon, and perhaps rule the dark elves with her power," I replied, and Brionnach blinked in surprise. *"Yes, beloved. Your desire is clear to me. You seek far more than merely a cure for the punishment that was inflicted upon you. You seek revenge, and domination. Such is the way of your people."*

"But... But how do you-"

"I am far more familiar with the emotions of darkness than you realize - and far more familiar with the emotions of light than you dare imagine," I replied, and smiled. "You once said that someday, I would awaken, and that moment might be amusing. You meant, of course, amusing for you. Now, that moment has arrived. However, I am afraid that it appears, my beloved, the joke is on you."

"Wh-what do you mean?" Brionnach stammered, taken aback.

"Tell me, beloved... Why did you take up the study of Necromancy?"

"I..." Brionnach replied, then her eyes narrowed. "That is none of your business, barbarian!"

"Shall I guess, then?" I asked, as the crystal sphere shimmered nearby.

Brionnach ground her teeth, gazing at the sphere for a moment. "It matters little now, the entrance is sealed. They have begun. Everything was for naught..." Brionnach struggled in my grip for a moment, the scowled at me. "Say your piece, Barbarian, then release me!"

"And so I shall. You loved someone - you loved someone with all your heart and soul," I said, and Brionnach gasped. "Yes, beloved. It is obvious to me, now. You loved someone dearly - an emotion that, to your people, is one of weakness. Yet, you loved anyway. And they died. You took up the study of necromancy to try to learn how to bring them back from the Void."

"Only to learn it was *impossible!*" Brionnach screamed.

"Perhaps... Perhaps not. You have not asked the Great Mage. The powers of Eddas Ayar go far beyond your wildest dreams, beloved. You fear Eddas Ayar as an enemy - yet, you now know this is not so."

Brionnach paused, taken aback for a moment. "It... It is rumored that Eddas Ayar knows the secret, yes..." After a long moment, she hung her head. "My love was Tialanad. He was the only one I had ever met in my life who truly loved me. Not mere trickery to gain sexual favors, or perhaps cheat me out of my dowry, but *true* love..." She said, and sighed, her gaze cast down to her feet. "He was slain eighty years ago by a bolt to the head from a dwarven crossbow while with a scouting party. He and a small detachment of goblins were part of several groups searching the tunnels to try to find and stop Eddas Ayar from reaching *Baile'mor'Dorcha*, and apparently they stumbled across a dwarven ambushade..." Brionnach shook her head. "It is a long story, and of no importance. A failed effort, a life wasted," she said, then paused a moment. "Perhaps... Perhaps I could ask. I am nothing to him. Eddas Ayar might do it on a whim, perhaps even out of amusement, should I crawl to him on my hands and knees... Which I would do gladly, to recover Tialanad..." Suddenly, her jaw firmed, and she looked up to me, her eyes flashing fire. "But it doesn't *matter*, now, does it?! *Look at me!* I am *stained* by the *Lobh'dath!* Tialanad would *never* accept me if he came back, now! I followed my heart instead of my head, and *this* is where that path has led me! *Such is the penalty for my foolish love! Such is the price for my own weakness!*"

"You still do not understand. The path you chose has led you to something far greater. The path you chose has led you to one who loves you more than you can possibly imagine, and more than you dare possibly hope," I replied, and Brionnach blinked in confusion. *"Yes, beloved. Your misbegotten spell did not draw a simple slave to serve you, but drew one who loves you. I stayed with you not because you forced me to, but because I wished to. I love you. That is my existence. Love has always been my existence, for all the countless aeons before you ever drew me to this plane, to fill this body and serve your needs,"* I said, and drew her close. *"Release your anger. Let go of your hate. It doesn't matter, now,"* I said, and kissed her long, deeply, and passionately.

Brionnach drew back from the kiss, her dark eyes gazing into mine. "You... You truly love me? Truly? Not mere words to soften me or trick me, but truly love me?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"Truly. I can do nothing but love you. It is why I am."

"But... But you cannot! It's impossible!"

I simply smiled, and kissed her again. I could feel the tension in her shoulders draining as her resistance ebbed.

"You can't..."

I kissed her again.

"But..."

And again.

"Oh..."

Slowly, her arms slipped around me, and she held me tight. After a moment, she pulled my head down to hers, and kissed me in return. My fingers slipped over the lacings to the leather garments I had made what seemed like an age ago, and tugged at the knots. She squirmed slightly, not to escape, but to slip free of her garments. My own garments she slipped from me easily, then let her hands slide over my back. In a moment, she drew me down to the marbled floor, her fingers running through my hair as she gazed at me. Suddenly, she paused. "Wait... It is spring. I am in season..."

"Should I stop?"

Brionnach looked me over, and smiled. "No," she replied, and drew me close.

* * *

The rumbling of the tower strengthened. Already, bits of the marble stair were falling, cast down into the nothingness of a collapsing tesseract. *"You must flee, beloved."*

"No, I must stay," Brionnach replied dreamily, her nude body curled against mine as she gently stroked my hair.

"This tower is doomed, beloved. Soon, it will detonate, the energies within released to destroy it. You will die, beloved. You must use your sorcery and flee."

"And go where? Home? I have none. Everything I owned was forfeit when the queen's hounds captured me. Back to the goblins, to serve the High Necromancer as some mere lackey for the rest of my days? I think not."

"But you will die!"

"Yes. And I will die happy. You may not understand that, Barbarian, but to my people, that actually *means* something. For once in my life, I will be truly happy - and my life will end in happiness, and love. Not in pain, not in misery, not in the slow horror of *basaich* or the disgrace of suicide, but in happiness and love," she said, and kissed me again. "You will be returned whence you came, to carry your love for me on eternally, so long as you may exist. As for me, my spirit will move on. Perhaps to the afterlife. Perhaps to hell. I know not. I care not. I only want my life to end on this one note of happiness."

"You have a greater destiny, beloved. The gods have need of you."

"Oh, they do, do they?" she replied, smiling.

"Yes."

"Well, to hell with the gods," she replied, and smiled again, drawing me down for a final kiss.

I lifted my head after the kiss, and gazed into her grinning face. I couldn't help myself. As the tower's rumbling built to a final crescendo, I looked into her eyes and laughed long, loud, and heartily.

The Ocean - Thirty-Seven.

I blinked rapidly as my vision returned. We were in an enormous chamber of stone, round, like the top of the tower I had seen from the ground. The dome of the chamber was clear crystal, and the stars and the full moon above could be seen through it. In the center of the table was a circular stone altar, covered with ornate runes I could not read, with four massive chains attached to titanic machines I did not comprehend. It resembled the wooden gears of a mill, but was beyond my comprehension otherwise. The other end of the chains were attached to the prisoner in the center of the table.

She was female, of that there was little doubt. But she was not human. Her arms, hands, torso and upper legs were human enough, and her nude body was sheened with sweat. But she was covered not in skin, but the pelt of an ebon horse. Her head was that of a mare, a long horse's tail was attached to her rump, and her legs below the knee were the limbs and hooves of some equine beast. Chained to the circular stone altar as though being drawn and quartered, Marilith screamed in agony, her breasts heaving as she gasped for breath.

"Sister!" I said, starting to reach for her - but Eddas clapped her staff across my chest, holding me

back.

"Don't touch, dear, you have no idea what you're looking at."

"But I can *see* her! She's *there!* If we can just slip her arms free of the chains-"

"She doesn't *have* arms at the moment, and there *are* no chains, Sasha. It's a trick of perception caused by the very enchantments which keep her prisoner here. It's simply the way your mind interprets it - it's not what is actually here."

"Then... Then what do you see?"

"I told you before. I see a shapeless form, twisting through a diamond tesseract, trying not to be torn apart. Now *don't touch anything unless I tell you!*"

I nodded, my eyes misting as Eddas walked around the room. Her eyes were everywhere, examining everything. I saw machines of some kind... But that was not what was here. I saw my sister in agony, her shoulders nearly out of the sockets... But that was not what was here. I did not understand.

Finally, Eddas shook her head. "This demon is weakening, and our simple presence in this tower is upsetting the balance of the forces within it. In an hour, maybe two, she'll be dead and this tower will be a cloud of vapor."

"No!" I gasped.

"Sasha, come stand here," she said, and pointed near Marilith's head.

I did so, and looked down to Marilith's face. Marilith howled in pain, and I was utterly helpless.

"Tell me what you see," Eddas said calmly, studying Marilith.

"My sister's head. She's in great pain, Eddas, can't we do *something?!?*"

Eddas nodded. "Actually, since that's what you see, yes. Hold your hand over where you see her face. Don't touch her, just show me." I did so, and Eddas chuckled. "Why does that not surprise me? Alright - stroke the sides of her face, like you were trying to comfort her."

"It's alright? I can do that?"

"Yes. Try to comfort her, Sasha, the emotion is important," she said, and began stroking the runes of the circular altar with a gloved finger.

As I stroked the sides of her face gently with my hands, Marilith's screams stopped, and her eyes flew open. They glowed red, like hot coals. "*Sister! You came for me!*"

"Yes, Sister," I replied, weeping.

Marilith sobbed. "*You must flee! I cannot hold it any longer! Please, Sasha, leave me! Run away!*"

"No! I'm staying here, with you!"

Eddas looked up, and began to gesture carefully and precisely. Marilith gasped, looking around.

"The pain! It... It's GONE! For the first time in nearly two thousand years, the pain has completely stopped!"

"Yes, I'm holding the tesseract with my will, for the moment," Eddas replied, beads of sweat appearing on her forehead. "The one who created this was quite clever. Quite clever. Unfortunately, it's a bit harder for me than for you, I'm outside the tesseract, pressing inward on it with my will - that means I can't hold this long. Now, listen carefully, Marilith: We're going to try to pull you out of this and release the forces very gently. Show me where the tidal forces are connected to you. Just pull very gently to show me."

To my eyes, Marilith's left arm moved, and she wiggled her fingers.

"Gah. The creator of this place did *not* intend extracting you to be easy. I can barely see that."

"You cannot see the interstice?"

"Not clearly enough to release the tension and extract you, no. Whoever made this place already knew how it was constructed, they didn't *need* to look. Thus, they made your cage such that it's relationship with the rest of reality can't be easily visualized even with a spell of truesight, so it would be harder for you to escape. Judging by the enchantment, you can't really see anything within a league of you from inside there."

"No, I can't."

"Ummm... I can see it easily, Eddas," I said, looking at Marilith's left hand.

"Tell me what you see?"

"A chain, attached to a manacle about her wrist. There's some slack in the chain, now. When you told her to pull a bit to show you, I saw her flex her arm and wiggle her fingers."

"That's actually an emerald about the size of a draft horse, and you're stroking part of the diamond in the center of this place, but let's not split hairs, this is exhausting," Eddas said, her eyes closed in concentration. "Marilith, your sister's vision is the key. Looking at it the way you see it or I see it is not going to help - this place was meant to contain creatures who can visualize hyperdimensional relationships. It would hold me just as easily as it's held you, were I in your place, and I doubt I'd have survived as long..." Eddas said, her face still a mask of concentration. "Sasha, tell your sister how she has to move to escape the chains. Marilith, close your eyes, visualize yourself as humanoid, and move as your sister tells you."

"Ummm... Fold your left thumb in," I said, and watched as Marilith did so. "Okay, now turn your hand a bit downwards... Okay, now pull your arm straight out." Marilith did so, and her left hand was free. "You did it!"

"Yes, but now we're committed, Sasha. We have to get her out while my will lasts, or the remaining forces will tear her apart as soon as I lose my hold on the tesseract. Marilith, show us where the next connection is. Sasha, keep going."

Slowly, we extracted her right arm, then her right hoof. Finally, we were down to her left hoof. "Bend your hoof down a bit," I said, looking from where I stood.

"I can't, that's as far as it goes!"

"Try harder, it's almost loose."

"I can't! I can't! Aaaaah! I'm going to die!"

Eddas gritted her teeth, her eyes tightly shut, sweat dripping from her brow. "Marilith, calm down, I can hold this for a little longer. Sasha, look again, but don't touch anything other than her face. Is there anything else she can do?"

"Ummm... Try wiggling your hoof, maybe you'll kick the manacle off yourself."

Marilith gasped. *"No, I won't! I'll kick myself free of the tesseract!"* she screamed, and flicked her hoof hard.

There was an enormous crash, a sound of a titanic shattering...

...And suddenly the entire room changed.

I gazed around in wonder. Gone were the wooden mill wheels and the chains. Instead, we were in a room at the top of a tower with four titanic gemstones around a central crucible, shaped much like the four arms that held up the crystal sphere at the top of the stair. Shards of diamond lay scattered all over the floor, and I could feel a steady vibration beneath my feet. Before me, in the center of the room, Marilith stood, looking just as I'd seen her on the altar. She staggered, stumbling around. *"Sasha! Where are you?"*

I reached out, taking her hand. "I'm here, Marilith," I replied, wrapping my arms around her and hugging her tight.

"I *really* wish you hadn't done that," Eddas remarked dryly, brushing shards of diamond from her ebon robe.

"I am sorry, Eddas Ayar, I didn't think... I was so eager to escape, I didn't realize..."

"Didn't realize what?" I asked, looking up at her.

"No time to discuss it, unfortunately," Eddas said as the vibrations beneath my feet grew stronger. "Marilith, can you see to take us to the bottom of the tower?"

"No, Eddas Ayar. The world is chaos, to my eyes. I am blind."

"Blind?!" I yelped.

Eddas reached out an ebon-gloved hand. "Alright, I'm taking the both of you with me. Sasha, take my hand, and place your sister's hand on my arm. Do it right now." I did so, and Eddas nodded. "Sasha, bring your lance, it won't survive here," she said, and I nodded, willing my lance to my grip. "Good. Sasha, Marilith, hold on tight, and don't let go." Eddas then gestured briefly with her staff, incanting a short spell. The world blurred...

...and suddenly we were at the base of the spire. Joy and Kyrie were sitting by a small fire, and they rose as they saw us. "Ooo! Grampa, she's pretty!"

"That's the demon?" Joy asked.

"Yes, Joy," Eddas replied, "and we'll have all the time in the world to discuss it *later*. For now, pick up Kyrie and your staff and take my arm, we've got to get out of here."

The trembling of the earth grew stronger, and stronger. Joy nodded, sweeping up her staff and the child, then clapping a hand to Eddas's arm. "Come on, Kyrie, your grampa's going to take us home, apparently he botched things a bit."

"I did not!" Eddas objected.

"It was my fault," I said.

"No, the fault was mine," Marilith said. "You see, I-"

"Should we really be standing here and arguing this?" Joy asked as the earth began to rumble.

"No," Eddas said, and gestured again. The world blurred, and distantly I heard the sound of an immense blast...

...then it was gone, and we stood at the base of a square marble tower, fifty cubits high and sixteen cubits wide, gleaming like bone in the light of the full moon. Around us were beautiful trees, all in neat little rows. We stood on a hard-packed dirt road just before the tower, and a bit further on down the road, I could see a stone bridge crossing a quiet river. Crickets sang in the darkness, and I grinned. "Where are we?"

"At my tower," Eddas replied, then leaned heavily on her staff. "Joy, holding that tesseract was *particularly* tiring, and I'm really not looking forward to four flights of stairs. Can I ask you-"

Joy grinned, setting Kyrie down gently. "Kyrie, could you carry Auntie Joy's staff, please? Your grampa's all tuckered out, he needs a lift, now."

"Okay, Auntie Joy!" Kyrie replied, taking the staff with a grin.

"You don't have to put it like that, you know," Eddas grumbled as Joy swept her up into her arms.

"Sorry, Old Man," she said, walking to the door. She looked over her shoulder at Marilith and I, then grinned. "Come on, you two! We'll have dinner ready shortly, as soon as Eddas has some time to rest."

"I... I cannot, I am sorry!" Marilith wailed. "I've been in the tesseract so long, I can't even see around me, much less remember how to walk! Just standing is hard enough!"

"Sasha, can you carry her?" Joy asked, looking at me.

I grinned. "Sure. Mermaids are very strong," I replied, and after dropping my lance, I managed to pick up Marilith. She was somewhat heavy but not overly so, and though I was still quite sore from my tumble down the stairs, it seemed like I could manage. Kyrie dutifully trotted over and picked up my lance, then walked over to Eddas and held her hand out. Eddas handed over her staff with a sigh.

"Bah. I feel like a helpless child," Marilith grumbled.

"Get used to it," Eddas replied sourly. "Unfortunately, you're going to be here awhile while we work on getting you used to three dimensions again, and by the time we're done I'm sure Joy will have utterly corrupted Sasha and she'll care for you like a newborn."

"Naturally," Joy and I replied in chorus, and Kyrie burst into giggles.

"Come on, the lot of you, let's get inside," Joy replied, and strode to the door of the tower.

The Ocean - Thirty-Eight.

"*Oh, that feels so good...*" Marilith murmured as Eddas gently stroked her ebon fur, whispering a quiet incantation. Eddas had Marilith lying on the carpeted floor of her room at the top of the tower, and was working over her quietly as she lay there. My own injuries from tumbling down the stairs, Eddas had healed in a matter of a few heartbeats, touching me here and there with a gloved hand and muttering a brief incantation while Joy handed us a pitcher and some damp cloths to get cleaned up a bit. Healing Marilith's injuries, however, appeared to be a far more complex proposition.

Eddas had conjured a meal for all of us earlier, but I had to hand-feed Marilith - she literally was helpless. Even after I placed her hand on the spoon, she could not find the soup nor bring it to her mouth, so I had to feed her myself, like a baby. Kyrie had been disappointed to learn that Goodman Bones had been left behind with Brionnach, but Eddas simply said it was his fate to be with her - it was, quite literally, why he existed. Whether they survived or not, Eddas did not know, which disappointed Kyrie even more. Kyrie had, however, been quite delighted with Marilith, and found her endlessly fascinating. Eventually, dinner was done, and Kyrie had (rather reluctantly) been put to bed. Joy was downstairs, preparing a guest room for us. I knelt beside Eddas on the carpet, watching as she worked. I wanted to help, myself, but I had no herbs to work with at all, and I wasn't exactly certain which ones might work on Marilith anyway.

"Will she be alright?" I asked nervously.

"Eventually," Eddas replied, pausing and looking Marilith over. "She's been starved for millenia, and every atom of her existence has been under endless strain all that time. In human terms, she's been on the rack long enough to not only be injured by it, but to develop scar tissue inside her from it. But, her body isn't human - really, the only reason she's alive is *because* she's not human. Unfortunately, it takes enormous time for her people to heal from injuries. Some of the greater demons don't heal at all from injuries - it takes magic to heal them."

"There are a few healing crystals in Hell we use, as well, much as you use herbs, Sasha,"
Marilith added.

"So how long will it take her to heal?"

"Well, I *can* heal her faster, of course, but if we just let her lie there, probably two or three centuries."

"Centuries?!" I yelped.

"Possibly even longer, yes. That's another reason I was always so careful in summoning demons. Like I told Joy - they don't *want* to be summoned, and when they get injured, they don't just heal it up as easily as a human might. Dragging someone out of their home, forcing them to work for you and getting them hurt is *not* a very pleasant experience, particularly when sending them home wounded means years and years of pain for them. I never wanted an immortal on another plane to be sitting there in agony for years or even centuries, and hating me for it - so, I was always careful, and only summoned them when absolutely necessary."

"A-are you in pain now, Marilith?"

"No, sister."

Eddas nodded. "She's not hurting now, just because of the tremendous pain she tolerated for so long. But, eventually, that will wear off, and she'll start feeling how badly off she really is."

My eyes misted. "Could... Could they heal her back home?"

"Probably a lot easier than I could," Eddas replied, nodding.

"Then maybe we should-"

"No!" Marilith interrupted. "No, Sasha! Please! I want to stay here with you! Please don't send me home! Please! I could never come back!"

"Y-you couldn't?!"

Eddas shook her head. "Not on her own, no. The dimensional membrane there only permits ingress - it's part of the Divine Compact, and it renders her people independent of the conflict between the gods. Once I or anyone else forced her to return, she'd be gone. There's always a dimensional tension between her and her home plane anyway, Sasha - she's not of our world, and there's no summoning spell holding her here. If she wanted to go home, she'd already be there just by relaxing her will. I could bring her back, if I had to, but I'd rather not. If she wants to stay here in this world, she stays. If she wants to leave, she can leave."

"I... I just want her to not be in pain. I love her, she's my sister," I said, tears rolling down my face.

"Sasha, I don't want to go home! Even if I have to lie here in agony for centuries, I don't care! I want to be here with you! I love you, too! Please don't send me away!" Marilith sobbed.

"I won't!" I sobbed in return, and pulled Marilith up to me, hugging her tight. "I told you that when I found you I'd hug you tight and never let you go and now I will!"

I shuffled Marilith into my lap, and we hugged each other for a long time, sniffing. Eddas simply gazed at us quietly, her gloved hands in her lap as she knelt there on the carpet beside us. Finally, she looked at me. "Sasha, be very clear about what you're undertaking. Marilith is a lesser demon - a nightmare, in fact. But, she's crippled. At her full health, she's a match for any ordinary mage, and her powers are vast - her people live outside the Divine Compact, and their magic is still that of the Will and the Word. But right now, her powers are scattered, in total disarray. She's spent almost two thousand years using her will just to stay alive. Their bodies are, really, an extension of the Will and the Word - and as such, even the

ordinary things you and I take for granted, like walking and eating, are affected by the damage. You'll have to care for her until she recovers - and that might be a very long time. I'm willing to help, but only if I know *you* are willing to care for her for however long it takes for her to recover, be that a month, a year, or even a century."

"I'll do it - she's my sister, I love her," I replied, hugging Marilith tight.

"And *you* need to be clear about what *you're* undertaking, Marilith. You're young, I can see it in your aura, so I have to ask you to think carefully about this. You *really* understand the complications of you staying here? You can't just be independent, like any other demon. Even taking *food* here, which you've already done willingly, compromises your independence to some degree. If you bind your life to Sasha's, you share her fate - and all the fates of all the mortals and immortals in this world are tied to the will of the gods. You still have your Free Will, just as we do - but if you use it to choose to stay here, you will become a pawn in their wars."

Marilith sighed. *"I believe I already was a pawn, Eddas Ayar, to some degree. In truth, our independence is in name only, as we can still be summoned from our plane to this one, and forced to serve. Still, I am willing to sacrifice my independence under the Divine Compact to remain with my sister."*

"And you realize that she is *mortal*, not immortal? Eventually, she will grow old and die."

"Not if I have anything to say about it," Marilith replied with a snort.

"If you think you'll just use the Will and the Word to keep her eternally young, think again. Your powers right now are in total disarray. It may take years for you to adapt after being trapped in that tesseract for so long. You may never adapt. Even with me helping you heal, you may not even learn to walk again, much less use your full powers. She might have to carry you around like a baby for the rest of her life."

Marilith paused, but I spoke up immediately. "I'm willing to do that. She's my sister."

Marilith sighed. *"Sasha, I'm not sure-"*

"I am!" I replied firmly, and took her hand. *"Even if I have to carry you in my arms for the rest of my life, I will!"*

"And there's still more, for the both of you. Marilith is a demon free on this world. Some may want to destroy her, thinking she's evil - most people look at demons the same way they do dragons or kraken. Others may want to enslave her, and use her powers themselves. You're safe here, with me - but should you choose to leave, you'll have to help her defend herself, Sasha. And that won't be easy, at times. You got lucky against Brionnach - she tried to use the Spell of the Envenomed Blast against you. She didn't realize you're basically a mermaid. Had she used a few of the spells I know, you'd be dead. You've no Talent at all, and you've no idea how to defend yourself against sorcery."

"I'll teach her. I'll do all that I can!" Marilith replied.

"Assuming you manage to heal and regain your powers."

"Well... Yes."

"There are times you will be a burden on her, Marilith - and times she will be a burden on you. I can see by her face that she's ready to accept that, so I'm not going to bother asking her. The question is, are you willing to accept that? I'm willing to help you, but only if I know that you fully understand the decision you are making. Are you truly willing to accept the idea that you will have to rely on each other, and at times you may actually be a burden on each other?"

"With all my heart and soul, Eddas Ayar. Sasha reached out to me when I was dying. She touched me, and took away the pain. She loved me, even after she learned what I truly was. She humbled me, and showed me that creatures I once thought of as mere ants could be more noble, more wonderful, and more beautiful than even the most radiant Cubus in my world. She took the anger I had from two millennia of pain, and turned it into joy that it ended with being in her arms. I would accept anything, Eddas Ayar. Anything in the universe, just to repay her for the moments

of laughter, and the gentle relief from pain she gave me. I love her. She is my sister."

"I love you, too, Marilith," I said, hugging her, my eyes misting.

I heard footsteps on the stairs, and looked up. Joy was returning to the top floor, and she was shaking her head as she looked us over. "Old Man, are you *quite* through, here?"

Eddas nodded, pushing herself to her feet. "Yes, Joy. I'm quite tired, I'll have to begin the serious work tomorrow, after I've had some rest."

"Good. I've the guest room prepared downstairs. You go and get changed, I'll put these two girls to bed," she said, and stepped over to me, easily lifting Marilith into her arms. "Come, Sasha. The guest room is on the bottom floor."

I nodded, picking up my lance and rising. "Alright. Can Marilith sleep in the same bed with me? I really don't feel comfortable letting her sleep alone."

"Certainly," Joy replied, smiling.

"I don't sleep to begin with, however," Marilith said, and grinned at me.

"You will," Eddas replied, her gaze calm, but her voice ominous.

The Ocean - Thirty-Nine.

I snuggled behind Marilith, spoon-fashion, holding her close beneath the blankets. The little room we were in was quite dark, but I had seen when we came through earlier that it had several bunk-beds. Why Eddas Ayar would need bunk-beds in their tower I did not know. Did they receive many guests at once, perhaps? I had no idea. The room smelled dusty, and disused. Yet the bed was warm and comfortable, and simply being able to *hold* Marilith at last felt wonderful. I closed my eyes and snuggled into the long hair of her mane, breathing her furry scent, and smiled.

Marilith trembled. *"Do you think I will really sleep?"*

"Maybe - I don't know," I replied, and hugged her again.

"That frightens me. What if I don't wake up?"

I giggled. "I was worried about that when I was a little girl. My father said not to worry. He said that I would always wake up, every morning, time and time again, until I was very old. Then, one morning I would wake up in the Afterlife, and be very happy."

Marilith shuddered again.

"What's the matter?"

"The notion that I might wake up on an alien plane hostile to my very existence and dedicated to the tertiary fulfillment of the Divine Compact and would also be separated from you and everything I know for the rest of eternity is not a comforting one. Your father was a horribly cruel man if he said that to you as a child."

I giggled. "Really, Marilith. It's alright. I'm right here with you. Nothing bad is going to happen to you," I said, and hugged her again.

Marilith sighed. *"You have no idea how comforting that is, Sasha. Truly."*

We lay there in silence after that, the darkness of Eddas Ayar's tower around us. I did not know if Marilith would sleep - but I knew I could, and did.

The Ocean - Forty.

"No, no. *Focus* your will. Reach around you, and *feel* your surroundings with your mind," Eddas said, watching Marilith.

We sat beneath a lovely tree at the base of Eddas's tower, Eddas and Marilith kneeling on a little carpet Joy had laid out earlier, while Joy and I sat nearby, watching. Little Kyrie gazed on, as well, sitting in Joy's lap. Joy had changed out of her armor, and now wore a pretty chartreuse dress that fit her large frame quite nicely. She had poured herself and I some lovely black tea she called *bayallar*, and said it was made from the beans of the trees which grew around us, standing in the neat rows. Eddas explained that lands were, in truth, an ancient plantation - and much of what they needed each year they obtained through trading the beans, the local village of giants helping with the harvest and taking a share of the crop for their work. The trees were in full bloom, now, and when morning had come, the little flowers had opened to the warmth of the sun. Birds twittered among the branches of the ancient trees, and bees buzzed from flower to flower. Fifty paces away, deep within the rows of trees, I saw a doe peering at us in curiosity. Even though we were nowhere near the ocean, I still found it incredibly beautiful, here.

Eddas Ayar had been so tremendously generous, I didn't know if I would ever be able to repay her. Or *him*, as Joy constantly reminded me. Though her body was that of a half-elf woman, it appeared her soul was that of an ancient man, a male from an ancient human civilization, now long gone.

Shortly after we'd gotten ourselves settled in, Eddas began the slow process of working to heal Marilith, and teaching her to use her senses and her powers again. She said she had not wanted to constantly maintain a translation spell for me so I could understand Kyrie's words and she mine, so instead, she simply made a small silver band for me to wear about my right wrist, invulnerable and sizable as the little chain I wore about my left wrist. It was done so casually, she made it seem trivial - but Marilith told me later it was hardly that, and the truth was that Eddas Ayar was a Great Mage, a master of the Deep Magic. As such, her powers easily rivaled those of a dragon. Now, we sat in the cool shade of the tree at the base of Eddas' tower, watching as Eddas carefully worked with Marilith, trying to get her to perceive the world properly again.

Marilith opened her glowing-red eyes, then shook her head. *"I am trying, Eddas Ayar, but..."* Marilith replied, and sighed.

"Close your eyes again, that's only adding to your confusion. If we can get you oriented, the rest will follow," Eddas said, and Marilith nodded, closing her eyes again. *"Feel* the force pulling at you. Feel the pressure on your legs and head. Orient yourself to it - it's gravity, pulling you down."

"It feels kata, to me."

"It isn't. It's down."

"Why is this so hard for her?" I wondered aloud. "Can't she just feel and look around, and see it herself?"

"*I wish,*" Marilith replied, sighing.

Eddas sat back, looking at me. "Well, it's difficult to explain simply. It's a matter of perception. Here - perhaps a small illusion will help you understand," she said, and gestured. A small translucent ball appeared, floating before my face. "See the ball?"

"Yes."

"Now - I've written something on the back. Tell me what it says?"

I leaned forward, trying to look around to the back side of the ball, when suddenly it vanished. I blinked, surprised, and sat back in my chair - the ball reappeared. "Ummm... I can't. I try to look, and the ball vanishes."

"That's because this illusion only has two dimensions. Your mind interprets it as three, and you try to move your head to look behind it," Eddas said, and lowered her hand to her lap - the ball vanished. "That's what her problem is. She's been seeing in four dimensions for almost two thousand years, her vision refracted through two tesseracts. Our world *isn't* four-dimensional, it's three-dimensional. She's having to learn the act of perception all over again - or, more precisely, she's having to un-learn the way she perceived when she was in her prison. If I show her a ball and ask her to look behind it, her instinct is to look *kata* to it. But the ball doesn't have an *ana* or *kata*, and it keeps vanishing to her eyes. The whole world keeps vanishing in bits and pieces, because she's trying to look at from directions that don't exist in our world. You see, perception for her isn't an act of moving her eyes or head to see light falling upon an object. It's an act of *will* - and we have to re-train her will so she can perceive our world properly again."

"Is that why her eyes glow red?" Joy asked, looking at Marilith. "Her eyes don't work like ours do?"

"No, they glow red because that's how her body works. Like all demons, she can eat nearly anything - but as am *equibranche*, a nightmare, her normal diet is fire and lava. Glowing embers are like sweet-meats to her, and lit charcoal to her is like hot pastries to you and I."

"*Mmm... Charcoal...*" Marilith replied, licking her lips. "*Do you have some?*"

"There will be some embers in the fire when we're ready to stop for lunch," Eddas replied. "Now, ignore your stomach and concentrate on what we're doing, here."

I held out my wrist, pointing to the little bottle that dangled from the bracelet. "Maybe she could look through this and see around her? It's transparent, and you said it was a tesseract."

Eddas smiled. "Can *you* look through it and tell which way is up and down?"

I held it up to my eye for a moment, looking around, then nodded. "Yes, it's like looking through a little glass bottle."

"There you are," Eddas replied, smiling. "We're talking about perceptual realities, Sasha. That tesseract is linked to the reality around it, and transmits light as though it were an ordinary bottle. For Marilith to look through it see the world in four dimensions, she'd have to be inside it. And she won't fit," she explained, and chuckled.

The air shimmered, and an olive-skinned woman with black hair and white robes appeared nearby us.

"Mummy!" Kyrie squealed, hopping down from Joy's lap and dashing over to give the woman a hug.

"Hello, my little darling!" the woman replied, kneeling and hugging her back. She looked around, seeing me and Marilith, then paused. "I'm sorry, Father, am I interrupting? I know you told me to check back once a week, but-"

"No, no, Lyota. In fact, you might be of some help. Come - we've an extra chair there that Marilith was using. Have a seat, and we'll explain what's happened."

An hour or so followed, during which we spent turns explaining our parts of the story to each other. As it turned out, the woman was one of Kyrie's two mothers - Floria being the one that actually gave birth to her, Lyota using the spell her own father, Eddas, had taught to her to spark the pregnancy. The relationships were somewhat confusing - but, apparently, quite normal for those known as the Witch-Women of Hyperborea. They literally survived on the strength of their sorcery alone, and each was a very powerful mage in their own right.

At last, the stories were done, and Lyota gazed at Marilith, thinking. Eddas had conjured a small lunch for all of us, and as we ate, Lyota used the time to study Marilith. Finally, Lyota set the little wooden plate aside, and nodded. "Well, Father, I can tell you that from what I see of her, your assessment is very accurate. Every fiber of her being shows scarring, and scars upon scars. The stresses must have been tremendous - really, the only reason she isn't dead now is because she's held together by her will to begin with. Have you tried singing her to health with that great knot of mana within you?"

"No, I'm afraid of the risk. She's not of this plane, Lyota. Though I would almost certainly heal her, knot of mana which maintains me is not a true manifestation of the Will and the Word, and still has to obey the Laws of Magic that apply here in our world."

"Ah, and by the Laws of Magic, she's one of the Independents. If you pour that much *mana* into her at once, she'd violate the Law of Apex. She'd be snapped back to her own plane whether you healed her or not, just as surely as if you'd blasted her to vapor with a spell."

"Precisely," Eddas replied, nodding. "And she doesn't *want* to return home - if she did, she could simply relax her will and she'd be there already. So, the healing has to be done slowly and carefully, not all at once. Of course, I could attempt to bind her here - certainly, she's willing enough, it could be done."

But, that leads to it's own problems."

Lyota nodded. "She'd die, for one."

"Die?!" I yelped.

Eddas nodded. "Your sister's body has little intrinsic ability to survive on it's own, Sasha - it's too ductile for that. For you and I and everyone else in this world, the body is a container that houses the soul, limited by the laws which apply to our world. Her body is an extension of her *will*, limited by her training and perception. Her entire existence is the Will and the Word - but if I bind her here, that existence violates the Divine Compact. Her body would become a container for her soul, like with us - and it's simply too badly hurt to live."

I ran a hand over Marilith's shoulder, feeling her smooth pelt. "But she *looks* fine..."

"Of course, she's a demon," Eddas replied, then looked to Marilith. "Marilith, would you like an ember from the fire for dessert?"

"Oooo! *Yes, please!*" she replied, opening her mouth.

Eddas gestured, and a glowing ember floated up from the fire, then settled itself on Marilith's dark tongue. Marilith chewed and swallowed, then blew a puff of smoke out her equine nostrils. "*Mmm... Delicious. Is that from the trees I smell in bloom around us?*"

"Yes, I've quite a bit of dried *bayallar*-wood for cooking and such."

I gaped. "Alright, it seems her body does *not* work the way mine does."

"Not in the slightest bit," Eddas replied as the others giggled at my amazed expression. "If it did, she couldn't possibly have survived century after century in constant pain and with no food or drink."

"Mmmm... A drink would be nice. I don't suppose there's any lava nearby?"

"None, I'm afraid. Thanks to you, there's been very few new volcanoes these last two thousand years."

Marilith sighed. *"Not even a spot of molten lead?"*

"I'm afraid not. *Bayallar* is all we have," Eddas replied as the others giggled.

"I suppose that will have to do," Marilith replied with a sigh, and Eddas held her cup to her lips.

Lyota shifted Kyrie in her lap, then looked to Eddas. "Well, Father, if you decide to continue slowly working on healing her and you need an extra hand, let us know. We could come by if you need us, and take turns with you on working with her. From what I can see of her aura, however, what you're doing is probably the best way of doing it on this plane, and I doubt anyone could do better. Well, except perhaps for Karg."

"True, and I could probably get him to do it, but I hardly think Sasha and Marilith have the gold to repay him for it."

"Who is Karg?" I asked.

"Karg the Terrible, a dragon I know," Eddas replied.

Lyota nodded. "Our little village in the mountains is in his territory. He's friends with Father, and has been for a good two millenia or so. He likes us, too, because we leave him alone. Dragons are like that," she replied, and rose to her feet, setting the child down beside her. "Well, Father, I'm going to take Kyrie home - Floria's been *ever* so anxious worrying over her," she said, and Eddas rose to hug her. "Farewell for now, Father! Floria and I will come visit this winter with the young ones!"

"I'm looking forward to it," Eddas replied, then Lyota took Kyrie's little hand, gestured with her staff, and vanished.

"Well," Joy said, rising to her feet, "I'll let you continue working, Old Man. I've got quite a bit of work ahead of me, my little garden hasn't been tended for a year and the whole tower needs dusting. I think I'll do the latter, first. Call me if you need anything?"

"Yes, Joy, and thank you," Eddas replied, giving her a hug.

Joy walked back inside the tower, and I watched as Eddas resumed working with Marilith. Eddas spent much of her time touching Marilith on various parts of her body, trying to get her to understand concepts that seemed utterly basic to me - up and down, left and right, front and back. She was fine when it came to her own body, but relating her body to the rest of the world seemed utterly impossible for her.

"I cannot, Eddas Ayar. It is simply too much. I cannot focus my perception properly. The world turns, flying through space... The stars dance, the universe turns..."

"None of which matter. Let it go," Eddas replied, and placed an ebon-gloved palm on her broad equine forehead, between her closed eyes. "Feel this. Feel it. Focus your mind on the sensation of a hand, pressing against your forehead."

"I... I have it."

"Now, expand your perception. Slowly," she said, and began slowly lifting her hand from Marilith's forehead. "Feel the relationship of space around you. Focus your mind on the hand. Feel it moving away from you. Feel your perception expanding. You kneel on the ground, atop a carpet. Do you feel it beneath you?"

"Yes."

"Tell me what else is around you, within that area."

"I see a half-elf woman... An ethereal beauty, an ancient wisdom... She holds her hand out... I am focused on her hand."

"Look deeper, into the astral. Tell me what you see."

"I see a man. He kneels before me, his hand outstretched... Dark of skin, long of beard... His heart glows with kindness, yet he is focused, watching me... His will is upon me... I am focused on his hand."

I blinked, looking around, but saw nothing other than Eddas and Marilith.

"Look broader, at the greater reality," Eddas replied. "Tell me what you see."

"I sense a titanic raven, just at the edge of my perception. Ancient, powerful, tremendous... My clan-father is not half so strong. It's will is upon me, it's wing outstretched... I am focused on it's wing."

I blinked again - there was still nothing there other than Eddas and Marilith.

"Very carefully, turn your head so your nose is pointing at the raven's wing," Eddas said. "Sense the broader reality of this, feel the direction you are pointing."

Marilith did so, pointing her equine nose at Eddas' outstretched hand.

"Now - very carefully, lift one of your hands - either hand - and point at the hand of the man. Keep your eyes closed, and don't touch."

Marilith lifted her left hand, pointing at Eddas' hand.

"Now... Very carefully, lift your other hand, and point at the hand of the woman. Keep your eyes closed, and don't touch."

Marilith lifted her right hand, pointing at Eddas' hand.

"Hold the three in your mind. Sense the physical reality, the astral reality, and the deeper reality. Hold them in your mind. Let me know when you have it."

"I... I have it, I think."

Eddas slowly moved her hand towards Marilith's face. "Feel the three become one, reaching for you. Sense the hand of the woman, the hand of the man, and the wing of the raven reaching for you," she said, and extended her gloved forefinger, touching her gently on her broad equine forehead, between her

closed eyes. "Feel the touch of the three. Feel it in the same spot. Tell me if they merge in your mind."

"They do. I can sense the three overlapping."

"Feel the touch drawing back. Keep the three in your mind overlapped. Sense where you are. You kneel beside the tower of Eddas Ayar, in what once was the kingdom of King Darrak, in the land of Hyperborea. Beside you is a dirt road that joins the ruins of the King's Road at league marker forty-three. Sense the roads that join the land. Expand your perception. See the wider reality of Hyperborea, and the lands beyond. Sense the continent of Antonica beneath your feet, the Bright Sea lapping at its western shores. Sense the shimmering of the Inland Sea to the east, and the deserts beyond it. Sense the crater where your prison once stood. Feel the land of Vilandia rising from the sea to the west across the Bright Sea. Feel the continent of Palome rising from the sea to the east, beyond where your tower once stood. Feel your perception merge, and hold the world in your mind. Let me know when you have it."

Marilith's face took on a look of concentration. *"I... I have it."*

I simply gaped, amazed.

"Now draw your perception in, slowly. Just the continent, then just this land, then just the three before you. Are they still one?"

"Yes."

"Don't move, don't turn, hold perfectly still. Feel the orientation of that in your mind. Focus your mind. Hold the three, as one."

"I have it," Marilith replied, her voice confident.

"Good. Now - don't shift, don't turn, don't move a muscle. Feel where your hands are pointing. Feel where your nose is pointing. Feel how this relates to the three, and the reality around yourself that connects you to them. Once you have that firmly in your mind, very slowly, open your eyes, and look at the three."

Marilith slowly opened her eyes, a flash of glowing red orb peeking from behind furry eyelids. After a moment, she smiled. *"I have it."*

"Very good. Now - turn your head slowly to your right. Feel your perception shift, and look to your right."

Marilith turned her head to me, and smiled. *"I see my sister,"* she said.

"Good. Hold this in your mind. Feel how your perceptions relate. Look up," she ordered, and Marilith did so. "Now down. Good. Now forward, to me."

"I... I think I can do it like this."

"Do you want to try walking?"

"Yes."

"Sasha, take her hand, and help her to her feet - but *gently!*"

I nodded, smiling, and rose to my feet, then helped Marilith rise. She stood there next to me, swaying. *"Ooooooh... This is much harder."*

"Hold her hand, Marilith, and feel her relationship to you. Feel the world around you that connects you two."

"I can feel the world turning on it's axis, and revolving around the sun, and the sun and moon and all rotating with the galaxy, and the galaxy moving through space... Aaaaah! How do humans even know where to put a foot?!"

"Ignore it. Focus on your sister, and the reality that connects the two of you. Let her lead you."

Marilith nodded, and I took a step. Marilith took a step to follow, very hesitantly, her hoof scuffing the dirt. I took another step, and Marilith followed again, with a bit more confidence. And again, and again - and soon, Marilith was grinning as I walked her in a circle. *"I have it!"*

"Good. We'll practice this again a few more times over the next few days. If you can consistently hold your perception for a few days, we'll start working on trying to get you to focus your powers again."

Marilith grinned at me, then stopped and hugged me. I hugged her back, my mind awl with what I'd learned. My body was something my mind inhabited, and seeing and walking were simply things I took for granted. For her, her body was an extension of her will, and even the simplest of things took an innate perception of reality that went far beyond my own mortal senses, in a way that both awed and humbled me... And yet left me feeling profoundly sorry for her at the same time.

The Ocean - Forty-One.

Days turned into weeks, Eddas working with Marilith each day. Elven and dwarven traders came, trading for the strange *bayallar* seeds Eddas had stored in exchange for various things that Eddas and Joy apparently needed. Eddas, who had covered Marilith with an illusion so she would appear as just a human girl and not startle the traders, had asked if either of us might wish her to trade for bolts of cloth that Joy might make into clothing for us. When she asked me if I might want to wear something other than my armor, however, I had to admit with some embarrassment that I wasn't *wearing* armor - the scales were part of my skin. I was nude, and had been so for most of my life. This shocked Joy immensely, and it was with great embarrassment that I accepted the various dresses, blouses and skirts that she created as spring wore into summer. Marilith settled on a simple band of black cloth she wore tied tightly across her breasts, and a simple loincloth of the same material, a small hole cut in the back for her horse-like tail and the ends hanging down to about her knees. Though this satisfied Joy, as she apparently didn't expect a demon to observe proper dress, Joy looked disapprovingly at me anytime I was dressed in anything less than a skirt and blouse.

It was a joyful day when Marilith, after weeks of trying, finally made a small flame appear at her fingertips about the middle of summer. Eddas said that if she continued to work at it, soon, she would have full control of her powers again. And yet, I wondered... Would she still want to stay with me once she finally did have her full powers back? I was, to her, almost nothing. I was a mere mortal. She, on the other hand, was an immortal, with powers so vast it defied my comprehension. Once she finally recovered her full strength under the patient care of Eddas Ayar, she would have as much in common with me as I did with an ant.

Summer's sun shone down very warmly as I walked down the little lane that ran past Eddas' tower. All morning I'd stood atop the stone bridge that crossed the river that passed through Eddas Ayar's land, leaning against the rail, but no matter how long I studied the quiet waters, I found no answers there. Eddas and Marilith were at the top of the tower, Eddas still working with her to help her overcome centuries of crippling pain and perfect her control of her powers again. They had no use for me there, so I walked on, gazing at the garden Joy grew beside the tower. I looked, and saw her standing in the garden, carefully hoeing and weeding in a bright summer dress. I walked between the neat, tended rows, the soft earth warm beneath my bare feet. Joy looked up to me, and smiled, then turned back to her work.

I looked at the garden, searching for something to say. "Ummm..."

"Yes, Sasha?" Joy asked, continuing working.

"You could plant sage between these rows of tomatoes. It'll help keep the bugs off them," I said, looking at the garden. I was, in the end, a farmer - it was all I could think of to say.

"Really? I didn't know that," Joy replied, pausing. "Hmmm... Sage smells awfully, though."

"Well, yes, that's what keeps the bugs away."

"Hmmm... Well, it might also annoy Eddas. He really doesn't like strong smells, unless it's *bayallar* or dinner. I'll just keep picking them off as I find them. It gives me something to do."

I grinned. "You could just do it anyway, and tell him to hold his nose if he wants tomatoes."

Joy chuckled. "Yes, I could - but why do something I don't really need to do and I already know will annoy him? It will just create an argument for no purpose."

"I..."

"Yes?"

I sighed, and Joy paused, looking at me. "Something's on your mind, dear. What is it?"

"Well..."

"This isn't about my garden, I take it," Joy said, smiling wryly.

"How do you handle it?" I blurted.

"Handle what?"

"I mean... He's so powerful, and you're..."

Joy nodded. "Just a little giantess, yes. Compared to him, I am nothing. And more, he's given me everything I have. Every moment of happiness I have ever had in my life is because of him, Sasha. All he wants in return is someone who will love him. And I do," she replied, looking at me.

"I... I see..."

"No, you don't, but you will eventually. Your sister loves you. Eddas says she could go home at any time - she could the moment she was freed. She chooses to stay, and be with you. Don't compare yourself to her, and wonder why. Simply accept it, and hold her close for as long as you can."

"But... But I feel so *small* compared to her! Like an ant!"

Joy smiled. "But you're hardly that, to her. To her, you are the most important thing in the universe. Otherwise, she would have left the moment she was freed."

I sighed. "I know, but..."

Joy set aside her hoe, then reached out to give me a hug. "My dear, I know how you feel. Truly I do. I tower over Eddas like a tall tree, yet in truth he towers over me like a mountain. He deals with gods and dragons and ghosts and all sorts of frightening things with total aplomb - it's quite disconcerting. Yet, I know he *needs* me, and he loves me. So, I often try to take him down a peg or two, to remind him he is still just a man - that, too, is what he needs. He needs to feel grounded, and he needs a bit of humility from time to time, like any man. Even more than some men, for as a Great Mage, he wields more raw power than even the mightiest king - thus, when I see his ego puffing up, I often pull out a pin and deflate it a bit, and remind him he's just a man," she said, and grinned as I giggled. "But, I know he is far more than just a man, and far more than I can ever dream of. I feel proud and honored that he loves me, and I love him back with all my heart."

I hugged Joy back, sighing, and she let me go, straightening up and holding my hands for a moment. "I don't have any answers for you, unfortunately. Your relationship with Marilith is something you and she will have to work out for yourselves, over time. But no matter what happens, always let her know that you love her as your sister of the soul. Always."

I smiled. "I will."

There was a sudden puff of brimstone-scented smoke to my side, and suddenly Marilith appeared, standing next to me. She grinned broadly, hugging me tight, then hopped up and down. "*I did it! I did it! I translocated straight to you!*"

I reached out, grabbing her shoulders. "Stop! Stop! You're trampling Joy's garden!"

Marilith instantly stopped, looking down at her feet and seeing the trampled tomato bush beneath her hooves. "*I'm terribly sorry, Joy. I was so excited, I didn't stop to think...*" she said, her head hanging down.

Joy wagged a finger warningly at Marilith's equine nose. "You must always stop to think, Marilith. Eddas says that you'll be at your full powers, soon. And when you are, you must use them carefully. You can survive a mistake you make. Your sister might not."

Marilith's head drooped lower, and the long hair of her drooping tail brushed the ground. *"I'm sorry, Joy. I'll remember your words."*

Joy nodded, then looked to me. "Well, Sasha, see if you can help your sister out of my garden without *too* much more damage," she said, and as Marilith turned away, Joy winked at me.

I grinned. "I'll see if she can manage it," I replied, and took Marilith's hand, carefully leading her between the neat little rows of Joy's garden. When we had finally reached the edge, I squeezed her hand. "Incidentally, Sister..."

"Yes?" Marilith replied, sighing.

"Congratulations. I'm very proud of you."

Marilith grinned broadly. *"Thank you, Sister."*

Night came again, and after a pleasant dinner with Eddas and Joy, Marilith and I had gone to bed. I'd fallen asleep very quickly, and was having a rather pleasant dream about Round Island when I felt Marilith shift in my arms. I didn't really think much about it, only fully awakening after she had carefully, silently slipped herself out of the bed. I looked - she seemed to be stealthily creeping over to the stairs. I was immensely curious. Marilith glanced back to me, her glowing eyes visible in the gloom, and I slitted my eyes, pretending to still be asleep. Satisfied, she looked up the stairs, and gestured briefly. She then stood, waiting, her tail flicking back and forth quietly.

Eddas came down the stairs, and I blinked in surprise. She was dressed only in her gloves, boots, and very skimpy, revealing undergarments made of chainmail. The undergarments struck me as quite odd - how could they possibly be comfortable? I guessed that it was something one simply got used to. Eddas' hair hung loose about her shoulders, and she glowered at Marilith, reaching behind her to adjust the slim chain that tightened her upper garment over her breasts. Marilith held a finger across her equine lips, glancing to me, and Eddas nodded. Eddas entered the garderobe, and I heard the sounds of it being used. A little while later, she came back out, still glowering at Marilith as she adjusted the slim chain that held her lower garment in place. "I *sincerely* hope you have a *damn* good reason for that," she hissed quietly. "A person's bladder isn't something you play around with."

I suppressed a giggle with a mighty effort, trying to remain as quiet as a mouse. Marilith, however, simply smiled, pointing to the door that led outside, and crooking a finger. Eddas nodded, and the two walked over to the door. Oddly, only Marilith's hooves made a sound, Eddas' feet were utterly silent. Eddas muttered briefly, gesturing, then opened the door - it opened completely silently, without even its usual creak of hinges. The two of them walked outside, then closed the door behind them. Filled with curiosity, I sat up quietly. Bare feet would be quiet on the wooden floor, but soft-soled boots would be even quieter. After reaching down to my boots and pulling them on, I slipped from the bed, then silently crept over to the door.

"My clan-father whispers to me, Eddas Ayar," Marilith said, and sighed.

"He wants you to come home, I assume," Eddas replied.

"Yes. Failing that, he begs me to trick you into summoning him."

"So he can kill me, most likely."

"I... I do not know, Eddas Ayar, I am sorry."

"You know you're getting close to the point where you won't be *able* to go home. You've eaten here for weeks, now - you, of all people, know the rules."

"Yes, I do. Your healing of me, my eating the food of this plane... All of it. But it is worth it, Eddas Ayar. She is worth it. I owe her everything... Everything. You can't imagine the pain, Eddas Ayar... And yet, she took it from me. She freed me. She is everything to me. I don't want to go home. I want to stay with her. Wherever she is... That is home."

"Be careful. Even *saying* that aloud alters your situation - yours is the Will and the Word, and you shape your will with your desire. Are you truly certain? Once you commit yourself to this plane, you cannot change your mind later."

"I am very certain, Eddas Ayar. I feel it. It is my destiny. She is my destiny."

Eddas sighed. "Well, I suppose I'd best summon your clan-father, then."

There was a long pause, and small scratching sounds. Burning with curiosity, I very carefully pulled the door open, trying to peek outside. Eddas had summoned her staff, and now used it to mark a circle in the dirt around herself. "I'll need his name, dear. Otherwise I'll just get a random member of his caste. And what caste is he, incidentally?"

"Ummm... Satyribranche."

"Oh, splendid," Eddas replied, rolling her eyes.

"His name is Azual."

Eddas nodded, then raised her staff, gesturing in the air with her free hand. Glowing runes of fire appeared in the air before her as she chanted an incantation.

Suddenly, there was a flash of fire, and a strong scent like brimstone. An enormous demon, easily sixteen cubits tall, stood before Eddas, looming over her ominously. It's upper body was somewhat humanoid, with thick, powerfully muscled arms and clawed hands. It's lower legs were those of a goat, with cloven, goat like hooves. Two enormous, ram-like horns curled from its brow, and it's fanged, goat-like face twisted in an scowl of fury. It roared at Eddas, every muscle of its body tense. *"Free my daughter, Eddas Ayar!"*

Eddas simply gazed at the enormous demon silently, her jaw firm. The air between them seemed to almost vibrate with a titanic yet invisible battle... After a long moment, the demon's shoulders slumped. He spoke, his voice a growl of angry defeat. *"I should have suspected the will of a Great Mage might surpass mine... Command me, foul enslaver, I obey."*

Eddas crossed her arms. "If you don't mind, my mate is asleep upstairs, I'd rather handle this with some degree of civility."

The demon looked around, then their eyes caught on me peeking out from behind the door. *"What, that little mortal behind the door?"* the demon rumbled.

Eddas sighed. "No, that's Sasha of Woe. There's my mate," Eddas said, pointing upwards.

"Eddas!" Joy called down, apparently from the parapet above us.

"Go back to bed, Joy, I'm just having a chat with Marilith's clan-father!" Eddas called back.

There was a long pause, then Joy shouted again. "Should I faint before or after I make a pot of *bayallar* for our guest?!" she called back sarcastically.

I couldn't help myself - I burst out giggling. Marilith laughed, and even the large demon before Eddas chuckled, a sound like a rumble of thunder. Eddas, however, merely smiled. "Go back to bed, Joy, everything's alright, and he won't be staying long enough for a pot to warm!"

"Old Man, you and I are going to have a *long* talk when you get done!"

"One I'm sure I won't enjoy," Eddas muttered, then smiled up at the parapet. "Yes, dear! Sorry! I'll try to conjure greater demons a bit more quietly next time!"

"I don't think you're helping yourself, Eddas Ayar," Marilith giggled.

"Oh, yes, a very long talk!" Joy shouted back.

"Wonderful," Eddas muttered, then looked to me. "Come on out of there, Sasha."

"But... Ummm... I'm not dressed!" I called from behind the door.

"Now."

Willing my scales to cover myself, I opened the door and walked over next to Marilith, blushing.

Eddas, however, did not look at me, but looked up to the demon she had summoned. "Sit, Azual. I have no commands for you other than to simply sit and talk peacefully, and remain until you have heard what your daughter wishes to say. I am not holding your daughter here. She stays of her own free will."

"Truly?"

"Truly," Eddas replied, and gestured.

"You release me?"

"Of course. I have no commands for you, Azual. Simply sit, and listen to your daughter. As I said, she is not my bond-servant. She stays here of her own free will."

"It's true, father. I am here of my own free will, Eddas Ayar does not compel me. He respects our people, and understands our status in the Divine Compact. He freed me, with the help of my sister, Sasha. He is a Great Mage, father, and an immortal of this plane. He understands us quite well."

"Yes, child, his name and reputation is well known in Hell, though you know it not due to your imprisonment. I thought, perhaps, that this reputation might be undeserved, and that Eddas Ayar held you bound. I can see I was wrong... But then I must wonder what has happened to you to make you choose so foolishly?" The huge demon sighed, lowering himself to sit, then looking at Marilith. *"The Ocean whispered she might work for your freedom. I see by this Daughter of Ocean she has. Yet, you remain, and call this Daughter of Ocean your sister... I cannot understand. What dire trick has the Ocean played upon you, my child?"*

Marilith shook her head. *"No trick, father. I have learned much from two thousand years of watching this world, and from watching this one all her life. Those whom I once despised as mere ants, I have learned can also be great and noble beings. Sasha accepted me as a sister of the soul - and I her. I was dying in agony, father. She reached to me, she eased my pain, and saved my life. I was imprisoned, and she freed me with the help of Eddas Ayar. I have shared her laughter and tears for years now, father, and that laughter helped me endure, and survive. I love her, father. I do not wish to leave her."*

"My child... I can see it in your aura, you are in dire risk of conversion to the laws of this plane, and the loss of your independence. Is that truly what you wish? To become an immortal of this plane, bound to mortal coil? If you die here, you would simply be gone, lost to the Afterlife, just as the immortals of this plane are. Even the greatest of us could never recover you! Come home, child."

Marilith reached out and hugged me. *"I am home, Father. Wherever she is, that is my home."*

"I told her much the same, Azual, and that was her reply to me, as well," Eddas replied. "I think if you're expecting your children to listen to you just because you're right, you're probably expecting too much," she added, then smiled wryly.

Azual glowered at me. *"And you, mortal... Do you really know what you are doing to my daughter, and to my people? The loss of even one of us is a grave matter. She could never have children on your plane, and upon your death, you condemn her to a life of loneliness! She could be captured by a mage of this world, enslaved to do their bidding! She could be slain by one of the other immortals of this world, and lost forever!"*

It was a moment before I found my nerve again - he was very large, and quite frightening. "Well, as to the first, I can't say much. I can't reproduce, myself. My menses stopped years ago, from the belt the mer-magi gave me, and-"

Azual peered at me, then snorted. *"Bah, you are not barren! Your womb is that of a human woman, you've simply stopped menstruating and now have estrus instead, like most other mammals of your world. You could have a child anytime you wished. She cannot!"*

Eddas blinked, looking at me. "You don't menstruate?"

I blushed. "No, I don't."

"You're lucky," Eddas replied, making a *moue*'.

Azual chuckled, and I spoke quickly, hoping to change the subject. "Ummm... Well, as for the other two things you mentioned, I'll protect her."

"Bah! You're a mere mortal, without even a trace of the Talent! I could destroy you with a flick of my finger, and Eddas Ayar could do the same. Any immortal of this plane could kill you easily - and many of the mortals, as well! How can you possibly protect my daughter, foolish mortal?!"

Marilith raised her head. *"I will teach her, father. I will use my powers, I will create the tools she needs to defend both herself and me, and teach her how to use them. I will enchant her boots to shield her like the finest armor. I will enchant her gloves to allow her to deflect sorcery much as she would deflect the blows an enemy might deal with their fists. I will create the tools she needs, and teach her to use these tools."*

Azual looked to Eddas, the expression on his goat-like face quite odd - he looked... Desperate. *"Help me, Eddas Ayar! Explain to my daughter the true dangers she is undertaking, the true difficulty of all this! You have her respect, that much is obvious! Help me convince her this is foolish!"*

Eddas shrugged. "I can't, Azual. It's her opinion this is her destiny. And, in that, I think she's probably right. The greater reality about them has yet to form - but you can sense it. It's there. Her fate and that of Sasha are intertwined, obviously. I think that perhaps they may become together something far greater than they are individually. I do not know - your people are the Independents, under the Divine Compact. No god looks over you, and none look out for you. But, they are *watching* you, and have been *using* you from time to time for ages. If the Ocean intends Marilith and Sasha as a pawn in the Great Game, then it's a bold move indeed - and one that may, in the end, be to your benefit. But it's simply too early to tell. We will have to wait until their final forging is complete."

Azual sighed. *"Which may be here with you, or centuries from now on some unknown field of battle,"* he replied. He stared down at the ground for a long moment, and I saw him in a different light. His people were, really, *people*. Different from myself, yes. But, so were the mer-folk different from me,

once. Yet, they were people, too. And like all people, some were good, some were bad, some merely misguided.

Finally, Azual nodded, then looked at me. *"Take these, Daughter of Ocean,"* he rumbled, holding out his clawed hand. Several crystals appeared in his palm, each of a different color. *"I sense you are trained as a healer. These crystals are from our dimension, and are used in healing my people. My daughter can teach you how to use them. I hope you will have no need of them, however."*

"Thank you, I hope so, too," I replied, taking the crystals from him. There were seven in all, each about as thick as my wrist and about two hands long. I placed them inside the little magic bottle at my wrist.

"Daughter, I do not agree with your decision. But, I will respect it. The Great Mage is right. When the two of you stand together, there is a greater reality between you that lurks at the edge of my perception. You are still a child, to our people. But here, on the Mortal Plane, you are an Ancient One, a being of great age, and great wisdom," he said, and glowered at her. *"See that you do not shame your clan by failing to live up to this."*

"I will do my best, father," Marilith replied, bowing her head.

"Good. And always remember..." he said, then sighed. *"You will be missed."*

"I'll miss you, too, father," Marilith replied softly.

Azual then rose to his feet, and looked to Eddas. *"You have built quite a reputation in Hell, Eddas Ayar. I see it was well-deserved,"* he rumbled, a wry grin at the corner of his fanged, goat-like muzzle. Then, in a flash of fire and brimstone, he vanished.

I smiled. "Well, that's that, I suppose. Come on, Marilith. Let's get some sleep."

Marilith sighed for a moment, then smiled, looking at me. "*Alright.*"

Eddas shook her head. "Oh, *no!* You are *hardly* going to just trot back to bed and leave me to face Joy for this alone!" she snapped, then crooked a finger at Marilith. "Come along, girl. You're going to explain this to Joy for me."

"*But-*"

"Now," Eddas replied, glowering at her.

"Yes, *Eddas Ayar*," Marilith replied meekly, and followed with her head lowered in embarrassment. I followed behind them, and as they went up the stairs, I climbed back into bed.

I grinned in the darkness, curling up beneath the blankets. "How bad can it be?" I whispered, knowing Marilith could hear me through our link. "After all, you were brave enough with your clan-father!"

"*Would you like to take my place?*" Marilith whispered back.

I could already envision Joy's stern face in my mind. "Ummm... No," I replied, and burst into giggles.

The Ocean - Forty-Three.

Three weeks later, near the end of summer, a crisis occurred. Now, I was desperately pulling Eddas Ayar's gloved hand, leading her down the stairs. "Hurry!"

Eddas, who had barely had time to dress before I came upstairs, trotted along behind. "Alright, alright - but would you mind telling me what the problem is?"

"She didn't wake up this morning!"

"Ah. Is she still breathing?"

"Yes, but I can't wake her up!" I wailed, reaching the bottom of the stairs and dashing over to Marilith.

Eddas walked over, summoning her staff to her grip, then knelt beside the bed, looking Marilith over. Marilith lay there quietly, breathing softly. Eddas lifted Marilith's eyelids, revealing the incandescent orbs of her eyes, then ran her fingers over Marilith's body for a moment. "She's asleep, alright," she said at last.

"How can you be so calm about this?!" I yelped.

Eddas rose, smoothing her robe. "Probably because I already told her this would happen. I've known

it would happen since you first came here. Yorindar hinted at it in a dream. He hints quite a bit, rarely speaks plainly. Even the gods must be careful when dealing with Paradox."

"But... But what's the *matter* with her?! Why won't she wake up?!"

Eddas looked to me, her expression grave. "She sleeps the sleep of one who has never slept in nearly three thousand years, Sasha of Woe. She has finally made the conversion to the laws of our world. Her body now is no longer merely an extension of her will, but now is a vessel for her soul, like yours and mine. For good or ill, she's now permanently a resident of our world. She can never go home again."

"You... You mean she'll sleep *forever*?!"

Eddas smiled. "No. She'll wake up eventually on her own, of course. It's as I said - she hasn't slept for her entire life, and she's nearly three thousand years old. If we leave her alone, she'll wake up sooner or later."

"How long will that take?"

Eddas shrugged. "Oh, no longer than a few weeks, I would guess. She's hardly a dragon, after all."

I gaped. "A few *weeks*?!"

"Yes, of course!" she said, and grinned. "Come - I don't have my waist-belt or my hair-band on, and Joy is probably wanting breakfast. Come upstairs. We'll wake Marilith in a bit, she'll be fine here until then."

I followed Eddas back up the stairs, still very concerned. She paused in her laboratory long enough to pick up a small hanging brazier and some coals, and after hanging it on the hook in the fireplace, she lit

some coals inside it. After Eddas finished dressing, she conjured breakfast for Joy, herself and I. Unfortunately, I was almost too upset to eat.

"Eat, Sasha," Joy said, smiling. Eddas had already explained the problem simply by telling her Marilith was asleep - it was, apparently, a conversation they'd had before, so Joy did not ask for any further explanation.

I sighed. "I'm just worried," I said, picking at my food.

"Sasha," Eddas said, smiling, "it will be alright. Really."

"Are you *sure* of that?"

Eddas smiled again. "Positive. Now hurry up, the coals are almost ready."

I eventually finished, and soon Joy, Eddas and I were heading back downstairs. Eddas had the brazier's chains over her staff, and carried it before her down the stairs carefully, trailing smoke behind us. When we reached the bottom of the tower, she looked to Joy. "Joy, could you open the door, please? I'd rather not fill the tower with smoke."

Joy nodded, doing so, and Eddas knelt beside Marilith. With a gentle breath, she blew some of the smoke from the charcoal across her face.

Marilith's equine nostrils flickered, and Eddas smiled, blowing a bit more smoke across her nose.

"*Mmm... Charcoal...*" Marilith murmured.

"Wake up, Marilith. Time for breakfast."

Marilith yawned, stretching and blinking her eyes - then suddenly jerked awake, sitting up in a flash.
"Aaaaah! I was asleep!"

"Of course you were, dear," Eddas replied smiling, and I grinned.

"And I had a dream!"

"Of course you did, dear," Eddas replied, smiling wider.

"But I don't sleep! None of my people do! I've never slept before in my life!"

"You do, now. Now, do you think you can remember the feeling of being asleep?"

"Well... Yes, I can. It's much like the Plane of Dreams usually feels, but with less focus..."

"Good, because you're still a being of the Will and the Word, Marilith. You'll have to notice when you are asleep, and remember to wake up on your own."

"But... But that means..."

"Yes. You've finally converted to the laws of this world, Marilith. Your body is fully healed, and your

powers should be restored. But, you can never go home again."

Marilith nodded, sitting up in bed, a contemplative look on her face. Finally, she looked at me, and smiled. "*I am home, Eddas Ayar. Wherever my sister is, that is home.*"

I sat next to Marilith, and hugged her tight. "I feel the same way, Sister."

"Good," Eddas said, smiling again. "Now - eat your breakfast, Marilith. That's another thing you'll have to start getting used to. Your will can sustain you quite a long while - but you're not a greater demon, and this body is now subject to the rules of this plane. You *do* have to eat something now and again."

"Oooo... *Charcoal...*" Marilith said, reaching out to pluck a glowing piece of charcoal from the brazier with her fingers, then pop it into her mouth, chewing happily and swallowing it down.

"Isn't that hot to you at all?" I asked, gaping at her.

Marilith blew a puff of smoke out her nostrils, then grinned. "*Think of it as very, very spicy food,*" Marilith replied, and giggled.

I did a double-take, then burst out laughing. Joy giggled as she watched us, but Eddas merely smiled. "Just in case this happens again, Sasha, this is the pleasant way to wake her up."

"There are unpleasant ways to wake her up?" I asked, watching as Marilith gobbled more hot coals.

"Umm-hmm. As you've already figured out, she's never slept before, so she'll sleep very deeply until she gets used to it. If you don't have some fresh, hot charcoal available, try sticking your finger in her nostrils and wiggling it a bit."

I nodded. "I'll remember that."

Marilith clapped her hand over her equine nose, looking at me wide-eyed. "You wouldn't!"

I grinned. "Of course I would. You can't sleep forever, you know."

"But... But I'm your sister! That would be obscene!"

I blinked. "It would?"

Eddas grinned at Marilith. "You haven't explained to her how your people reproduce, have you?"

"Well, no! I'd already decided that if I was going to stay here, I obviously wasn't going to have any children so I never thought to... I mean..."

"You reproduce through your *nose*?!" I giggled.

"Mouth and nose, actually," Eddas replied, smiling. "Their bodies vary extremely widely, you see - each chooses what their body will be when they reach maturity, based on what task they wish to take up as an adult. Though some of their males and females have genitalia like humans do, it's more for pleasure than anything else. All of them, however, have a mouth and nose of some kind. When they reproduce, male and female kiss, and the female stops breathing. The male then exhales into her mouth, and she breathes only from him until the new spirit takes hold within her. A newborn demon has no physical body, it's more like a fog or puff of smoke - the female exhales it out her nose eventually when it's finished developing. The kiss, however, takes quite some time to complete."

"I can't believe you're actually telling her this," Marilith replied, turning her head and looking very embarrassed.

I giggled again, seeing Marilith's reaction and remembering my own feelings years ago in a very similar situation. "How long does the kiss take to complete?"

"Usually no more than a century or two."

I gaped. "A *century* or two?!"

"Yes. The female then exhales the spirit-form child sometime in the next three or four centuries."

Joy smiled. "That sounds very romantic, Old Man. A kiss that lasts a century. But however did you find all this out?"

Eddas grinned. "Well, Joy, summoning demons was a part of the training of the Dyclonic circle - Journeyman were required to master the basics of the Greater Magics before they could be promoted to the rank of Master, and summoning demons is a part of that. After learning the precautionary spells and the spells of summoning, I summoned my first demon under the watchful eye of High Master Frarim. It was a lesser demon, a *bufotibranche*, a small little male that resembled a somewhat humanoid slime-covered toad with horns. I expected it to scream at me and try to unnerve me so it might win the contest of wills. And, it did. It screamed "*You bastard! Do you know how long I've been trying to get her to say 'yes'?!*"

Marilith burst into whooping laughter, and I doubled over with giggles. Joy guffawed, shaking her head. "What happened then, Old Man?"

"Well, I apologized, of course, and asked him what had happened. The explanation evolved into an explanation of demonic reproduction in general, and that's how I learned - the whole Dyclonic circle learned, really. Master Frarim had me later write it down to add to our knowledge, as we'd simply never

known any of it before. It was quite an honor to actually add a new book to our library... But, I digress. Anyway, once we were done chatting, I told the little demon that I thought if his intended mate wasn't patient enough to wait until his return, then she probably wasn't good enough for him anyway. Well, he accepted this, and I let him go. *Bufotibranches* have quite a high opinion of themselves, as for a lesser demon they're considered quite handsome."

I blinked - I couldn't understand how a slime-covered toad with horns might even be thought of as attractive. "They are?"

Marilith smiled dreamily. *"Mmm... Yes. Very handsome. And quite tasty when you lick their..."* she said, then looked around. *"Ummm... Nevermind."*

I doubled over with giggles again, and Joy and Eddas chuckled. "Come, Marilith - finish your breakfast before it cools," Eddas said.

Marilith nodded and did so, gobbling down hot coals, and when she was done, she blew a long puff of smoke from her nostrils, and smiled. *"Thank you, Eddas Ayar."*

"You're welcome," Eddas replied, rising to her feet and still holding the brazier dangling from her staff. "I'm going to put this brazier away. Joy, help Sasha decide what she's going to take with her, will you?"

"Alright, Old Man," Joy replied, smiling.

I blinked. "Take with me? Where am I going?"

Eddas paused on her way to the stairs. "Anywhere you like, Sasha. Your time with me is done. If you want, you can come by and visit, of course - Marilith can bring you. And, of course, if you have any trouble you think you need help with, feel free to drop by and chat with us about it. But otherwise, your time with me is done. You're free to go anywhere you wish."

I smiled. "It's been almost twelve years... I'd love to go back to Round Island again. That's really home, for me," I said, and looked to Marilith. "Marilith, can you take us back home to Round Island?"

Marilith nodded, smiling. "*Easily.*"

I grinned. "Great! I was *not* looking forward to swimming for another six months of a year to get there. I don't even know which way the ocean is from here!"

Eddas chuckled. "West. Follow the ruins of the King's Road past the ruins of King Darrak's castle, and you'll eventually come to the Western Dead Zone. Head straight across it, and you'll be at the sea."

"Ruins? Dead Zones? That sounds like something terrible happened here..."

Eddas' smile faded. She spent a moment sliding the brazier up her staff closer to her hand so it would be a bit easier to carry, then looked at me. "Yes. Something terrible did happen. This land was once the home of a great civilization, Sasha - that of my people, the Hyperboreans. A terrible war came, and now, they're gone. Some day, my daughters will grow in numbers, and raise their own civilization from the ashes of mine. Today, the Witch-Women of Hyperborea are honored and respected for a thousand leagues around - and someday, they will be respected throughout the world as honorable and noble descendants of my people. But my people and my civilization are gone forever," Eddas replied, and turned, walking up the stairs.

Joy sighed, looking after Eddas. I looked to Joy, very embarrassed. "Ummm... Did I say something wrong?"

Joy shook her head, and smiled at me. "No, dear. He's just in one of his moods. He sometimes gets this way when people have to leave. He spent many years here utterly alone, and..." Joy shook her head. "Well, nevermind. A story for another day, perhaps. For now, let's go through the clothes I made for you, so you can choose what you'll take with you. You don't have a lot of room in that little bottle, I think, so we'll have to choose carefully."

I smiled. "Alright."

The Ocean - Forty-Four.

Our homecoming was rapturously joyful. Pearl wept endlessly, hugging Marilith and I for quite some time - and we, her. Even for the long-lived mer-folk, twelve years was quite some time to be parted. All my clan was tremendously overjoyed to see me again, and even happier to finally meet Marilith, who had been for so long merely someone they had heard of, and never seen. My ability to transform as I chose into human or mermaid fascinated many who had not seen it before, of course, and some wished to know if Marilith could do the same. She explained that she could, but only through use of magic - her body naturally had two forms, like mine, but neither one was that of a mer-folk. When she showed her second form off to everyone, even I was amazed - she transformed into a mighty horse, a powerful and ominous mare who could gallop across the beaches at breathtaking speeds.

There was so much to tell and so many to tell it to, it took days to explain it all. A lot had happened to me in almost twelve years, and I had learned much. Not all of Buntaro's knowledge was that of pain and killing - pressure points could be used to heal, as well. What little I had learned of Eddas Ayar I shared with them, too, which all found quite fascinating. In turn, they shared what had happened among themselves in twelve years. There were now many more children, and all the clans of the Windward Isles were now part of a loose alliance, dedicated to not only protecting each other, but to slowly writing down their knowledge, legends and stories for future generations (using the new alphabet Pearl had developed).

Cleaning the dust and spiderwebs of over a decade in my little house was quite a chore - but, once I was done, I discovered even more work was in store. The house now needed a bit of repair, as it was getting quite old. I told Marilith about it, and she simply nodded, and began repairing the house with careful magical gestures. She was very tired afterwards and slept the rest of the day, but the house was repaired and very comfortable for us to live in.

Above all else, however, was Yanar. He was so wonderful. Bright-eyes and Yanar accepted me as part of their little family, and Yanar held me close, cuddling me often. We spent a week in pleasant experimentation, Bright-eyes' hand atop mine, teaching me, guiding me, and sharing her mate with me as I cuddled him and stroked his hips. But, unfortunately, we discovered that it was true - I could not have children with him. Still, Yanar and I shared our love for nearly a year thereafter, and it was a wonderful and special time, for me.

Finally, however, Yanar's son came of age to begin his hunting lessons. With most of his time thereafter spent in the sea, teaching his son to hunt, I had more time to myself - time to think about my relationship with Yanar and Bright-eyes. And, as time passed, Yanar and I gradually drifted apart.

We remained close thereafter, of course. Yanar, Bright-eyes and their children remained very close to me and I to them. Their children eventually came to call me 'auntie', as I was still part of their little family. But in the end, though we remained dear friends, I knew in my heart that I would always be slightly apart from them. Neither fully mermaid nor fully human, I was accepted by my clan as one of them, but I knew in my heart that I was not. No, I was something different... Something I did not completely understand. I could feel it - something larger loomed over me... I had a larger destiny than being merely another mermaid of the Round Island clan, though I knew not what it was.

Finally, one day, I sat on the little porch of my house, my legs dangling over the edge, thinking. Quiet hoofsteps approached, and Marilith pulled herself atop the little platform, sitting next to me. *"Is something wrong, Sister?"*

"No, no... Just thinking," I replied.

"What about?"

"Well... When we were with Eddas Ayar, she said so much... And now, a lot of it begins to sink in."

"Oh? Like what?"

"Well, she said that between us, there was a greater reality... That somehow, together, we were something greater than we were individually. And your clan-father agreed. Now I'm sitting here on Round Island, and realizing that this is true. Our destiny isn't to just sit here for the next few thousand years and live with the mer-folk. There's something larger out there for us... I can sense it, somehow."

"Aaaaaah, so that's why you broke up with Yanar," Marilith said, smiling. "You've finally reached the point where you can sense the greater reality."

"Can I? I can't really tell. I just feel..." I said, and shrugged. "Well, I can't really describe it."

"My people call it the foreshadow. After an event passes in the stream of time, the aftershadow is easily visible. The foreshadow, what humans often call destiny, is harder to see. Storm once said I was much like a giant manta of immense size, casting a shadow over your life. She did not know that the truth is a greater reality lurks between and above us, casting it's shadow over both our lives. I have seen this now for months, ever since we returned to the island. I hoped that eventually, you would sense it, too. And now, you do."

I smiled. "Well, I'm glad it's actually *something* I'm sensing, and not just me being maudlin."

"You being maudlin? Hah!" Marilith replied, rolling her eyes at herself. "I've had to catch myself a hundred times or more, what with how much of a fool I made of myself while we were at Eddas Ayar's tower," Marilith said with a sigh, and shook her head sadly.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, Sasha! I'm a good thousand years older than Eddas Ayar, and yet he made me feel like such a child! Time and time again I found myself not merely feeling like a child next to him, but acting like one, as well."

I burst into giggles. "You, too? I'm over thirty, and yet I felt like a *baby* next to Eddas and Joy."

"Exactly how I felt," Marilith said, nodding, then sighed again. "I suppose we were supposed to feel that way. Eddas is a tool of the gods... And, someday, when our own forging is complete... We will be the same, and be his equals," she said, then grinned wryly. "Or, if not his equal, at least we'll have enough confidence to where we won't be acting like we need diapers."

I smiled, wrapping my arms around Marilith and hugging her. Marilith smiled, and hugged me back. After a moment, I scooted close to her, rump-to-rump, drew her arm over my shoulder, then draped my arm over hers. Together, we sat and looked through the trees, at the ocean beyond.

So many things had happened to us... And yet, my life still felt incomplete. Yanar had been so wonderful... And yet, it was not meant to be. I sighed, gazing out at the ocean. "Do you think there will ever be someone for us?"

"Someone for you, you mean?"

"No, I mean someone for us. Like Joy is for Eddas. I am *hardly* going to find someone who won't accept the both of us, Marilith. I never want you to be unhappy again," I said, and sighed. "Really, I think that's another reason Yanar and I drifted apart. He loves me, of course. And he likes you. Unfortunately, that's as far as it will ever go. And I couldn't just live in happiness, knowing that you would be lonely."

Marilith burst into giggles. *"That would have to be some man, to love you and your demon sister."*

"Mmm... And he'd have to be handsome," I said, grinning. "No ugly ones. And *definitely* male. Joy may be able to accept Eddas as she... Err... As he is, but I want a *male*, thank you very much."

Marilith giggled harder. *"And a good kisser! I want a nice, long kiss."*

"And perhaps a pleasant breath?" I replied, grinning slyly at her.

"Mmm... That would be so nice... I mean, even if I can't have children here, it would be so nice... Feeling a strong male's breath gently filling me... Feeling his spirit warming me..." Marilith shivered, then giggled again. *"Yes, add that to the list."*

"And *tall!* No little Palomean men! *Goddess*, it was so annoying sometimes, most of them only came up to my breasts, and that's all they could look at sometimes!"

"Awww... But General Morita looked so cute when he was staring at your breasts and trying to figure out how you got your armor to stick to your skin like that," Marilith replied, and giggled again.

"Tall," I insisted. "If you get sweet breath and good kisser, I get tall and handsome," I said, then giggled.

"Deal," Marilith replied, grinning. *"Now what do we both get?"*

"Hmmm... Smart. Accepting. Has to be able to accept both of us. It's a two-for-one deal, here, either he accepts both of us or he doesn't get either."

"Agreed. And he has to be wise," Marilith added. *"And humble. No pompous ones who think they know everything."*

"Supportive. A good sense of humor. And very caring," I added, and Marilith nodded again.

We sat there for awhile in silence. I hugged her shoulder, and she hugged mine. Finally, Marilith spoke again. *"So where are we going to find a man like that?"*

"Beats me, but I know what we should do in the meantime," I replied, and grinned.

"Oh? What?"

"Well, it dawned on me that you were probably right - the Goddess *does* intend for us to be her tool in the conflict between the gods. And with all the training I did and with all the training you did, the one thing we've never done is actually sit down and taught each other what we know, and learn how to work together."

Marilith nodded. *"That's true. I watched you and Buntaro for years - but watching is not the same as doing. And, I told my clan-father I would make you a few enchanted items, and teach you how to use them to defend yourself against sorcery. I need to do that. And I still need to teach you how to use those gems my father gave you, in case I am ever hurt or ill. Someday, the Ocean will whisper again, that we are needed somewhere. You will need to be ready. And, really, so will I."*

"Then we're agreed. We'll train each other in what we both know, and stick together - sisters forever," I said, and grinned.

"Sisters forever," Marilith agreed, and we hugged each other tightly.

"Shall we get started now?" I asked, grinning.

"Alright. What shall we work on, first?"

"Learning to ride your back when you're a horse," I replied. "You told me before that translocating two people is a bit tiring for you, and you also said it's somewhat... Err... 'Noisy', magically speaking. I should learn to ride bareback when you're in your quadruped form."

"Hmmm... While all that's very true, I think you also just want to ride a horse again. I saw you in Palome - you loved every moment of riding!" Marilith said, and grinned.

I blushed. "Well, yes, that too. It is alright, isn't it? I mean, you don't mind?"

"Will you teach me to swim like a mermaid in turn so I can follow you in the water? I can form a tail to do it with sorcery."

"Sure!" I replied, grinning.

Marilith hopped off the porch, then shimmered - in a moment, she'd shifted to her quadruped form. *"Then I'd love to,"* she replied, and giggled. Marilith side-stepped closer to the edge of the porch, then looked at me over her shoulder. *"Come on - slide on my back!"* I grinned, slipping my leg over her back and sliding off the porch, onto her. I could feel her powerful muscles shifting as she sidestepped away from the porch, and turned to face the beach. *"Okay, now there are three rules, here: Rule one, hold on with your legs, not with your hands. If you hold onto my mane, it hurts. Rule two, duck the branches of trees. There's some trees right there, if you're sitting straight up you'll crack your skull. Duck low so you don't get hurt. Always remember - when I say duck, you duck."*

"Okay, I can do all that. What's the third rule?"

Marilith glowered at me over her shoulder. *"If you try to put a saddle on me, yell 'giddyup' or start*

calling me a horsie, I'm going to buck you so hard you won't hit ground for a week."

"Deal," I replied, grinning.

"Alright - here we go!" Marilith shouted, and began trotting for the trees, heading for the ocean. I ducked the branches, and once she reached the beach, she turned and started galloping along the sand. She drifted a bit over to the water, splashing me with the spray from her hooves as she ran along. I couldn't help myself - I squealed with laughter. Marilith grinned, looking over her shoulder, and trotted around and around the island, teaching me how to hang on when she turned, slowed down, speeded up, and came to a stop. It was actually different than riding a normal horse. She was larger than the horses of Palome had been, and unlike them, she was actually trying to keep me on her back. The mer-folk saw us trotting around, and waved happily. I waved back, grinning broadly.

Finally, Marilith slowed to a halt on the eastern beach, and I leaned down, wrapping my arms around her neck. "I love you, Sister," I said, hugging her tight.

"I love you, too, Sister," Marilith replied, grinning an equine grin.

The Ocean - Forty-Five.

We worked daily after that, teaching each other what we knew, learning from each other - and, in

truth, growing closer together. Learning with Marilith also meant learning *about* her, and what she was really capable of doing. Though her powers were now limited by the laws of magic which applied to this plane, her powers were still, as she put it, the Will and the Word. She could, really, do anything a highly skilled sorcerer could do, and usually with the same effort - though, because she had a more innate understanding of magic and did not need to bother with complex formulas and incantations, she could often do it faster. Her body was no longer the flexible, ductile dream-warrior's body she once had, and she was now limited to the two basic forms that were natural to it - that of a horse, and that of an equine humanoid. Yet, her powers of magic more than made up the difference - she could, with an effort, form a mermaid-like tail when she was in her humanoid form, and she eventually learned to swim just as fast as I could.

She still retained the innate abilities of her kind, of course - she could understand any language, teleport anywhere she pleased, defend herself against magic easily, and she was immune to poisons and diseases of this world (or, at least, so we assumed - we hadn't found anything that could make her ill yet). But, with her new body came what were, to her, new limitations. Her flesh, once the elusive, ductile material of dreams and almost impossible to injure, now was no stronger than the flesh of any other mortal. One day while in her humanoid form she stepped on a small stone that might have been just a painful annoyance to my heel. For her, however, it got stuck into the frog of her hoof - she was lame for an hour until I managed to heal her with the crystals her clan-father had provided. I'd thought she would just heal herself with magic, but she explained that she couldn't. She could heal me easily with sorcery, but healing herself was immensely difficult, due to the laws of magic which applied to this world. Certainly, her flesh was immune to extremes of temperature - she could easily pluck a coal out of the fire and pop it into her mouth without harm. But, sharp thorns could still pierce her skin and wound her in tender spots, as she learned one day when she sat on the grass near the beach and got a thorn in her rump. Eating was previously simply a pleasure to her. Food and drink to a demon maintained the body without effort of will, and freed the will for other uses. But now, food and drink was a necessity for Marilith - though she could go without, she would grow *very* hungry, thirsty and weak, and it was obvious she could starve and thirst to death. She could eat nearly anything, however, so feeding her was not a problem. Though she preferred hot coals from a fire to eat, I eventually managed to get her used to more ordinary dishes like fish. Really, we were a matched pair - for each weakness she had, I had a strength. For each weakness I had, she had a strength.

As the days turned into weeks, I discovered Eddas Ayar had been right - my speed of learning was, apparently, due to being a mermaid. Marilith learned Buntaro's art quite slowly, far more slowly than I had. Still, my own learning of the defensive techniques she was teaching me did not proceed much faster - lacking the *Talent* or any other innate way of understanding magic, Marilith had enchanted my gloves to give my hands clues as to the magical energies around me. Learning to read these subtle clues and apply my will through the gloves to deflect these energies took quite a bit of practice - and many energies could not be deflected, but had to be resisted with my will, or simply dodged. No matter what the appropriate response was, however, the decision had to be made instantly, as innately as one would deflect a punch or kick. And that, I found, was quite difficult to master.

As the weeks turned into months, I realized that Marilith truly felt like a sister to me, now. Older than I, and when it came to some things much wiser than I. Yet, at the same time, there were things about which I was often wiser than her. We laughed together, worked together, ate together, slept together... We were, truly, sisters.

Yes, the more I worked with Marilith, the more familiar I became with her - and the closer we became. I learned she had a very dry wit, one that had not really shown itself much when she was imprisoned and in pain. Now, free of pain and settling into a new life with me, her wit often came to the surface. When we spent time with the mermaids at the cove, preening each other and watching the males play their usual courtship games, she often would form a mermaid's tail of shimmering ebon scales and simply join in. It was normal for mermaids to comment on the mermen who tried to woo their friends, casting various aspersions about the males who occasionally came up with gifts of fish and such to try to court them. However, Marilith's dry wit often made us all laugh so hard that the poor males were nearly crushed by it. It didn't help that Marilith was, in the eyes of the mer-folk, an 'Ancient One' - a being of great age, and thus presumably great wisdom. This was a role Marilith fell into naturally, and seemed to enjoy quite a bit. Still, those who were sincere and genuine (and persistent) often found that Marilith would eventually accept the sincerity of their courtship, and temper her wit with a smile.

As the years passed, Marilith slowly fell into what I eventually realized was a more 'natural' personae for a demoness - dark of wit, sly of smile, and seemingly full of secrets. Yet, when we were alone, she simply was herself - my sister. Though she was thousands of years older than me, in truth, she was still a young girl in the eyes of her people. Eventually, I realized that as much as I had grown into a woman on Round Island, Marilith was doing the same in her own way - slowly shedding the memories of her centuries of pain, learning who she was, and learning more confidence in herself. And, as she grew up as a person, I found I loved her even more. I often found myself snuggling close to her at night, smelling the scent of her fur, and feeling very comfortable with her scent. I told her about this one day, and told her I literally could not imagine sleeping without feeling and smelling her near me. Marilith hugged me tight for a long time afterwards, and said she felt precisely the same way. As much as we had spent every waking moment together before she was freed, we were truly inseparable, now.

One day we were on the beach, Marilith working with me to continue my training in using the gloves she'd made to defend myself against sorcery. The spring sun shone down brightly upon us as we stood on the eastern beach, and we had been working for nearly an hour. "One more, then we break for lunch?" I asked.

"Certainly," Marilith replied, smiling.

"Alright. I'm ready."

Marilith nodded, then flicked her hands out. I felt the magical energies washing over me as I tried to block with the enchanted gloves. I staggered, and Marilith shook her head. *"No, no. That was the block for the Elemental Blast of Fire,"* Marilith said, pausing. *"You needed to roll to the side, that attack would have been the Elemental Explosion of Fire, if it had been real."*

"I still keep missing the difference, sorry," I said, lowering my hands.

"Well, if you had the Talent, it would be easier - you'd sense the energies forming naturally. Of course, if you had the Talent, you'd just cast a defensive spell and be done with it, so nevermind," she said, grinning wryly. *"Just remember to pay attention to the feelings the gloves give you. If you feel the really sharp pricklies in your palms, that means an explosion is coming - you can't block it, so dodge to the side."*

"Argh. It's been years, you think I'd have mastered this by now!"

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Sister. Remember I cast with the Will and the Word. A wizard actually takes longer to cast than I do, as they actually have to speak an incantation. Against any mortal wizard, I think you'd do very well. Alright?"

"Well, alright," I replied, smiling.

"Good. Now, let's..." Marilith said, her voice trailing off. Marilith raised her equine head, her long ears flicking.

"What is it?"

"The Ocean whispers to me. Can you hear it?"

I listened to the surf, then shook my head. "I just hear the surf."

Marilith smiled. *"Another reason we are sisters."*

"What's she saying?"

"One word. A name. Orissa."

I blinked. "Orissa?!" I shook my head. "Goddess... I haven't thought of her in *years*. We were best friends when I was a child... Almost as close as you and I, really. What's happened to her? Can you see her from here?"

Marilith blinked at me, then burst out laughing. *"No, of course not!"*

I stuck my tongue out at her. "You could see the whole world when we were at Eddas' tower."

"No, I could perceive the whole world, it's not the same thing. If you see two mermen a league away, can you tell who is who?"

"Well, no, of course not."

"It's similar with me. Through our link, I could perceive what was around you even if you were in another dimension - but just looking from where I stand, my perception is limited by distance, much like yours is. I can perceive the village of Woe from here, but I certainly can't tell you who's in it. I can tell there are people there, and I can perceive the daily motions and rhythms of their

lives, but I cannot perceive who is who from this distance, nor what anyone is really doing right now," she said, and gazed off into the distance. After a long moment, she shook her head. "No. Even focusing my perception, I can't tell you what's really happening there. It's too far away. All I can tell you is the village is still there, it's grown a bit in twenty years, and I don't perceive anything truly terrible like a fire or something happening right now." Marilith looked at me. *"The Ocean says nothing more, Sister. Just 'Orissa'. What shall we do?"*

"Well, I suppose the Goddess wants us to speak with Orissa. We'll have to visit Woe and talk to Orissa ourselves to find out what's happening," I replied, then paused. "But if we're going to go back to Woe, there's *one* person that *I* want to see, *first!*" I said, and scowled.

"Malik," Marilith said, nodding. *"As my people say, 'A Blood Debt is one that must be paid in full.'"*

"Yes. I'll go pack our herbs and crystals and things if you'll go tell the mer-folk we'll be gone for awhile."

Marilith nodded. *"I'll meet you at the cabin, Sister,"* she said, then turned and trotted off towards the homes of the mer-folk. I turned to the forest at the top of the beach and began jogging to our cabin.

Epilog.

Hours had passed in the little cabin, and the shadows of the storm outside finally began to fade into the light of an overcast afternoon. Sasha gazed out the window, seeing the rain finally start to lighten. The storm was nearly passed, and the sea was beginning to calm. Finally, she shrugged. "Well, we came to the village, and asked around for you, Malik. Once we found out where you were, we rode out here. The rest, you already know. Now - what of your part of the bargain?" she asked, then looked to Malik. "What happened to Orissa?"

Malik sat there at the table, his hands trembling slightly. "You look tired, Wench. Perhaps you'd like to sit, and have more tea?"

"Just tell me, Malik. I've hardly the patience when it comes to you."

"It was four years after... After you left. No one knows what happened, Wench. She simply vanished, much like you did that day. That's all I know - that's all anyone knows. All I can tell you is that the raiders weren't around when Orissa disappeared - whatever happened to her, it wasn't them... Orissa hated me after you... Well, she hated me, and she was very vocal about it. I think it was really her doing that many of those who supported me the most eventually came to mistrust and dislike me. Well, when she vanished, the whole of the village blamed me for it, of course. But I had nothing to do with it. She simply disappeared," Malik said, then paused, looking up to Sasha. "Are you certain you're not at least a little tired?"

"No, of course not," Sasha replied, frowning.

"Damn," Malik sighed, and slowly slipped from his chair, collapsing to the floor.

Sasha blinked in surprise, then stepped over to the old man and knelt beside him. Touching a finger to his neck, she felt his pulse was weak... Fading swiftly. "Marilith!"

A sudden puff of brimstone-scented smoke appeared behind Sasha, and Marilith stood in the room. "Yes? *What's happened? Did you finally get tired of the old goat's ramblings and kill him?*"

"No, he just collapsed. His pulse is fading. I think he's dying."

Marilith gazed at the old man for a long moment, then chuckled. *"He's poisoned. I can see it in his aura,"* she said, then looked around the room. Picking up the teapot from the table, she opened it. Marilith chuckled again, reaching in and extracting a long brown root from the waters of the teapot. *"Jumberry weed. Very slow, very fatal. And useless on you, of course. It appears he hadn't quite become the reformed old man he tried to present himself as. A last, final strike at the woman who cost him his son?"*

Sasha shook her head. "No. I think he just didn't want to die alone and untended. Can you heal him?"

"If you wish," Marilith replied, and knelt beside Malik. Marilith gestured over the old man for a long moment, and after a few heartbeats, he opened his eyes. Marilith rose, standing beside Sasha as Malik coughed.

"You... You saved me," he said, his voice weak.

"Of course," Sasha replied, kneeling and picking Malik up, then laying him in his bed gently. Pulling the blankets over him and tucking them around him carefully, she rose again. After looking Malik over one last time, Sasha nodded in satisfaction, her spear appearing in her hand.

"But... But why?"

Sasha looked down at Malik coldly. "I told you, Malik. For what you did to me, you die alone. None will be there to see you off, none will care that you are gone, and none will tend to your rotting carcass. For what you did to me, you die alone. I am the Wench of Woe, and my enemies do not escape their fate that easily."

Marilith chuckled. *"That's my sister, alright. And here I was worried you'd gone soft."*

"Hardly, Sister. Let's be off."

"*Yes, let's,*" Marilith replied, and the two turned and walked to the door. The two continued chatting much as two sisters might as they walked out the door, closing it behind them. Soon, Malik heard the sounds of hoof-beats on the beach, fading away in the distance.

Malik sighed, rolling onto his side, and wept.

~End~